

Democracy in Nigeria: Antithetical Issues 2015 – 2021

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Abstract

Democracy as an index of development is a global trend that is taking various dimensions in different countries. Ideal democracy is guided by basic fundamental tenets of rule of law of which fundamental human right is paramount. Democracy in Nigeria is undergoing transformation, which, rather than manifest upward trajectories tends to be antithetical to freedom of speech and expression. Journalists and social media bloggers have been arrested for issues relating to freedom of speech and expression. The control and influence of mass media and other means of communication is prevalent which negates democratic principles. Secondary sources of data/information gathering were adopted in the course of this investigation which guided in the conclusion and recommendations. It is therefore observed that the general perception of the people is that government is not taking enough actions against vote buying, hate speeches and provocative utterances. Drawing conclusion from information gathered from the print and online media, democracy in Nigeria lacks high level of fundamental human right in its operation/practice. It is on this note that recommendations are made in the following order: there should be freedom of expression in Nigeria, ban on twitter should be lifted, journalists/media practitioners should not be harassed and detained ones should be released. Vote buying should be stopped and offenders prosecuted.

Keywords: Democracy, People, Development, Fundamental Human Right, Rule of Law, Detained.

Introduction

Democracy has taken a global trend and is recognized as one of the indices of development and modernization. Most or all advanced countries practise democracy as a system of government. In this era of globalization, democracy has spread to developing or less developed countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, South Africa etc. One major role model of democracy to Africa and Nigeria in particular is democracy as practised in the United State of America.

The people as it relates to democracy are qualified citizens of a state who are legible to vote or be voted for, who can participate in electoral process by age qualification. The people are the masses or the majority in a political system. Harrison et al (2011) state that citizens are “members of the polity who, through birth or naturalization, enjoy the right, privilege, and responsibilities attached to membership in a given nation”. Democracy is incomplete without the input of the people. Harrison et al (2011) also state that democracy is “government in which supreme powers of governance lies in the hands of its citizens”. In this case, democracy is indirect because it is a representative democracy where elections are held and people are elected as legislators and executives.

Democracy is people oriented, made and developed by the people and guided by rule of law which is a fundamental tenet of democracy. Brigid, Jean, Gary & Michelle (2011) opined about

America democracy thus: “the United State was founded by individuals who believe in the power of democracy to respond to the will of citizens”. Involvement of the people in democracy is what makes democracy what it is. The people's involvement in democracy determines the functionality of democracy through interest interaction. Therefore, Harrison (2011) et al describe democracy as “government in which supreme power of governance lies in the hands of its citizens”.

Democracy originated from the ancient Greek, with the term “*dēmokratiā*” which means “people power”. American democracy originated from the Greek philosophy of people and power. People decided the direction of government which was embedded in the constitution made by the people. By this, the philosophy of democracy transcended from Greece, therefore, implying that the same standard of democracy should be upheld in all countries involved in the practice.

There has been four attempts at democracy from the time Nigeria gained independence in 1960 till date. The first attempt at democratic rule in Nigeria was the First Republic. after independence (1963-1966). The military took over Nigeria's governance till 1979 when there was a second democratically elected government. The democratic era lasted till 1983 when there was another military coup. In 1999, there was another democratic government which has lasted till date. The democratic government in 1999 lasted till 2007 and subsequent civilian to civilian transfers of power to other democratically elected governments till date (Nigeriafinder.com 2016).

during the period between 2015 till date, several issues have come up which tend to negate the principles/concept of democracy. Democracy as a system of government is based on the concept or principle of rule of law which spells out tenets such as equality, supremacy and fundamental human right.

Antithesis of democracy in Nigeria is not only about government and its institutions, but also about citizens/people's actions and inactions towards democracy. The people get into governance positions through the electoral process and thereafter go against the tenets of democracy. Therefore, government and citizens/people are part of antithetical issues in Nigeria's democracy.

Theoretical Framework

Elite Theory

Elite theory defines the relationship between the masses and political class as asymmetric. The elite who are minority, control economic and political power of a country. The elite are against or opposed to pluralism which is a strong tenet of democracy. Those propounded the theory include Vilfredo Pareto (1935) and Gaetano Mosca (1939), who posited that elite theory presents a true picture of modern day democracy where few elites are financially strong people who control the affairs: politically, economically and otherwise (Bottomore, 1693).

