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Democracy in Nigeria: An Overview

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Abstract:

Democracy has become the most feasible form of government in most states across the globe. Nigeria has had a long distressed history of hopping around democracy because of the believe that it is the only acceptable political alternative for the nation. This commitment to democracy remains wide spread despite frustrations with the government over flawed 2003, 2007 and partially successful 2011 and the acclaimed 2015 credible elections. The paper used content analysis and adopted liberal theory of state to arrive at the following recommendations: There is a compelling need to strengthen our political parties. Where political parties are weak or unviable, both democracy and good governance are undermined. There is also the need for attitudinal change because it is an indispensable condition for national transformation and rebirth.

1. Introduction

A lot of attention has been given to democracy the Worldover and naturally, much is expected from global accepted system of government. In every nook and cranny of the globe, it is expected that all political systems should be embracing democracy because of its acceptability and advanced form of administrative techniques and qualities.

It is noteworthy, however, that the same democracy seems to be disappointing people. Whereas much is being expected, the system delivers little or nothing especially in Nigeria. This is why Yaqub (2010:17) insists that there is no democracy that fits all. It should be noted, that democracy is not a destination, but a journey: for it to deliver, its values must be entrenched in any political system that practices it.

Consequent upon the above, this paper attempts to look at the Nigerian democracy, particularly issues concerning its evolution, defects and strengths. Illusion and reality. It will also attempt to provide recommendations that will make the system effective.

2. Conceptual Issues

Man's capacity for justice made democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice made democracy both necessary and inevitable. President Abraham Lincoln of the United States gave democracy its simplest definition till date when he called it- "A government of the people, by the people and for the people."

He then proceeded to rationalize it on the ground that no one is good enough to govern another without that other's consent. But the idea of democracy certainly predates Lincoln, and is even steeped in antiquity.

The political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, theorized that the era predating the nation state was a precarious situation of flux in which man lived in a state of nature where life was nasty, brutish and short. Torn by violence, tormented by the elements, insecurity and uncertainty, man soon innovated an escape from the state of nature, and devised the "social contract". Man agreed to surrender his absolute individual rights to the Leviathan in return for the Leviathan's guarantee of security, progress, prosperity and relative certainty. The social contract gave rise to the existence of a politically organized society.

The problem with the Leviathan was that he tended to be an autocratic ruler, and in that autocracy also lay the seeds of the breach of the social contract by the Leviathan.

The political history of man, from his time in the state of nature, to the present moment, has been one long odyssey in which man has experimented with different methods of political organization. Man has experimented with Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, Theocracy, Authoritarianism, and Dictatorship. These experimentations only ended up clothing the Leviathan with another face, sometime even more bizarre than the original one. In each of those systems, absolute power was concentrated in a ruler or set of rulers, who exercised it arbitrarily and often, abused it.

The idea of democracy arose primarily as a reaction to the concentration and abuse of power by the ruler. The earliest effort to defrock the ruler of absolute power and steer him away from arbitrariness and malignancy was made by the Athenians of ancient Greece. The Athenian innovation took sovereignty away from a single, all powerful ruler, and returned it to the people. Thus empowered, the people were free to choose their representatives, a collection of usually very distinguished and accomplished nobles, who met in the Athenian National Assembly. The Athenians gave the world the gift of democracy.

Athenian democracy had its limitations. For one, suffrage was not universal, and women certainly had no say in the scheme of things, and the concept of diffusion of powers was still alien. The Idea of democracy soon spread to ancient Rome, and caught on. These two powers were the democracies of classical antiquity.

The modern theory of democracy was not formulated until the 17th and 18th centuries, an epoch which is called the age of enlightenment in the history of western philosophy. It was only then that Philosophers defined the essential elements of democracy. These are separation of powers, basic civil rights/human rights, religious liberty, separation of church and state. A very significant contribution to the modern idea of democracy was that of the French Political Philosopher, Baron Montesquie, who enunciated the doctrine of separation of powers. By this doctrine, sovereignty was broken up, shared and vested in three independent but mutually complementary branches of government-the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary.

