

The Irony of Democracy in Nigeria

Sulaimon Adigun Muse and Sagie Narsiah

*University of Kwazulu-Natal, College of Humanities, School of Social Sciences,
Durban, South Africa*

KEYWORDS Deliberative Democracy, Nigeria, Universal Suffrage

ABSTRACT Democracy as a form of government means different things to different people depending on their location, situation, and circumstances. Democracy, which in the popular imaginary is a government by the people, is sustained through inclusivity and broad participation. Furthermore, it comes with many benefits - good governance, rule of law, political stability, and economic advancement. These democratic benefits are absent in Nigeria. Democracy in Nigeria has been reduced to a mere periodic ritual of elections, without any credence to the credibility, fairness, freeness and popular will of the people. The aim of this paper is to look at the challenges to democracy in Nigeria. One of the suggestions of this paper is that the will of the people must prevail. At present the will of the people is subordinate to that of the elites.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy as a form of government has multiple meanings and is dependent, in many ways, on location, situation, and circumstances. Democracy, which many believe is a government by the people and is sustained through popular opinion, comes with many benefits, such as, good governance, rule of law, political stability, and economic advancement.

According to Oluwatusin and Abolarin-Egbebi (2015: 36-42), "democracy is essentially a contested concept, which does not lend itself to any universally accepted definition owing to the ideological, cultural and historical contextualization that underpins it. This accounts for why adherents of a diversity of political philosophies and ideologies all insist on being labeled "democratic" because democracy is associated with goodness. Democracy is a form of government that has its historical roots in the ancient Greek city-states where all adult males were accorded equal opportunity of directly participating in the decisions affecting the governance of their society. The "direct" democracy obtainable in the Greek city-states was possible because of their small size both, in terms of population and geographical territory".

However, "the emergence of the modern nation state with extensive population and expansive geographical territories has necessitated the

institutionalization of "indirect" democracy and representative governments. Democracy has thus, become a form of representative government in which a few are elected to stand on behalf of the majority of the people based on so-called equal and universal franchise. Thus, democracy can only be effective and meaningful if the people are fully involved in making decisions about the way they are governed. The present situation in the country whereby the ordinary people are recognized only during the formalistic democratic rituals characterized as elections is unacceptable and cannot be meaningfully called democracy. It is imperative in a democracy that the people participate fully in the decision-making processes and that they be provided with available and reliable information" (Oluwatusin and Abolarin-Egbebi 2015: 36-42).

According to Omotosho (2015: 25-30), "democracy is a power or rule by the people". Going further, Omotosho (2015) remarks that, "democracy is a system in which people decide matters as a group, arguing, the term is typically used in the context of a form of government in which all the citizens have a vote. This conception connotes democracy as a people-oriented, people-driven and people-deciding rule that recognizes the sovereignty of people's decision against the dictatorship of a monarch or an oligarchy characterized by oppression, repression and force which is already moribund to modern governance process and practice".

Furthermore, Omotosho (2015: 25-30) views democracy from three perspectives: "as a concept, as an ideology, and as a system/process. As a concept, that it is a terminology in the dic-

Address for correspondence:
Sulaimon Adigun Muse
University of Kwazulu-Natal,
Durban, South Africa
E-mail: muse1428@yahoo.com

tionary of political science used for interpretation. For example, describing what the term is from the perception of a group or system and so on. As an ideology, it is a practice suggesting a way of governance life, as a system it is a mechanism for serving as a working tool to achieve a viable governance process within the principle of the General Will”.

According to Teachout (2015: 79-84), “right now, a fundamental premise of American democracy—that people are represented by those in powers—is threatened by the architecture of the political campaigns. Many of those in power are not serving the public, but their own interests or those of their donors. Privately funded elections encourage lawmakers to serve private interests, because they will be more likely to be able to raise money. The revolving door between Congress and the lobbying industry—roughly half of all retiring members of Congress go on to become highly paid lobbyists—encourages lawmakers to serve their future bosses instead of their current constituents”. Teachout (2015: 79-84) gave the instance of a state like New York, where an individual can contribute as much as USD 60,800 to a governor’s race. The system gives gubernatorial candidates an incentive to oblige those who can donate such large amounts or can pull together donations of millions of dollars.

