

Democracy and the Problems of Development in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

An elementary definition of democracy, and one that is quite encapsulating, is the government of the people by the people for the people. Democracy denotes representative government which ought, theoretically, to stimulate a sense of attachment to policies and programmes of the state by the governed. The foregoing suggests that ultimate power rests with the people in a democracy. The emphasis of the democratic precept is on the people. The cause and consequence of democracy are the people. One could therefore conceptualise democracy as a people-oriented paradigm for governance. This, however, has not been the reality in the democratic experiment of the fourth republic in Nigeria. The elected representatives of the people who supposedly embody the collective will of the citizenry have turned full circle and become lords over those they ought to serve. Elected representatives have become detached both physically and psychologically from the aspirations of grassroots people, pursuing white elephant projects with very scanty use-value for the common good. This apparent truncation of the democratic process has grave implications for Nigeria's development. When people do not have a say in how they are governed, they tend to crave relevance by engaging in actions that are inimical to the practice of good governance. This may well explain the upsurge of youth restiveness in contemporary Nigeria. As a corollary, when elected officials are not accountable to those who elected them, there is a general tendency towards corruption and a truncation of the democratic process. These are some of the issues canvassed in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

The most pervasive and somewhat simplistic definition of democracy remains that provided by Abraham Lincoln who conceptualized democracy as 'government of the people by the people and for the people' The Webster's Dictionary aptly defines democracy as rule by the ruled. Berman and Murphy (1996:6) adds rather aptly that the central-idea is that democracies place Key political powers in the hands of the people. At a minimum, citizens in a democracy choose their leaders freely from among competing groups and individuals' Diamond (1989:16) summarized the critical features of democracy to include popular participation, competitive choice, ample scope for civil and political liberties and accountability, of the political leadership to the electorate. Other features that are germane to the democratic process have been outlined to include, political pluralism, transparent electoral process.

Justice, rule of law, system of checks and balances, tolerance of opposition, etc, (Kumado, 1993 29). Democracy denotes representative government which ought theoretically to

stimulate a sense of attachment to policies and programmes of the state by the governed. The foregoing suggests that ultimate power rests with the people in a democracy. The emphasis democratic precept is on the people. The cause and consequence of democracy are the people. One could therefore conceptualise democracy as people oriented paradigm for governance. In advanced democracies as Berman and Murphy (1996:6) rightly noted;

Voters are free to propose a wide currency of public Policy option and to join groups that promote those Options. Voters may even directly determine through Referenda which policy will become the law of the land. This pattern contrasts sharply with that of an authoritarian Regime in which government stand apart from the people, oppressing citizens by depriving them of their basic freedom to speak, associate, write and participate in political life without fear of punishment.

Greeberg and Page (1996:247) have outlined the central role of elections in the democratic process.

Kymlicka (1995:34) has similarly indicated that "democracy's most basic commitment is to

freedom and equality of its individual citizens. This is reflected in constitutional bills of rights, which guarantee basic civil and political rights to all individuals, regardless of their group membership.

The need to uphold the democratic tenets across the globe may have informed the provisions of

Articles 55 and 56 of the charter of the United Nations on Human Rights including universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all (Human Right: New Consensus, 1994:193).

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL

Implicit in the democratic ideal is the false assumption of man's rational approach to politics where individual behavior is motivated by self-interest, utility optimization or simply put, goal fulfillment. As Monroe (1991:171) succinctly put it, rational choice theory fails to construct a model of political behavior, which accounts for the complexities of human nature and various and various aspects of organized politics.

A polity constituted by self-interested individuals is incompatible, even antithetical to the promise of democratic citizenship. The qualities of the individual and the vision of political life supported by rational choice theory present serve limits on the transformation of the self-regarding individual into a citizen. The transformation is one of the essential defining characteristics of many classical and contemporary theories of democracy. Citizenship is more than a status. It is also a characteristic of how the individual views the world.

Monroe's (1991) postulation is quite instructive especially in the Nigerian context, where the notion of citizenship has remained obfuscated as individual interests coalesce around ethnic cleavages with one ethnic group pitched against the other in fierce competition for the ever-dwindling national resources. If the interpretative understanding of the obligations attached to citizenship is crucial to the success of democracy, then one can argue that a virtual absence of commitment to the notion of citizenship is the major impediment to the success of democracy in contemporary Nigeria.