The thinkers of the age of the enlightenment, including Montesquieu, wrote against the backdrop of the forms of government which predominated in their day, and which still survive up till this day. It is important that we briefly examine each, just to give fuller context and flavor to the idea of democracy.

2.1. *The Totalitarian Regime*

This is a government by little group of leaders who forcefully exercise power on the basis of an ideology. The regime is usually brutal and does not tolerate any deviation from its stated ideology. Validation is accorded all actions of states on the basis of state ideology. Gradually, its ideology becomes a mass movement and attempts to replace religion. Regime opponents are persecuted, tortured, detained and even liquidated. A classic example of a totalitarian regime is the defunct Soviet Union.

2.2. *The Authoritarian Regime*

This is also a government by a small group of leaders. In contrast to totalitarian regimes, authoritarian regimes have no distinct State ideology and grant some amount of freedom as their rule is not jeopardized. The most important objective of authoritarian regimes is the maintenance of power and the personal enrichment of the members of the regimes and their families. Most military regimes are authoritarian regimes is the maintenance of power and the personal enrichment of the members of the regime and of families. Most military regimes are authoritarian in nature.

2.3. *Theocracy*

Otherwise called "Government by God". In reality, this is a government by religious leaders. Usually, it involves a doctrinaire and rigid interpretation of ancient religious laws which forcefully are made to replace modern and secular forms of law. These ancient religious laws are then enforced with the utmost severity and brutality. A contemporary theocratic State is the Islamic Republic of Iran.

2.4. *Monarchy*

This is government by a single ruler, who may be a King, Queen, or Emperor. Here, the Kingdom of Morocco comes to mind!

2.5. *Aristocracy*

This form of government is usually hereditary, and is exclusively by noblemen.

A common thread runs through all these systems of government. They are dictatorial in nature, and brook no opposition.

There is however a strain of government which is autonomously called "Dictatorship". This is government by a group of people, usually the military, which has seized power by force of arms, and which hold on to power by sheer coercion.

It is trite to say that the above analyzed forms of government were the Leviathan still manifesting in varying draconian mutations. Wherever democracy has taken root in the history of the modern period, it has come mostly after the defeat, or the surrender, of the forces of arbitrary power. In order to merit the label, modern democracy, a country must fulfill some basic requirements, and they need not only be written down in its constitution, but must be observed and kept up by politicians and authorities. The requirements are as follows: -

- a) The fundamental law must guarantee basic human rights.
- b) It must enshrine the principle of separation of powers.
- c) It must guarantee freedom of speech and opinion.
- d) It must guarantee religious liberty.
- e) Free and periodic elections, and universal suffrage.
- f) All the crucial institutions of State must be primed and conditioned in such a way as to guarantee governance.

It should be noted that no one can pretend that democracy is perfect or all-wise. In fact, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government. This why Yaqub (2010:17) opines that there is no democracy that fits all, and therefore, nobody should foist on people a monster going by the name "democracy" except that all the other forms of government that have been tried over time produced less desirable results than democracy, and all the ills of democracy can only be cured by even more democracy. Until today, man has been unable to invent any system of government that could regulate public affairs better than democracy.

While undoubtedly, geography and history can combine to give the democracy operational in a given country some unique peculiarities, it is doubtful that any democracy in which any of the above outlined ingredients of democracy is lacking, can be called a genuine democracy. The papers are not unmindful of the antics of various strongmen, especially in the third world, who insist on their right to redefine democracy, and who have dubbed the various aberrant systems they have evolved "home grown democracies" (Omotola, 2006) in most these systems we see a desperation to shore up one-man rule, and grim determination to crush dissent, muzzle the press, and trample upon human rights. At best these are sham democracies.

