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Exigencies and Controversies of Democracy in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper critically examined the exigency of democracy in Nigeria – a cause of tremendous scandal. The concept of democracy has been examined by different scholars throughout the world. In Nigeria, many scholars emphasized much on the positive impact(s) of democracy since its inception till date. However, this work strictly looked at the controversies it brought to the nation. A critical method of data collection was used to carry out the investigation. It was critical in other to draw out some factors that ought to be observed as a democratic nation. Data was collected through existing scholarly works, including journals, textbooks, newspapers, and other useful materials found in the library. The findings revealed that the concept of democracy has been misinterpreted and brought disasters into the vein of the nation due to the inability of the elected aristocratic leaders who have seen this as “coteblanche” (freedom) to scandalize, bully, embezzle, and siphon the milk of the nation. This paper concluded and recommended that since democracy promotes equal rights, then, the concept of democracy must be observed and practiced. Political leaders’ immunity should be removed for proper justice against violation. The Constitution must be re-reviewed and the concept of equality spelled out in the Constitution should not be theoretical.

Keywords: Democracy, Nigeria, government, political, military, election, controversy, constitution

Introduction

Exigencies and controversies of democracy in Nigeria reflect the challenges faced by the country in its efforts to build a stable and inclusive democratic system. Nigeria has experienced numerous military coups and transitions between military and civilian rule, leading to a lack of continuity and stability in its democratic governance. Elections in Nigeria have been marred by allegations of fraud, vote rigging, and violence, undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the democratic process. Widespread corruption within the political system has eroded public trust in democratic institutions and hindered the effective functioning of governance. Nigeria's diverse population and complex ethno-religious dynamics have often led to tensions and conflicts, which threatens the stability and inclusivity of the democratic system.

Nigeria's democratic institutions, including the judiciary, legislature, and electoral commission, have often been perceived as weak and susceptible to political influence, undermining their effectiveness and independence. Violations of human rights, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, and restrictions on freedom of expression, have raised concerns about the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms in Nigeria's democratic system.

Persistent poverty, inequality, and economic underdevelopment have posed significant challenges to the consolidation of democracy and the delivery of public



services to the Nigerian people. Addressing these exigencies and controversies requires concerted efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, promote transparency and accountability, and address the root causes of political instability, corruption, and social tensions. It also requires a commitment to upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights, and fostering inclusive and participatory governance. Ultimately, the success of democracy in Nigeria will depend on the ability of its leaders and citizens to address these challenges and build a more resilient and responsive democratic system.

Scholarly Perspectives on Democracy

It is difficult to reach a consensus on the definition of democracy; the main idea of democracy is widely accepted to have originated from Athens in the 5th century B. C. Democracy is a government in which supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through representation (Nwogu, 2015). According to Ferdinand Muller-Rommel and Brigitte Geibel (2020) democracy means inclusive, collective will formation and decision-making, aiming at political responsiveness in the sense of effective transformation of citizens' preferences into policies and outcomes while ensuring political rights and liberties via constraints of the will of the people. To Warrew (2017), this definition gives no clear indication of how people are meant to rule. Therefore, the normative idea of democracy must be related to the concrete functioning of political institutions in a state, as expressed in the rule of the land. However, one could support him by echoing the popular saying that democracy is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Linz (1997) argued in support that "No state, no democracy." That is, the democratic power of a government is not vested in the ruling party or leader but in all citizens.

O'Donnel (1999) said that the realistic definition of democracy contains two kinds of components. The first consists of an assertion of what it takes for elections to be considered sufficiently competitive. This is a stipulated definition, not different from "triangle means, a plane figure enclosed by three straight lines," it asserts that elections are to be considered competitive if each one of the attributes spelled out holds. The second definition lists conditions designated as freedoms, guarantees, or primary political rights that surround fair and free elections. These freed are conditions of existence of an object competitive elections to which they stand in a causal relationship. By quoting Philippe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl (1996), modern political democracy is a system of government in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives. The definition only reveals little about two important matters, (i) how to characterize existing democracies and (ii) how to meditate in theory if not in practice.

