

Democracy and Its Adoption in Nigeria: Western Liberal or Indigenous Option

Murtala Ahmed, Mohammed Isah Shehu
Department of Public Administration
zababa72@yahoo.com

Department Of General Studies, Federal Polytechnic, Bauchi - Nigeria

Abstract

This paper examined democracy and its adoption in Nigeria. The study was born out of the numerous debacles encountered by Nigeria and Nigerians in the process of achieving democracy. The study used secondary source to gather data. The study found that Nigerians desire and cherish to entrench a democratic system and government, the journey to achieve democracy is a long and trying one but Nigeria is still far from achieving it due to the failure of the system and the leaders to provide the suitable option and guidance, Nigeria's present democratic setting is unnecessarily expensive and too accommodative, unwhole suitability of the Western liberal democracy to Nigeria's socio-economic and political environment and failure to domesticate the democracy to suit Nigeria's peculiar circumstances. It is also found that wholesome adoption of the Western liberal democracy will not suit the Nigerian context and so, there have to be adjustments to uniqueness of Nigerian state and societies and that excessive use of money in the polity hinders achieving democracy. The study recommended among others development and adoption of indigenous democratic values and principles, redistribution of national wealth, income and resources to ensure justice among Nigerians, extensive and intensive civic education to citizens, constitutional enforcement of social justice among Nigerians, adoption of politics of pluralism and consensus, cultivation and institutionalization of habits of transparency and good governance especially on the part of the leaders, establishment of genuine national political parties, reviewing the presidential system currently operated to reduce excessive politics of accommodation and the cost of running government.

Keywords: Democracy, Liberal Democracy, Adoption, Achievement.

INTRODUCTION

For any society, group, organization or state to achieve its collective goals, there has to be effective machinery that would be charged with the responsibilities of organizing men and resources towards achieving whatever set goals. In the case of states, what is required is more than just an ordinary leadership but one that is distinguishable by its composition of men with powers to make and unmake by one, few (on behalf of all) or by all as well as the mandate to exploit both the human and material resources towards attainment of the goals. One of the major frontlines of debate, complexity and general concern to many people is the type of government to adopt, the nature, type and composition of men to be vested with the responsibility of conducting these affairs. At the peak of this debate is democracy which stands as the most common choice advocated and promoted by many around the world.

However, all societies (proponents and opponents of contemporary democracy) originally have one form of government or the other that they have, inherited or adopted prior to the succumbing to the much talked, promoted and debated democracy i.e. many societies and states had adopted one form of state's existence and operating or the other. Since the departure of man from state of nature, man has been moving from one form and or system of government to another in an attempt to arrive at one the most popular and or suitable one. Most of the governments adopted at one time or the other by societies was based on their traditions, customs, beliefs and or geographical conditions. During colonialism, leaders and politicians became primarily concerned with how to dislodge the colonial masters and after securing independence, these leaders and politicians became pre-occupied with how to consolidate political and economic powers and the quest for full and

relatively Western liberal democracy, military rule and subsequent events which came later (Awa, 1993:43). The Western style of governance in the name of democracy has over shadowed any other especially after the cold-war and collapse of the Soviet Union. This is despite the fact that all the societies had their own modes of governance prior to the contact with Europe and some had even reached advanced level of governance along their traditional or religious lines and with varied polities of different sizes and effectiveness such as the Sokoto Caliphate (1804 Jihad), Oyo, Kanem-Borno empires with cultural diversities (Tamuno and Atanda 1989:3).

Colonialism, neo-colonialism, collapse of communism and contemporary globalization have over the decades, greatly influenced the pattern of lives, politics and governance of most states especially the developing ones. As a result, many states have begun to consider and adopt the contemporary Western styled democracy and in most cases at the expense of indigenous, traditional and well suited other forms of governance and for Nigeria as maintained by Joseph (1986:30), for decades Nigerians have had preference for a system in which they will openly compete for political power, exercise the powers with constitutional limits, independent judiciary and balance of political competition - democracy.

