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An Assessment Of Democracy And Development In Nigeria

Mohammed Bukar

Ramat Polytechnic, Maiduguri, Department Of Social Services, Borno State, Nigeria

Yabawa Mohammed Kadai

Ramat Polytechnic, Maiduguri, Department Of Social Services, Borno State, Nigeria

Hajja Bintu Bukar

Ramat Polytechnic, Maiduguri, Department Of Social Services, Borno State, Nigeria

Abstract:

Nigeria having experienced an interrupted period of misrule by the military incursion due to coups and counter coups as well as the devastating civil war and coupled with corruption and mismanagement has every reason to celebrate now for enjoying the longest period of civilian rule since independence of the 1960.

The expectation of the general populace about democracy is that it comes with a lot of promises that is associated with rapid growth and development, improved living standards and social amenities as well as freedom and peace, but the reverse is the case in the Nigerian context.

It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to assess the impact of democracy and development in Nigeria with a view to critically analyse some of the challenges impeding Nigerian democracy towards achieving its goal.

1.Introduction

Nigeria is now enjoying the longest period of civilian rule since independence in 1960. The first civilian republic ended with a military coup in 1966, ushering in a devastating civil war and several more military governments. In fact, during the 33 year period from 1966 until the fourth republic came into being in 1999, civilians only governed for four short years. Historically, therefore, the dearth of democratic experience has created enormous challenges to institutionalizing democracy in the Nigeria. Nonetheless, it is critical to recognize the fact that the trend over the past decade and especially since 1999 is modestly positive.

2.What Is Democracy?

The word 'democracy' comes from the Greek word 'demostrós'. The first syllable 'demos' refers to the body of all citizens in a country; the second, 'kratos' refers to either power or rule. It is therefore possible that power could be in the hands of certain individuals, who at the same time are not actually ruling in the official sense (Sammah Doh, 2002). Democracy as a concept has been defined in various ways and given various interpretations. Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as 'the government of the people by the people and for the people'. It is also seen as a form of government in which the sovereign or indirectly through a system of representation as distinguished from a monarch, aristocracy or oligarchy (Jemibewon, 1998).

There are two types of democracy: direct democracy and representative democracy. Direct democracy is that in which political decisions are made by the whole body of citizens, the majority of voters being accepted, whilst representative democracy refers to political decisions are made by persons chosen to represent and be responsible to the whole body of citizens. Features of democracy generally include:

- Rule of the people (the people own the government and not vice versa).
- Free and fair elections
- The principle of individual freedom and autonomy, this entails the following:
 - Freedom of speech and expression
 - Freedom from want
 - Freedom from fear
- Independence of the judiciary (the court must be independent of the executive, they must not be biased to any political party and must administer laws which have to be assented to by a large majority in the legislative assembly).

- Equality before the law (all men should be treated and regarded equal under the law), Jemibewon (1988).

For McLean et al. (2001) democratization is a process of change towards more democratic forms of rule, that is, a process in which a political regime opens up and extends more civil and political liberties to individual citizens in an attempt to achieve the basic goal of governance, transparency, equality among citizens.

Democracy as a system of governance underscores the plural nature of politics and hence gives recognition to the diversity of social forces particularly in the federation. It systematically accommodates these forces by providing for a polycentric political order which not only recognizes these forces formally but enables them to interact with one another in diverse ways, in competition, collaboration or cooperation as well. Since democracy exists when relation between the governed and the government abides by the principle that the state is at the service of the citizenry and not the citizenry at the service of the state; and that the government exists for the people not vice versa could perhaps be the linchpin behind devolution of powers from the centre to the peripheries in a federal arrangement like Nigeria.

Democracy constitutes an approach to connecting rule-ruler-ruled relationship which dominates the best, but it is the least problematic in constituting modern political systems. Robert Dahl (1979) refers to democracy as a system of government which is defined by three important attributes: competition for public office by individuals and organized groups (political parties) at periodic intervals without the use of force; an inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies; and a level of civil liberties – freedom of expression, freedom of press and freedom of association – sufficient to guarantee the integrity of political competition and participating. Similarly, Huntington describes democracy as ‘that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire power to decide by means of competitive struggle for people’s vote’ (Huntington, 1991).

From these definitions, we shall conclude that democracy means liberty, egalitarianism, fraternity, effective citizenry control over policy, responsible and responsive government, honesty and openness in politics, informed and rational deliberation, equal participation and power and virtues. Therefore, the central dimension in democracy is stability.