The democratic experiment of the fourth republic in Nigeria has been fraught with problems stemming largely from the inherent

contradictions of the democratic idea. The elected representatives of the people who supposedly embody the collective will of the citizenry have turned full circle and have become lords over those they ought to serve. As Emiri (2004:279) lucidly argued "representative democratic government under the rule of law, creates the impression that all citizens have equal rights and are of equal value in society and that collective wealth is maximized for the people's happiness. When the veneer of liberalism is removed, however, we are exposed to a vast reservoir of structural inequality and social unhappiness". Emiri (2004: 279) further highlighted the point that "most liberal democracies have sought to portray liberalism in consensual terms by the use of the constitutive "we", thereby giving the impression that liberalism is a catalyst of social Justice. The US constitution of 1989 for example, begins with the words 'we, the people of the United State The Nigeria constitutions of 1999 begins similarly 'We the people of the federal Republic of Nigeria"

One may ask rather rhetorically. Is there a sense of we or of collective belongingness to the idea of Nigeria? The answer as far as these authors are concerned is a resounding No. This also a reflection of the poverty of historicity of the circumstance that gave rise to the Nigeria nation when Lord Lugard amalgamated southern and Northern protectorates in 1914 (Popper, 1957) The bringing together of the Northern and southern part of Nigeria to become one country without a corresponding social engineering initiative to weld both regions into a solidary whole with a consensual vision, continues to have a negative influence on the practices of democracy and the interpretative understanding of citizenship by the citizenry. Thus, it is not we the people of Nigeria who put the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria together in 1999. It was the handiwork of selected self-serving military bigots who put together a constitution protect their narrow interest rather than the common good.

A constitution that is drafted by a handpicked few, rather than the substantive representatives of the people has grave ramifications for every facet of the democratization process (Flamenatz, 1973) The ideals of democracy, especially the inherent freedom and the equality of opportunity are roundly compromised. Here, people are free but they do not have the economic opportunities to enjoy the substantive benefit accruable to stakeholders. Children go to school and graduate

into unemployment. Ex-prisoners relapse into criminality thereby increasing the rate of recidivism in a country that is desirous to stem the tide of crime (Bawls, 1971; Dahl, 1989).

It is perhaps pertinent at this juncture to articulate the collective inalienable freedom that is integral to the democratic process. The freedom of assembly and freedom of association which are all enshrined in the charter of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights and also adopted as a constitutional provision in several countries ought to strengthen democracy and encourage good governance. But this has not happened. What is freedom, we may ask, if one is steeped in dire poverty and is not able to meet certain basic vital needs of life? What is freedom of speech if people do not have a say in how they are governed either directly or through their representatives? The fundamental freedoms have not been matched with available opportunities to express them. Freedom of expression should go with a wide political amplitude to tolerate dissension or contrary views.

Freedom of association, or for that matter, assembly should not be constrained by cumbersome conditionalities as is often meted out to civil society organizations when they want to assemble to canvass views that are adjudged antithetical to establishment mainstream views. As citizens assert their rights and as law enforcement agents maintain order and protect the status quo, there is bound to be some measure of conflict. As Welsh (1973:113) eloquently argued "conflict is one of the central features of political life, it is a necessary characteristic of modern society:

The existence of conflict as an everyday part of life helps underscore the fact that the efforts directed by society toward the handling of conflict aim at conflict resolution or management, rather than at the elimination of conflict; for erasing conflict is for all practical purposes, impossible. We must live with conflict.

As Berman and Murphy (1996: 13) rightly highlighted "the values of freedom and equality central to a democracy often stand in tension with the power of the state to control its citizens. For every society to be successful, it must maintain order and provide social stability. So that citizens can go about their business in a secure and predictable manner. Governments make use of laws, regulations, courts, the police and the military to prevent societal chaos. The

need for order does however place limits on individual freedom and frequently violates certain notions of equality.