According to Botstein (2015: 52-65), “the progressives understood that education could transform private individuals with diverse faiths and origins into equal citizens in a democracy. Thus, for example, the privatization of education is a strike against democracy. The fact that there is so little opposition to it among the privileged is of even greater concern.”

Like any other country in the world, Nigeria is also grappling with her own share of problems emanating from the practice of democracy. Thus, democracy has been reduced to mere ritual of elections that are conducted periodically, without any credence to the credibility, fairness, freeness and popular opinions of the people.

In order to get into power, Nigerian politicians have resorted to electoral malpractices, election rigging and electoral violence, leaving in their wake, loss of lives and properties and ensuring that the votes of the people do not count. Even with the recently concluded elections there is a sense that undemocratic practices are still extant. In this paper the concept of

democracy in Nigeria and its various challenges, will be investigated.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to examine the concept of democracy and the way it is practiced in Nigeria, with a view to highlighting the crucial challenges being confronted. Furthermore, the intention is to identify the reasons for the non-effectiveness of democracy in Nigeria.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Materials for this paper were largely based on secondary data. The secondary data was collected from published literature that was relevant to the topic such as books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines and Internet sources, as well as other library materials. The paper analyzes materials collected using a qualitative methodological approach. No primary data such as that derived from questionnaires or interviews was used.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

According to Oyediran (2002), Nigeria has witnessed undemocratic tendencies even before independence, as the main political parties that contested elections such as the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), The Action Group (AG) and The Northern People Congress (NPC), were informed by ethnic and tribal sentiments. This provided the opportunity for the parties to work for their different ethnic groups at the expense of the Nigerian state.

Furthermore, it also acted as a catalyst for other political crises that engulfed and enveloped the country, such as the census crisis of 1962/63, the Action Group crisis of 1962, the Federal election crisis of 1964 and the Western election crisis of 1965. These crises culminated in the final blow to democracy in Nigeria as the military took over the government in January 1966.

The intervention of the military into the body politic of the Nigerian state ensured that the democratic structure and true federalism, was jettisoned, bringing with it the rule of men (soldiers), in place of the rule of law, and the introduction of a unitary system of government.

According to Asoga-Allen (2009: 38-72), the unification of the country ensured that other tiers of government, such as the state and local governments relied heavily on the federal government for their budgetary allocation and fiscal finance. This has had the effect of concentrating too much power and influence in the federal government. In effect the federal government supplanted the country's constitution. The constitution has been reduced to a text devoid of power and content.

Alonge (2005) suggested that political alienation or apathy results when a person has no interest in governmental affairs. He identified the following as some of the causes of political apathy or alienation with particular reference to Nigeria: legal restriction by the constitution, lack of finance, psychological threat, loss of one's private life or job, lack of political skills and competence, religious consideration, election irregularities, and unfulfilled promises by the political elites and military regimes.

The above aptly captures the Nigerian situation, due to the litany of unfulfilled electoral promises by the political leadership and dashing of the hopes and aspirations of the teeming populace. Many adults, young and productive citizens have become despondent with the system of democracy and have shown little or no concern for political developments in their environment. They have become apolitical as a result of misrule by the leadership. Although democratic structures exist on the ground as it were, but the people, the engine that drives democracy have been systematically alienated and disenfranchised by an oligarchic leadership.

According to Achebe (2008: 5-23), "the problem with Nigeria is simply a failure of leadership. There is nothing wrong the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or the inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility and the challenge of personal example, which are the hallmarks of true leadership".

Alonge also shares this view, but it should be noted that, while there is the problem of a leadership deficit, the followers have also in one way or another contributed to the democratic malaise in Nigeria. This situation has been aptly captured by Ojukwu (2008: 25-92) that "political supporters in certain areas of this great nation are to say the least, extremely supine, resulting in leaders being seduced by power and turning

into tyrants. We are sycophants. We even applaud executive imbecility. We genuflect to mediocrity and defend the indefensible executive indiscretions".

