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NIGERIAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

Vol. 2 No. 1

**A SPECIAL EDITION OF NSS JOURNAL ON: THE STATE,
SOCIETY AND DEVELOPMENT**

THE STATE AND THE PROBLEMS OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Nigerian state today is nothing more than a rentier state whose neo-colonial capitalist mode and social relations were not substantially modified by the rapid transformation from the production of agricultural commodities (palm oil, rubber, tin, cereals, etc.) to petroleum as the main source of capital accumulation. The unpredictability and volatility of the rentier economy has over the years been the central factor in all regime changes and democratic developments since independence. While in the core developed countries the state historically evolved some measures of 'relative autonomy' from the economically dominant class and fractions, the state in Nigeria fuses class power and political power together. Thus the on-going struggle for state power through the process of democracy is simultaneously a struggle for the means of distribution and consumption which only power can confer. This paper therefore examines the structure of the Nigerian state and the attendant constraint it poses for the practice and sustainability of democracy and democratic institutions. The paper sums up the conclusion that the state in Nigeria is anti-thetical to the survival of democracy since the state has become politicised and instrumentalised into a partisan state that is at once the arena and object of particularist conflicts.

Introduction

It is obviously pragmatic to note that the historical origin of the Nigerian state from inception has remained a foreign imposition both in its conception and organization, thus making it to operate according to the principles of state capitalism. It derives its logic from the colonial state where it has remained an alienated entity serving the interests of groups and segments whose strength is a function of the external conditions and classes and not the interest of the real material conditions of the Nigerian people.

The nation-state of Nigeria emerged out of political amalgamations of extremely diverse ethnic groups and class configurations brought together as a colonial necessity in 1914. Since then the continued existence of the nation as a sovereign entity has proved to be a precarious balance between the dominant elements of the social structure, namely- ethnicity, religion and class. The configuration of social relationships among the people of Nigeria has been characterized by instability arising from distorted production and reward systems, where the various social groups feel marginalized and cheated in the appropriation of available resources, thus raising stringent agitation for autonomy or a more equitable share of the nation's resources by the various ethnic groups through several schemes such as the activities of militia (Agbesu Boys, Odua Peoples' Congress (OPC), Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), Bakassi Boys etc and other

ethnic groupings in the various regions which have seriously shook and threaten the corporate existence of the nation. This threats and general agitations do raise the fundamental national question about its origin, the systems of production and distribution, types of leadership and citizenship, democratic participation and defence of justice and human rights etc. It is these issues that this paper seeks to address itself with in analyzing the structure of the Nigerian state and the challenges it poses for the sustenance of the ideals of democracy and processes of democratisation.

The nature of the Nigerian state

Before the incursion of British colonialism, there existed in the territorial entity known today as Nigeria various ethnic groups who lived and interacted with themselves most essentially through trade and in some cases through conquest by warfare. Beyond this contact, they existed as autonomous socio-cultural, political and economic units but sharing some cultural patterns in common. For example, the monarchical feudal system existed both in the Northern and Southern parts among the Hausa-Fulani emirates, the Yoruba, the Bini chiefdoms etc (Anikpo, 2002:51). Despite these similarities, the pre-colonial ethnic groups maintained their respective autonomies in governance and economic exploitation of their resources. This was the setting until the British colonialists imposed nationhood on them in 1914.

During the colonial era, the British organizational style of 'divide and rule' with which they rule the people did nothing to correct the divisive barriers that existed among the various ethnic groups along the lines of ethnicity, religion and class. Rather, these elements of the social settings were reinforced and used as instruments by the colonialists to gain competitive advantage in the new political order toward meeting their economic interests/purposes of exploiting our collective resources and dominating us in the process of governance without any commitment to building the ideals of democracy and respect for human rights in the nation. These dividing lines of ethnicity, religion and class categorization between the ethnic groups became intense and hardened during the colonial and post colonial Nigeria, such that the class configurations were interwoven with ethnic alliances which enabled factions of the ruling class in the various regions during the colonial and post-colonial period to strive to gain competitive political and economic advantages over other contenders in the quest to govern the nation.

It is this kind of structure that is most glaringly manifested in the political arena, where we have had eleven military regimes and three "democratically" elected governments that have engendered instability and national crisis in the nation's political economy despite the enormous deposit of natural and mineral resources in the land. Thus the state from inception was seen as an instrument and as an arena for intra-class struggle between the civilian, military, commercial, and bureaucratic elements of the petty bourgeoisie and between these elements and the masses.