As it relates to democracy in Nigeria, the political class is dominated by few financially strong people who dominate the economy as well. The economic scenario in glamorized by political activities hence the attention and fanfare. Most citizen therefore want to have a share of the glamour. The elite also want a closed system where none or fair will step into the class, thus political offices are held tight by occupants, as much as they can. The Elite in Nigeria direct the pace and state of political development, hence, the continuous strive by the masses to attain elites' status. The masses are swayed by financial inducements which direct their line of political inclination. This practice of financial inducement in democracy is antithetical to national development.

Concept of Democracy

The people and all that relate to the interest of the people that emanate from the people make the concept of democracy. Democracy is people-centered as the will of the people is expressed through election in a fair contest. The philosophy that democracy is built upon started from Thomas Hobbes whose view of monarchical rule as divine was debunked by John Locke. John Locke's assertion was that every individual had the right to rule based on natural rights such as life. Thomas Jefferson postulated after Locke about the role of government in the protection of life and property such that the people's right to contribute to governance was inherent in man (Pojman, 2002:31).

Democracy as a system of government is grounded on the rule of law. Though different countries practise democracy at different levels, the rule of law is fundamental. The degree of practice of fundamental human rights varies from country to country, just as the extent to which a country allows the rule of law to thrive determines the level of democracy of such a country. The major concept of democracy is political participation which is a function of the rule of law and citizens' participation in politics determines the extent of democratic practice in such a country.

Liberty is another fundamental tenet of democracy. Liberty as it is, is double-sided i.e. freedom from government interference in personal lives and individual freedom to pursue happiness. What gives uttermost benefit to man in terms of liberty is what John Stuart Mills holds forth. Therefore, man has the liberty to seek happiness as long as it is within the ambit of the law and does not interfere with the rights of other fellows (Sriranjam, 2008). As it relates to democracy, liberty is paramountly embedded in the rule of law, freedom of speech and expression, without fear of molestation and violence.

Equality is yet another tenet of democracy which is based on human and natural law. Every man is equal before the law. According to Acharya (2008), "yet, as human, we believe, and rightly so, that we are essentially equal and possess equal worth especially when it comes to realizing the ideal in social, economic and political structures of our society". In a democratic setting, equality is sacrosanct. By nature, all were born equal, as such, are equal before the law. Each individual has an equal chance of existing like the other. This gives credence to the fact that participation is fundamental in democracy. Thus, participation in either to rule and be ruled which leads to the method of selecting a leader, is a process that must be trusted, reliable and dependable to foster the will of the entire people. This means that the institution, organization or body responsible to coordinate and organize elections must be credible and legitimate (Srinivasan, 2008).

According to Brown (1962:15), "in every type of political system, policies are formulated and decisions made within a value-framework". Based on the above statement, every decision or policy made is based on the philosophy, framework or ideology of the policy maker or government of the day. Ideology of a group or party is what will guide policies made by such governments. Johari (2011:206) goes further to relate political ideology to contemporary society by stating that "its assumption maybe to lie in the paraphernalia of a democratic order having representative government, responsible executive, socio-economic and political checks and balance, independence of judiciary and rule of law". Therefore, any government must operate within the political ideology they stand for.

Issues and Problems in Nigeria's Democracy

From independence till date, Nigeria's democracy has been founded on established segmentation of Nigeria into regions based on geographical locations, tribal and ethnic alignments. Therefore, political parties were formed and supported on tribal and ethnic sentiments based on regions (Joseph, 1999:44). Joseph (1991:44) further observes that "following the heels of the introduction of mass electoral politics in many parts of Africa, was the