Nigeria, located on the West-Coast of Africa, is the most populous and largest state and market of all and the most endowed with both human and natural resources as observed by (Irukwu 2005:189) and amalgamated into one single entity in January, 1914 is one of those influenced by those events. Thus from pre-independence, independence in October, 1960 to date, several democratic experiments have been made with success as well as failures. The basic problem is however, that Nigeria is yet to arrive at a democracy that would sustain its people as one, develop the state along socio-economic, political and educational lines. According to Amuwo et al. (2003:137)

“The Nigerian state is in dire need of organizational institutionalisation and coherence. The history of the political process in Nigeria, characterized as it were by rhythmic dislocations and disruptions, significantly point to the absence of an institutional unifying appeal for the Nigerian state”

At any rate, the most important and strategic expectations of African political system are according to Awa (1993:44) to: ensure social justice to all the people in terms of land for socio-economic purposes, welfare of extended families and obligation of the ruler to ensure that harvests were good and that society was rid of epidemic diseases and despotic behaviour on the part of the political class. This assertion proves that the politics and governance in Africa still revolved around issues of providing the basic amenities to citizens.

This is where many query the suitability of the alien (Western/American styled) democracies adopted while others query the operators of the system and not the system itself as observed by Akpata (2000:74) that many of today's Nigeria political appointments at all levels could not be justified as the appointees possess no elements of technocracy or versatile generalists and the consequence is that many of those appointed do not feel the sacred commitment to effect fundamental social changes in the Nigerian state and the body polity.

This poses the questions of whether to adopt Western Liberal/American democracy, develop indigenous option or go back to the ancient indigenous traditional/religious modes of governance. This paper discusses current and prevailing issues regarding the suitability of contemporary/Western democracy to Nigeria as a result of impending developments in Nigeria's body polity. The test and demonstrations on democracy in Nigeria have over the years been frantic, violent, expensive, misconceived, poorly implemented and abused. Such are manifested in violence, instabilities abuse of human rights and deliberate usurpation of powers, diversion of public resources and gross mismanagement of the economy in the name of democracy. Additionally, the citizens and the body polity have been polarized along ethno-religious and sentimental lines so much that many have lost hope in the state system and the democratic establishment itself thus near collapse of the state system.

DEMOCRACY- HISTORICAL ROOT AND CONCEPTUALISATION

In the early and original invention of democracy, it was used by the Greek City state citizens as both Sociological and political senses i.e. (a way of life and form of government respectively) ; as a way of life which places values on individuals rights, equality of citizens, importance and recognition of all individuals and as a form of governmental arrangement in which the citizens have the powers of selecting their leaders and exercise state powers either through direct or indirect means to determine their affairs (Banjoko, 2004:18). Democracy as it is today (relatively different from the original and ancient one) the world over, is traced to the Ancient Greek City State people (in the present Greece, Western Europe) about 1505 years ago. Precisely by 507/508 BC, the Greek City people (Athenians) invented democracy as a form of government only for their small city state (Polis) with a population comprising of small and large number of Athenian citizens and non-citizens respectively. In that Athenian democracy, every adult citizen was on equal basis entitled to participate in the village assembly where major issues on the city-state were decided by simple majority votes and offices rotated among the citizens in the assembly. That was direct form of democracy as all the adults directly participated in the process of determining the city affairs thus participatory/direct democracy unlike the current indirect/representative democracy which according to (Janda et al, 2002:34), is a system of government where citizens elect public officials to govern on their behalf. Representative and or indirect democracy emerged because of either largeness of population where it is not possible for all to directly participate in the government or there is the need to employ competent and few hands in the art of governance, hence the selection/election of few from among the many to represent all in assemblies (legislative) and executive capacities (Banjoko, 2004:25). This is where the issue of democracy being will of the majority is questioned as with the concept of representation, two main questions also arise: whether those representatives would serve interest of all (majority) or only promote their minority (the few representatives interest).