3. Development

Development has been defined by several writers from diverse fields to mean different things depending on their background. Some have focused it on production and thus narrowly viewed it as a process of achieving a buoyant economy (Stepanov, 2004, Adesanya, 2004). To the United Nations Development Programme, Human Development report (1996) development ‘...not bequeathing human generation an instable and an under democratic political system’. Sociologically speaking, development means transformation from simple to complex or from rudimentary state to advanced one. Development transcends all spheres of human life and his environment. For the purpose of this paper, the term is used to connote positive development in the life of the ordinary citizen as it relates to his physical and environmental milieu as a result of the democratic process.

4. Democracy: The Nigerian Experience

Nigeria’s democratic struggles began with the decolonization process. In the post colonial era, her journey towards being a self-determining and truly democratic state was impeded on several occasions by military incursion into politics.

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria witnessed six successful military coups:

- The Major Kaduna Nzeogwu coup (January, 1966)
- General Yakubu Gowon coup (July, 1966)
- Murtala Mohammed coup (July, 1975)
- Buhari/Idiagbon coup (December, 1983)
- Ibrahim Babangida coup (August 1985)
- Sanni Abacha coup (November, 1993)

Over period of time, other coups which took place but were foiled include the Dimka coup, the Vasta coup, Gideon Orkar coup and the 1995 alleged coup during the Abacha regime. In the final analysis, out of fifty-one years of post-independence, the military dominated the political landscape for more than thirty-two years. Today, Nigeria has witnessed three successive democratically-elected governments (the Obasanjo administration handing over to the Yar’Adua administration and the succession of Yar’Adua by Goodluck Jonathan) without the interference of the military, an unprecedented feat, given the country’s former history as regards intermittent military-civilian political power tussle. The emergence of a democratic Nigeria in May 1999 ended 16 years of consecutive military rule.

5. Positive Trends

- Enduring support for democracy
- Reduced discourse of ethnic separatism among the elite, focusing instead on improving the federal system;
- Growing consensus on alternation and zonal rotation; and
- Ongoing national dialogue over constitutional re-engineering

6.Challenges To The Nigeria's Present Democratic Milieu

We could summarize these challenges under the following headings:

- Persistent ethnic and religious grievances susceptible to elite manipulation;
- Political and economic over-centralization under the executive; and
- Poverty amid massive oil revenues, particularly since 2004, undermining public faith in the Federation and the political system overall especially in the Niger-Delta.

Years of predatory military, utilizing cultural divisions to stay in power, wore away the fragile consensus rebuilt in Nigeria after the 1967-1970 civil war. Consequently, pent-up ethnic and religious based tensions have ignited communal violence in a number of states across the federation. One bright spot, however, is that Nigerians appear to have come to consensus that democracy is the only acceptable political alternative for the nation. This commitment to democracy remains despite widespread frustrations that the government has yet to produce a satisfying "democracy dividend".

7.Rule Of Law

The judiciary at the federal level has been singled out in Nigeria for its growing autonomy and work as a check on executive impunity. In particular, the Supreme Court and the Federal Courts of Appeal are clearly emerging as islands of integrity in what is commonly viewed as a bleak judicial landscape. This is due to the rather dismal backdrop of systematic marginalization of the judiciary under the preceding military rule, which continues to cast a shadow over the rule of law in Nigeria. In the context of increased competition among the country's big men, however, political elites have themselves increasingly turned to the judicial system to resolve their disputes. Budgetary constraints, however, remain particularly worrying when it comes to judicial and court reform. Another disturbing development undermining rule of law and building on the old authoritarian patterns, is the rise of ethnic-based militias across several sections of the country. Likewise, in the north, vigilantism has emerged from the general outrage about crime and the dismal state of security.

8.Competition

The defeat of the third term reinforced another critical democratic trend in Nigeria: an increasingly assertive National assembly. The failed third term has also energized Nigeria's dormant political opposition. The intense inter-ethnic competition of the past through ethnic-based political parties has largely disappeared. The largest parties, the People's democratic party (PDP), Action Congress (AC) and All Nigerian People's party (ANPP) are vast multi-ethnic coalitions, reflecting the many faces of their oligarch founders. The end result is that ethnic competition now occurs at the party level, rather than at the governmental level as it did in the past.

9.Inclusion

Politics in Nigeria is still largely an elite game, along the lines presented above: rich, male and old. Discrimination against women in Nigeria is deeply entrenched. In the north, however, the introduction of the Sharia has had the counter-intuitive effect of enabling women to use the law to seek to better their lot. The majority of Nigerians that find themselves mired in poverty are also largely disenfranchised from political processes. Another key barrier to inclusion is the widespread discrimination against citizens known as non-indigenes, no matter how strong their ties to the communities in which they live. The rights that are systematically denied to non-indigenes run directly counter to the constitution's guarantee of freedom against discrimination and remain a source of considerable resentment among many Nigerians, especially as demographic changes in the country continue to take place, such as internal migration.

