

DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: RETROSPECTS AND PROSPECTS

INTRODUCTION

By definition, political democracy in nation states requires some minimal level of citizen participation in decision-making. The most effective way of institutionalizing such participation is through some form of representative government (Neubauer, 1967)¹. The degree of democratization in any state can, therefore, be measured by the level of participation of the citizen, through their elected representatives or directly by casting their vote. Also, are the presence of other attributes such as the judiciary and the legislature, and their ability to function independently without interference. At a higher level, democracy includes other variables such as freedom, rights to life, property and association. Several attempts have been made to clarify the reason why Nigeria once considered a "show piece of decolonizing Africa" could then manage to "plummet from such an apogee of grace" (Kirk-Greene, 1977:7)². Attempts at providing answers to the above question have usually focussed on the military who are said to prevent the institutionalization of democracy by their frequent intervention in politics³. Others point to leadership (narrowly defined as those at the helms of affairs) as being unable to chart a good course for democracy (Achebe, 1980)⁴. Other single factors like religion and ethnicity have also been cited (Rubusaka and Shepsle, 1972:10). Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe claim that inability to democratize the state results from the impact of rapid social mobilization (Melson and Wolpe, 1971).

None of these have made any attempt to analyze the conditions under which democracy strives in stable societies so as to ascertain whether such conditions are in Nigeria. This work will present the conditions under which democracy has thrived elsewhere and show that those conditions are lacking here and will then make suggestions towards facilitating those conditions that are so vital for democracy to thrive.

Politico-Historical Conditions

The fact of history as a point here, refers to the time factor required for democracy to develop. Nation-building is generally a slow process, partly because new loyalty must in some measure disclose some system of old loyalties, tribal or otherwise and partly because the state is large, vague, impersonal, and often associated in the subjects mind ... with

onerous regulations as with benefits. In addition to this, there must be present before democracy can take root, a sense of liberalism or institutionalism. This refers to attitudes favourable to compromise, habits of political moderation, commitments to procedures designed to limit arbitrariness to ensure that decisions are not made without hearing all sides and without adequate information and deliberations. Only when these have been well ingrained into the national character, can democracy develop. Looking at the Nigerian political scene, it is apparent that these conditions are yet to evolve and take root. Old loyalties have persisted. Since independence, political parties have been generally formed on tribal lines. It has been clearly demonstrated that all the political parties that have developed in Nigeria are traceable to the three major ethnic groups of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (*Guardian, Nigeria, 1989*).

The government has attempted to develop agencies that could help mobilize Nigerians towards national loyalty, but this has failed woefully. Nigerians have continued to live and work in their respective geographical areas of origin. Those who move elsewhere, do so only as a temporary measure. Even when they live in areas outside their regions for a long time, they generally do not associate themselves with those areas. For instance, it is not possible today for an Igbo from the East to win election as Chairman of any local government in the North or western part of Nigeria, even if he had lived in that area for most of his life.

Factors of language and culture seem to die hard; and the people do not easily assimilate others outside their tribe. Inter-marriage and modern social organizations have not succeeded in welding a Nigerian that is one. As at today, Nigerians are still introduced as Igbo, or Hausa or Yoruba rather than as a Nigerian. Wide differences still persist in the mode of dressing, diet, music, etc. in line with pre-colonial conditions such that one can easily pinpoint in a crowd of a few hundreds those that are Igbo, Hausa or other tribes. Music and food can as quickly be identified. Added to the above, is the total absence of a sense of liberalism and constitutionalism. There is no doubt that the numerous governments that have ruled Nigeria have attempted at different times to build institutions that may guide the development of constitutionalism, yet this has not been helpful in any way. First of all, some of these governments would by their own actions undermine the aspects of constitutionalism which they seek to institutionalize. For instance, one government made a stiff law against examination malpractice in Nigerian schools. It instituted a twenty-two-year jail term for any offender. This same government will send potent

papers from above when one of their relations is involved, squashing the law as it applies and directing that the culprit be freed.

