

DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: UNDERSTANDING THE KEY CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a critical appraisal of the challenges, problems and prospects of Nigerian democracy. After more-than half a century Nigeria got political independence and adopted democracy as its system of governance, the country continues to grapple with the challenges of economic stability, insecurity and good governance. The optimism, hope and great expectations of Nigerians that democracy will facilitate the development of the country seem to be misplaced. Previous studies on the challenges facing Nigerian democracy identified corruption, mismanagement, public malfeasance, nepotism and lack of political will as the major impediments to the success of democracy in the country. The aforementioned notwithstanding, present challenges to Nigerian democracy, however, they are symptoms of an intrinsic but often neglected factors. The study identified two key factors that are sabotaging Nigerian democracy to include: imitation and replication of democratic concepts and militarized-democracy phenomenon. These two factors incubate the other vices that are preeminent in the Nigerian political sphere.

Keywords: Democracy, development, good governance, imitation, Nigeria, Naira (₦)

INTRODUCTION

The concept of democracy has become an indispensable phenomenon in our contemporary world. Consequently, the world has witnessed a vehement push for the adoption of democracy as a system of governance and the ultimate arbiter for world peace and development in impoverished nations of the world. However,

democracy has faced a lot of ideological contradictions and recriminations with its practices and outcomes varying from nation to nation. In general, there is a misconception about democracy, particularly its de facto meaning. Evidently, democracy has proven difficult to conceptualize, and as a result, its real meaning has become elusive. Supposedly, democracy is the form of government where ‘the people’, the demos posses and exercise political power in the best interest of the entire population. Pennock (1979:7), defined it as “the government by the people, where liberty, equality and fraternity are secured to the greatest possible degree and in which human capacities are developed to the utmost, by means including free and full discussion of common problems and interests”. Basically, democracy tends to challenge the status-quo power equation, through reassigning power from the elite to the ordinary people and thus redefine the actual custodian of power. However, over the roughly two centuries that modern democracies have flourished around the globe, the real exercise of power by the people remained questionable, as power significantly resides in the hands of the elites in the society.

The most widely known definition of democracy is that it is a system of government of the people, by the people and for the people. The definition was spurred by President Abraham Lincoln’s speech during the Gettysburg address in 1863. It obviously implies that power resides with the people; they decide the electoral process, vote for their choice candidates for leadership positions, who in return will manage the affairs of government in the best interest and benefit of the people. However, this theoretical assumption seems to be at odd with the “real” practice of democracy in many, if not in all democracies. Hypothetically, democracy is a system of governance that promote equal participation for citizens in the areas of governance and nation building, while upholding the principles of justice and the rule of law. In its real terms, democracy guarantees free and fair elections; freedom of expression and association; accountability of the State’s administrative organs; equal rights and opportunities for citizens and security of lives and property (Klein, et.al., 2011). Most importantly, democracy facilitates fair distribution of resources and as well, guarantees peaceful coexistence and economic stability.

In Africa, democracy seem to be utterly misinterpreted. In Nigeria, it is wrongly practiced, leaving scholars and analysts to suggest a number of factors responsible for the inapt practice of democracy in the country. Among the factors identified are: corruption and mismanagement of resources, poor macroeconomic policies, public malfeasance, inadequate skilled manpower and lack of political will (Oluwaseyi,

2016; Ojoh, 2017:2). Though each and every of the aforementioned factors contribute to the challenges facing democracy in Nigeria and perhaps Africa in general, scholars have often neglected some fundamental issues that negatively affects the understanding and practice of democracy in the world's most populous black nation. This article therefore, proposes and examines two key factors that undermine the practice of democracy in Nigeria. Firstly, Nigeria is practicing an imprudent democratic system, where the practice of democracy is rooted in overt imitation/ replication of democratic concepts from advanced democracies without first putting in place the structures that facilitate and sustain democracy. Secondly, there is the challenge of "militarized-democracy phenomenon", a situation where most of the leaders are stocked in military mentality, yet occupying democratic positions. These phenomena have affected the practice of democracy in Nigeria adversely. This study therefore explores the aforementioned factors, in-light of their abhorrent impact on democracy in Nigeria.