appearance of political alignments along sectional and especially ethnic lines”. With this pattern of democratic development, it was inevitable to be sentimental to national issues that border on unity and equity. This neglected merit and fairness and supported sentiments based on region and ethnicity. The reflection of the created divisions manifested in the conduct of elections during the Second Republic where parties were formed on regional bases e.g. NPN, NPP, UPN, PRP respectively. Formation of these parties was a continuation of the parties that existed during the First Republic such that “of the four parties which were granted status, all of them, the NPN, NPP, PRP, UPN, could be shown to have clear links with the former dominant parties of the independence era” (Joseph 1979:84). The names of the parties, according to their acronyms NPN - National Party of Nigeria represented the North; UPN - Unity Party of Nigeria represented the West; PRP - Peoples Redemption Party represented the North; while NPP - Nigeria Peoples Party represented the East. First generation parties were: Northern People's Congress (NPC), representing the North, Action Congress (AC) representing the West and NCNC representing the East (Joseph, 1979:84).

Recorded Antithetical Issues in Nigeria Since 2015

1. In Nigeria, more than 19 journalist and media practitioners have been arrested and detained in Nigeria since 2016. Some of the reasons for these arrests range from exposing corruption, election coverage, social media post critical of government to expression of views against government (Ukpong, C. 2019). Olu-Adeyemi (2012) avers that “at present, fundamental rights of citizens still come under attack despite the advent of democracy” citizens' utterances and associations have been confronted by arrests and detentions by law enforcement officers, for example, there was a case of Joe Chinakwe who named his dog “Buhari” and was arrested and detained for days BBC (2021). Adedeji (2016) has spotted the recent ban of twitter by Nigerian government as another example of government's seeming intolerance of citizens' freedom. This ban infringes on the rights of citizens to express their opinions through global mass media platforms. In early June 2021, the President of Nigeria, Muhammadi Buhari announced a ban of twitter from Nigeria over twitter deleting of comment made by the president. This sparked world-wide condemnation of such violation of human right (Blankenship, M. and Golubski, C. (2021).
2. Mr. Abri, publisher of Weekly Source Newspapers was arrested in Baylesa State by men of state secret service (SSS) on 21/7/2016. The arrested gentleman was alleged to be a militant.
3. There was the recent arrest and killing of END SARS protesters at Lekki and others parts of Nigeria.
4. Another instance was the case of a Nigerian lady, Boloneru Opukiri who lost her job after criticizing the President and the Vice President of Nigeria and on social media (twitter), on their travels out of the country, without letting the Senate President act in that capacity. She was dismissed from her job at the Presidential Amnesty Office (Ogundipe, S. 2018).
5. There was also the assault on Oludara Richard of the Guardian Newspaper by men of SSS for protesting against the arrest of Sowere.
6. Another was the arrest and detention of Tosin Ajunon who was filming a protest in Ondo State (Ukpong, 2019).
7. Others arrests by the government include Dipo Awojobi, Gidado Yushau, Adebowale Adekoya etc. (Amnesty Int. Nigeria @AmnestyNigeria) Nov. 8/2019 (Monitor.civicus.org).

As earlier stated, democracy in Nigeria is formed on the bases of regions created before and after independence by the colonialists. The formation has continued to exist till date based on region, tribal and ethnic inclinations. Loyalty is more to the region and not to the federal government.

The earlier mentioned concepts of democracy should form the parameter for judgment and assessment of the degree of compliance to democracy as practised in Nigeria. Based on concerns raised by Saliu and Ifejika (2016:18) in their article entitled “The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and 2011 Election”, liberty and equity in Nigeria democracy are issues of concern. Liberty and equality of the citizens to participate in electoral process is questionable. They assert as follows:

The electoral umpire Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) shows some bias. INEC should strive to improve its relationship and collaboration with the political parties so as to increase the level of confidence of the parties in the commission. This should also afford INEC the platform to effectively check the parties on the rules of the game in a bid to elicit their contributions in ensuring that elections are free and fair by, conducting their activities in modest democratic manners during campaigns, the elections proper and after the election.

The rule of law as practised in Nigeria affects the level of democratic participations. Hindrances to the participation of citizens in democracy by actions of government are antithetical to democracy. Freedom of speech and expression is a yardstick to know the extent and level of democratic development. Joseph (1991:31) stated that “a viable Nigerian democracy has to allow considerable room for self-expression and the assertion of group interest.....”.

