



Democracy, Justice and the Quest for Socio-Political Order in Nigeria

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Abstract. Many countries of the world, especially in the post-modern era, crave to enthrone democracy because it is popularly believed that it is the best system of government. So, to ensure socio-political, economic and religious advancement of the state, democracy is preferred. African nations are not left out in this crave especially as they wouldn't want to be left behind in the march towards globalization. Nigeria recently became a democratic nation and she is fighting very hard to consolidate it. With the attainment of democracy, some analysts have come to the conclusion that the much advocated justice and equality of all men will be phenomena that has come to stay. Hence, it is the aim of this paper to attempt an examination of the nexus between democracy and justice and the benefits accruable to the Nigerian society or any society at that. The paper will also try to find out how democracy and justice can bring about socio-political stability and advancement to the country- Nigeria.

Keywords: Democracy, Justice, Socio-Political Stability

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a nascent entity in Nigeria as it is a little over a decade since it came into being. Some analysts have contended that if democracy is allowed to survive and remain in existence in Nigeria, then the country is sure to make remarkable progress in her desire to attain development and advancement. It is argued that democracy will guarantee socio-political and economic stability which is a panacea for progress and holistic development.

To this end, this paper will try to attempt a clarification of the concept of *democracy* and *justice* with a view of determining their connection with socio-political stability in any society in general and in the Nigerian state in

particular. Another question, is democracy a traditional system of government in Nigeria in terms of management and consolidation? If so, how was it practiced before now? If not, what was obtainable before the advent of democracy? A historical exposition of Nigeria's political past will aid the reader's comprehension and appreciation of the country's acquisition and desire to consolidate democracy. It is also concluded by a school of thought that democracy has certain benefits which many refer to as the "dividends of democracy". How do these dividends lead to socio-political, economic and religious advancement as far as the Nigerian nation is concerned? These constitute the focus of this paper.

DEMOCRACY DEFINED

It is salient at this point to attempt a definition of the term **democracy**, specifically as it is connected to socio-political order and stability. Hence, it is pertinent to acknowledge that many thinkers and scholars have advanced various views of what democracy is. The uniqueness of these definitions lies in the fact that they all have one essential ingredient as we shall see. Some of these definitions includes as follows: "It is a system of government of popular participation".(Raphael, D.D., 1987) "Democracy is that type of government whereby the minority have their say/wishes while the majority ultimately end up having their way at the end of the day" (Stewart, R.1986) . There is however, one very popular definition which has gained acceptance and recognition among many scholars. It is the definition coined by a past American president- Abraham Lincoln, who concludes that "democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people". (Raphael, ibid.)

By and large, some analysts contend that democracy is the most legitimate government since after the tacit consent was sealed i.e. after men abandoned the state of nature. An examination of Lincoln's notion of democracy will reveal that it is people centered. It starts and ends with the people i.e. the masses or commoners. It has the backing and express approval of the citizens of the state. Being a government of the people, it means that those at the helms of affairs are a collection of those whose interests are at stake either directly or indirectly. That

is, those charged with the responsibility of administering the state are either elected or selected from among the masses or common people, and since they are the masses or commoners, in this sense, they wear the shoes and they know where it pinches.

Being a government by the people, it implies that the government in power was enthroned or licensed by the collective consent of the larger majority of the masses or commoners. Put differently, it is not a government by a few individuals or the minority but a government by a large majority of people in the political environment.

Finally, being a government for the people, it simply means that the policies of the government serve the best interest of the larger majority or common masses i.e. the people. (Irele, D 1993) The interest of the common man, here, is in terms of the equitable distribution and allocation of resources. Its respect for the fundamental human rights is such that is not obtainable in any other form of government. In some situations true democracies has often been misconstrued for socialism.