Seyla Benhabib (1996) opined that democracy is a model for institutions of society based on the principle that decisions affecting the well-being of a collectivity can be viewed as the outcome of a procedure of free deliberation among individuals, considered moral and politically equal. Larry Diamond et al (2004) offered a similar definition of democracy as a system of government that meets three essential conditions; meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (political parties) for all effective positions of governmental power at regular

intervals and excluding the use of force. A highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies through regular and fair elections, such that no major social group is excluded, and a level of civil and political liberties, freedom of expression, press, freedom to form and join organizations, sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation.

Dahi et al (2003) stated that in a representative democracy, every vote has equal weight, no increasable restrictions can apply to anyone seeking to become a representative and the freedom of its eligible citizens is sealed by legitimized rights and liberties which are typically protected by a constitution. An offshoot of this variant is the Westminster system as practiced in the United Kingdom with a governing monarch, parliamentary participation, and judicial independence. This is different from the democracy practiced in the United States of America which practices separation of power between three arms of government—the executive, legislative, and judiciary. However, this allows credible elections that promote equality among all eligible citizens in all respects and also ensures that the rules of all elections are clear, set out in advance, and do not privilege any group or individual over another (Nwogu, 2015). Nassbaum (2000) asserted that the basic feature of democracy is the capacity of all voters to participate freely and fully in the life of their society and that democracy is a form of government in which all eligible citizens have an equal say in law-making. Having examined some scholars' views on the topic, a question arose, Is the concept of democracy fully observed in Nigeria?

Pre-Democratic Era in Nigeria

A history of Nigeria can be traced to settlers trading across the Middle East and Africa as early as 1100 BC. Numerous ancient Africans settled in the region that is known today as Nigeria, such as the Kingdom of Nri, Benin Empire, Oyo Empire, etc. Islam reached Nigeria through the Borno Empire—between 1063 and 1384 AD, while Christianity came to Nigeria in the 15th Century. History of Nigeria has been crucially affected by the transatlantic slave trade which slanted in the late 15 century. However, Lagos was invaded by British forces in 1861 and formally annexed in 1865 (Ojukwu et. al, 2020). From the creation of the Lagos Colony in 1861 to the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorate of Nigeria in 1914, constitution-making and not general legislation was the chief concern of the British crown in the Nigerian government. The crown regarded constitution-making as its exclusive preserve with which the Nigerian legislative must not be allowed to intermeddle. In 1915, Lord Lugard established the Nigerian council which was advisory to the government and wielded both executive and legislative powers. Clifford's constitution of 1922 introduced an elective principle that gave franchise to Lagos and Calabar. By 1946, Richard's Constitution divided Nigeria into three regions and brought in regional Houses of Assembly and a bicameral legislature in Northern Nigeria only, embedded with House of Assembly and House of Assembly of Unicameral, one legislature each. Macpherson's Constitution of 1951 introduced a bicameral legislature in Western Nigeria and political parties. By 1954, Littleton's Constitution embraced a federal status for Nigeria making the reign autonomous and providing for a premier for each region before the 1960 Constitution gave

independence to Nigeria; yet Nigeria still retained the British crown as her head of state (Abubakar, 2005).

After the amalgamation of the North and South, Nigeria became unified under a unitary system. The Northern territory provided a seat for the operation of the indirect rule system that later failed in the East when it was extended there. Economic necessity made amalgamation desirable. The period of 1914 to 1922 witnessed the development of representation government in Nigeria, even though there were considerable limitations. However, four indigenous peoples were elected into the newly created legislative council and two political parties appeared to contest these seats (Nwokeji, 2019).

Republic in Nigeria

In October 1963 Nigeria proclaimed herself the Federal Republic of Nigeria and former Governor General Nnamdi Azikiwe became the country's first president. From the outset, Nigeria's ethnic and religious tensions were magnified by the disparities in economic and educational development between the south and north. The Action Group was maneuvered out of control of the western region. The federal government and a new pro-government Yoruba party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) took over, shortly afterward, the Action Group (AG) opposition leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo was imprisoned without foundation. The 1965 national election produced a major realignment of politics and a disputed result that set the country on the path to civil war (Meredith, 2005). The north dominated Northern People's Congress (NPC) went into a conservative alliance with the new Yoruba NNDP, leaving the Igbo National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) to coalesce with the remnants of the AG in a progressive alliance. In the vote, widespread electoral fraud was alleged and riots erupted in the Yoruba west where the heartland of the AG discovered had elected pro-government NNDP representatives.