Jooji (2003) is of the opinion that governance involves interactions between the formal institutions and those in civil society. It refers to a process whereby elements in society wield power, authority and influence and enact policies and decisions concerning public life and social upliftment. This constitutes another spike in the wheel of the democratic process in Nigeria. Here, the government perceives civil society as competitors and not as collaborators.

Evaluation

The Irony of Democracy in Nigeria

The system of democracy in Nigeria faces many challenges. Some of these challenges, militating against the growth and development of democracy in Nigeria, include: group interest, discontinuity, economic issues, corruption, militarism, patron-clientelism, ethnicity/tribalism, and a weak justice system. The researchers will discuss each of these in turn below.

Group Interest

More often than not, politicians in Nigeria while canvassing for votes from the electorate will go to any length to make endless promises. However, most of these promises are often not met after they are sworn into office. They are always preoccupied with the protection and the maintenance of those from their own group or political sympathizers, forgetting that once they are elected they are no longer accountable to a party only, but to the electorate at large. They in fact should act as a representative of all, but this does not happen. They end up creating a very powerful oligarchy centered around themselves. As a consequence democracy, which is supposed to be majority rule, is supplanted by minority elite interests (Osuji 2013).

Discontinuity

In most cases, there is usually no follow up on the programs and policies from government to government. When a new government comes into power there is always a tendency to discard

and do away with the policies and programs of the former government. This pattern of continuous discontinuity has always led to a “policy somersault” leading to retrogression in the country. In all situations, there is always a thesis, which is the original idea, followed by antithesis, which is the opposition to the original idea. These two are then combined to form a synthesis of the two ideas for progress to be made. But, the reverse is the case in the Nigerian state, where there is a permanent thesis and antithesis, thus any opposing or alternative voice or opinion is viewed in adversarial terms. As a consequence, it must be crushed with all energy and resources. This situation is not conducive to democratic practice. What happens is that more policies are developed, but services are not delivered (Obasanjo 2012).

Militarism

This is another irony of Nigerian democracy. The military according to the constitution is meant to protect its citizens from any external aggression. It is meant to protect the geographical territory of the country. But, in Nigeria, the military makes incursions into politics with impunity. Military takeover is in most cases marked by the suspension of the country’s constitution, as well as civilian rule. Human rights are abused through the imposition of states of emergency or curfews. Press freedom is restricted and detention of perceived enemies, without trials becomes ubiquitous. The military by its nature is run through a unitary system of control. After disengaging from politics, they end up imposing a unitary system of government on the people, which is against the pluralistic nature of democracy. Of the post-independence heads of state in Nigeria, six were military officers. The state is seen as an extension of the military barracks and the civilians are often viewed and treated with contempt. For example, a police official, sent to ensure that Governor Rotimi Amaechi did not pass through a particular route in Rivers state was quoted as saying “I do not take orders from civilians”. This was a state where Amaechi was the executive governor (Akasike 2013).

Patron-Clientelism

The government is supposed to be funded by the public. This provision is enshrined in the

constitution. But, the government in Nigeria funds itself and the public. The government is the patron and the citizens are the clients. Thus, a situation of patron-client, master-servant, and landlord-tenant relationship ensued. Thus, commonwealth of the states is used to enrich a few. Another dimension to this is the patron-client relationship between the political fathers and their political sons and daughters (political godfatherism) is such that the political father is willing to go to any length to impose his son or daughter on the electorate, even when there are better, competent and more qualified candidates to occupy such positions (Osumah 2010).

Ethnicity/Tribalism

Politicians in Nigeria to sow division and foment conflict have often exploited the multiplicity of ethnic groups. This could be intertribal or intra-tribal conflict. Nigeria has well over 250 ethnic groups, and over 300 languages. As such it is more susceptible to ethnic conflicts and crises. There is a sense that ethnicity takes precedence over a common Nigerian identity. In the first republic, the popular cliché among the political elites was, “North for the northerners (Hausa/Fulani), east for the easterners (the Igbo), west for the westerners (the Yoruba) and no body for Nigeria” (Dudley 2004).