Looking at the definition that refers to it as “popular participation”, it is obvious that it simply means the participation of the larger majority. “Popular participation” refers to the larger number of voices that give consent and approval to the government in power and at the same time determine actively, through their representatives, what happens in the state as far as resources are concerned. That is, the larger voices participate actively in the decision making process of the state.

PROMINENT FEATURES OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy is different from all other types or kinds of government in many different ways, (Stankiewicz, W.J, 1976), hence, it stands out from systems like Aristocracy, Monarchy, and Feudalism etc. Democracy has the following unique features that other systems do not have, such as;

- i. The existence of political parties
- ii. The existence of periodic elections.

- iii. The existence of an electorate.
- iv. A recognized and respected constitution.
- v. The prevalence of elections rather than selections.
- vi. Respect for the fundamental human rights.
- vii. The existence of pressure group(s).
- viii. The existence of a given period of stay in office.
- ix. Separation of powers and
- x. The existence of all the organs of government.

Further, there are various types of democracies among which are (1). Direct democracy, which is most applicable to/or in small states e.g. city-states, and small nations such as in ancient Greece or Athens. (2). Representative democracies, such that are applicable in nations like America, France, Nigeria, etc.

By and large, many scholars have queried the definitions of democracy to be deficient in some ways because if according to them, democracy is a government of the majority, then it is guilty of the fault of leaving a large number of the population out of the equation. In many nations such as the city-states, a category of individuals are left out. These are slaves, under aged-people who are not up to 18yrs of age, women such as in Muslim societies where women are not allowed to interact with the outside world, insane or mad people, non-citizens residing in the state are exempted from participating actively in the democratic process.

It is contended that all of these persons have one stake or the other in the state they belong to. If these people are put together in their totality it will be discovered that they constitute quite a vast majority.

Another quarrel with democracy been undemocratic in the true sense of the word is the fact that the voices of the minority are ignored in lieu of receiving attention. Ideal democracy must carry everyone along; otherwise it oppresses the minority whose voices could in fact be the correct agitating voice. A good example is the popular biblical account of 40 (forty) prophets of Baal against Elijah who stood

alone but ultimately turned out to be the only one who spoke the truth. (The Holy Bible). In this case, democracy practices the tyranny of the majority over the minority. Whether we like it or not, the minority has a stake in the democratic process just like the majority even if they are a minority, they too have a right.

A response to the query of the above school of thought is that the points raised are only obtainable in an ideal state. An ideal state is one that is utopia; a state of el-dorado. This school of thought conclude that the above school prescribe “what ought to be” as in an ideal situation, rather than consider “what the actual situation is” (Omoregbe, J.I, 1997). These are, however, very technical issues that can constitute an entirely gigantic debate when democracy is discussed in theory and in practice. This kind of debate is for another day.

MEANING OF JUSTICE

An important reference point in this regard would ideally be the work of John Rawls in his book titled: “A THEORY OF JUSTICE” (1972). First, let’s attempt a literary definition of the notion of justice. It should be understood that a univocal definition of justice which cannot be queried is not possible due to the diverse opinion on what the equality of men should be. This appears to be so because many scholars argue that all men are not equal. However there is a school of thought that sees justice as a situation “whereby everyone gets his due or is given his due”. (Rawls, J, 1972). Another school of thought also sees “justice as that which involves giving everyman equal rights” The argument that all men are not equal is strengthened by the physical instances sighted by thinkers when they say: some men are taller than others; some are lighter in complexion than others, some are more physically built than others, some are more intelligent than others, some are more talented and gifted than others, some are richer than others, some are more ignorant than others, some are introverts while some are extroverts etc. (Rorbert, C.S & Greene, J.K, 1978) Following this position, it becomes obvious that justice is not easy as it seems to define.

