

The Practice of Inauthentic Democracy in Nigeria: My Worry

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Abstract

Democracy popularly regarded as the government of the people, by the people and for the people remains one of the best systems of government. The advent of democracy in Nigeria, after many years of military rule opened up the opportunity for the majority to be represented in government. To many, it opened the door of progress, growth and development they have waited for over the years. Hence, the beginning of democratic rule in 1999 brought a lot of hopes to Nigerians. However, while it remains true that Nigeria is governed by democratically elected leaders, Nigeria is yet to practice an authentic democratic system and a model that fits its nation. Consequently, Nigeria is faced with social maladies such as bad governance, corruption, poverty, economic imbalance, power tussle, and many other leadership problems. This work sets out to expose the practice of inauthentic democracy in Nigeria and the remedy to this situation. It recommends among others that Nigeria should integrate in its governance democratic principles and that Nigeria should evolve a democracy that works for her.

KEYWORDS: *Democracy, Nigeria, Government, Democratic principles*

Introduction

Democracy has won for itself a household name across all societies in the world today. The concept has gain prominence largely because it is believed to be an ideal system of government and a prerequisite for growth, development and sustainability of a society as opposed to a military autocracy. It is based on the

maxim contained in the American Declaration of Independence from British rule that all men are created equal, and they are endowed with certain inalienable right by their creator (Joseph, 2011:246). Accordingly, government exists to secure these rights, and government must derive their powers from the consent of the governed.

The concept 'democracy' is not strange to an overwhelming percentage of Nigerians, because it is a common word used in Nigeria. However, what may be strange to them is the ideal practice of democracy which results in continuous development seen in political stability, economic growth, scientific and technological advancement, educational development and life-enhancing social services. It was in 1999 when Nigeria returned to civil rule that she adopted a democratic system of governance. The new turn was widely embraced by Nigerians. It was viewed as key to promoting legitimacy, changing cultures of exclusion and ensuring better decision making. Such goals were unattainable under the military regime. The expectation of Nigerians was very high and there was so much confidence in this new system of government to bring about an end to untold hardship of the masses and unprecedented transformation in the lives of the people. Unfortunately, this turned out to be a mirage. Despite over two decades of civilian democracy, none of these have been attained. This development has redirected us to pertinent questions about the potency of democracy to deliver development in Nigeria: Is there a Nigerian democracy? Has it failed Nigerians? Is it really working in Nigeria? Why is it not working in Nigerian? What can be done to arrest the situation? This work therefore sets to expose the practice of inauthentic democracy in Nigeria and what can be done to remedy the situation.

The Concept and Meaning of Democracy

Indeed, there is probably no concept that has been so subjected to varying definitions, antagonistic interpretations and contradictory practices as the concept of democracy in contemporary political analysis. Gallie may therefore not be wrong in including democracy in the catalogue of what he referred to as ‘essentially contested concepts’ since a term that means anything means nothing (Andrew Coax et. al., 1885). This appears to be the case with democracy which nowadays is not so much a term of precision and specific meaning but a vague endorsement of a popular idea.

Notwithstanding, some conjectural attempts have been made to explain the concept of democracy. For Ukana, any meaningful attempt at understanding democracy must proceed from the ancient definition of democracy as peoples’ rule (Ukana, 1988). The Greek words 'demos' and 'kratia' mean people and rule or authority respectively. Thus, democracy refers to ‘rule by the people’.

In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln gave what has since become the most famous definition of democracy. In the Address, Lincoln asserted that ‘all men are created equal’ and defined democracy as ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’. (Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address” 1863). This definition makes the people the subject and object of democracy. The definition stresses the principle of equality since all men are supposedly created equal. Thus, a democratic state is often said to be one wherein the citizens have equal access to justice, job, power, privilege, etc.