In essence, the different ethnic groups see themselves as a self-contained nation. They do not see themselves as Nigerians. For instance, in Nigeria there has always been incessant tribal acrimony between the Ijaw and the Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo between the Ife people and their Modakeke neighbor, between the Umuleri and the Aguleri, among others. Tribal and ethnic conflicts like those mentioned do not serve any purpose for democracy to thrive. Wherever they occurred many lives and properties were lost as a result of these conflicts.

Weak Justice System

The justice system of most African countries, including Nigeria is not strong enough to sustain a viable democracy. The outdated justice system, status and bylaws that have been inherited from the colonial masters are still in operation years after independence. When a government official has succeeded in stealing public funds there are no structures or judicial

systems in place to hold such officials accountable. This is because there are many loopholes in the legal system, which can be easily exploited. The slow pace of the justice system is also a key weakness (Egbosiuba 2013).

What Is To Be Done?

It is the contention of this paper that if the following structures, suggestions or solutions are put in place, Nigeria may indeed witness the desired benefits of democracy, political stability and economic development.

Rule of Law

This refers to the adherence to law and order. The supremacy of the rule of law is paramount and non-negotiable. The law has to apply equally to all citizens, the government and the governed. It is often referred to as the due process of doing business within and outside the government; it is the equality before the law. In most cases, senior government officials, parliamentarians and civil servants are compelled to disclose their assets and liabilities, publically, before and after the assumption of office, but the same cannot be said of ministers, governors, prime minister and the president. This is against the spirit of the rule of law as it sometimes sends the wrong signals to the people, leading to unconfirmed gossip and rumor, which is unhealthy for the sustenance of democracy (Ajepe and Akanbi 2012).

Robust Economy

A thriving, diversified and robust economy will no doubt serve as a catalyst to sustain democracy. This will help create the much-needed middle class. The failure of democracy in most African countries is due to the fact that the middle class has been stifled out of existence, thus polarizing the populace into two categories of the poor and the rich. The poor people do not like the rich and the rich people do not like the poor. The existence of the middle class will serve as the real pivot on which democracy is built and the conveyor belt between the rich and the poor. Furthermore, the task of building a sound economy is not just for the public sector, but both, public and private sectors, small-scale businesses and entrepreneurs (Enwegbara 2013).

Armed Forces

The constitutional mandate and constitutional provision of the military is to protect the territorial integrity of the state from external aggression. Any other activities outside this may amount to a *coup de etat*. The military has no business in governance and therefore, the military has to remain non-partisan and maintain their constitutional role, responsibility and professionalism. The incursion of the military into politics in Africa has only added to the underdevelopment of the continent as they lack any meaningful idea about governance and have often left administrations more corrupt than the ones they toppled (Siollum 2009).

Human Rights

These are the inalienable rights of the citizens as provided and enshrined in the constitution. The violation of human rights in Africa is a serious issue that needs serious attention as freedom of movement, freedom of association, freedom of speech and so on, are being denied by the government on a daily basis. Furthermore, the government needs to educate the people about their rights, duties, privileges and obligations. The United Nations has also recognized the fact that the civic and political obligation of the populace must be given its rightful place. Voting in elections is part of the political rights of the people, which they must not be denied. Moreover, civic/citizenship education should form a part of the education curriculum from the elementary level to the high schools (Sebiomo 2009).

Electoral Commission

This is the electoral umpire that must not be heard to be just, but must be seen to be just and sincere. The role of this umpire is strategic as it confers legitimacy and credibility on the government. The electoral commission must be just and fair to all political parties before, during and after the election. It must remain non-partisan and neutral, and resist all temptation to rig election in favor of any political party. It must be staffed with people of unblemished character, people of integrity, who are above reproach at all times. Furthermore, the salaries and allow-

ances of the members of staff must be drawn directly from a consolidated account with adequate legal and constitutional backing, devoid of any influence by the executive or the legislature (Ighorjeh 2008).