In fact, there is disorder at all levels of the political and social spectrum. In Nigeria, there is no standardized way of doing anything. I, before others, would be an appropriate characterization of the Nigerian scene. No laws prevail that cannot be circumvented, bent or scrapped to please selfish interests. There is no concern for others or even the nation. Moderation, persuasion or compromise is hardly a working tool in Nigeria. There is an unmodulated cut-throat competition for everything. Nigerians cannot queue up for anything or wait for their turn. Political parties can never work out compromise on any issue, such as that at all times anarchy looms really large. This has led the Late Professor Claude Ake to lament the over-politicization of social life,⁵ while Olusegun Obasanjo, former head of state, regretted that Nigerian society, in spite of our efforts since 1975, is not sufficiently disciplined⁶. But it is Claude Ake's over politicization of social life that captures the state of the Nigerian nation. Nigerians, according to him, "...are intoxicated with politics, the premium on political power is so high that we are prone to take the most extreme measure in order to win and maintain political power. Our energy tends to be channelled into struggle for power to the detriment of productive efforts, and we habitually seek political solution to virtually every problem"⁷. Ake explains further that social life is over-politicized because the Nigerian state intervenes everywhere and owns virtually everything, including access to status and wealth. This leads to desperate struggle to win and hold power since this means being powerful and owning everything. Politics is, therefore like warfare, a matter of life and death.

This aspect of the historical political conditions injurious to the development of democracy has persisted in Nigeria. No machinery has yet been put in place to combat it. Nor is there a general or wide spread awareness of their effects. As a result, efforts at democratization have remained an exercise in futility. The logic is simple, and is like planting maize in an environment totally uncondusive to the growth of maize. No matter the quality of maize it may not germinate at all, or if it manages to germinate it will eventually die away. Such is the state of democratization in Nigeria.

The Socio-Economic Order

The socio-economic order that supports the growth of democracy is one in which there is flexibility, and power is not converted in one

identifiable and intercommunicating group, it is one in which the government does not own or monopolize the major means of production, allows free trade unions and other voluntary organizations to function without control; it is in addition a system where wealth and income are not concentrated in the hands of a few. This had led Dahl to conclude that "a competitive regime is unlikely to exist in a country with highly centralized direction of the economy, no matter what form of ownership". Furthermore, research has shown that democratization is more effective in a competitive economy than in a semi-competitive or authoritarian political system (Almond Coleman, 19790).

In relation to Nigeria's socio-economic order, one notices first and foremost the concentration of power in the hands of Muslim and Northerners since independence except for brief periods when it devolved on Olusegun Obasanjo, a Southern on the death of Murtala Mohammed, and on Ernest Shonekan when General Ibrahim Babangida voluntarily stepped down. Not only are the Northerners in control of the leadership position, they also monopolized during the same period key portfolios in the cabinet. In an interview with the *News* magazine on 23rd May, 1994, Chukwuemeka Ezeife, ex-governor of Anambra State restated this point when he observed that "34 years of Hausa/Fulani monopoly of political power in Nigeria has been a story of monotonic decline". In a country with three major ethnic groups and several minorities, it would have been in the interest of democracy and nation building to spread the major positions in government broadly. Unfortunately, this condition is lacking and this had gone a long way to discourage unity which is most essential for democracy. Agitation against this had been in the background of the crisis that destroyed the second republic. During elections for the third republic, rotation of the presidency and an even distribution of key offices were cardinal points. When eventually M.K.O Abiola (a Southerner, though Moslem) won the election, and General Babangida, a Northerner annulled it, it was generally perceived as a rehearsed measure intended to safeguard the north from losing its monopoly of power. Alhaji Umaru Dikko in exile and one-time Minister of Aviation is said to have warned that should the north allow a Southerner to rule, all efforts of the past three decades would have been totally lost.

The crisis which this nullification engendered and the animosity thereof, threatened the very survival of the Nigerian state as it was beginning to rumour wildly that the Yorubas were about to secede from the federation. The Igbo, another major ethnic group had seceded in 1967

for the same reason of marginalization. The Nigerian civil war fought thereafter demonstrated the degree of bitterness over the issue of monopoly of power by one ethnic group for too long. The fear of another such war still looms large.

In effect, temperance persuasion and co-operation which are the basis of democracy were jettisoned while full scale anarchy is let loose. During the first republic, the three regions remained in constant conflict with the federal government led by Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. This reached fever heat during the 1964 elections leading to the riots in Western Nigeria, breakdown of law and order and the eventual military take-over of 1966.