Andrew Gamble describes a democratic state as the ‘republic of equals’. (Andrew, 1981). This is because democracy implies that there should be a substantial degree of equality among men. However, as fascinating as the concept of egalitarianism is, there exists a wide gulf between its theory and practice and indeed between the theory and practice of democracy itself. There is hardly anywhere in the world where democracy is a republic of equals because, as Kenneth Janda et. al. has asserted, ‘through occupation or wealth, some citizens

are more able than others to influence political decisions’ (Kenneth Janda et. al.,1999, p.13).

According to Dakuku, democracy is a universal concept that embodies fundamental principles and doctrines that make it unique as a form of government. It relies on the idea of the supremacy of the people. The first aspect of democracy is that the people have the right to choose and decide who will govern them through periodic elections and hold the officeholders accountable for the power they derived from the people. The second aspect of democracy is that principles govern it, without which it becomes an aberration and a folly of indescribable proportion even with the first aspect (periodic election to choose leaders). These principles include the rule of law, fundamental human rights, liberty, and accountability, and it is only the combination of these two aspects that makes democracy worthwhile (Dakuku, 2021).

Democracy and Governance in Nigeria

With the inception of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria in May 29, 1999 after several decades of military dictatorship, there was rising expectations that the newborn democracy will deliver Nigeria from the long decades of hardship, savagery and oppression. A vast majority of Nigerians looked with great expectations of better things to come in the process of governance; they looked forward to the freeing of national commonwealth from the stranglehold of greedy public officials and to more effective and efficient programmes of social service delivery in areas of education, health, infrastructural development, poverty alleviation, disease control, unemployment, security, etc. These elements constitute the crux of meaningful human existence for the teeming 150 million Nigerians waiting hopefully for better days ahead (Erunke, 2007; Omojuwa, 2007; Danfulani, 2007).

Unfortunately, this turned out to be an illusion. Despite practicing democracy for over two decades, none of these goals have been achieved. Rather, the country gets worse by day. This state of affairs disproportionately affects Nigeria's poorest people. What accounts to this lies in the country's failure to integrate in its governance democratic principles. This is evident in proven cases of unilateralism in the affairs of governance, godfatherism, godsonism and goddaughterism; election rigging, etc. Nigeria is also faced with so many social ills due to leadership problems such as: bad governance, economic imbalance, power tussle, control and domination by those in power and their cronies among others which have over the years been the bane of her development. These trends have obviously characterized the civil governance since 1999 to date and have had very profound socio-political consequences for Nigeria's quest for peace, progress and sustainability.

The Practice of Inauthentic Democracy in Nigeria

Democracy is said to be government of the people by the people and for the people, a claim that originates from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (1863). Hence it is generally assumed that democracy is the most suitable form of government at least in principle. It is also generally taken for granted that the pursuit of the welfare of the generality of the people is the epicenter of democracy wherever it is practiced (Sen, 1999). While this may be so in some democracies, the reverse is the case in others. Nigeria probably personifies the latter. 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; others, like Nigeria, make their own brand of democracy government of the few by the few and for the socio-economic benefit of the few. Indeed, the most outstanding feature of Nigerian democracy is mind boggling and unpardonable waste of public funds on the comfort of a few Nigerians. The democracy of waste practiced in Nigeria invests, first and foremost, in the

comfort of officials rather than in human and material resources (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Again, it is quite unfortunate that in Nigeria today, individuals struggle heart and might to provide for themselves those basic social amenities the state should normally provide. Those Nigerians who have the means generate their own power, make personal security arrangements, patronize privately-owned schools and hospitals, etc. On the other hand, the less privileged rural dwellers who are in a clear majority, live in palpable darkness, drink all sorts of contaminated water and contact all kinds of water-borne diseases from there and are regularly harassed, wounded or killed by armed bandits. In most parts of Nigeria, power supply is almost exactly nil, potable water is a scarce commodity, health care facilities are either altogether nonexistent or in complete shambles while hundreds of people die in motor accidents annually owing to extremely poor road networks. From all indications, the irreducible fact seems 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.