Yet in the light of the fragile relationship of this class to actual production, the state has become an indispensable instrument of capital accumulation. As such the state thus constitutes the principal instrument for private appropriation of capital where the different faction of the petty bourgeoisie engaged in fierce struggle to control the instrumentality of state utilizing its allocative and distributive power for their own private ends. Furthermore, as various factions of the dominant class struggle to capture state power, they pay little attention to the economic and social concern of the ordinary citizens. The neglect of their material needs and the instability generated alienated them from politics. Politics thus became the exclusive domain of the

dominant classes (Agbese, 1990:27).

Thus the incorporations of the nation-state of Nigeria into the process of international capitalist accumulation as a primary products/ mineral producers of semi-industrial goods and the factional class struggle among the leading nationalists, coupled with her dependence on the core developed nations of the United States and Western Europe exposed the nation to the vulnerability and vicissitudes of international capitalism reflected in the country's state of social and economic crisis epitomized by incessant coup de tat and several political violence that permeated the polity. i.e. the killings of Pa Alfred Rewanu, Bola Ige, Ayo Daramola, Chief Harry Marshall etc are cases in point.

Furthermore, the Nigerian state after independence still followed after the absolutism and arbitrariness of the power of the colonial state such that it continued to be totalistic in nature and its economic orientation highly statist. It presented itself often as an apparatus of violence, its base in social forces remained extremely narrow and it relied for compliance unduly on coercion rather than authority. With few exceptions, the elite who came to power decided to inherit and exploit the system to their own benefit rather than transforming it democratically as had been expected. This alienated them from the masses whom they now had to contain with force.

The elites came to see state power as the only way to secure life and property and some level of freedom. This has accounted for the reason why state power since independence till date was sought for with such desperation that political competition tended to degenerate into warfare as gloriously manifested in Oyo state following the power tussle between governor Lodoja and Adedibu over share of security votes; Dr. Chris Ngige (former governor of Anambra state) and his erstwhile godfather Chris Uba crisis that has brought mayhem upon the state as well as the impeachment crisis that rocked Ekiti, Plateau, Anambra state respectively.

The state in post colonial Nigeria was privatized by the ruling elite who were and are still operating in a state of siege. The leaders employed a great deal of coercion not only to constraint the political expression of mass discontent but also to imposed "political unity" in the midst of considerable social pluralism. In addition, the character of the state and the political class has never been conducive for the survival of the democratic enterprise. It is not surprising that for most part of our attaining independence over forty years, the only thing that has been developing is underdevelopment in the political, economic and social sectors.

Democracy in Nigeria

Before we can discuss the place of democracy on Nigeria, it will be relevant to provide a conceptual meaning of democracy which derives from two Greek words, "Demo" and "Kratia" meaning people and the rule or popular power respectively. Accordingly, democracy is therefore a governmental system that involves the widest spectrum of participation, either through elections or through the administration of accepted/adopted (state) policies (Yaqub, 2000:26). Also Edwards, Watterberg and Lineberry (1996) conceive of democracy as means of selecting policy makers and organizing government so that policy represent and respond to citizen's preferences. Thus democracy can be seen as the system of governance under which people exercise their governing power directly or indirectly through their representative periodically elected by themselves. Indeed, a democratic government is invariably a government that is founded on the principle of the rule of law, accountability and transparency devoid of

arbitrariness, highhandedness and dictatorship/autocracy.

From these definitions highlighted above, it is obvious that for any government and by extension state with its apparatus to be called democratic, its origin must be based on the consent of the people, and the people in this case refer to the people over which a government exercises authority. Thus at the core of any system that attaches to itself the symbol of democracy are found certain identifiable features to determine if such a system is indeed democratic or not. As such Dahl (1982:11) identified the following: right to vote (equality), right to run for elective office (freedom), periodic free and fair elections conducted to choose elected officials, respect for the rule of law(Justice), control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in elected officials, the rights of citizens to form and organized independent political parties, interest groups and other associations(fraternity), accountability of government to the governed etc. as the basic values that should be present for any system to be designated as modern democracy.