OVERVIEW OF NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY

Nigeria gained independence from Britain on 1st October 1960. Like any other British colony, the country was compelled by Britain to adopt democracy as its system of governance. However, shortly after independence, Nigeria became the first British colony to abandon its colonial constitutional heritage (Herskovits, 1979/80). The country rejected the British parliamentary system of democracy and instead embraced the American (United States) model of democracy. Cloning American model of democracy, the constitution of Nigeria stipulates that a President will serve a maximum of two terms that span eight years (four years per term). The national assembly is bicameral, comprising of the upper house (Senate) and the lower house (House of Representatives), whilst the members of parliament are constituted by representatives from the thirty-six states. In addition, each state has a governor and a unicameral House of Assembly that consist of representatives from each local government in the State. The appointment of Ministers, Ambassadors and Judges of the Supreme Court passes through parliament's scrutiny and approval.

Unlike the United States, Nigeria lacks the necessary pillars to support democracy and help it to thrive, there is an apparent lack of established institutions such as the judiciary and police among others. Thus, Nigerian democracy kicked off on an infertile foundation. In less than six years of independence and practice of democracy, Nigeria experienced a military coup in January 1966, followed by another coup in July of the same year. Other successful coups were carried out in 1975, 1976, 1983 and 1985. Then in August 1993, the then Military Head of State General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida handed over power to an interim government headed by Ernest Shonekan. The interim government lasted for only 3 months before it was toppled by a military junta led by late General Sani Abacha.

Abacha remained in power until 1998 when he died. Following Abacha's death, an interim government was formed and headed by General Adulsalami Abubakar until September 1999. On 29 September 1999, Nigeria reverted back to democracy under the presidency of Rtd. General Osegun Obasanjo. From 1999 till date, Nigeria has witnessed peaceful transition of power from Rtd. General Obasanjo to late Umaru Musa Yar'Adua and from Goodluck Ebele Jonathan to Rtd. General Muhammadu Buhari. Records show that since independence in 1960, Nigeria has been ruled mainly by the military. Ironically, the country's transition to democracy did not change the category of leaders managing the affairs of the country. Observably, the same individuals that truncated the country's democracy are the ones running the affairs of the country under democracy. This obviously raises concern about the future of Nigeria's democracy vis-à-vis the development of the country.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized the content analysis method. The reason for adopting this method is primarily because the study is a qualitative research that relied profoundly on documentary evidence in data collection. Secondary data was the main source of data and therefore making content analysis approach imperative for the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study approaches the subject from the perspective of Democratic Peace Theory. The theory emanated from Immanuel Kant's (1795) essay titled: "Perpetual Peace." The theory proposes that adopting democracy as a system of governance will guarantee global peace and wealth creation through free market economy system. While appraising the theory, Russett (2009: 9), argues that the absence of war among liberal democracies across a wide range of different historical, economic, and political factors suggests that there is a strong predisposition against the use of military violence between democratic States (Russett, 2009: 9). Similarly, Gowa, (1999) explains that the acceptance of democracy as a system of governance is the way to achieve world peace. She identified four key elements that explain why democracies are peaceful and do not fight one another. According to her, the first reason is that democracies inherit norms of peaceful conflict resolution, and they also display these inherited norms in their external relations. Second, democratic institutions produce competitive elections and powerful legislatures that prohibit the executive from

making irrational decision such as going to war. Third, in most cases, democracies are trading partners; thus, war would only bring loss, which is not acceptable. The fourth reason is that democracies are mostly liberal societies, and this liberalism produces all of the above effects (Gowa, 1999). Basically, Democratic Peace theory contends that democracies are satisfied States and less likely to fight about territory, particularly if they are well established democracies. Also, they have strong economic ties, which foster mutual cohesion and liberal peace. The theory's main proposal is that in a democratic setting, the opinion of citizens is usually sort before the State can engage in a warfare and that the citizens will obviously object any form of military action and/or war with another democratic State.