John Rawls sees Justice from the view point of neutrality. He imagines the

“original position”. According to this view, Rawls invites everyone to imagine a situation whereby a new society is to be created. He says that everybody who is to be involved with the creation and the arrangement of facilities and structures in the state will also at the end of the creation be the ones to occupy and enjoy all the facilities and structures put in place. Rawls stresses the fact that none of those involved with the creation will know what position or profession they will occupy. Whether one will be a doctor, lawyer, nurse, driver, carpenter, etc. in this proposed state none of them knows until the principles underlying the creation has been determined. Rawls refers to this as the “veil of ignorance”. He insists that this veil is necessary for the sake and purpose of objectivity, fairness, justice and equal rights. If people were to know the position or profession they would occupy then they will be biased to unduly favor their future position. If I were to know beforehand that I will end up as a minister or doctor then I will be prejudiced to choose all the principles that will favor my future position but with the veil of ignorance, there will be equal opportunities for everyone in the state. Equal opportunities will abound when I do not know what my position will be because I will be forced to choose all good principles for all the positions and professions so that I will be favored no matter where I eventually find myself. The veil of ignorance is removed after all the principles have been erected and the state created. I will not suffer no matter where I find myself since I chose all good principles for all positions and professions.

By advocating the original position with the veil of ignorance, Rawls is directly and indirectly suggesting impartiality, and impartiality simply amounts to justice and fairness. Justice and fairness means objectivity which interprets that there is no bias, prejudice or sentiments as far as the allocation of resources is concerned. There will always be bias when political power or power in any manner is absolute.

Although all men are not born equal and cannot be equal for the reasons pointed out earlier, they should, however, be given equal opportunities on a level playing field, *ab initio*. This is Rawls’ idea of equality i.e. his theory of justice and

fairness.

NIGERIA' POLITICAL HISTORY

Anyone who is familiar with Nigeria's political history will concur that democracy as a system of government is traditional to the people or the political environment especially before her contact with the outside world. This political period of Nigeria's history is referred to as the period before the "external influence." (Nzemeke, A.D & Erhagbe, E) The country's political history can be broadly classified into three distinct epochs and they are;

1. The indigenous or (pre-colonial) era,
2. The colonial era and
3. The post-colonial or independence era.

Before the discovery of Africa i.e. before the external influence, many African states practiced a kind of uniform government that can best be described as Monarchy. Monarchy is a system of government where a single individual known and recognized as the king or Rex is left with the charge or duty of administering the state (people). (Appadorai, A, 1956) There are two types of monarchy, namely: (a) Absolute Monarchy, a situation whereby the king or Rex reserves the exclusive right or power to single handedly take or make policy decisions without necessarily or compulsorily having to consult with anyone, council or cabinet. The words and commands of the Rex are law and unquestionable. (b) Constitutional Monarchy, where the Rex is more or less a ceremonial head or mere figure head. His decisions on policy matters must be in consultation with the council or cabinet of chiefs or elders. There are constitutional ways of attending to state matters that the Rex must strictly adhere to unlike in absolute monarchy where there is no such thing but the sole discretion of the King. (Appadorai, ibid)

Absolute monarchy was practiced in many parts of Nigeria especially in the western and south eastern parts of the country. All powers revolved round the king, Oba or High chief, without whom the socio-political wheels of the society

will grind to a halt. Ascension to the throne was/is by birth, from the Royal bloodline. That is, claims to the throne, such as in the old Bini Kingdom, was and is still considered from the perspective of dissensions from the Royal family or bloodline. (Eghrevba, J, 1982)

In the Benin kingdom, for instance, the heir apparent to the throne is the first or eldest son (male child) of the incumbent Oba of Benin. There is no contest as to who the next Oba is to be except in very rare cases where and when the incumbent Oba does not have a male child, ascension to the throne can be traced down to the next male child of the Royal bloodline.

The point here is that, Africans in general and Nigerians in particular are so used to having political power obtained and consolidated within the family for as long as possible owing to their monarchical orientation. With the industrial revolution in Europe and the concomitant search for lubricants, Africa was discovered and in turn the political landscape of the continent was adversely affected. For example, with this discovery, the (3) three Cs were introduced to Africa: CHRISTIANITY, CIVILIZATION and COLONIALISM. With the emergence of colonialism, democracy, among other systems of government, emerged as a political system.