However, a cursory evaluation of the practice of democracy in Nigeria have shown repeatedly over time that our political elites generally embrace democracy and enjoy democratic legitimacy without subjecting themselves to the demands of democratic practice which they have trivialized. The idea of using democracy as an essential platform for empowering the people through providing them opportunity to access basic necessities and improving the national development performance has not been realized. Rather, the democratization process in Nigeria is characterized by cases of economic mismanagement and brutal repression by the indigenous leadership that has become life threatening for the ordinary people.

The demand for democracy in Nigeria and Africa in general derives from the pathology of political decay occasioned by long years of exploitative and oppressive state system which was first started by the British colonialist and continued after independence by our "national leaders" (military/civilian) which basically depoliticized the society allowing the "leaders" to dispense with the substance of democratic participation. This dilemma was made more acute by the endemic socio-economic problems that pervaded the Nigerian economy and its people. In the word of a report of the Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2000:1) flashpoint of ethnic, communal, religious and resource conflict still persist and pervades the nation. The economic environment is still very much unstable, the Niger Delta crisis is yet to be resolved and today it has assume a worrisome dimension following the activities of hostage takings of expatriate oil workers in the oil rich Delta region.

Be that as it may, the path to democracy practice in Nigeria began during the colonial times following several major constitutional conference starting with the 1922 Clifford constitution down to independence in 1960. This was followed by the constitution of 1979 and 1999 constitution that ushered in the second and present republic we are presently operating. Also we have operated two democratic systems of government namely parliamentary and presidential systems since independence. However, our experiences at our experimenting with these democratic practices have been largely anti-thetical to democratic norms, principles and even politics. The past two experiments we have had including the present indulgence have been characterized by political thuggery and brigandage, unmediated and unrestrained violence and killings, lack of accountability and transparency, high level corruption and abuse of office, rigging, exacerbating the misery to the people due to the lack of the fulfillment of their existential and welfare expectations by the state.

The unfortunate dilemma plaguing the survival of democracy and democratisation lay both in the attitude of the parties in power and the behaviour of the opposition parties themselves. The ruling parties in Nigeria's democracy are always wont to foster a culture of harassment in a bid, apparently to continue the politics of warfare of frustrating the opposition and bringing about their extinction. On the other hand, the opposition themselves are never always tutored to accept defeat in an election; instead they are prepared to destabilize the system or alternatively fraternize with the military to bring about an end to the life of the party in government as it has been the norm in the Nigerian state.

Related to this is the manner in which elections are been conducted in this country and the role of the electoral body saddled the task of ensuring that they are free, fair and reflective of the wishes of the electorates. The electoral commissions we have had in the annals of Nigeria democracy have never been quite free from criticisms for the conduct of viable elections which is a crucial component of democracy. The various electoral bodies we have had had always been accused severally of being patently corrupt and partisan as well as collaborating with the incumbent government in power to subvert the will of the people at all elections we have held with the exception of the June 12 1993 presidential election which was adjudged the freest and fairest election.

The political economy of the Nigerian State

To understand better the problems of democracy in Nigeria within the context of the state and how it engenders political and economic instability in Nigeria, it is crucial to examine the political economy of the state. Thus the characteristic and motive force of the Nigerian political economic position within the context of the international economic system of capitalism and international division of labour since the colonial times has remained that of a weak peripheral, dependent state producing primary agricultural products which has been replaced by one commodity oil for the world market. Foreign trade is still oriented toward exports of primary products to the major metropolitan powers upon whom the economy continued to rely for the importation of technology and capital intensive manufactures and know-how.

Thus, the Nigerian economy has come to conform to the classic profile of a mono-mineral dependent enclave that has evolved into a rentier state in the world market where it severs the link between production and distribution. The country as a peripheral capitalist state is controlled by the political elites who are non-capitalists which exist mainly to guarantee the conditions for the reproduction and expansion of capitalist property relations and mode of production. Unlike the elites in the core capitalist state, it lacked the socio-economic 'base' to sustain and develop a relatively autochthonous capitalism and so intervenes in the economy, in collaboration with the external elements of this economic base to create the preconditions for, and to promote private accumulation.

Therefore the Nigeria state has thus become the platform for the creation of a bourgeoisie class whose role is to promote the interests of the state class in the distribution, management of investment, accumulation and hence capital formation. In a sense, therefore, the state has become the "means of production" in peripheral society in so far as it monopolizes the means of exploitation, appropriates a large part of the surplus value, and acts as the fundamental source of accumulation and hence of class formation. Thus the on-going struggle for state power by the elites is nothing but a struggle for the means of distribution and consumption which only the state power can confer (Graf, 1988:224-225).