Fidel Odum (1990), described the crisis relationship between the federal government and state governments under the Shagari regime (1979-83) in these words:

"The Federal Government ... was incredibly, imperious. Equally, over-bearing were some of the State Governments, but the Federal Government misconstrued its superiority to a point where it spurned in many ways the power and authority of its inseparable partners in governance... Examples are legion, of steps taken by the Federal Government in the Second Republic which guaranteed it a show-down with the duly constituted and separately elected State Governments. For one, the idea of deploying presidential Liaison Officer to the State was clearly an act of aggravation. More gratuitously, the attempt by the centre to not only conceive but implement programmes which were clearly within the competence of states... exacerbated inter-governmental crisis."⁸

Such has been the state of affairs in Nigeria; it has never had a quiet moment. It is either that ethnic, religious, or other related issues would lead to crisis of incredible dimensions or the political elite would go to war against themselves using up above mentioned issue as much as they deem fit to serve their personal political interests.

Again, the various governments since independence have monopolized the means of production, allowed only shaky freedom for trade unions and other voluntary organizations, while wealth and income are concentrated in the hands of only a few Nigerians. Virtually, all industries of substance are owned by the Federal or State government; if they can't own them alone, then the government would, at least, retain a substantial share. The rest are owned by foreign private firms in

conjunction with less than ten percent of Nigerians who are rich enough to make the down-payments required to own a share.

There is, as well, wide disparity in the area of wages, for while Federal Government workers receive better pay than their state counterparts, those in private-owned companies earned well above both. From another angle, teachers were the worst hit for in their own case, there was no fixed pay. Both in the second and third republics, in several states, teachers were constantly owed salaries for between six and nine months at a time.

Put together, the workers; civil servants and teachers, including others in private or government-owned corporation were receiving pay that was well below what obtained in many other countries. At one time a University professor in Nigeria was paid annually, the equivalent of five hundred dollars. Even internal differences in the wage of the lower class and the higher class was outrageously guided against the lower class. Nothing but misery characterized life in Nigeria. The middle class known for its balancing effect between the rich and poor was clearly wiped out. What remained were the powerful and wealthy members of the 10 percent of the national population, and the rest. The patriot described the condition when he said, "The rising cost of living has made life so intolerable that even the so-called middle class cannot comfortably afford three square meals a day⁹.

As if these were not enough, the economy itself was in jeopardy. Since 1979, the price of crude oil on which the nation depends for hard currency has been falling. This reduced the ability of the Federal Government to fund imports of both raw materials and consumable for the economy. Again, the economy itself had been elitist in nature. This compelled the economy to develop along the lines that served the class. Factories and industries were built whose main function was to produce substitutes to imported products for the elites. As the economy drifted from deep sea to deep sea, the Federal Government battled in vain to salvage it with programmes like SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme), SFEM and FEM (Foreign Exchange Markets). Each effort led to a more helpless conditions seen in the helpless proclamation of the then Head of State, General Babangida "that the Nigerian economy had defied all solutions"¹⁰.

The result of all these on the efforts at democratization are among others, that it removed the cushion which economy prosperity provides for compromise. The uncertainty surrounding the fortunes of the Nigerian

economy led many Nigerians into corrupt practices. This occurred directly when government funds were stolen in order for people to live a good life or when government workers either in the customs, police, ports authority, banks and others used their offices to corruptly enrich themselves. The ordinary Nigerians who had no control of government funds or positions to use in order to get rich took to protest,¹¹ armed robbery¹² and other crimes all in the bid to provide a better life for themselves. But these were nothing compared with the huge, mind-boggling amounts which Nigerian leaders - heads of state, ministers, governors, chairmen of council, etc. have stolen from the federal treasury.¹³

The socio-economic atmosphere in Nigeria is like a rat race. A lot of premium is placed on acquisition with little or no regard for the respect of law or concern for others which are the basic conditions for democracy. Even the government is most of the time, reckless in its spending of what is left after others have been stolen. Useless projects that serve nobody's interest except for those in government, are pursued with no concern for the detrimental effects of these on the nation. Democracy cannot develop in an unproductive, mismanaged and disorderly economy. The atmosphere of uncertainty, strife and hopelessness which is concomitant to this is also not in the least helpful for democracy. Unfortunately, this had been the case in Nigeria, hence attempts at democratization had failed consistently.