On January 15, 1966, a group of army officers mostly from southeastern Igbo overthrew the government and assassinated the Prime Minister. The bloody nature of the young majors' coup caused another coup to be carried out by General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, some young majors were arrested, and detained by the Ironsi government. The Federal Military Government that assumed power under Ironsi was unable to quiet ethnic tensions on the issue and unable to provide a constitution acceptable to all sections of the country. Most fateful for the Ironsi government was the decision to issue decree No. 34 which sought to unify the nation (John, 2007). Decree No. 34 sought to do away with the whole federal structure under which the Nigerian government had been organized. General Yakubu Gowon toppled power in July 1966. The name Federal Republic of Nigeria was restored on August 31, 1966 (John, 2007). In a move towards greater autonomy for minority ethnic groups, the military divided the four regions into 12 states. Following the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War which came to an end with the speech "No victory, no vanquished" in 1970, the country turned to the task of economic development. The U. S. intelligence community concluded in November 1970 that Nigeria's civil war ended with relatively little rancor, where Igbo were accepted as fellow citizens and that General Yakubu Gowon was the accepted national leader. On July 29, 1975 General Murtala

Mohammed and his group staged a bloodless coup against Gowon, accusing him of corruption and delaying the promise to return to civilian rule. General Mohammed replaced thousands of civil servants and announced a timetable for the resumption of civilian rule by 1st October 1979. He was assassinated on February 13, 1976 in an abortive coup and his chief of staff Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo became the Head of State. In 1979, five political parties competed in a series of elections in which Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was elected as president (Meredith, 2005). In 1982, the ruling national party of Nigeria, a conservative alliance led by Shagari, had hoped to retain power through patronage and control over the Federal Electoral Commission. In August 1983, Shagari and his party were returned to power in a landslide, with a majority of seats in the National Assembly and control of 12 state governments. But the elections were marred by violence and allegations of widespread voter fraud including missing returns, polling places failing to open, and obvious rigging of results. By December 31, 1983, the military overthrew the second republic. Major General Muhammadu Buhari emerged as the leader of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), the country's ruling body. Buhari's government was peacefully overthrown by the SMC's third-ranking member, General Ibrahim Babangida, in August 1985 (Diamond, 2005). Babangida cited the misuse of the SMC and the government's failure to deal with the country's deepening economic crisis as justifications for the takeover.

During his first day in office, President Babangida moved to restore freedom of the press and to release political detainees being held without charge. As part of a 15-month economic emergency plan, he announced pay cuts for the military, police, civil servants, and the private sector. President Babangida demonstrated his intent to encourage public participation in decision-making by opening a national debate on proposed economic reform and recovery members. However, the public response convinced him of intense opposition to an economic recession. He promised to return the country to civilian rule by 1990 which has extended until January 1993. The history of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, which most observers deemed to be Nigeria's fairest, early returns indicated that wealthy Yoruba businessman M. K. O. Abiola won a decisive victory. But on June 23, Babangida used several pending lawsuits as a pretense and annulled the election, thronging Nigeria into turmoil. More than 100 were killed in riots before Babangida agreed to hand power to an interim government on August 27, 1993. He later attempted to renege on this decision, but with popular and military support, he was forced to hand over to Ernest Shonekan, a prominent nonpartisan businessman. Shonekan was to rule until elections scheduled for February 1994. Although he had led Babangida's transitional council since 1993, he was unable to reverse Nigeria's economic problems or defuse lingering political tension. On November 17, 1993, General Sani Abacha assumed power and Shonekan was forced to resign. Abacha dissolved all democratic institutions and replaced elected governors with military officers. He also promised to restore civilian rule but refused to announce a transitional timetable until 1995. Opposition leaders formed the National Democratic Coalition which campaigned to reconvene the senate and other disbanded democratic institutions.