The concept of democracy does not have any universally accepted meaning as most people, states and individuals define the concept in their understandings, values and preferences, traditions or end gains. There arises therefore, relativity in conceiving and or defining what democracy is among states and individuals (Joseph 1986:16, Awa 1993:46 and Banjoko 2004:18). At a conference on democracy organized by UNESCO in 1950, more than fifty (states) with divergences in political and economic ideologies as well as internal political and other settings each insisted being democratic despite their relativities. This attests to universality as well as

relativity of democracy. To Aristotle, the fundamental element in democracy is freedom which envisages respect for humanity in religion, decision-making, movement, speech, thought et cetera. Schumpeter (1943) has asserted that democracy is not a theory of means and ends, i.e. it is not associated with any particular ends and purposes but it is an arrangement that leads to reaching political decisions and in addition to that, democracy encompasses responsiveness meaning decision making principle necessitated by representative government which also implies that elected representatives should do what the majority of people want (Janda et al, 2002:35) Banjoko (2004:31) outlined some major principles of universal democracy and representation in government which may all or partly be applicable depending on situation, nature and composition of leaders and the led, level of political development et cetera. These include: separation of powers among arms of government, universal representation of voters, universal suffrage, appropriation of political rights, free and fair elections, group or corporate representatives for voters, political heterogeneity/pluralism of citizens (in choices, ideologies, factions, groups et cetera), non-transferability of mandates, periodic elections to maintain or renew representatives and mandates, conduct of internal/primary elections among aspirants and or parties preceding the general election (internal democratic principle), dominance of political parties rather than other interest or particularistic groups, general and uniform representation of voters in all levels of

governance, proportional representation of voters and rotation of political offices.

Generally, many people and politicians believe that democracy is associated with effective citizen control over public policies, honesty and openness in politics, a responsible government, equal citizens' participation and exercise of powers, informed and rational deliberations (Huntington, 1993:9).

THE UNEASE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

The problem of democracy in Nigeria came even before the attainment of independence but there is no single factor that simply explains its failure. Generally, where democracy fails it is often a product of a collective and complex socio – political and economic institutions, policies and actions. It is therefore extremely difficult to isolate a particular factor as the cause of the problems Nigeria is experiencing in its democratic experiment. Rather it is cumulative effect of intertwined socio-economic and political factors. These factors can be traced as far back as Nigeria's formation (the amalgamation of 1914), independence and post independence periods as the country was constantly involved in socio-economic, religious and constitutional crises. These became manifested in failure of constitutionalism; rule of law and electoral malpractices, regimentation of the political class; probity and transparency, the class character of the political economy, the problem of national culture in politics and the federal system in operation.

CONSTITUTIONS MAKING

According to Migan (1993:36) explanation and re-making of post-independence constitutions could be found in the attitude and behaviours of the political elite, with particular reference to the constitution-makers, constitution operators and the military that overthrew with the result that during each transition to civil-rule, a new constitution has to be fashioned. Nigerian politics has been characterized by constitutions making, re-makings and are largely influenced and promulgated by the military with lack of popular basis, solid foundation and legitimacy, as most of these constitutions apart from the 1960-/63 were promulgated and or mid-wifed by the military including the formation, registration and initial operations/functioning of political parties. Although public consciousness such as Constituent Assemblies were established and or elected, the final outcome of these supposed democratic institutions were dictated by the military. In the same vein, Cohen (1974) as cited in Joseph (1986:39) concluded that for any constitution to succeed especially in states like Nigeria, it must address the issues of the elimination of cut throat politics and competition, discourage institutionalized opposition and develop consensus politics based on interests of all, establish principles of accountability in offices and among public offices holders and check over centralization of powers in the hands of few through more diffusion.

ELECTIONEERING

Also contributing to the political instability in elections is rigging as all the political parties were engaged in massive and pervasive rigging to win elections. Each party accused the others of rigging in places where they lost and rejected the result which in essence question the legitimacy of the government formed on the basis of such elections. Elections in Nigeria have been a recurring source of disputes, strong -arm tactics, crises and conflicts. Electoral crises characterized by abuses of electoral process by political parties and the refusal of the politicians to accepts electoral verdicts have had detrimental effect on democracy in Nigeria. These adverse effects have led on several occasions to the termination of attempts at democratic rule by the military in the face of political chaos and instability. As a result of this therefore, elections in Nigeria political process resulted to war where all weapons (ethnicity, religion, and power of incumbency, corruption and the abuse of electoral process) were freely used.