Democracy is a journey, and not a destination. This is why Yaqub (2010:19) submits that democracy is a process. This connotes that this system of government is 'ever-continuing'. That is to say a democratic political system never reaches the zenith of being called 'perfect' democratic system. Theoretically and in practice democracy has not been argued to be only form of government that man must practice. In fact, Appadorai (1974:143) submits that no realistic thinker regards democracy as the ideal form of government; it is at best the least objectionable form of government that is practicable. However, on relativity, it is conceived to be better than any form of government. This is given voice onto by John Stuart Mill that democracy is superior to other forms of government because the rights and interests of every person are secured from being disregarded. It follows that in democracy citizens have more opportunities to participate in government.

This shows that even when a particular democratic system is nascent or is seen not to fully evince all the objective ingredients of democracy, its democratic credentials can still be sustained by an institutional acknowledgement of the deficiency. Provided, of course, that its fundamental processes are robust and dynamic enough to embark on the search for a cure for the "democracy deficit". In the modern period, the idea of democracy, embodying all its cardinal indices, has found its fullest expression yet, in the Constitution of the United State of America. But even in that country, democracy has been but a journey. It was not until the twentieth century that universal suffrage was enthroned, with women and blacks achieving the right to vote.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the liberal theory of state as the basis of analysis. The theorists like John Locke, John Stuart mill among others hold the view that the state exists to promote the welfare of its citizens and protect their lives and property. These objectives are pursued by the state to earn the loyalty of its citizens and extract compliance without recourse to force. Therefore, in a democratic setting the role of government is either a direct agent of state or a mediator between the people and the state. However, the success or failure of these roles is a matter of conjuncture (Ozoemenan and Chukwudi, 2009:10).

As a follow-up to the above, one could identify three basic issues in liberal political theory.

1. Accountability of performance
2. Efficiency of Management
3. Effectiveness in mobilizing and using resources.

This framework ensures that accountability is the most important objective and that efficient management and effective resource mobilization stem from Accountability. In essence therefore, good democratic practice ensures the above essential ingredients of democracy which ultimately leads to good governance.

This liberal theory of state addressed the key challenges of the Nigerian political, social and economic situation in precise term and this account for the reason why it was adopted as the basis for analysis. Looking at this theory critically it is clear that the fundamental issues addressed are those of accountability, rule of law, fundamental human rights, good governance etc. However, the question is how far have the Nigerian experience gone in ensuring the fulfillment of the essentials identified by the theorists?

4. The Nigerian Experience

In 1999, after almost sixteen years of un-interrupted military rule, Nigeria returned to democracy. Before then, democracy had brief stints in our country. Westminster model democracy was practiced from independence in 1960 to January 15, 1966 when it was aborted by the first military putsch.

In 1979, democracy once again berthed in our country, but this time, it was the American Presidential model, with a constitution which provided for an executive president. The experiment was short lived, as it was aborted by yet another military coup in December, 1983. The 1989 Constitution which heralded the third Republic, is similarly patterned after the United State model. It provides for an executive president, a bicameral legislature, an independent judiciary, a free press, separation of powers, system of checks and balances, fundamental rights and civil liberties. The 1999 Constitution enshrines the principle of the ballot and the franchise, and also provide for periodic elections. However, most of these provisions are not new. Almost every Constitution in the history of our constitutionalism, starting from the Clifford's Constitution of 1922, the Richard's Constitution of 1946, the McPherson's Constitution of 1951, the Littleton Constitution of 1954, the Independence Constitutions of 1960, the 1963 Republican Constitution, up to the 1979 and 1989 Constitutions, contained lofty democratic provisions. Yet, until the prevailing democratic dispensation which has now lasted unprecedentedly for an un-broken period of sixteen years, democracy had only known short spells in our history.

Two mutually reinforcing factors are responsible for this malaise. The first is the absence of democratic impulses in us, while the second is our instinctive inclination to desecrate the ballot, the supposed pivot of democracy.

