

## UNDERSTANDING THE TRAJECTORY OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to attempt a critical appraisal of the pace, practice, pattern, priorities, problems and prospects of Nigeria's democracy. While it remains true that Nigeria is governed by democratically elected leaders at the federal and state levels, Nigeria as a country is yet to institutionalize democracy after a century of existence as a political entity. The paper discusses some of the impediments to the institutionalization of democracy in Nigeria after more than half a century of political independence. The paper argues that the pivot around which most of the factors listed revolve is corruption which has virtually become a way of life in Nigeria. The paper however contends that notwithstanding the problem, the prospect of a politically stable and democratically viable nation is marked by people's eagerness to participate in the electoral process. The paper obtained its data from primary and secondary source materials and employs the historical method of data analysis- simple descriptive collation and analysis of historical data.*

### Introduction

Democracy may not be strange to an overwhelming percentage of Nigerians; what may be strange to them is the brand of democracy that invests, first and foremost, in human and material resources for the purpose of political stability, economic viability, scientific advancement, technological breakthrough, educational development and life-enhancing social services. Given the general confidence that Nigeria was going to be the citadel of democracy in Africa after her independence from Britain in 1960, one should normally expect that by now democracy should have been fully grounded in the country. Unfortunately Nigeria, as far as the practice and delivery of dividends of liberal democracy is concern, is yet handicapped that can barely stand, let alone walk or run. This paper asserts that Nigeria's model of democracy has three outstanding features. First, it is squanderer. Nigerian democracy is a brand of democracy that spends so much to accomplish so little (where and when it achieves anything at all). This is so because the practice of democracy seems to be anti-theatrical to the ideals. The structure is hinged on personalities rather than on institutions such as the rule of law. Second, it invests in the comfort of officials rather than in human and material resources. Infact, the welfare of the common man occupies the bottom stair on the

ladder of the priorities of the anchors of Nigeria's democracy. As I have opined earlier in a paper delivered in 2003, titled democratic ideals and the Nigerian democracy what hope for the future? It was argued that in all its intents and purpose in Nigerian democracy is far lacking behind. Third, Nigeria democracy is plagued by hydra-headed and pathological corruption which ensures that the impact of any seeming good policy is either extremely negligible or almost exactly nil.

Jean Jacque Rousseau (1712 – 1778), the Enlightenment French Social and Political Theorist and one of the first thinkers to question the basis of the undemocratic and absolute power wielded by Europe's monarchs, limited his notion of democracy to property owners while John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873), the British philosopher-economist, called for the extension of the franchise to the property class only. In every human society and organization, as Gerald et al have noted, there are bound to be inequalities in status, contributions and rewards. While admitting that the pattern and practice of democracy in Nigeria has widened the gap between the rich and the poor, fueled by corruption, exacerbated ethnic and religious unrest, provoked unprecedented agitations by ethnic militias, led to the intervention of the military in the democratic

process, strangled the economy and impoverished the masses. Interspersed by vagaries engendered by deep-rooted ethnicity; complacent and squanderer leadership; incessant intervention of the military in the democratic process; electoral fraud; wide spread poverty and high illiteracy level.

In my paper published as chaptorial contribution in the work church and democracy in West Africa 2003. I have argued that structurally the Nigeria state since independence has assumed a hegemonic character amidst institutions smack of internal colonialism which has engenders economic strangulation, political marginalization, ecological and environmental degradation and the abuse of fundamental human rights. The structure has assumed a draconian status-monster which is a negation of the original intent of a state. The state is supposed to be a social milieu that will afford all the rights of existence, were inclinations of brute force as in the state of nature gives way to rational imperatives and where the strength of all in a symbiotic manner becomes the defense of each which enables him to transform himself for humanistic excellence through the realization of his potentials and self-realization. This is farfetched in Nigeria where governance is hinged on national interest rather than on rule of law. The worst rest on the fact that other institutions like the judiciary and legislative arm are misled into doing the bidding of the executive arms. Election which ought to be the platform on which candidates are elected for effective representation of their people is now a caricature of its model-only those said to be anointed by their godfathers are given the opportunity to contests. This issue of godfathers is hinged on selection rather than election where leaders are expected to emerged through popular votes.