Although the theory possesses merit in several aspects, it however makes generalization that is problematic, in that peace entails much-more than the absence of war. Obviously, peace is relative and evolving, however, it encompasses key elements such as social justice, harmony and happiness of the population among others. Though the theoretical perspective of the theory is appealing, reality shows that democracy as it is practiced in our contemporary world is yet to achieve peace within and across State borders of democracies - both young and advanced. Thus, the notion that democracy is equal to peace is hitherto to be substantiated. Another issue of concern is about the conceptualization of democracy; who determines what democracy is and which States are practicing it? The absence of a generally, or at least mutually agreed definition of the term democracy, makes it difficult to determine a benchmark for a democratic State. Consequently, the recognition of one State as democratic or practicing democracy solely rest on the shoulders of another State(s). Observably, economically powerful Western States have arrogated this responsibility to themselves. Often times, the United States and its allies have taken coercive action, in a way of economic sanctions against States perceived not to be practicing democracy or those considered not to be democratic enough, based on the Western standards of democracy. In principle, Western countries holds the "democracy scorecard" and reserve the prerogative of scoring other States based on their discretion.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Democracy in the Nigerian/ African context

The continent of Africa has faced tough challenges in its process of emancipation. First, the continent suffered colonization, which exploited its natural and human resources to the benefit of the colonial masters. Second, postcolonial Africa faces the challenge of governance, particularly, adopting a system of governance in line with the needs and aspirations of its people. Observably, the independence given to African States excluded the freedom from making own choice of type and style of leadership/ governance. Instead, the colonial masters imposed on their former colonial subjects the system of

governance they presume to be suitable for them. This phenomenon compelled African States and many other countries of the world to adopt “Western democracy” as a system of governance, under the assumption that it will facilitate peace, economic growth and development in their country.

According to Ake (1996), the conventional narrative among scholars is that democracy will facilitate Africa’s development. However, many African States started practicing democracy in the 1960’s, during the decolonization era, and until present they remained underdeveloped and instead riddled with violence and foreign debts. The question now is: why has democracy not been able to facilitate the development of Nigeria and other African States after more than half a century? An important fact to note is that democracy is in twofold: democracy in theory and democracy in practice. An understanding of these two aspects of democracy is important to determine the future of Africa. Ake (1991) argues that why democracy has not translated to development in Africa is because; power tussle has not allowed African leaders to adopt an effective development agenda in their respective countries. African leaders perceive power as an end in itself, a social artifact, which determines other values to be aspired. Ake’s argument underscores the notion that democracy is still a theoretical phenomenon in Africa; its main essence is power grabbing, sharing and rotation. Given that the primary objective of the ruling elites is to acquire political power that will enable them to control State resources, democracy is considered a game of “winner gets all” in Nigeria and most African countries. Thus, instead of democracy resulting in the development of Nigeria, it has been weaponized for ethnic division that repudiates structural and institutional development of the country. After 60 years of independence, the practice of democracy in Nigeria has offered little benefit to the population. While democracy manifests quality standard of living, economic prosperity and a secured future in Western countries, it produces the opposite in Nigeria. The practice of democracy in Nigeria is associated with huge cost, yet there is a glaring manifestation of underdevelopment in the country. This is evident in high level of illiteracy, poverty and insecurity. The benefits of democracy to the Nigerian populace is at odd with the realities in Western countries, where the system was adopted from. Accordingly, Nigeria’s democracy need to be modified and adapted to suit the needs and capacity of the country in terms of running cost and dividends offered to the population.

The challenges of democracy in Nigeria

As noted earlier, among the numerous issues identified to be obstructing Nigeria’s democracy include corruption, mismanagement, nepotism and lack of political will among others. Evidently, each of the identified factors has a negative impact on Nigeria’s democracy. However, these factors are only symptoms of an intrinsic but often neglected

phenomenon. The study identifies two key factors hampering Nigeria's democracy and they are as follows:

- a. Imitation of democratic concepts:** Democracy in Nigeria and Africa at large, seem to be a house built without first laying the necessary foundation to support it. During the decolonization era in the 1960's, African nations that gained independence were swayed by their colonial masters to adopt democracy as their system of governance. Instead of encouraging the newly independent countries to develop their own system of governance in line with democratic principles; they were influenced in some cases and in other cases coerced to adopt "Western" model and standard of democracy. Consequently, attaining democracy became a goal for most postcolonial African States including Nigeria, even when they lack the necessary pillars that will support democracy to flourish. Instead of cultivating democracy, the strategy after gaining independence was to copy and replicate democracy the way it is being practiced by their colonial masters. The copycat approach has frustrated the practice of democracy in most western colonies to the point where it is difficult to differentiate the system from other political systems (authoritarianism, totalitarianism) that democracy challenged.

