



Challenges of Shrinking Civic Space and the Path towards Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria: Lessons from the President Muhammadu Buhari Administration

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Abstract

This paper examines the experienced challenges of shrinking civic space and the path towards sustainable democracy in Nigeria during the President Muhammadu Buhari administration. It discusses the etymology and problems of shrinking civic space in Nigeria under democratic dispensation. The paper also highlights the potential consequences and some practical instances of shrunk civic spaces during Buhari's administration. It goes further to link the concept, roles, setbacks and examples of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and how they attempted to promote and safeguard civil space. The paper identifies the connectivity between Marxism and Liberalism theory in the Nigerian civic space and highlights the efforts made by these theories to address the shrinking of civil space. Furthermore, it presents a comprehensive analysis of the prospects and challenges of the civic space in Nigeria and provides steps for policy reforms as a roadmap towards achieving sustainable democracy. The researchers recommend amongst others that the government should prioritize transparency and accountability in its actions and policies. This could be done by promoting access to information and ensuring that public officials are held accountable for their actions and combating corruption. By promoting transparency and accountability, the government is most likely to build trust with citizens, strengthen democratic institutions, and create an environment conducive to sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

Keyword: Shrinking Civic Space, Sustainable Democracy, Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari Administration, Lessons, Challenges

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Introduction

As a neo-colonialist State, Nigeria has faced significant challenges to its democratic development, particularly in the areas of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, during the President Muhammadu Buhari administrations since 2015 (Abbah, 2018). These challenges have contributed to the shrinking of civic space and hindered the ability of citizens to participate fully in the democratic process (Agwuegbo, 2021). To address these challenges and ensure a sustainable democracy in Nigeria, it is crucial to learn from the lessons of the Buhari administration and prioritize the protection of civil liberties and the promotion of inclusive political participation. It is quite unfortunate to observe that shrinking civil spaces in Nigeria has reduced citizens' ability to freely express their opinions and participate in public discourse, leading to a decline in democratic accountability and transparency (Akinola, 2020; Alubo, 2018). It has also results in the stifling of independent media, limiting the flow of information and critical reporting. Additionally, the curtailment of civil spaces has impede the work of civil society organizations, hindering their ability to advocate for human rights, social justice, and good governance (Onuoha, 2019). This qualitative study therefore is set to critically examine the fundamental challenges of shrinking civic spaces and the path towards sustainable democracy in Nigeria, using the President Muhammadu Buhari's administration as a focal point.

Conceptual review

The etymology of civil space in Nigeria

The term "civil space" in the context of Nigeria does not have a specific etymology. It is a concept that refers to the realm of civic engagement, participation, and public discourse within a society (Tushnet, 2020). Salawu (2017) and Uadiale (2021) strongly argued that the term "civil space" is often used to describe the arena where individuals and groups exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Osiki (2017) opined that the origin of the term "civil space" can be traced to broader discussions on civil society and democratic governance. Civil society encompasses a range of non-governmental organizations, community groups, and individuals who come together to pursue common interests, advocate for social change, and engage in public discourse. This implies that the concept of civil space emerged as a way to describe the physical and metaphorical environment where civil society operates and interacts with other actors, including the



government and the private sector. Olowu (2018) and Onuoha (2019) submitted that in the Nigerian context, the term "civil space" is used to analyse and discuss the conditions and dynamics that shape civic engagement, activism, and democratic participation within the country. According to Olaniyan and Olayiwola (2020), it encompasses the legal framework, social norms, and political context that either enable or constrain the ability of individuals and groups to exercise their rights and contribute to public debate and decision-making. While the term "civil space" does not have a specific etymology tied to Nigeria, its usage reflects the broader global discourse on civil society, democracy, and citizen participation.

Theoretical Framework

Marxism and Liberalism theory were adopted for this study. Liberalism and Marxism are two schools of thought which have left deep marks in political, sociological and economic theories. Both have been very successful in enlightening a wide range of common issues across these fields. However yet are usually perceived as opposite, rival approaches contradicting each other in general (Okeke, 2018). In Marxism theory, the concept of civil society can be traced back to the nineteenth century. During that era Karl Marx (1818-1883) developed his views on civil society by calling it a bourgeoisie society. He argued that bourgeoisie society in Marxian perspective represented all non-state aspects of society which utilize the state and its apparatus to promote their own interests. In other words, the economic scope of labour, production, and exchange became the fundamental aspects for civil society according to Marx. Moreover, civil society, in the Marxist perspective, is the arena for selfish competition, wage-linked exploitation, and class inequality (Eboh, 2018).

In this perspective, the State by maintaining the narrative of equal rights and freedom, actually guarantees the dominations of civil society. Others argues that liberals concentrate on the dominations of the state, but they do not inquire about the dominations of civil society. And the Marxist concentration upon the dominations of this sphere has led them to neglect any analysis of the institutions and values of civil society. Contrary with the contemporary liberalism scholars in the social sciences and political philosophy, a liberal aspect of civil society is to enhance social and political liberty. Contemporary *liberalism theory* states that the liberal justification for civil society rests on a vision of politics in which the ability to choose a free life (Eboh, 2018).