It should, however, be noted that democracy was never practiced when the colonial overlords still had control over the African continent. It only existed in principle. It came into practice after many African nations had gained independence and began to test run democracy as a veritable tool that can guarantee progress and advancement. Political analysts and theorists have advocated that democracy is the best kind of government for any group or society. That many African leaders (heads) crave desperately to grab hold and consolidate political power dates far back to the history of traditional Africa. Meanwhile, theorists have suggested that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” (Lord Acton, 1879) In other words, the concentration of power in the hands of one man or a few individuals is bound to be abused and misused.

Socio-political scientists have strongly advocated that a combination of democracy

and Justice are an indispensable panacea to the holistic development of any state or society. Since Nigeria attained her political independence on October 1st 1960, she has fought doggedly to become democratic but couldn't attain this feat until May, 29th 1999 when Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar handed political power to a democratically elected government headed by (Gen.) chief Olusegun Obasanjo (Rtd.) after an acclaimed free and fair election.

A number of public analysts have contended that it is too early to judge the performance of democracy in Nigeria as it is considered a nascent occurrence of less than two decades of its existence. This argument is against the back drop that countries like America, Israel, France, and many other western countries have practiced it for more than a hundred years and have still not gotten it perfectly. The hiccups and drawbacks in the nascent Nigerian democratic process are perceived by many as a normal part of the learning process. This school of thought holds on to the argument that with time the country will get it right, learning from her mistakes.

Many would readily argue that before 1999, justice was almost completely absent in Nigeria, but in recent times, in the present dispensation, the judiciary is beginning to regain the confidence of the people. This is due to the outcome of some cases, especially of state and national interest in such a manner that had never before now happened. That is, in a fashion that the majority interest and the general will, i.e. the will of the people privileged. Some popular cases in point are the election disputes and other political matters which the people believed received fair and just treatment. The interest of the masses was at stake and threatened by the high and mighty but justice prevailed at the end of the day.

Some cases in point are those of the present Edo and Ondo states governments whose mandates were considered stolen and the cases taken to the elections tribunal. The EFCC (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission) is another notable government agency fighting corrupt leaders who have turned public funds to their personal private funds. Thus, converting government property to their private property. The EFCC has publicly persecuted corrupt government

officers who have been found guilty of embezzling government funds and corruptly enriching themselves.

Before the enthronement of democracy in the country, there was no outfit or body to check the activities of public officers, or accountability to the people. In the past, public officers did whatever they pleased while in office without anyone blinking an eye.

SOCIO-POLITICAL STABILITY IN NIGERIA

Before the emergence of democracy in Nigeria, that is, after the attainment of independence, it was more or less autocracy or what can be best described as despotism that existed. Military governments after military governments took charge of the political affairs of the country with the claim that they took over to set things right. There were coups and counter coups in this regard. The constitution was often suspended, the press was not free and the fundamental Human rights were not respected, there was no popular participation and above all the wishes of the masses did not count. The “khaki boys” were completely in charge of the affairs of the country. Any act of protest or resistance was seen as an act of treason-an offence punishable by death. All of these are against the principle of democracy.

During the periods of these military regimes all the machinery of government were completely in the hands IBB-General Ibrahim Babangida and late General Sani Abacha respectively who administered them as they pleased. And because absolute powers were in their hands they almost plunged the country into another round of civil war, besides leaving her in ruins. Justice was totally perverted. Critics of despotism contend that the situation is better in the present political dispensation despite the prevalence of some socio-economic obstacles which appear to be a daunting; they contend that the political and otherwise unity of the country is not threatened and that for them is a pass mark. Despite the current prevalence of incidents like kidnapping, suicide bombings, assassinations and other social problems, Nigeria forges on as a sovereign nation, everyone openly condemns these acts and conducts as counter-productive and

unpatriotic no matter the guise in which they are perpetrated. The violent activities of the resent “Boko Haram” sect has been linked with the world’s most dreaded Al Qaeda group and everyone is joining in the fight against the international terror group. (Punch Newspaper, 2012)

Socio-political and economic stability occur when there is relative peace, decorum and tolerance. Democracy is devoid of political tension in lieu it is characterized by periodic elections, a collective active voice, respect for the judiciary, respect for the fundamental human rights, constitution etc.