In Nigeria, the practice of democracy is evidently deficient, politics is practiced not based on ideology, but personal interest. The foundation was not laid for ideology to take foremost interest in politics, but rather personal gain. Theoretically, democracy is supposed to yield universal result wherever it is practiced, but evidence shows that what works for Washington D.C. may not work for Abuja. This suggest that trumping up democracy as a homogenous concept is problematic, instead, it should be adaptive, whereby States can adopt and modify democratic principles in way that suit their domestic needs, aspiration and capacity.

Another issue with copycat democracy in Nigeria is the huge running cost that is involved. Observably, the practice of democracy is expensive all over the world, but the cost is daring to economically unstable States like Nigeria. Following the footsteps of the United States, Nigeria's National assembly comprises of 109 members for the upper chamber and 360 members for the lower house. At the state level, the office of the governor is entitled to ₦500 million "security vote" every month. Each state has a legislative house (House of Assembly) that comprises of representatives from all the local governments in the state. Also, there is the local government council, which is the third tier of government. Nigeria has 774 local government authorities (LGA's). The local governments are governed by a council that comprises of the Chairman who is the Chief Executive of the LGA,

and other elected members referred to as Councilors. The role of the Councilors is to make laws for their LGAs, similar to what the House of Assembly members do at the State level and what National Assembly do at the federal level. Councilors are constituted to represent the electoral wards that make up an LGA. Though the reason behind decentralization of government is to bring governance closer to the people in a way that will recognize and address problems at grassroots, however, reality shows that Nigeria is incurring a huge cost for governance without any significant positive impact on the lives of the population. For example, members of the national assembly earn higher compared to lawmakers in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, and most EU countries including Sweden and Finland. In Africa, they earn much higher than their counterparts in other countries including Uganda, South Africa and Kenya. According to Sahara Reporters:

A Senator earns an annual salary of about ₦2, 020,000.00 while a member of the House of Representative receives ₦1.980, 000.00 as annual basic salary. The basic salary of the Senate President is ₦2.480, 000.00 while that of the Speaker of House of Representative is ₦2.470, 000.00. The Deputy Senate President earns ₦2.300.000.00 as annual basic salary while his counterpart, Deputy Speaker earns ₦2.280, 000.00 annually. In addition to the annual basic salary, each member of the National Assembly receives 200 percent of the annual salary for accommodation, 75 percent for vehicle maintenance, 25 percent for Personal Assistants, 5 percent for house maintenance, 75 percent for domestic staff, and 30 percent for both entertainment and utilities. Others are, 25 percent for wardrobe, 15 percent for newspapers and responsibility allowance of between 10, 7, and 5 percent respectively [...]. While each senator receives a whopping 250 percent for constituency allowance, member of House of Representative gets 100 percent for the same annually. In all the senate alone numbering 109 senators gulped the sum of ₦1.85billion in the last one year (2015), while the 360 members of the House of Representatives got ₦4.93 billion. In total, the National Assembly members received salary and allowances of ₦6.78 billion in 2015 fiscal year (Sahara Reporters, 2016).

From 1999 when Nigeria returned to democracy, until 2014, the National Assembly received about ₦1.26 trillion from the Federal Government. Between

2011 and 2014, it received ₦150 billion yearly (Kazeem, 2015). The yearly allocation of the National Assembly, which has less than 10,000 employees on its payroll, is higher than the budget of about 21 of Nigeria's 36 States with each of the States having populations of more than four million people. Clearly, the huge cost of practicing democracy in Nigeria is not sustainable with the dwindling available resources. The idea of a wholesale imitation of democratic principles from an established nation like the United States has not paid off in terms of dividends to the population. Though corruption plays a huge role in sabotaging the dividends of democracy, the fact is that even without corruption the cost of maintaining the constitutional arms of governance is exorbitant and unsustainable. Worse still, the idea of making politics a fulltime job is detrimental to democracy in Nigeria. Like the United States, a national assembly member can remain in his position for life. Unlike the United States, where individuals are voted based on performance, in Nigeria votes casted in an election often don't determine the outcome. Summarily, democracy as it is copied and practiced has taken a poignant deep on Nigerian resources, worrisomely, instead of facilitating the development of the country; it has turned to a burden, particularly to the suffering population.