CONCLUSION

The paper gave a brief introduction, literature review, and it also attempted to explain the irony of democracy, with emphases on Nigeria and finally suggested solutions to some of these problems. In the final analysis, democracy may not be the best form of governance, however it remains the best alternative in the contemporary global political arrangement as the worst democracy is far better than an autocratic or totalitarian regime.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper suggests the implementation of deliberative democracy as a possible solution to the challenges of democracy in Nigeria. Democracy is all about the people and they should be involved in governmental processes and policies that affect their daily lives. Beyond voting in periodically conducted elections, this should be implemented from the local government to the national government. This will not only make the people part of the government, but will also serve as a catalyst for political stability, economic growth and development as investors will only invest where there is political stability and a measure of predictability, which democracy provides.

Furthermore, there is a dire need for social behavioral reengineering of the people, it has been observed by state men, such as Ojukwu aptly depicted in his book, "because I was involved", that the problem of democratic governance in Nigeria could be easily traced to the wrong perception of most Nigerians. The Nigerians that complain bitterly about poor infrastructure and lack of service delivery still end up voting for the same government in the next election.

Lastly, the civil society, human rights groups, student organizations and professional associations must not just be heard to be democratic, they must be seen to be democratic, by conducting their affairs, particularly their elections in line with democratic ethos. These groups are the mirrors of society.

REFERENCES

- Achebe C 1984. *The Trouble with Nigeria*. London: Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Ajepe S, Akanbi M 2012. Modeling separation for constitutionalism: The Nigerian approach. *Journal of Law, Policy and Globalization*, 3: 22-30.
- Akasike Chukwudi 2013. 2015: Rivers PDP and the Trouble Within. *Punch Newspapers*, September 19, P. 7.
- Alonge F 2005. *Principles and Practice of Governing of Man, Nigeria and World Perspectives*. Ibadan: University Press PLC.
- Asoga-Allen K 2009. *Nigerian Democracy and Democratic Experience: An Historical, Political Economic, Social and Religious Analysis*. Lagos: Rich Mark Publishers.
- Botstein L 2015. Are We Still Making Citizens? From <Democracy.org> (Retrieved on 26 May 2015).
- Dudley BJ 2004. *An Introduction to Nigerian Government and Politics*. London: Macmillan Limited.
- Egbosiuba M 2013. Nigeria Oligarchy and the Justice System. Developmental and Local Governance in Nigeria. From <www. allthingsnigeria. com> (Retrieved on 18 October 2013).
- Enwegbara O 2013. Nigeria Economy in Bad Shape. *The Nation, Lagos*, August, 29, P. 10.
- Ighorjeh B 2008. Political violence and democratic governance in the Nigerian State: The experience in the Fourth Republic. In: A Adebayo (Ed.): *Ethical Values and the Challenges for National Development in Nigeria*. Nigeria: Michael Otedola College of Primary Education, pp.72-88.
- Jooji I 2003. Mending the Crack Pot: Perspectives on Conflict, Non-violence Social Justice and Reconciliation in Nigeria. *Daily Graphics*, March 15, P. 8.
- Olusegun Obasanjo 2012. Obasanjo Blames Food Insecurity on Discontinuity of Agricultural Policies. *Punch Newspapers*, March 4, P. 5.
- Ojukwu EO 1989. *Because I Am Involved*. Nigeria: Saros International Publishers.
- Oluwatusin AO, Abolarin-Egbebi AF 2015. Poverty and the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 20(2): 36-42.
- Omosho OF 2015 Democracy in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects in the next twenty years. *The Academic Journal of St Clements Education Group*, 6(1): 25-30.
- Osuji OT 2013. Interest Group Politics in Nigeria. Nigeria Village Square. From <www.nigeriavillagesquare. com> (Retrieved on 18 October 2013).
- Osumah O 2010. Patron-client politics: Democracy and governance in Nigeria, 1999-2007. *Africana*, 4(2): 39-64.
- Oyediran O 2003. *New Approach to Local Government*. Longman: Nigeria.
- Sebiomo, B 2009. Abuse of fundamental human rights in Nigeria: Sociological perspectives. In: MA Adesowo (Ed.): *Religion and Rule of Law in Nigeria*. Nigeria: National Association for the Study of Religions and Education (NASRED), pp. 96-97.
- Siollum M 2009. *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture (1966-76)*. New York: Algora Publishing.
- Teachout Z 2015. Quid Pro Con. From <democracy-journal. org> (Retrieved on 26 May 2015).