Furthermore, it must be noted that the greatest problem threatening Nigerian democracy today is corruption. In Nigeria, the latter is probably more institutionalized than the former hence the country is an eminent member of the comity of the most corrupt nations of the world. Unfortunately, the forces reared against corruption in Nigeria are altogether feeble and negligible. Indeed, directly or otherwise, successive Nigerian governments had aided and abetted corruption. For example, in March 2013, Nigeria President, Goodluck Jonathan, pardoned (under state amnesty) Chief Diepreye Alamieyeseigba, a former state governor who stole public funds running into several million dollars while nothing drastic was done to James Ibori, another former state governor until a Southwark Crown Court in the United Kingdom sentenced him to 13 years imprisonment in April 2012. (Premium Times Nigeria.com)

In addition, as earlier mentioned, democracy relies on two important aspects; first, people's right to choose and decide who will govern them through periodic elections and secondly, democracy has principles which govern it, without which it becomes an aberration. These principles include, the rule of law, fundamental human rights, liberty and accountability. It is only the combination of these two aspects that makes democracy worthwhile (Dakuku, 2021). Analyzing how Nigeria fares in these two critical aspects of democracy indicate that Nigeria do not measure up to them. The perpetual inability to conduct relatively free and fair elections is a problem to Nigerian democracy. Despite their enormous financial implications, Nigerian elections can hardly be described as elections as they are characterized by all sorts of malpractices and fraud. It is indeed instructive to note that controversies arising from widespread electoral fraud and malpractices had assailed Nigerian democracy all through its entire post-colonial political history. For example, on February 25, 2023, Nigerians elected a new president in a process that fell far short of what voters deserved and expected. The election which delivered the presidency to Bola Tinubu, the ruling All Progressives Congress party's candidate was widely described as "flawed" inside and outside Nigeria, casting a shadow over Tinubu's anticipated inauguration on May 29. Again, Nigeria's elections have been characterized by voter apathy (Bratton & Logan, 2015). A small percentage of the voting population actually vote, which is an affront to idea of 'majority rule' which is one of the basic tenets of democracy. With this and many more problems with Nigerian democracy, one can say that the way democracy is practiced in Nigeria today, is a hybrid (Osaghae, 2002; Reno, 2014). It is a combination of civil rule, militarism, and ethnic jingoism. There is no national consensus on what democracy should be in Nigeria or should do for Nigeria. No shared national vision binds citizens and the state, and no common aspiration (Falola & Heaton, 2002). In the absence of shared national aspiration, democracy is just a word, a concept borrowed "to fulfill all righteousness".

The Problems with Nigerian Democracy

Recent experiences, especially economic frustration and insecurity have made some Nigerians question the western-style democracy we adopted and doubt whether it can deliver sustainable development (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Thecable.ng, 2023). Despite practicing democracy, Nigeria is still faced with persistent conflict (Osaghae, 2019), high cost of governance (World Bank, 2022), corruption (Transparency International, 2023), poverty (World Bank, 2022), indiscipline (Elabo, 2016), inefficiency (Anyanwu, 2011), insecurity (Human Rights Watch, 2023), high-level unemployment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), and divisiveness that pervades the land (Osaghae, 2019). It is the truth that the way we practice democracy in Nigeria today is not working. The reasons vary: from the greedy political elite that is not driven by principles or vision (Osaghae, 2019) to expensive governance structures that are self-serving (Anyanwu, 2011), and from indiscipline to cultural misfit (Elabo, 2016).

The problem is squarely that of the appropriateness of our democracy model. No serious attempt has ever been made to work out a democracy model that fits, serves, or recognizes our unique cultural attributes (Osaghae, 2019). Different countries adopt various models of democracy to suit their context and cultural environment. For example, China adopted a one-party system with bureaucratic control emphasizing efficiency and economic growth (Lin, 2014). Singapore adopted a democratic approach that emphasizes equality of all and economic prosperity, and it has a unique parliament made up of single-member constituencies, group representation constituencies, and nominated members of parliament (Rodan, 1993). These two countries and many more are relatively successful because they adapted democracy to fit into their culture. Practicing democracy and seeing good result is not limited to conducting periodic elections but addressing the structure and cultural fit of our model of democracy to make it work (Diamond, 1999). It is also essential to pay attention to the cultural peculiarities of different sections that make up the country. True democracy is

that form of democracy adapted to the circumstance and cultural context and delivers the greatest good to the highest number of persons measured by material prosperity.