10.Poverty

A fundamental feature of any democratic society is the ability of the society to hold 'free and fair' elections within a generally-accepted rule for orderly succession of power. However, given the degenerating and debt-ridden Nigerian economy which has pauperized majority of Nigerians, it becomes pertinent to note that the prevalent poverty make a mockery of our democratization process. This is because the electorates sell their votes to rich contestants rather than vote for the morally upright and those physically and intellectually capable of filing such political posts. This invariably precipitates the multiplier effect of corruption and implementation of bad agenda, poverty, bastardization of value and squalor. On 22, June, 2010 Lawmakers in Nigeria's House of representatives threw decorum to the winds and engaged in fisticuffs. At least one member sustained a broken nose and another had his clothes torn and a female member was manhandled. At the stake was the missing sum of nine billion naira (₦9,000,000,000) which the Speaker, Dimeji Bankole claimed he needed for eight bullet proof cars for his convoys. As it happened, a group of 75 school children were in the gallery of the House of Representatives to observe the democratic process in action. In an article entitled 'Nigeria's show of shame' written by Adewale in New Africa, August/September, 2010 'money or how to get money it appears to be the only topic on the agenda of our lawmakers'

11.Illiteracy

It is also important to note that only the enlightened and educated are aware when, in the light of the Constitution, international human rights documents and charters, that their rights are being violated. This knowledge often precipitates agitation and the mobilization by the civil society to fight power/position abuse. For example, it was the educated elite like Ken Saro Wiwa and the Ogoni eight that decried the environmental degradation perpetuated by the Government and Shell and brought to focus of the international to the

Niger-Delta. It could be said educated people are less intimidated and exploited than the ignorant and illiterate, and it could be inferred that the education of the masses would invariably improve human rights records and also discourage future dictatorship type of governments.

12.Ethnic Diversity

Nigeria is home to more than 270 ethno-linguistic groups and two major religions – Islam and Christianity. Its complex ethnic and religious divisions are intensified rather than muted by the regional concentration of the three major ethnic groups (the Muslim Hausa-Fulani in the north, the religiously bi-communal Yoruba in the southwest and the Christian Igbo in the southeast) and by the pronounced differences in the levels of socio-economic development across the ethnically distinct regions. At the heart of the matter is an explosive contradiction between the political power of the Muslim Hausa-Fulani of the north and the socio-economic power of the Yoruba in the industrial southwest and the Igbo of the oil-rich southeast. This diversity sometimes portends negative implications, invariable impeding unity within civil society organizations especially where religious and ethnic sentimentalities hold sway.

13.Segmentation Within Nigeria

Our society is divided along numerous class and parochial lines. The pro-democracy vanguard is comprised largely of the urban middle class from the southeast and southwest. Farmers are not well organized, labour is fragmented and business groups see little advantage to becoming active in politics. Even under the best of circumstances, these divisions make it hard to mobilize broad popular support.

14.The Way Forward

President Obasanjo must be credited for implementing a range of important reforms since 2003. His introduction of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in late 2003 breathed new life into the anti-corruption agenda. Yet, corruption is still the stock-in-trade of Nigerian democracy, rooted in the centralized, clientelistic nature of politics described above. Political elites misappropriate considerable public funds for their personal gain, while most of their constituents lack access to potable water. As good governance continues to be found lacking by the majority of Nigerians who live without access to basic public services, other organizations have stepped in to fill the void.

Religious organizations such as the Pentecostal churches, now provide a range of social services that government generally provides and Islamic religious schools have also sprung up in the north. These problems are symptomatic of a broader, over-arching democracy and governments (DG) problem in Nigeria which relates to an oligarchic control of political power both formal and informal, by unaccountable political elites. This oligarchic control of political power contributes to patterns of inefficient centralization, a dearth of meaningful representation within the political system and a culture of impunity that dates back to military rule. This has created a stark gap between the rulers and the ruled, leading to a general dissatisfaction and cynicism regarding governance combined with growing sentiments of injustice which are fueled by attempts to manipulate ethno-religious rivalries. This directly threatens political stability, which is extraordinarily fragile. A break down in stability could undermine ongoing reform efforts which the analysis indicates are beginning to gain some traction in each of the areas of governance despite the predominant obstacles.