The Political Culture

Political culture includes a collection of individual characteristics, values, attitudes, beliefs, myths, sentiment and ideology, that pervades the individuals or states political arena. Without argument, it is extremely difficult to quantify and analyze things like sentiments or beliefs for an individual let alone a State. On this issue, Dahl (op. cit.) had warned that "at present and for an indefinite future, no explanatory theory can account satisfactorily for the beliefs of political activists and leaders". This notwithstanding, it is possible to articulate certain individual characteristics and beliefs that impinge on democracy. The first of these are dignity, autonomy and respect for person. It should be obvious that wide spread commitment to these values is exceedingly important for a stable democracy. By this began a sense of privacy, a demand for areas of life that are sacrosanct is part of the individualistic complex. In other words, an attitude of healthy skepticism towards Authority. According to Pennock, democracy needs citizens who respect the law and resist its abuse

- it needs citizens with clear sense of the proper limits of state authority and readiness to do battle, at least, by legal means, in support of these limits. Looked at from the Nigerian perspective, it is difficult to say that a sense of respect for others had existed at any period since independence in 1960. Both military and civilian governments have never shown respect for human dignity. Examples abound of individuals, oppositions and political enemies who have either been brutalized in jail without trial or killed by unknown persons. Two will suffice here: the detention of civil rights activists like the popular Lagos lawyer, Gani Fawehmi, Restus Ajayi and the life sentence of union leaders. The murder of a legislator in Umuahia, the murder of the Chairman of the Social Democratic Party in Port Harcourt, and Chairman, Oredo Local Government in Bendel State are other examples.

A second set of values include trust, tolerance and willingness to compromise. These are necessary if not important for democracy to thrive. In Nigeria, the fact that Governments have been illegitimate, creates constant room for distrust. Even civilian governments have had legitimacy problems because of the rigging and other electoral violations. Nobody really trusts anybody or any system in Nigeria. Like trust, tolerance is very low, if not completely absent. Nigeria can easily win the title of the least tolerant state in the world. And without tolerance and sympathy for people's ideas, passions or feelings, there can never be compromise. In Nigeria, no major issue has led to a compromise. Up till now, there is still disagreement on the correctness or otherwise of the 1963 census, quota system of admission to universities, revenue allocation formula, state creation and many others.

Thirdly, is the commitment to Democratic procedures and values. By this we refer to the willingness of the political elite and masses to agree to play according to the rules, that is, to cast only one vote and avoid rigging of all sorts, give others a fair chance to win and accept defeat without bitterness and rancour. Since 196, the Nigerian political scene had been characterized by political violence, rigging, double voting and unwillingness to accept defeat. This disregard for democratic procedures and values has remained one of the main factors working against the establishment of democracy in Nigeria.

The fourth variable, important as an aspect of political culture relevant to the establishment of democracy, is Nationalism. This refers to a commitment to something more evocative of emotion, more warming to the heart than a set of procedures, a commitment to a nation as most

important even above the democratic value of liberty and equality. Rupert Emerson denied it as "one of the major manifestations of the modern social ferment which overturns traditional social relationships and gives new consequence to formerly submerged elements of society. This sense of the Nation as most important and clear to everybody's heart is one of the glaring inadequacies of the Nigerian polity. As far back as the 1930s, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a powerful political activist and leader of the Yoruba described Nigeria as a mere "geographical expression". Recently, in a freshman government class, I put this question across to over five hundred students: How many of you will agree to donate your school fees to save Nigeria from bankruptcy? The result was zero. I put the question differently by asking how many would be ready to sacrifice their lives to save Nigeria from external aggression, the result was again the same. In so many other facets it can be deduced that Nationalism is not yet a part of the Nigerian political lexicon. The creation of states recently seemed to have totally destroyed the idea of nationalism as most Nigerians have continued to return to their traditional homes or states, seeing themselves first as Kalabaris, Yorubas, etc., and not as Nigerians. The National anthem and pledge are more lip-service and are usually sung-recited without any feelings or attachment whatsoever.