The issue of freedom is a major antithesis of democracy in Nigeria. The era of military rule that transitioned to democracy has more or less been guided by the same principle of authoritarianism. Ahmed (2013:294) stated that the country's underdevelopment has been reinforced by authoritarianism, political instability, ethnic and religious conflicts in the last decade.

Even almost a decade after the return to democratic rule, palpable bad-governance is marked exclusion of the people from governance, non-accountability by public officials, lack of transparency in decision making, electoral fraud and colonization and personalization of the state and national resources by the political elite. This situation presents particular challenges for the Nigeria youth.

Democracy is practised by the participation of individuals, groups, institutions, organizations who have common ideology encapsulated in respective political parties. Every political party seeks to retain power or take over power through a credible electioneering process. It is the ideology of the party that projects the kind of government that will be in operation. The case in Nigeria is different as people cross from one party to the other indiscriminately. Changing party means changing and conforming to a new ideology. Once there is a change of party, such an individual should vacate such an office originally occupied, since the office belongs to the party and not individual. Hence the free movement of political offices holders from one party to the other should not be unhindered. As Ekeman, Mac-Ogonor, and Uduak (2013:117) have stated:

ideology plays a very important role in party identification in most western democratic systems. People join parties on account of ideology because there are some vital issues for individuals in party which affiliation to a particular party can better address... people join political parties to give support to issues that serve their ideological interest.

The citizens also constitute part of the antithetical issues in the political sphere by participating in vote buying. The act of collecting money or selling vote is very detrimental to societal development. The consequence is underdevelopment due to silence by slain conscience. Lucky (2014:55) bemoans the issues of vote buying from the post-colonial era till date, given that the different elections, since the independence of Nigeria, have been influenced by vote buying. This trend has continued till date as evidenced in recent elections. Thus Onucha and Ojo (2018:110) believe that vote buying was very present in the 1992 SDP/NPC election in Jos hence the cancellation by the Babangida's, Military Government. Vote buying necessitated the passing into law of the penalty of vote buying in Nigeria. They are of the view that vote buying or money politics has greatly influenced Nigerian politics.

Democratic participation in Nigeria is low due to how previous elections were conducted, the lack of fairness and transparency by electoral bodies and government have direct impact on the activities of the masses in participation. Apathy in participation means that true value of democracy cannot be achieved. Interest in participation among the citizens is low, hence the current state of political situation in Nigeria where accountability is low. Minority of the citizens are responsible or saddled with law making responsibilities through the votes of the majority. Where the majority are not interested, the minority law makers will continue to take decisions that will only benefit them and not the majority (Ray, 2011:199).

The endemic nature of corruption in Nigeria has a direct relationship or influence on the state of democracy in Nigeria. Corruption has affected and permeated the political process/sphere deeply. The officials, citizens contributed negatively to the growth of democracy as regards vote buying. This being the case, democracy in Nigeria is yet to mature to a point of reliability.

Conclusion

Democracy in Nigeria has antithetical issues to deal with, that is, issue like vote buying, violence, proparganda etc. Also, the facts of negation of rule of law is high, just as apathy to political participation is also high. Except these issues are corrected, democracy will continue to suffer and retrogress. Though democracy in Nigeria has passed the state of infancy, yet it is truncated with divers issues that are antithetical to it.

Political actors, institutions, ministries and agencies are alleged to conform and support the ruling party. The endemic nature of corruption has also influenced political activities. Political activities control or influence other activities in the country e.g. economy, culture, development, etc. the political actors and citizen are caught in the web of antithetical issues.

Recommendations

In observation of recent political events in Nigeria, democracy will not develop to meet world standards if antithetical issues that are evidently present in Nigeria democracy are not addressed and expunged from the political system in Nigeria, hence the recommendation of the following:

1. There should be freedom of speech and expression at a very high degree. The rule of law should be the guiding principle of democracy in Nigeria.
2. Institutions of the state such as Ministries, Departments and Agencies/ Parastatals, including the Armed Forces, should not be politicized.
3. The appointment of electoral officers should be from and supervised by the national assembly through multiple negotiation and representation of interests.
4. There should be strong presence of checks and balances as well as separation of power at the national and state assemblies.

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