- b. Militarized-democracy phenomenon:** This is a situation where individuals occupying democratic positions are deeply stocked in military mentality and as a result their behaviors, attitude and countenances represent impunity. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria's democracy has been truncated at different points by the military. The interference of the military in politics contributed greatly in setting Nigeria's democracy backward. Military interference in Nigeria's democracy created a culture of impunity, which manifested in high level of corruption, mismanagement, public malfeasance, nepotism and other social anomalies present in the political system of the country. These social vices are profound and easily recognizable in the political landscape and among elite politicians in Nigeria. Nigerian democracy can best be described as an extension of the Nigerian military, with most of the retired military personnel occupying sensitive democratic positions and swaying public opinion and policies. To contextualize, since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, the office of the president has been occupied by more ex-military officers than civilians. Rtd. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo was the president between 1999 and 2007, while Rtd. Gen. Mohammed Buhari is the current president. Out of 22 years of Nigeria's return to democracy, ex-military officers have occupied the seat of the President for a period of 14years and counting.

Apart from the seat of the President, principal positions in the National Assembly have been frequently occupied by ex-military officers, while the officers who are not occupying political positions lord themselves as political “Godfathers”. They are pejoratively referred to as “Godfather” because they sponsor candidates to win office positions for the purposes of protecting their personal interest, which usually is not in the public interest. Perceptibly, the practice of democracy in Nigeria appears to be one which people who sabotaged democratic governance and process at one point through military intervention are recognized as acolytes, champions and celebrities of democracy. These have negatively impacted governance of the country, with terrorism and banditry presenting the greatest challenge to lives and property and aiding escalation of brain drain and economic losses. In 2012, the former Vice President for Africa of the World Bank, Dr. Oby Ezekwesili, revealed that over \$400 billion of Nigeria’s oil revenue has either been stolen or misappropriated since Nigeria gained independence in 1960 (Okoye, 2012). More-than 70% of the money was linked to military regimes, meaning that these funds are traceable, yet none of the individuals involved in looting or misappropriating it has been prosecuted. The main challenge of prosecuting those involved in the looting or misappropriation is because some of them are actively occupying public offices, while the others have their proteges in office to shield them from prosecution. The study holds the opinion that the rampant participation of ex-military officers in politics has sustained the culture of impunity in the Nigerian political landscape and thus, it is identified as one of the principal impediments to the development of the country.

CONCLUSIONS

The article concludes that two major factors hampering the practice of democracy in Nigeria, in terms of dividends to the population are: unhealthy imitation from advanced democracies and the dominance of ex-military personnel in politics, while still holding military mentality. The study made the case that verbatim copying of democratic principles and practices from Washington D.C, London or other economically developed Western States pose a challenge to democracy in Nigeria. Nigeria lacks the resources and functional institutions necessary to sustain the democratic practices that are being copied from advanced democracies. Therefore, Nigeria must redesign its democracy within its reach and capacity, without which the dividends of democracy will continue to elude the population. Again, the idea of electing the same ex-military officials that truncated democracy into top political office positions, with the mandate to solve the problems they created, even when they are upholding the same mentality that created the problems must be challenged. Democracy by implication should reflect a call to serve and not a call to loot as reflected in the present day Nigeria. It is illogical to believe that those who failed

the country yesterday could manage to secure its future. It is therefore imperative for Nigeria to have a paradigm shift in its leadership recruitment process. One way out is to reduce the involvement of ex-military officers in Nigeria's politics, through legislative process. Besides, the cost of governance should be reduced to reflect what is relevant to Nigeria as a state and not what is applicable elsewhere.

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