Finally, the presence of democratic institutions, viz: constitution, political parties, pressure groups and others are an integral part of the requirement for the establishment of democracy. It is not just establishing them, but respecting them and avoiding all sorts of interference and manipulation. In Nigeria since independence in 1960, there has been three constitutions and none of them lasted more than four years. Attempts in 1962 to establish the West-Minster type of system, and the 1979 Presidential system were all abysmal failures. The 1993 attempt to mix these with traditional variables ended in a fiasco which nearly put Nigeria out of existence. For democracy to thrive, Nigerians must begin to respect political institutions which help to sustain democratic values.

Conclusion and Suggestions

It should be clear at this point that the problem of democratization in Nigeria is not just a problem of leadership though this is no less important. The problem goes well beyond the role of a leader. The fact of the matter is that the colonial masters for some reasons never properly prepared Nigeria for democracy. None of the conditions that enhance democracy was nurtured or even introduced.

The conditions for Democracy have never been there, and for Democracy to take root, efforts must first of all be made to create those conditions. The paths that can be followed in creating these conditions are discussed in the options that follow.

Option 1: This option is founded on the general conclusion that the basic conditions for democracy are non-existent. Therefore, in order to create those conditions, a ten-year period of negotiated apprenticeship is recommended. During this period, assistance should be sought from Britain, USA and India by way of allowing these three democracies to control and nurse the seeds of democracy in Nigeria.

The proposal is that each of these countries should appoint five of their nationals into an interim supervision board (ISB) based in Nigeria. The duty of this board would include the supervision of all elections and appointments, supervision of the judiciary and other arms of government. They would also review cases and petitions on all matters directed to it. The board would also have the right to oversee the legislature, pointing out and correcting anomalies of all sorts. The board would be an impartial umpire on all matters affecting the state.

To strengthen this board, the following should be co-opted: (1) Head of the Muslim religion (2) Head of the Christian religion (3) Traditional rulers representing (a) Hausa/Fulani (b) Igbo (c) Yoruba (d) two from any of the minority tribes. Altogether, the membership of the ISB should be twenty-two, i.e., fifteen from outside and seven from within.

The board would have the right to over-rule on all disputed legislative, executive and judicial matters affecting the Nigerian state for ten years, broken into five years terms.

Option II: This option has the same qualities as the first except that its membership would all be Nigerians. In this case, the ISB should be a thirty-one man board made up in the following manner:

- (i) one representative each of all the armed services, i.e. Army, Navy, Air-force, Police;
- (ii) one representative each for all the labour unions in the country not exceeding twenty members altogether;
- (iii) one representative each for Moslem and Christian religions;
- (iv) five traditional rulers selected from (a) Hausa/Fulani (b) Igbo (c) Yoruba (d) two from any of the minority tribes.

Again, their duty would be similar to that of the ISB in option one. The chairmanship for both shall be elected by members annually.

FOOTNOTES

1. Deane Neubauer: Some conditions of Democracy. *APSR* Vol. LXI, Dec. 1967.
2. Kirk-Green, A.H.M. 1976. *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*. Vol. 1, London, Oxford University Press.
3. Mostly the view of Nigerian politicians.
4. Chinua Achebe 1980: *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Fourth Dimension Press Enugu.
5. Claude Ake's Presidential Address to the Nigerian Political Science Association, May 25, 1985.
6. *Fortune*, July 16 1970, p.147.
7. Claude Ake, *op. cit.*, 116-4.
8. Fidel Odum "Making the Nation Work". *The Guardian* (Nig.), Sunday, March 11, 1990, p.6. *African Concord* Vol. 7, no. 38, Feb. 1993.
9. Text of Address by Alhaji Maitama Sule to the Concord Conference, 1st November, 1998.
10. *The Guardian* (Nig.) Friday, July 13, 1984, p.13.
11. Mass Protests have occurred on several occasions since 1960, but the May 1990 riots nearly reduced Nigeria to shreds.
12. Violent crimes like armed robbery became a regular feature in Nigeria since 1970, but it peaked during the 1990s, when armed robbers like the notorious Anini could take the Federal Government to ransoms for several months.
13. Nigeria is a typical example of a country where rulers do not serve but suck the nation. There is no Nigerian who had held any of these positions in the past that is not a multi-millionaire today. Evidence for this is easily available in the type of property they own ranging from cars that cost up to ₦2m (two million naira) to houses with built-in amenities like boreholes, giant plants, satellite dishes, etc. in many parts of the country.

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