This is because it is believed that democracy is the superior form of government because it is premised on the respect for man as a reasonable being. But it is also a difficult kind of government because it requires the highest qualities of self-discipline, restraint, a willingness to make commitments and sacrifices for the general interest. It also requires deep knowledge and wisdom. It takes constant practice to acculturate these essentials and to manifest them as impulses. This is why Gauba argues that:

- Democracy has an additional merit in that it stimulates men to self-education, because participation by the people in government activities opens wider horizons, for the individual and tends to broaden his interest (2003:423)

At the time of the introduction of parliamentary democracy at independence in 1960, the idea of democracy, talk less the Westminster model, was alien to each of Nigeria's component tribes. Constant practice could have bred acculturation. Unfortunately, a dearth of those cultural essentials of democracy quickly undermined the nascent democratic institutions of the First Republic. The last straw was the instinctive inclination to desecrate the ballot, thereby frustrating the will of the people.

The massive rigging of the 1965 Western regional elections unleashed anarchy and chaos, and led to fall of the First Republic in 1966. It also set off a chain of events which culminated in the Civil War.

Regrettably, by the time democracy was restored in 1979, it turned out that the political class had not learnt any lesson from the debacle of the First Republic. This was understandable. The thirteen-year military interregnum which supervened between 1966 and 1979 attenuated the process of democratic acculturation, meaning that in effect, the political class of 1979 had to start on a new, uncharted slate. Once again, the old monster of profligacy and electoral brigandage, the very antithesis of the democratic project, surfaced. The rest is history. The second Republic was torpedoed on the 31st of December, 1983, and between that date and May 29th, 1999, when the third Republic came into being, Nigeria was effectively under the jackboots.

In effect therefore, while it was true that our Constitutions have always provided for periodic elections during which Nigerians troop out to vote, the challenge has been how to ensure that every valid vote cast in elections not only counts, but is counted as well. It is only by so doing that ballot can rightfully and peacefully succeed bullets. Tom Stoppard, the British Playwright, was right when he observed that it is not the voting that is democracy, it is the counting.

As earlier noted that the 1999 Constitution has ushered in an unbroken sixteen years democratic, spell, which is good for our country. In my view, two factors are responsible for this. The first is that with the collapse of global Communism, and the emergency of a uni-polar world, there is now almost zero tolerance for extra constitutional change of power. Cold War inspired support for military overthrow of democratically elected governments has effectively dried up. Secondly and more importantly, there is beginning to emerge from the political class itself a willingness to look at itself in the mirror, acknowledge its many failings and shortcomings, and to confront them, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (God bless his soul), started and inspired this happy trend. Acknowledging publicly that the 2007 elections that brought him to power were flawed, he vowed to reform the electoral process. The National Assembly quickly picked up the gauntlet. In May, 2009 in order to give zest to the Constitution and electoral review process, the two chambers of the National Assembly inaugurated their committees on the Review of the 1999 Constitution.

Both committees avoided the wholesale approach, and focused primarily on electoral reforms. In 2010, the National assembly made history. It not only successfully amended the Constitution, but also passed into law the Electoral Act, 2010. One crucial component of the electoral reform process was the insertion of a Constitutional provision giving both INEC and the judiciary a first –line charge on the Consolidated Revenue Fund. This had the immediate effect of strengthening the independence of the election management body, and that of the Judiciary which is the arbiter in election disputes.

The general elections of 2011 and the 2015 have been the beneficiaries of those legislative efforts. Our elections may not yet have attained absolute perfection, but there is now a growing realization that impunity is no longer welcome in our electoral system.

4.1. Good Governance

One of the crucial indices of democracy is good governance. However, many hold the view that Nigeria suffers from good governance deficits, and cannot claim to be a democracy yet. But as earlier pointed that democracy is a journey, and not a destination.

One question therefore arises. With its acknowledged good governance deficits, is Nigeria a democracy? The answer is that it is. The 1999 Constitution, despite its flaws, contains all the objective ingredients of a democratic Constitution. More importantly, the continuity which the present democratic experiment has enjoyed is leading to a gradual but steady acculturation of democratic ethos and values.

And what is more, there is an honest acknowledgment by the political class across the land of the good governance deficit. Concomitantly, there is a growing sense of determination that we cannot carry on as usual, and that the structural and systemic defects that inhibit good governance must be identified and eliminated.