Flagrant disregard for the rule of law and the consequent political instability has become the lot of Nigeria's fourth republic, which began on, May 29, 1999. Most of the elections at the three tiers of government, viz Federal Government were controversially won and controversially lost. It is common knowledge that the substantive winner of the Presidential election in 1999 between Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and Chief Olu Falae was rather contentious. This was even more so during the 2003 Presidential election between President Olusegun Obasanjo and Alhaji Muhammadu Buhari. Claims and counter-claims of rigging by both parties have become the subject of litigation in the courts. It was quite evident at the close of election in 1999 and 2003 that the entire elections were a charade and a travesty. While one could actually point to pervasive rigging in the 1999 general elections, the general elections in 2003 were marred by profound irregularities including allocating predetermined number of votes to candidates favoured by incumbent governors or prevailing political godfathers. As Greenberg and Page (1996:247) noted, "elections are fundamental to democratic politics. They are supposed to be the chief means by which citizens control what their government does. That is, they are the principal means by which popular sovereignty and majority rule are supposed to work. If elections are integral to the democratic process and Nigeria's elections are often compromised what then is the future of democracy in Nigeria? Lack of credible elections has also meant lack of identification and obedience to constituted authority. This was clearly demonstrated in the abduction of the Executive Governor of Anambra State, His Excellency, Chris Ngige by a combined team of social miscreants and some policemen in 2003. The fall out of this sordid saga is yet to settle. This speaks volume about the volatile nature of politics, the fragility of the current democratic experiment and the ignoble role the Nigeria police continues to play in Nigeria's socio-political space. Highlighting the aberrant posturing of the Nigeria police, Jike (2003:215) indicated that:

Recently, the police embarked on a nation-wide strike action, however successful. The police have also orchestrated a botched civilian equivalent of a coup d'état against the incumbent governor of Anambra State, His Excellency,

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Chris Ngige. People perceive and describe the police in pejorative terms and the police have not helped matters because of the audacity. They have displayed especially in the taking of bribes and extortion of money from motorists.

Early in year 2005, the Inspector General of Police Mr. Tafa Balogun was forced to resign his position on allegations of corruption. This matter was however brought before the Economic and financial Crimes Commission (see Guardian of March 29, 2005).

It is worthwhile to highlight the ignoble role of the Nigeria police in the democratic process. The police are supposed to be part of the solution to the democratic conundrum but it has wittingly or unwittingly constituted itself as a crucial component of the problem of democracy. They flagrantly pervert the course of justice, they are willing accomplices in criminal acts and some have even become debt collectors, running with the hare and hunting with the hound in a bizarre scenario where police men demand instant gratification (Mueller, 1986).

COMMUNITY CONFLICT AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION

The upsurge of communal conflict and especially, the resistance of civil society groups against the excesses of the government have led to gross violation of human rights in Nigeria's fourth Republic. Mention must be made of the internecine if e/modakekê crisis that led to wholesale truncation of civil liberties and destruction of lives. Jike (2002) has outlined other internal communal conflicts such as Ijaw/Itsekiri, Jukun/Tiv, etc which severally had adverse repercussions for the sanctity of life and civil liberties.

State induced disasters have also become a regular feature in the democratic nomenclature of the fourth republic. Of particular relevance to the thrust of this paper is the well known crisis of Odi in Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Council of Bayelsa. It was alleged by the authorities that on November 4, 1999 seven police officers were murdered by members of the dreaded Egbesu cult in Odi, Bayelsa State. The Federal troops were on a reprisal mission, they swooped on the sleepy town and mowed about 400 indigenous peoples, sacking the town in the process and deiilishing every built structure (Feboke, 2003). Odi was not to be the last example of executive highhandedness. The same repressiveness was promptly demonstrated in Katsina-Ala Zak-

Ibiam in Benue State two years after when youths again abducted and killed police officers. Recently in March 2005 Federal troops were called again into a little town called Odidioma in Bayelsa state to uproot a vicious indigenous cell of cultists. The town of Odidioma was entirely destroyed.

Niger Delta minority groups are especially vulnerable to the political Chicaneries of the federal Government. Youth in these areas are especially restive because of the general perception of inequity and deprivation (page, 1983). Whenever a minority feels that its legitimate grievances are not being listened to i.e. dealt with fairly by the majority and that all legitimate channels of redress are blocked, disruption is likely. However, this condition is always a denial or deviation.

Thus, even though Nigeria is a signatory to the Vienna Declaration and programme of action on Human Rights, which was adopted on June, 25, 1993 by the World Conference on Human Rights, the human rights records of Nigeria is not altogether wholesome (Andrain, 1995; Duncan, 1983; Phillips, 1996).

DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

Democracy has a somewhat symbiotic relationship with development while democracy engenders transparent representation and instills a collective sense of belongingness in the process of governance, the ensuring tranquility stimulates a rash of entrepreneurial activities growth and ultimate development.

As Tandon (2004; 56) noted, the Dominate Development Theory (DDT) is a sub-set of the larger corpus of economic thought which is collectively known as neoliberal theory. The proponents of this theory argue in essence, that if you open up your countries and bring down your barriers to trade and flow of capital, you will attract foreign direct investment and technology, achieve competitiveness in the global market, remove inefficiencies in your economics, and, although there may be painful adjustments in the short run, the benefits in the run with bring growth and (ultimately) remove power v from Africa. To the extent that this is not happening, they argue, it is because African governments are timid in liberalizing their economics, narrowly nationalistic, protectionist, and above ii, corrupt.