It is pertinent to note that Nigeria adopted the US presidential system without adapting it to our cultural context (Osaghae, 2019). Must Nigeria have a bicameral legislature? (Elabo, 2016). Why should Nigeria have too many cost centers (Anyanwu, 2011) at the local, state, and federal levels that deliver no value? Why should Nigeria have a bogus governance structure? Is there a need for full-time legislature rather than part-time legislature? Why should Nigeria have a 1999 constitution (Osaghae, 2019) that many people do not accept its authority? Balancing federal and state power is an ongoing discussion, with arguments for both decentralization and stronger central control (Reno, 2014). Why should Nigeria have a federal structure that is more unitary in nature? These are fundamental questions that can help us define what we want from democracy and determine whether the model of democracy we practice can guarantee an optimal level of development.

Recommendations

From the above analysis, it is obvious that the balance sheet of democracy in Nigeria is less than satisfactory; yet all hope is not lost. In the first place, despite myriads of disappointment of hopes, denial of rights and betrayal of trust by successive Nigerian governments, the desire for democracy amongst Nigerians has remained unassailably high. Nigerians have consistently expressed their desire and preference for democracy by their active participation in the various transition programmes and electoral processes despite their regrets over aspects of these programmes and processes. What then should be done to remedy the situation?

- The most significant measure of the efficacy of democracy is its ability to raise the people's standard of living marked by a minimum level of

development. To achieve this, we should re-examine our democracy to make it fit for purpose (Diamond, 2020). For Nigerians to evolve a democracy that works for Nigeria, the critical consideration is the match between form and cost. It is on record that the recurrent expenditure of the Nigerian governments (states and federal) outweighs capital expenditure at a ratio of more than 80:20. The current form of democracy and democratic institutions have too much implicit and explicit cost that it leaves no money for development, and there is absolutely no incentive to invest in sustainable development initiatives.

- We should be intentional in evolving a democracy that aims at the sustainable development of Nigeria (Momoh, 2014; Ake, 1982). This new democratic model, must be wholistic and quintessentially and uniquely Nigerian – our democracy! A model that plagiarized American democracy with little or no modifications to fit our context is already structurally deficient. No matter how you practice it, you will always come out short.
- Nigeria should integrate in its governance democratic principles (Abdullahi, 2019; Human Rights Watch (2023)). These principles include, the rule of law, fundamental human rights, liberty and accountability, etc. These principles should be enforced and offenders should be punished no matter their status in the society.
- Nigerian authorities should take urgent action to account for election irregularities and make future elections stronger (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2022; Independent Election Monitoring Group, 2023).
- Nigeria has produced nine written constitutions but it is yet to institutionalize democracy (Osaghae, 2013; Gyimah-Boadi, 2020). 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 Nigeria, like in most African states, politics and

government are mostly personal and so do not always conform to an institutionalized system. This is perhaps the most important singular factor for the frequent failure of democracy and the regular breakdown of democratic structures and regimes in Nigeria and Africa at large. Therefore, democracy should be institutionalized in Nigeria and followed up to achieve a better Nigeria.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to expose the practice, pattern, priorities, problems and prospects of Nigerian democracy. One of the major findings and arguments of the paper is that while democracy is being nourished and made to take roots in other countries, it is being manipulated and malnourished in Nigeria. Nigerian political history is replete with failed attempts to make Nigeria better. Some of the reasons for these failures were also discussed in this paper. If the recommendations discussed in this paper are applied in the Nigerian democracy, then, the efficacy of democracy to bring about development and raise the standard of living of people will be experienced in Nigeria.

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