THE ECONOMY

The Nigerian state has also failed to resolve the inherent contradiction in neo-colonial political economy and hence the continuation of foreign domination. The state's loose and open door economic policies conducive to foreign exploitation subjected its political-economy to steering control of Western capitalist powers; the disagreements on revenue allocation and the Niger-Delta crises have also fuelled resource control agitations; the economy has undergone gross mismanagement; while the economic imbalance/inequality and growing class division have also hindered harmony and unity among Nigerians and have also become disenchanting; the constitution emphasizes the harnessing of nation's resources for national prosperity and an efficient, dynamic and self-reliant economy as well as control of the nation economy in a manner to secure the maximum welfare, freedom and happiness of every citizen on the basis of social justice (Section 16 [1a] of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria).

THE LEADERSHIP

What appears to have done the most damage is lack of popular, strong and effective leadership to drive the state, society and the economy greatness. The Nigerian political leaders have by acts of commission and or omission proved incompetent to resolve the socio-economic problems facing the country. What Nigeria needs is a strong leadership for survival of democracy. Leadership in Nigeria has been noted to be geared toward materialism and self-centeredness, this is clearly reflected in the graft, financial mismanagement, corruption and selfishness and other vices that have characterized both military and civilian leadership. Thus Achebe (1983) has capped it all that Nigeria's problem is squarely that of leadership.

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS PLURALITIES AND CONFLICTS

Democracy maintains law and order and prevents chaos by offering unity in spite of the plurality tendencies in a state. Nigeria is however in the name of democracy undergone series of recurring ethno-religious and sectional conflicts which have over the years impacted negatively on the state, society and the economy. These conflicts have on their own hindered effective democratic dispensation to hold.

From ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria to the ethnic clashes in the Southern part, militia in the south to political thuggery and religious insurgency in the north with no seeming end resulting in multiple deaths of both civilian and armed forces (security agents), declaration of emergencies and further disruptions of the weak and vulnerable political process.

THE MILITARY FACTOR

The Nigerian Military (Army, Navy and Air-Force) is primarily saddled with the responsibilities of defending Nigeria from external aggression, maintaining Nigeria's territorial integrity and borders (land, sea and air), acting in aid of Nigerian civil authorities to restore peace, order and stability when called to do so by the President and carry out any other function as may be duly approved by House of Senate and Representatives (1999 Constitution of Nigeria, Section 217) and According to Yahaya (1979) in (Oyediran, 1979:259):

“Military rule in Africa is regarded as an aberration. A normal political system is often regarded as one that is governed, directed and controlled by a civilian political class which has been recruited by popular choice to the decision-making structures of the state.”

But over the years and shortly after Nigeria's independence (January, 1966), the Military began to feature in the nation's politics and had since then until 1999 greatly shaped, undermined and or influenced the politics and political processes. This ranged from direct intervention, shaping the political process with decrees and edicts, establishment and or regulations of political parties and their operations and to the large extent conducting elections and determining when to hand over to civilian democratic regimes which have not according to Jega (2007:77), been easy as characterized by constant threats of authoritarian reversals and that the military have over these years played roles leading to many negative consequences as they became rooted in the governance process. The military which has dominated most parts of Nigeria's political history has brought with it negative trends and impact on the body polity and the democratic process by both

disruption of the political process, militarizing the spirits and psyches of Nigerians and making the changed and succumbed to authoritarian rule in place of the civilian democratic ones. Such effects with have made democracy and good governance indefinable and mirage. The military is seen as a major obstacle to democracy and democratic processes and the crises in governance is seen to emanate from military intervention, colonial rule, influences of traditional values, attitudes of post-colonial politicians and leaders who were charged with operations of the constitutions (Jega, 2007:78).