CRITIQUE

Since the birth of democracy in Nigeria on May 29th 1999, some contend that they are yet to enjoy the dividends of the system. According to this school of thought we are not just getting it right. Some hold that the military government seems better than the so called democracy. The reply to this school of thought or line of thinking is that it is too early to judge the nascent phenomenon just yet. This school argues that the worst democracy is better than the best military government. A state where the constitution is non-functional is more or less a tyrannic or despotic state.

Advocates of democracy maintain that the nascent democracy in Nigeria is analogous to a toddler who is just learning how to walk for the first time in his life. It would be practically impossible for the child to get up and start walking/running without first taking some few shaky steps and falling and then getting up to try again. It is simply not as easy as that. It is natural for the baby to get up and fall the first time and on second attempt might take a few wobbly steps and fall again. This continues for a while until the child overcomes his/her fears and begin a stagey life of walking never to crawl again. The child will, however, never learn how to walk if it abandons the idea because he fears he will or might fall. The dividends of democracy will take time to come. It is a process and all processes take time.

Investment in a democratic setting most definitely leads to socio-economic,

political and religious development. Investors who are sure that their investments are safe are sure to invest in the economy knowing that they would not have to use their tongue to count their teeth. Unlike the Abacha days when there was insecurity and uncertainty, the international community was weary of the country and never wanted anything to do with her. For example, throughout the entire period Abacha was at the helms of affairs there was no direct flight to or from Nigeria. Foreign investors pulled out their investments for fear of losing their precious investments. The consequent outcome of this was far reaching for Nigeria. Nigeria became a giant leper avoided by everyone. No one was interested in harnessing the great many potentials, especially in its people and its abundant natural resources. In the present democratic situation the table has turned and it is no longer business as usual. Public officers no longer administer their offices with reckless impunity but with caution and prudence knowing a day of reckoning will certainly come. No one ask questions of accountability in a non-democratic environment. In democracy, the people's rights are not trampled upon without consequences.

CONCLUSION.

Machiavelli, in his writings clearly and strongly suggests despotism or tyranny as the best form of government when he advocated his principle of grabbing hold onto power and consolidating it by any means fair or foul. He says a successful Prince (Rex) is known and respected if he is able to successfully consolidate power and keep the principality together as one unified and decorous entity. (Appadorai, A.A. Ibid). Hobbes concurs with Machiavelli when he posits that tyranny or despotism is the best kind of government. For him, this is suitable because man is erratic, unpredictable and intractable in character. So both Machiavelli and Hobbes advocates that men needs to be handed with strongest and hashest of all methods so that he can be kept in check always. Hobbes stresses that the best method is to hand power to a single individual. Critiques, however, reminds Hobbes that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Social

political stability can only be obtainable in a democratic setting.

Let it not be forgotten that it is only in democracy that the three arms of government functions fully and properly. These three arms are held and managed by the people. The judiciary is the hope and final place of respite to all those who believe that they have been treated unfairly and unjustly. The legislatures who enact laws ensure that the laws they put in place serve their own best interest and thereby leading to the attainment of a better and more comfortable society. The executive is a direct representative of the people and not just a handful of individuals as we have it in feudalism, aristocracy etc. In short, all the machinery of government that makes provision of a good and progressive society are at play in democracy and in the long run a society that is well balanced socially, politically, and economically reigns.

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