### **The Practice and Problem of Democracy in Nigeria**

Although, democracy is a universal concept, its practice differs from one place to another with regard to acquisition of (and disposition to) power and institutional arrangements. Hence, one can talk of American democracy, British democracy, Irish democracy, Canadian democracy and so on. Socio-economic and political inequality is a prominent and permanent feature of democracy particularly in Nigeria where democracy has widened the gap between those who have access to power and public funds and those who do not. Since democracy is said to be government of the people, by the people and for the people, it is therefore generally assumed that democracy is the most suitable form of government at least as far as the

delivery of 'political goods'/common goods is concerned. Gerald et al avers thus:

*It is therefore generally taken for sure that the pursuit of the welfare of the generality of the people is the epicenter of democracy wherever it is practiced. While this may be so in some democracies, the reverse is the case in Nigeria. While some countries aspire to and do indeed practice democracy for the socio-economic benefit of the generality of the people or at least as many people as possible; other, like Nigeria, make their own brand of democracy, government of the aristocrats by the aristocrats and for the socio-economic benefit of the aristocrats (22).*

**Systemic Corruption:** Indeed, the most outstanding feature that characterizes Nigeria's democracy is the establishment and institutionalization of corruption and unpardonable waste of public funds for the comfort of a few Nigerians. Ajayi and Ojo susceptibly note that "the democracy of waste practiced in Nigeria invests, first and foremost, in the comfort of officials rather than in human and material resources" (42). In 2012 national budget, about N176 Million was allocated to the extension of the gates of the As Rock Villa (the official residence of the President) apart from the N280 million allocated to the purchase of two bullet proof vehicles. In addition, N512.54 million was allocated to the renovation and refurbishing of the family wing of the President's main residence. Nigeria has one of the largest Presidential Air Fleets (PAF) in the world. While Ghana and Algeria each has only one aircraft in their Presidential Air Fleets and Japan and the Netherlands each has two, Nigeria has ten. The cost of the aircrafts in the PAF, which is larger than those of three Nigerian airlines combined, is estimated at about \$390.5m (N60.53b). In all the Presidency's total allocation under the 2014 Budget of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is N33bn (about \$190m) whereas all Nigeria's federal roads, most of which are accident-infested because of utter lack of maintenance, got a paltry sum of N100bn.49 (about \$575m). Unfortunately, the endemic corruption always ensures that funds are not utilized for the purposes for which they are allocated; funds are allocated to same projects cyclically and almost without end. Ironically, in Nigeria today, individuals struggle to provide for themselves those basic social amenities the state ordinarily ought to provide. Those Nigerians who have the means generate their own

power, make personal security arrangement, water, patronize privately-owned schools and hospitals, etc. On the other hand, the less privileged rural dwellers that are in a clear majority, live in blatant darkness, drink all sorts of contaminated water and contact all kinds of water-borne diseases. They are regularly harassed, wounded or killed by armed bandits. As if this is not enough sad tale, these rural dwellers are restrained by all kinds of laws from falling trees which is the source through which they cook their meals in absent of kerosene.

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released a damning report about Nigeria's education sector. According to the report, Nigeria has more than 10.5 million out-of-school children. Only recently, in a state of the World Mothers Report published by the Save the Children International, about 89,700 day-old babies are said to die in Nigeria annually. In Nigeria, power supply is almost inexistent potable water is a scarce commodity, health care facilities are either nonexistent or in complete shambles. While hundreds of people die in motor accidents. Developing counties studied [www.iiste.org](http://www.iiste.org) ISSN 2224-607X (Paper) ISSN 2225-0565 (Online) Vol. 4, No. 2, 2014 112 annually owing to extremely poor road networks from all indications, the irreducible fact seem to be that the promotion of the welfare of the masses is neither the primary preoccupation nor the cardinal objective of the anchors of Nigeria's democracy. Unfortunately, a famished, weak and ignorant citizenry can hardly serve as catalysts for the deepening and sustenance of democracy. Many Nigerians live in destitution and this has made them inconsequential number in political calculation. It is a common scriptural saying -first seek the kingdom and every other thing will be added unto you. In Nigeria since there is no kingdom to seek, the masses have resorted in seeking the stomach (stomach infrastructure) thereby at election period, selling their votes forgetting that the votes they sell empower them to effect the necessary change that will turn things around.