Although some of the military have proved to be corrective and patriotic with both popular and intellectual support from citizens especially in periods of political instabilities and conflicts thus creating a psyche that the military is a messiah, saviour and most prudent, decisive, patriotic and assertive thus the belief that only the military can rescue the developing states and take them to the promised lands (see Obasanjo and Mabogunje (1992:183), many military regimes have misused the body polity some with vague transitions. This had made

many of the military highly politicized, sensitive to politics in Nigeria and insensitive to popular and democratic values and calls.

PRE-CONDITIONS FOR STABILITY/SUCCESS OF NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY

For democracy to attain the desired level in Nigeria, there are basic conditions that must be fulfilled as;

- a) Proper Civic Education in which the citizens would know the basic and fundamental elements of politics, its practices and basic citizens' right as well as basic constitutional provisions.
- b) There must be proper vigilance on the part of citizens to what the government and or their leaders are doing especially as regards running the state affairs.
- c) There must be proper/accountable leadership on the part of political leaders and all those shouldered with the responsibilities of public matters and so application of the instruments of checks and balances on excesses in public matters/offices.
- d) Constitutional and practical guarantee of citizens' fundamental rights.

In the same vein Adekson (1981:140) has also maintained that for democracy to be actualized and to thrive especially in states like Nigeria, there has to be a proper civil-military system (defined pattern of interaction between the armed forces and the environment of a particular state) and that ours in Nigeria is unstable. This points directly to the current Nigerian situation where the Nigerian military is directly deployed to and involved in (internal affairs, peace keeping and or state of emergency) in 28 out of the 36 states of Nigeria (see Daily Trust, July 5, 2013:1,4).

This must on the other note be accompanied with a relatively wide and equitable distribution of wealth to ensure relative fair distribution of income linked to employment, stability and independence of the Judiciary to guarantee justice to all.

IMPEDIMENTS TO ACTUALISATION OF DEMOCRACY

Mazrui (1993:94) has identified concentrated presidential powers (incessant use and abuse of powers), single party tendency (non-tolerant and coercion of oppositions, zero-sum game politics), and shadow of the military (militarization of psyches, authoritarian tendencies) and national ideological void as the major impediments to democracy especially in Africa. This means that for democracy to be achieved in Nigeria, there have to be a definite reshuffle in the body polity, the democratic setting and dispensation.

THE POLITICS OF TRANSITION

The process of and transfer/handing over power to civilian democratic regimes is one feature that has characterized many especially the African states and their democracies as observed by Olagunju et al (1993:1). This process is however, not an easy one as maintained by Janda et al (2002:49) that it is difficult and many states fail completely or achieve little success due to the long impact of military rule, authoritarian tendencies, militarization of psyche, endemic ethnic and conflicts and expensive nature of such process.

CONCLUSION

Democracy is the most popular form of government all over the world today but there are variations of geography, religions, cultures, customs and beliefs and therefore it should be understood that while the system is popular all over the world, there were societies that had and operated very good systems of government relative to their socio-economic and cultural patterns of life. Different societies have values preferences and therefore and Western democracy may not wholly fit some other societies, hence the need for adjustments, indigenization and or domestication of the democracy to suit local situations but there are good examples that can be deduced from the ancient Greek or Western liberal democracy. The practice of Democracy in Nigeria is impeded by several factors that include among others: corruption, poor civic education, poor leadership, zero-sum game and militarization, abject poverty, politics with bitterness, indiscriminate usage of money