These theories have very little resonance with the reality on the ground, for they cannot really explain the gap between the West world and

Africans, and why. Africans are getting poorer. This is not a purely African phenomenon, but a global one.

Otite (2002:3) has paraphrased Firth (1972) that “development” in countries like Nigeria, involves more than increase in per capita income or investment per head. Rather, development also involves higher living standards, access to economic opportunities and improvement in local social institutions in urban and rural areas. There are, therefore, as Otite (2002:3) succinctly stated two perceptions of development in any locality. The first held by external (national government) macro development planners, conceptualises development through conventional indicator sand instruments such as Gross National Product and its growth rate through national income and investment, sectoral aggregates, per capita income, etc. But these may not adequately reflect the living standards and condition of local or rural societies.

The second is the view from inside which as Idachade (1981:6-7) rightly noted include “the availability of drinking water, housing units, medical life and educational facilities, good roads, life expectancy, caloric intake etc. This view presupposes the presence of adequate rural infrastructure e.g. physical facilities e.g. bridges, canals, ports, roads, irrigation, storage and warehouse, social facilities like health centres, hospitals, maternity, schools, including vocational ones and colleges and social-economic institutions such as cooperative societies, farmers unions and community development projects.

How has the Nigeria’s fourth republic fared in terms of delivering the dividends of democracy? The answer is neither here nor there. However, it might be pertinent to assess if the prevailing business milieu is enabling enough for the potential investor to want to substantively invest in Nigeria. Regarding the state of infrastructure, Nigeria still lags far behind its competitors in every facet. Even through there has been talk of reform in the energy sector for quite some time now the evidence on the ground is not encouraging. Electricity supply is still very much erratic and costly. Piped water most times is unavailable making citizens to become vulnerable to water borne diseases and public health risks. The business environment in contemporary Nigeria is both volatile and uncertain. Prices skyrocket by the day making it virtually impossible to plan or to make

projections in the short or long-run. Recently the price of a bag of Portland cement, which was Ni, 000, jumped to N 1,500 within a few days. Similarly, the price of fuel goes up and down in prices as ayoyo.

More fundamentally, one pervasive source of Nigeria’s fourth republic is widespread poverty. Poverty at the level of individual has generally coalesced as poverty at the level of societal institutions. In more ways than one, the society is generally bankrupt of values and economically comatose. Female prostitutions and child trafficking are rife examination malpractices are ubiquitous in tertiary institutions, armed robbery and other vicious forms of deviation from the normative standard are rife. Corruption especially in the public, sector has gone through the roof. In 2005 the Minister of Education, prof Fabian Osuji was rid of his portfolio and sacked ignominiously for bribing member of the National Assembly with 55 million to doctor his budgetary allocations for personal gains. The country appear on a rapid descent to the very bottom of moral depravity and there seen is no light at the end of the channel.

The political storm is certainly gathering. Everyone knows something has gone fundamentally awry but no one is dispassionate enough to come out of their prejudiced ethno-religious prism to make a fair and objective assessment of the actual of the situation. This is, perhaps, the reason why the National Conference on political Reform is both auspicious and timely.

We can avert this avalanche of a downpour and the deleterious impact, it may have on our lives if we are honest enough to objectively diagnose the problems of Nigeria and squarely address them (Held, 1987). Nigeria’s fledgling democracy is at the crossroads, development is also virtually compromised by the invisible hands of globalization and Nigerians are blamed for it.

CONCLUSION

Duru (1987:146) argued that Nigeria seemed set for a major rivalry over the mode of sharing legally generated revenue. Rivalry has now been transposed into fierce agitation for regional benefits and sectional interests. This has been demonstrated among all the groups or representatives at the National Conference of 2005. It is pertinent to reiterate the point that

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democracy has not taken root in the psyche of the average Nigerian (Jordan, 1989).

The corollary ideals of freedom and equality are mere embellishments, which conjure very little, in the interpretative understanding of the people. Elections are blatantly rigged. The rule of law is sidelined. The opposition is promptly crushed. Dissenting voices are silenced. Minority and human rights are truncated. The police constitutionally the gamekeeper becomes the most vicious poacher in this macabre democratic dance which has begun to undermine development in contemporary Nigeria.

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