**Incessant Killing and Crisis in Nigeria:** There is too much violence. In our democracy, Ajayi and Ojo posit that "we have bred enough Frankenstein monsters to haunt us. We feed them red meat each time they cry for blood" (12). Right from the time Nigeria gained independence, it has been one form of crisis or the other, most of these crises have led to massive massacre of innocent citizens, crises have separated

many family members from their loved ones, many have been displaced and have become homeless, some of these crises are engineered by power drunk Nigerians who want power at all cost. The incessant killings and bombing by Boko Haram have threatened the security of the nation. Many are agonized and ravaged by this terrorist group. Nigeria has not realized herself and the Boko Haram insurgency remains unabated. The country's in a state of political anomie and economic regression, funds that ought to be utilized for capital project are diverted into combating crises. It is an understatement to say three million Nigerians have been killed by Boko Haram.

In the South-South, the Niger Delta militants group due to the failure of the Nigeria government to heed to their appeal, have taken up arms, thereby, kidnapping expatriates/non-expatriates, vandalizing oil pipelines, which result into infertility of arable farm land. The spilled oil contaminates and pollute water around the region, this act do not only kill aquatic life, it has also made life unbearable for local fishermen and farmers right from the inception of independence, it has been from one crisis to another. Recently, the Fulani herdsmen have declared war against Nigeria and her peace loving citizens. Not long ago an onslaught took place in Plateau state and it was estimated that over two hundred innocent Nigeria citizens lost their lives, children and women were slaughtered brutally. The annoying part of the crisis which apparently depicts Nigeria as a failed state and the government as haters of democracy is the manner the Nigeria government handled the issue. The government failure to bring perpetrators of the massacre to justice, even when the culprits claim responsibility for the killing in Plateau state. In a chaotic state like Nigeria were killings seem to be a norm in our democracy, one is left in a state of perplexity and fear, and one is terrified and have no confidence in the capacity of the government to protect life and properties. The incessant spilling of innocent blood have turned Nigeria into a living hell, and so many Nigerians have taken to their heel, by seeking refuge across the borders of the country. Although, Nigeria has produced nine written constitutions, it is yet to institutionalize democracy. This is because the problem is neither with the makers nor matters of the constitution; but the men who have the responsibility of operating the constitutions.

In a lecture reinventing Nigeria for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Anya O. Anya a guest lecturer as the Obasanjo Awolowo Memorial Lecture succinctly opines:

*Leadership inadequacy has been at the heart of the Nigerian political problem since independence. It has not been the failure of an individual or political party. It has been the failure of the political class in particular and the Nigerian leads in general, that has brought Nigeria to the level where it is.*

Again in 1994, the same professor presenting a paper in Eni Njoku Memorial Lecture writes, I have examine some of the features responsible for this state of affairs which include the late comers status of the intellectual elite in the moderation of the direction and ethos of social change. The cultural distance and lack of empathy of the political elite to influence events in an autonomous manner and the unstated instability to the recruitment of the well education into the political, they not always dominate anti-intellectualism of the political elite civilian and military. When in addition the process of treasury looting and political malfeasance where not punished by the state but rather the children of the culprits not only inherits the ill-gotten gains but become proud symbols of affluence and wellbeing. We are inadvertently facilitating the collapse of moral values and inaugurating the process of self-selection through greed and opportunism as the new passport to public office and leadership.

**Military Coup:** Military coups are frequent in states where democracy is not institutionalized and very rare in those with institutionalized political framework. It would be recalled that of Nigeria's three democratic dispensations since independence in October 1960, the current 16-year old civil rule which commenced with ex-president Olusegun Obasanjo's regime on 29 May 1999 is the longest. It should be emphasized that while the Nigerian First Republic lasted approximately five years (1 October 1960-14 January 1966); her second republic lasted only four years (1 October 1979-31 December 1983). The implication of the above is that of the 39 years between 1960 and 1999, military incursion into politics is not peculiar to Nigeria; it is a world-wide phenomenon though notoriously prevalent in Africa. While we may not venture into a detailed enquiry into the proximate causes of the prevalence of coups attempts in Nigeria, suffice it to state that there are a number of causative factors. At the risk of over generalization, one is that countries where poverty is prevalent and per capita GDP is low are places where successful coups often take place. The several coups that have bedeviled Nigeria have an

intrinsic and negative influence in the way politics and practice in Nigeria as a result of the frequent overthrow of one government by the other Nigeria politicians have become so negatively influenced that getting into power is a 'do or die affair' with the military mentality with which politicians run state affairs, democracy in Nigeria had been seriously abused and its virtue and dividend are yet to be actualized in the Nigeria state. Indeed, because of endemic corruption, prevalent poverty and endemic economic and political crises, the intervention of the military in the democratic process sometimes received standing ovation and widespread support. But the uncompromised true is that military coups have in away underdeveloped Nigeria.