15.Political Actors

A review of key political actors helps to underline the strong vested interests that democratic reform has to contend with. The champions of reform are many but varied and they tend to lack the resources commanded by those who benefit from the status quo. However, there are two other elements that bode well for reform. This first is that those elites with vested interests in the informal networks of patronage are increasingly divided and the very competition among them has created openings for democratization. Secondly, the increasing demands placed upon the political elite by the population means that the frailties of the existing political system have become raw and exposed and threaten to cast the political order into conflict and turmoil.

16.Institutional Arenas

Oligarchy in Nigeria or the so-called godfather networks – constitutes an informal system of power based on clientelism that overlays or contradicts the formal structures of power, which are the democratic political system and its laws. For democracy to flourish, therefore, the formal democratic system and the rule of law must gain greater prominence – and eventually, primacy over the godfather system and its politics of might (and money) make right. Such progress in the Nigerian context can be achieved by two essential political developments:

- Horizontal checks and balances among political elites: This requires the development of stable coalitions of elites that can check each other's abuses through democratic institutions and whose competition with each other for power will push them to turn to the public for support. So long as this outreach to the public is done largely through the formal system (through electoral competition, lawsuits, executive-legislative battles and so on), this creates increasing incentives for elites to provide more socially beneficial public policies (the social contract). There are currently indications that a trend towards greater checks and balances is underway but there is still a long way to go.
- Vertical elite-public relations: the main issue here is rendering the oligarchic elite more accountable and responsive to the public by altering their relationships within their power pyramids. In doing so, politics can expand from serving primarily

the narrow interests of elites to the broader interests of the public, because elites come to see the pursuit of public interest as also being in their own private interests.

- Civil society is increasingly stepping in to fill the gaping inadequacies of state and local governments, particularly the religious groups. While in the short term such alternative means of political engagement might help citizens address some of their basic needs such as education, in the long run, such self-reliance is no substitute for government. Fundamental constitutional changes and increased levels of funding needed to render the state and local governments more amenable to political development will be necessary.

17.Strategic Approach

Oligarchy-driven insecurity and instability have generated a strong and widespread sense of injustice among the Nigerian public. Governance in that country has been characterized by inefficient yet authoritarian centralization, a dearth of meaningful political representation, a culture of impunity, and a demoralizing climate of accountability dating back to military rule. The combination of aggrieved injustice and the social misery of the majority, in turn, risks producing disillusionment with democracy, creates conditions igniting social conflicts and most importantly, threatens the stability of Nigeria's political order. The resultant effect of such is the 'Boko haram' syndrome.

18.Conclusion

The Nigerian State began as a colonial imposition on the wide range of policies existing within Nigeria's current boundaries, making it in many ways a nation of nations. Several decades of irresponsible military rule, after the exit of the colonialists, left the country as deeply divided as it was prior to independence. Military leaders and their civilian allies exploited ethnic differences to prolong their stay in power and to capture the vast oil revenues that had been centralized under state control since the 1970s. As the mismanaged economy nose-dived with oil prices in the 1980s, the handful of elite with access to the state grew fabulously rich while the number of Nigerians living in poverty rose shockingly from a quarter of the population in the 1970s to three-quarters of the population in the 1990s.

However, it is encouraging to note that against the backdrop of blatant corruption, mismanagement of funds, political repression and violation of fundamental human rights, the civil society has been able to engage in activities which have attempted to curb the excesses of incumbent governments that are unfavourable to the Nigerian populace through overt protests either in the media or via demonstrations and riots.

Centralisation of power, security and financial resources in the presidency constitute a major obstacle to the entrenchment and realization of democracy in Nigeria. In turn, this has undermined popular democracy, the rule of law, federalism, devolution of powers and good governance.

Nigeria has taken in over \$400 billion in oil revenues since the early 1970s, with an estimated \$45 billion in oil export receipts for 2005 alone. Today, oil and natural gas revenues account for 95 percent of state revenue, over 40 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and 96 percent of the value of exports. Nigeria has the tenth largest crude oil reserves in the world and the seventh largest known natural gas reserves. Scarcity of potential capital for development is not Nigeria's problem. Once Nigerian presidents – military and civilian gained control over energy revenues, they were able to centralize power at the federal centre, fund their network of clients and thereby buy off or intimidate traditional rulers or regional opponents to centralization, local resource control and presidential authoritarianism. A superb example is found in President Obasanjo's response to complaints that his personal control of the Ministry of Petroleum Resources was undemocratic and illegal: "It is therefore within my constitutional powers to choose not to establish the office of the Minister of Petroleum Resources and directly exercise executive control over petroleum matters. It is immaterial that the office of Minister of Petroleum Resources is provided for in the Petroleum Act as the provisions of the Constitution take precedence over that of an existing law in the event of a conflict".

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