to influence votes and denial of human rights. The paper concludes that both the leadership and the democratic system Nigeria operates are faulty as observed by Achebe (1983:4) and for democracy to be established and thrive in Nigeria, cognizance must be taken of the peculiarities in the cultures and traditions of Nigerians. History teaches that there is no security of tenure for any administration that places itself above the people, whatsoever may be its methods and techniques of holding unto power. Democracy is an option for this but with considerations of societal peculiarities to suit situations, culture, traditions and other factors. The journey to arrive at full and developed democracy is not done overnight but that mistakes, corrections and experiences must hold the way over time So also the process of achieving democracy as stated by Abba (2007:3-4) that it took Britain 800 years to achieve democracy in a purely suitable and representative form. It is also of no doubt that the long period of military rule in Nigeria has militarized the spirits of many civilians and many military both the officers and the rank and file have become politicized and poses a great challenge to the establishment of a virile civil-society and democracy with a good civil-military system (Obasanjo and Mabogunje, 1992:183).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Nigerians must learn and embrace the habit and cultures of good governance and transparency in their affairs especially public.
- There should be development of indigenous democratic principles and values to suit the Nigerian context.
- There should be intensive, proper and focused civic education and orientation to Nigerians with a view to educate them and change their negative stereotyping of politics and governance.
- There should be structural adjustment to Nigeria's current presidential system of government being too expensive and expansive with too many offices and unnecessary political bureaucracies and bottlenecks.
- Nigerians must avoid the habit of belief in anything Western as superior and Nigeria/African inferior.
- Civil societies and other democratic institutions should be formed on broad basis so that their activities and impacts can reach all and sundry.
- Indiscriminate usage of money should be discouraged and or stiff penalties already on ground be enforced to check its usage for negative ends.
- The political atmosphere of Nigeria should be more open to accommodate as many groups and other pluralities as possible.
- The leadership should be more committed to selfless services to Nigeria and Nigerians.
- Nigerians must also embrace the politics of pluralism and consensus so as to be able to accommodate the various heterogeneities in the body polity.
- There should be strict and constitutional enforcement of principles of social justice among and to all Nigerians.
- There should be deliberate economic redistribution and or fair sharing of income and nation's resources to ensure economic justice among Nigerians for democracy may not thrive in a society where equality is claimed but some citizens are abjectly poor while others extremely rich or affluent.

REFERENCES

- Abba, A. (2007) *The Northern Elements Progressive Union and the Politics of Radical Nationalism in Nigeria, 1938-1960*. Zaria: The Abdullahi Smith Centre for Historical Research.
- Awa, Eme. (1993) *Sustainment of Democracy and Good Governance in Africa*. Paper presented at conference of African Leadership Forum, October 5-6, 1993.
- Achebe, C. (1983) *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers Ltd.
- Ake, C. (1993). *Democracy and Imaginative Thinking in Nigeria: A Critical X – Ray of issues and facts in* Omoruyi et al [eds.] 1994 in 'Democracy: The Nigerian Perspective Vol. I
- Amuwo, K. et al (2003). (edit). *Federalism and Political Restructuring in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Adekson, B. J. (1981). *Nigeria in Search of Stable Civil-Military System*. Colorado: Westview Press Inc.
- Banjoko, O. O. (2004). *Universal Democracy (Holocracy): A Rule by All Parties*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd.
- Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999*.
- Dahl, R. (1993). *Politics, Power and Democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Dahl, R. (1989). *Democracy and its Critics*. New- Haven: Yale University Press.
- Fawehinmi, G. (1997). *Military and Transition*. Ibadan: Vintage Publishers.
- Huntington, S. P. (1993). *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century*. USA: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Irukwu, L. O. (2005). *Nigeria: The Last Chance*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Joseph, A. R. (1987). *Democracy and Prebendal Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Janda, K., Berry, J. M. and Goldman, J. (2002). *The Challenge of Democracy*. Boston: Houghton Milling Company.
- Misbahu, B. (2013, July 5). *Military Deployed in 28 States*. Daily Trust, pp1, 4.
- Migan, R.M.V. (1993) *Constitution Making in Post-Independence Nigeria: A Critique*.(An Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Bayero University, Kano.
- Obasanjo, O. and Mabogunje, A. (1992). (edit). *Elements of Democracy*. Abeokuta: Africa Leadership Forum.
- Olagunju, T., Jinadu, A. and Oyaovbaire, S. (1993). *Transition to Democracy in Nigeria:1985-1993*.UK: Safari Books.
- Ojo, E. O. (edit). (2006). *Challenges of Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria*. Ibadan: John Archers Publishers Ltd.
- Schumpeter, J. A. (1943). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Schumpeter, A. J. (1943). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Tamuno, T. N. and Atanda, J. A. (edit). (1989). *Nigeria Since Independence: The First 25 Years*. Ibadan: Heinmann Educational Books.