**Social-economic Deprivations:** Poverty, Hunger, Illiteracy, Diseases, Malnutrition and Other Unfortunate forces have successfully militated against the entrenchment of democracy in the Nigeria polity. As a result of the socio-economic awkward condition many Nigerian think is a total waste of time and energy to actively participate in the democratic process. Seeing that the government has failed to provide some life sustainable basic social amenities for them, the average Nigerian have taken upon himself to provide what the government failed to provide and therefore see no palatable reason why he should be involved in the democratic process. This naive and passive reaction towards politics consequently created a fertile ground for ruthless politicians to manipulate the democratic process, thereby, destroying the Nigeria democracy and making it fall deeply more and more into the abyss of hell. Nigeria has become a zoo, were there seem not to be law and order. Those who follow due process are regarded as weaklings, while those that can circumvent and meander through the law are highly praised and accorded due accolades. This is an aberration of what democracy stands for.

**Political Witch-Hunting:** The anti-corruption fight reared against corruption in Nigeria is altogether feeble and negligible. Indeed, directly or otherwise, successive Nigerian governments had aided and abetted corruption. For example, in March 2013, Nigeria President, Good luck Jonathan, under state amnesty pardoned Chief Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, a former state governor who stole public funds running into millions of dollars while nothing drastic was done to James Ibori, another former state governor, until a Southward Crown Court in the United Kingdom sentenced him to 13 years imprisonment in April 2012. It is also true that administration of former President

Olusegun Obasanjo established two supposed anti-corruption agencies, most Nigerian know too well that, except in very negligible instances, these agencies were nothing more than objects of vendettas, vengeance and persecution of political enemies of the president. Irrespective of the magnitude of corruption practices by public officers, they are immune to prosecution and conviction as long as they are in the good books of the president or party in power or party member. The so called anti-corruption fight of the present administration of Buhari is just a set up to haunt down political opponents that share different ideology or dare to criticize the ills of the government. The Nigeria government seems to be visionless and unfocused. Instead of the government to plan on how to improve standard of living, boost the economy, improve on our democracy and strategize on how Nigeria can compete favorably with world standard, their focus is on how to dehumanize and convict political critics and party opponents. This is not the ideal democracy Nigerian taste for. When party affiliation is praise over doing the right thing, ruthless politicians become even more canny and scandalous, since they know that all they need to do is to defect to the ruling party, and their stealing, looting will be automatically forgiven. This kind of party 'carpet crossing' has indeed bastardized and rubbished our democratic system. Unfortunately, the judiciary, the supposed last hope of the common man is itself a breeding ground for corruption.

However, in a country like Nigeria where illiteracy level is very high, confronting the electorate with too many political parties breeds confusion. It is gratifying however to note that some of these parties present relatively strong and viable opposition to the federal and the respective state governments. The most important signals to the prospect of the survival and strengthening of democracy in Nigeria is probably the ability to transit from one civilian administration to another even if through heavily flawed and widely played elections. Although Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960, it was in 2007 that the country, for the first time, successfully transited from one civilian administration to another.

All earlier attempts generated suffocating political logjams that ended in the intervention of the military.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted a critical appraisal of the practice, pattern, priorities, and problems of Nigerian democracy. One of the major findings and arguments of the paper is that while democracy is being nourished and made to take root in first world countries, it has been manipulated and malnourished in Nigeria. It has been mercilessly assaulted and violated... it is already being made to suffer from gross misuse and utter lack of nurture. Regrettably, the situation is worst today, than it was yesterday. The pace of democracy in Nigeria is everything but regressive- at times it stagnates while at some other times it retards. Nigerian political history is replete with failed electoral processes, a cyclical failure that returns the country to the bottom of the ladder, each time an attempt is made at making democracy get off the ground in the country. It seems that there are some devilish and invisible principalities that are contending against the Nigeria democratic process. Yet the problem is not in our stars but in us- this is because we have torpedoed those well cherished values, justice, freedom of association and expression the independence of the judiciary and placing national interest above the rule of law as Obama noted our political landscape be it at the national, states or local government levels is dotted with strong men instead of strong institutions and until these values are reversed Nigeria will still remain the lame duck of Africa.

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