On June 11, 1994, Moshood Abiola declared himself as president and went into hiding until his arrest on 23 June. In protest, petroleum workers called a strike and

other unions joined the strike demanding the release of Abiola and hand over of power to him. After calling off a threatened strike in July, the Nigeria Labour Congress reconsidered a general strike in August after the government imposed conditions on Abiola's release. On August 17, 1994, the government dismissed the leadership of the NLC and Petroleum Union, placing the unions under appointed administrations and arrested other unions' leaders. In early 1995, the government alleged that military officers and civilians were engaged in a coup plot. Security officers rounded up the accused—former Head of State Obasanjo and his deputy, retired General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua. In a secret tribunal, most of the accused were convicted and several death sentences were handed down. Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others were sentenced to death and they were executed on November 10, 1995. By 1st October 1995, Abacha announced the timetable for a three-year transition to civilian rule. Only five political parties were approved by the regime and voter turnout for local elections in December 1997 was under 10%. On December 20, 1997, General Oladipo Diya, ten officers, and eight civilians were arrested and tried before Gen. Malu's military tribunal on charges of coup plotting. Diya and five others were sentenced to death, to die by firing squad. Then, Abacha enforced authority through the Federal Security System which was accused of numerous human rights abuses, including infringements on freedom of speech, assembly, association, and travel, and violence against women. Abacha died of heart failure on June 8, 1998 and was replaced by General Abdulsalam Abubakar. On August 1, 1998, Abubakar appointed the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to conduct elections for local government councils, state legislatures, governors, the National Assembly and the president. The INEC successfully held elections on December 5, 1998, January 9, 1999, and February 20-27, 1999 respectively. The former Military Head of State, Olusegun Obasanjo who was freed from prison by Abubakar ran as a civilian candidate and won the presidential election. The PRC (Provisional Ruling Council, a Nigeria Intelligence Agency) promulgated a new constitution, based largely on the suspended 1979 constitution, before May 29, 1999 inauguration of the new civilian president. The constitutions included provisions for a bicameral legislature, the National Assembly consisting of a 360-member House of Representatives and 109 Senate members.

Democracy in Nigeria: A Cause of Tremendous Scandal

For democracy to engender national development there must be a sincere effort at institutionalizing egalitarianism which will lead to turning the economy around, redressing educational system, mending traumatized psyche, replacing disillusionment among people with healthy skepticism, ensuring rapid explanation of technological bases, tracking unacceptable and intolerable level of poverty, transforming rural areas into centers of production and cementing unity rather than fanning the embers of disunity in in the polity (Osinachi, 2009).

Most political crisis experienced in Nigeria was the consequences of political intolerance which most times became an open invitation to military takeover. Corruption and institutional decay was another feature of democracy in Nigeria. The political parties, mass media, judiciary, and legislature were all immersed in corruption. Most embarrassing was the level of corruption bestriding the judiciary which is supposed to be the last hope of the common man. The national assembly

was lambasted by Obasanjo as unarmed bandits; arguing further that the constituency allowances they do receive was a huge fraud and corruption. The strikes consistently broke up as a result of the so much money spent on the individual benefits of members of the national assembly while the education sector suffered neglect. Rather than make pro-active, development-orientated laws, members of the National Assembly were busy milking the state dry. Although democracy was transplanted to Nigeria, the environment was not made absorptive enough to accommodate it. The way it was handled by our leaders did not encourage national development (Ogbulafor et al, 2018).

From the foregoing, however, democracy in Nigeria does not exude the expected democratic flavour needed to foster national development. Reason: by birth and inclination, the behavioural orientation of Nigerian leadership is symmetrically opposed to models they have copied (Ngele, 2018). From 1999 till date, the parties on the saddle have not indicated any commitment to democracy and national development. Daily newsreel is replete with causes of hate speeches, corruption, and agitations against marginalization. The economy remains dependent while the unemployment rate is catastrophic. Religious bigotry and ethnicity manifest in obnoxious and stringent manipulation of the political system. The questions that beg for answers became: Has there been any free and fair election conducted credibly in the country since the advent of democracy? Are the political leaders democratic in nature?