Since the state cannot in some measure stand above the society, it becomes a broker among structurally heterogeneous parts or segments of the plural society. This now breeds competition among and between individual (all more or less state dependent) capitals which becomes a complex series of fractional struggle within and for the state. For example the current entanglement between President Obasanjo and his vice-president Atiku aptly describe this competing struggle which now takes place within the framework of the nation-state, where the relative strength of the contenders are defined by their sectoral, ethnic or fractional constituencies.

Given the moment the state power is captured by the coalition of particularized segments, it becomes 'their' provisional property that is privatized and used to create opportunities for accumulation, new positions; new area of investment and by the same margin broadens the range of its beneficiaries in order to create firmer links of patronage and clientele. This activity is an obvious manifestation of most governments in Nigeria with particular reference to the Babangida, Abacha and the present Obasanjo Administration for generating patronages and clientele, an act that clearly negates the central function of the state as system maintenance for improving the welfare of the greatest majority rather than a circle of cabals.

Thus the primary role of the Nigerian state is to establish, maintain, protect and expand the conditions of capitalist accumulation in general, without which neither foreign nor Nigerian capital can prosper. This it has done creditably with the economic reforms policy of Privatization, Deregulation and Liberalization in the key sectors of the Nigerian economy i.e. Oil, communication, sales of government estates/enterprises etc. The peripheral state specializes in the political regulation and ordering of the conditions of production which are initiated and sustained by external forces. Market relations as it were, are controlled by the core through the aggregating institutions of international capital such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, while social relations is carried out by the peripheral state.

Local state power thus attends to labour discipline, political stability and the politics of distribution within the state. Its task primarily is to ensure the totality of the conditions of capitalist relations of production for which it receives a negotiated share of the surplus, which it facilitates. The more it furthers exploitation within, therefore, the "stronger" it becomes. This disjuncture between politics as means of control at the state level and economics as the means of development at the international level has made the state in many ways a "territorial incongruence" between the inter-linked processes of "national" politics and the international economy (Hanisch and Tetzlaff, n.d).

Thus character of the post-colonial state in Nigeria is that its power over the economy and society is enormous, arbitrary and it is largely privatized very much like its colonial predecessor. For all but few of its citizens, it is alien and remote, uncaring and oppressive. As was the case with the colonial state, the distinguishing feature of the post-colonial state in Nigeria is its lack of autonomy; power is highly fused and used by those in control of the state simply as an instrument for serving their own interests. Lack of autonomy has been further compounded by the enormous power of the state and the lack of institutional checks on this power, all of which has raised enormously the premium on political power breeding the type of politics that is characterized by intense and lawless political competition where violence and instability are endemic. The state class emerges as a network of clients and patrons linked to the state as a principal supplier of the

means of consumption, and economic power is determined by proximity to the state hierarchy itself.

Obstacles to Democracy in Nigeria

The fundamental hindrance to the survival of democracy in Nigeria lie in the obvious division of the ruling class elite along ethnic, religious, regional and class lines. Such factionalism, coupled with the historical mistrust and hostility during colonial and post colonial period deals a deadly blow to our democracy experimentation. For example, the Nigerian political reform conference in 2005, the recently released 2006 population census results, the question of revenue allocation formula and resource derivation and transfer of power etc are just some of the pertinent issues tearing apart the growth and sustenance of democracy in Nigeria.

In the same vein, there is pervasive insecurity about the state given the insatiable appetite for power by our elites that they tend to narrow the social base of power in terms of those who are obliged to share in its exercise. Those in power are inclined to share it only with a very small coterie of collaborators. Often the state is effectively privatized in the control of this small group, whose powerful members are usually drawn from the leader's community, religious faith, geographical region or ethnic base. This was the case during the Babangida regime which employed the phenomenon of exclusion and the monopoly of power (Ake, 2003:39).

These exclusionary tendencies extended the struggles among elites to engulf the society. When this strategy is used, it also elicits by way of response a struggle for incorporation which also reaches beyond the elite to the rest of society leading to clash of identities, especially ethnic identities. This tendency has always reared its ugly head in Nigeria's polity following the demand by the various ethnic groups that it is their turn to produce the next president for the country thus dividing the nation along ethnic lines which is not healthy for the country's democracy. As such, when political struggles are constituted around such ideas and social formations, they tend to be very intense and violent leading to ethnic conflicts.