Finally, the point to make is that good governance is self-advertising, and does not require profligate propaganda to be felt. Once enthroned, the following tell-tale indicators will be felt and seen: -

1. A general rise in the living standards of the average man.
2. An increases public perception that the allocation and utilization of resources are both fair and prudent.
3. Renewal and functionality of critical infrastructure.
4. Diversification of the economy.
5. Enhanced credibility of the electoral process.
6. Greater effectiveness of the system of checks and balances, and the attendant enthronement of more accountability and transparency both in government expenditure and in the process of governance generally.

Good Governance is the process of decision making and the process by which decision are either implemented or not implemented. It includes formal and informal actors, all involved in decision making as well as formal and informal structures for the implementation of decisions. Government is just one of the actors in governance, albeit a crucial and formal actor.

Other actors include professional bodies, NGOs, research institutes, religious groups, traditional ruler's parties, political parties, social critics, the media, donor agencies, Kitchen cabinets, informal advisers, influential families, even organized crime syndicates, and yes, first ladies. These are informal actors in governance.

The activities and actions of the informal actors should not be geared only towards the protection of narrow agenda. The over-bearing influence of informal actors could sometimes engender corrupt practices, and thus inhibit the capacity of the formal structures to articulate and implement positive and constructive policies. This happens mostly when the formal structures are supposed to work, or nascent. Otherwise, both the formal and informal structures are supposed to work in complementarily. In the ideal situation, the informal structures inundate the formal structures with dynamic ideas which the formal structures then translate to implementable policies, resulting in good governance.

Good governance has some basic features. It is participatory, consensual, accountable, transparent, responsive, efficient, equitable, and inclusive. But most importantly, it adheres strictly to the rule of law. It affords a bulwark against corruption, and guarantees a voice to the voiceless, through their elected representatives.

Good governance has identifiable catalysts, some of which are: -

1. The Constitution
2. The Government
3. The Populace
4. NGOs, including donor agencies
5. Religious/moral teachings
6. Pressure Groups
7. Political Parties.

In our contemporary constitutional arrangement, political parties are not only the engines of democracy, but also the key to consolidating and institutionalizing it. Unfortunately, however, most of our political parties are weak. Even the big ones are not immune to strife. They are often times assailed by internal convulsions, lack of ideology, indiscipline, and a deficit of internal democracy. This impinges on good governance, since constitutionally speaking, party politics in Nigeria, a crucial predicate of democracy, can only be played on the platform of a political party.

Modern representative democracy requires viable, ideology based political parties capable of providing clear policy alternatives. There is therefore a compelling need to strengthen our political parties. When political parties are weak or unviable, both democracy and good governance are undermined as the parties will be incapable of fulfilling their crucial roles. Some of these roles are: -

1. Campaign linkage: Parties recruit candidates for elections and must act within the parameters of the electoral process.
2. Participatory linkage, by mobilizing the electorate to vote in the elections.
3. Ideology linkage, through the dispersion of policy alternatives and choices.
4. Policy linkage: This is achieved through the establishment of congruence between touted policy alternatives proffered during election campaigns and policy deliveries achieved through policy implementation on the attainment of political power.

The fundamental objective of good governance is the acceleration of social, economic and political development and the reduction, if not total eradication, of poverty.

4.2. Recommendation

The cardinal mission of the present generation of Nigerians must be the institutionalization of democracy in our country. It is a mission that we cannot afford to betray, lest we commit generational suicide. We must reinvent our nation by imbibing a new orientation based on thrift, service, and a strong work ethic. In this task of rebuilding Nigeria and institutionalizing democracy, every citizen must get involved, and carried along.

A new civic disposition must emerge, fresh and positive national ethos must crystallize. It is an indispensable condition for national transformation and rebirth.

Without attitudinal change, nothing changes. Constitution review alone cannot banish insurgency, corruption, kidnapping or the criminal insurgency now ravaging our nation.

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