The situation remains that some anti-democratic acts have saturated the ruling system—including rigging of elections, fraud, bastardizing human rights, and embezzlement among others. Nigeria is considered a nation in distress with more than two-thirds of the population living below the poverty line. The unemployment figure is soaring, with the National Bureau of Statistics official figure putting it at 23 percent. Education and health sectors are said to be comatose and virtually collapsed. The cost of doing business in the country is astrologically high due to a lack of access to soft loans, infrastructural deficits, and multiple taxation. According to Jide (2019), “It is very unfortunate that since the 1st republic till date (4th republic) there isn’t much to cheer about because the native land is still seriously facing challenges in the area of good governance and all indices of development are pointing downwards.” Gerontocracy and aristocracy are ironically practiced in Nigeria because the ruling system has been automatically restricted to the aged ones since the inception of the nation, and the young, energetic, charismatic, and intelligent citizens have been shunned from the system.

President Muhammad Buhari denied rumors that he would seek a third term. A third term would violate the constitution of Nigeria transitioned from military to civilian rule in 1999. The transition was the result of a bargain struck by an elite cabal between 1998 and 1999, following the death of the brutal dictator Sani Abacha. Among the principal points was that the presidency would alternate every eight years among the ethnicities. A corollary was that if the presidential nominee was Christian then, the vice nominee would be Muslim. However, this has currently cursed a controversy in the country against the All Progressives Congress (APC) presidential aspirants. The general theme of power alternation rather than power sharing as an approach to governance dates back to the colonial period – the principle

called 'zoning or power shift' that is, the principle of alternation every eight years of the South and the North. An attempt was made by Olusegun Obasanjo when he was the president to violate it but with the help of the liberals who were against him, his attempt failed (John, 2019). Yet, has interchanging of power resolved the nation's predicament or restored the tenet of equality, and has this principle been sincerely observed? Nigeria, the giant of Africa, is in a critical condition due to the corrupt practices of the elected aristocratic political leaders who saw democracy as a freedom to embezzle public funds, bully or silent any citizen who is willing to challenge them under hate speech, and siphon the country's treasury.

Conclusion

The exigency of democracy in Nigeria is a cause of tremendous scandal due to the deep-rooted corruption, political instability, and social unrest that have plagued the country for decades. Nigeria has a long history of military coups, rigged elections, and human rights abuses, which have severely undermined the democratic process and eroded public trust in the government. One of the main reasons for the scandalous state of democracy in Nigeria is the pervasive corruption within the political system. Politicians and government officials have been involved in embezzlement, bribery, and kickbacks, leading to widespread public disillusionment and anger. This has created a system where the interests of the ruling elite are prioritized over the needs of the people, resulting in economic inequality and social injustice.

Besides, the lack of effective governance and rule of law has contributed to the erosion of democratic principles in Nigeria. The country has struggled with ethnic and religious tensions, as well as a lack of accountability and transparency in government institutions. This has led to a culture of impunity, where those in power are able to act with latitude and without fear of consequences, further undermining the democratic process. Also, the prevalence of electoral fraud and manipulation has undermined the credibility of democratic elections in Nigeria. There have been numerous reports of voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, and vote rigging, which have called into question the legitimacy of the electoral process and the ability of the government to represent the will of the people.

In light of these challenges, it is evident that the pressing necessity for democracy in Nigeria has become a source of considerable controversy. The country is in desperate need of political and institutional reform to address the root causes of corruption, instability, and social unrest. Without meaningful changes, the democratic process in Nigeria will continue to be marred by scandal and controversy, and the country will struggle to achieve the stability and progress that its people deserve. Undoubtedly, the critical need for authentic democracy in Nigeria has led to widespread disrepute (Beaumont, 2021). To have a better Nigeria as a reformed 4th republic nation, therefore, the constitution should be re-reviewed and strictly observed in favour of the citizens. Justice should be maintained without favouritism and nepotism. The concept of democracy should be practiced and not merely theorized.

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