Related to the political impediments toward the survival of democracy in Nigeria is the economic angle, wherein the practice of democracy since 1999 has been characterized by severe economic and social problems. The adoption of the on-going economic reform policy by the Obasanjo administration has further widen and heighten the incidence of poverty and economic underdevelopment of the majority of the people due to loss of jobs, increases in the price of petroleum products, infrastructural decay etc, with the likely effect of furthering aggravating decades of violence, mistrust and fear, and lack of enthusiasm by the governed in the democratic process as epitomized by the inevitability of suffering, injustice and inequality which is increasing been exacerbated during the present democratic transitions in Nigeria. The same was the situation during the Babangida transition which lasted for eight years (1986-92) which eventually resulted in an annulment and the crisis that followed which almost put the country on the edge of violent disintegration.

Paradoxically, economic development does not inevitably produce liberal democracy, nor is democracy necessarily compatible with development, since economic development promotes social inequality and is anti-democratic. Our elites in power at the various levels of government are so undisciplined and incoherent to initiate and carry out a development project as their fast developing Asian economics, notably Hong Kong, South-Korea, Singapore, Thailand and

Taiwan (The World Bank 1993). The basic paradox of democracy and democratic processes is that those who have power tendentially have no interest or inclination to democratise, for democratisation entails the redistribution of power against those in power and those who are privileged. For example, the failed third term attempt of Obasanjo administration to extend his tenure beyond the two terms of eight years approved by the constitution and the refusal of the various governments (civilian/ military) to hold a sovereign national conference to discuss the future of Nigeria is a case in point.

Furthermore, it is sad to emphasize that the idea of democracy and the process of democratisation in Nigeria since independence has been reduce to mere electoral competition, which conceal the illusion of voting without choosing. To all appearances democratisation is not doing much about the democratic transformation of the state in order to create a window of opportunity, a political framework where groups struggling for development and human rights have better possibilities for expressing, organizing and realizing their demands; rather attention is only on who control the state. When democratic processes is limited to the competitive selection by political society at large of those who control the state, what we have mainly gained in the end of any transition is nothing but the right to choose between oppressors, not the right to choose between liberty and oppression.

Another very pungent challenge to the survival of democracy in Nigeria is the very faulty structural defection upon which the foundation of the nation was based. The British through its policy of indirect rule set the stage for the state structure where the main administrative and political units were made to coincide with the spatial locations of the major nationalities of Nigeria, the Yoruba, Ibo and the Hausa-Fulani. This regionalization framework set the stage for the emergence of the regionalization of the nationalist leadership who opted for power in the region instead of remaining in the central government which was still under British rule. This was the context that underscores the rising tide of ethnonationalism which has marked Nigeria's march to independence and beyond. Till date, this framework has created a state structure which lacked autonomy and inability to rise above the conflicts and struggles among particularistic interests between the North and South. It was this structure that led to the collapse of the first and second republic, the thirty month civil war and the annulment of the June 12 1993 presidential elections and is presently threatening the survival of the fourth republic administration in Nigeria. This lack of a state building project that will crystallize the collective purpose of the various major ethnic collectivities and the fear of domination by the minorities has been the bane of political integration and democratic political stability in Nigeria and further worsened during the era of military rule.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discourse, it is clearly fundamental that the institutionalization of democratic governance does not occur simply by holding elections, changing leaders, constitutions, and/or public orientation to the process of governance. Nigerians must seize the opportunity that this present democratic experimentation provides to chart a new vision for the collective development of the nation through the institutionalization of a legitimate political order, and refusing to be used by the ruling classes to perpetrate electoral fraud and chaos in order to truncate the process.

Thus the survival of democracy in Nigeria can only thrive if the whole process of its conceptualization and institutionalization is people based, where popular participation is not a mere rhetoric, but a process by which the people themselves press for genuine democracy accented to by them and to establish independent peoples' organizations that are genuinely grass-roots, democratically administered and self reliant. Also, for democracy to succeed in this nation, the living conditions and well-being of the majority of the people must be guaranteed and provided for in order to empower them to make them participate actively as stakeholders in the genuine effort to chart a positive political and economic direction for the corporate existence of the nation.

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