The major difference between Marxist theory and contemporary liberalism theory is that, the new liberal aspect of civil society focus on the democratic sphere on politics, while Marxist theory focus on the dominations of civil society in the economic sphere. Civil society organization in liberal view therefore, is the basic premises that citizens should be able to freely choose and pursue their individual life. They are also free to be connected with the existence of a vibrant set of groups of the state. These associations or groups constitute arenas in which individuals can express and pursue different interests, identities and aspirations. They also serve to preserve a robust sphere of liberty free of the state in which associations operate as centers of power. The groups are free to compete with the state and that enable their members to critically debate on the existing situations.

Furthermore, through civil society, citizens can examine governments' policy and mobilize for changes or amendment. They are also free to decide against the hundreds of choices made by elected and appointed public officials (Okeke, 2018). Foremost among these, the state must guarantee the fundamental rights of freedom of speech and association. This is important to acknowledge, as civil society groups have an essential role to play in terms of implementation, monitoring and accountability of the government. Governments and businesses often tend to target media outlets and journalists in order to avoid being held accountable. Such practice in most case might be considered as intimidation for civil societies and their people thus creating a tendency of self-censorship (Okeke, 2018).

Significantly, rationalization of liberalism theory on this study is crucial because it expose the fundamental ideology of civil society in promoting and maintaining liberty of the citizens. As the topic of this study suggest; an investigation on what CSOs are doing to address the shrinkage of civic space, the contemporary liberalism theory is the appropriate thought to be used as a basis for examine the phenomenon due to its emphasis on the maintenance of civic space and freedom.

Problems of Shrinking Civic Space in Nigeria under Democratic Dispensation

The shrinking civic space in Nigeria under democratic dispensation refers to the increasing restrictions and limitations on civil society organizations, freedom of expression, and citizen participation in public affairs, despite the country's democratic governance (Olaniyan, 2018).



In the same vein, Okoli (2016) alluded that this refers to the phenomenon where the freedom and capacity of individuals, civil society organizations, and other non-state actors to exercise their rights, engage in civic activities, and participate in public discourse and decision-making processes become increasingly restricted. It involves various forms of repression, including legal restrictions, harassment, intimidation, censorship, surveillance, and violence, which hinder the functioning of civil society and limit the ability of individuals and organizations to advocate for their rights, hold governments accountable, and contribute to social and political change (Momoh, 2017; Lahiry, 2015). Shrinking civic space is often associated with authoritarian regimes, but it can also occur in democratic societies where governments impose restrictive laws or policies, or where societal attitudes and practices undermine the principles of freedom of expression, association, and assembly. The shrinking of civic space poses a significant challenge to democratic governance, human rights, and sustainable development, as it undermines the fundamental values and mechanisms that enable citizens to participate actively in shaping their societies (Kode, 2018; Jegede, 2019).

Some Potential Consequences of Shrinking Civic Space in Nigeria

The consequences of shrinking civic space can have wide-ranging impacts on individuals, communities, civil society organizations, and society as a whole. According to Ikelegbe (2013), some potential consequences include:

1. **Suppression of Human Rights:** Shrinking civic space limits the ability of individuals and civil society organizations to advocate for and defend human rights. It can lead to a curtailment of freedom of expression, assembly, and association, resulting in a stifling of dissent and the suppression of voices critical of those in power.
2. **Weakening of Democracy:** Civic space is essential for the functioning of democratic societies. When civic space shrinks, it undermines democratic principles such as citizen participation, transparency, and accountability. It limits the ability of citizens to engage in political processes, contribute to policy-making, and hold governments and public officials accountable.
3. **Limited Civil Society Engagement:** Civil society organizations play a crucial role in addressing social issues, advocating for marginalized groups, and providing essential services. When civic space shrinks, these organizations face obstacles in carrying out their work,



including restrictions on funding, registration, and operation. This hampers their ability to address societal challenges effectively.

4. Erosion of Social Cohesion: Civic space provides avenues for dialogue, collaboration, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. When civic space is restricted, it can lead to the polarization of society, the suppression of diverse viewpoints, and the emergence of social divisions. This can exacerbate social tensions and hinder efforts to build inclusive and cohesive societies.

5. Impacts on Development: Shrinking civic space can hinder social and economic development. Civil society organizations often play a vital role in delivering services, advocating for social justice, and promoting sustainable development. When their activities are restricted, it can impede progress in areas such as health, education, poverty alleviation, and environmental protection.

6. Increased Vulnerability of Marginalized Groups: Shrinking civic space disproportionately affects marginalized and vulnerable populations, including human rights defenders, activists, journalists, and minority groups. They face increased risks of harassment, discrimination, violence, and legal persecution when their ability to advocate for their rights and address issues of concern is curtailed. Ibezim-Ohaeri (2017) warned that it is important to recognize that the consequences of shrinking civic space are interconnected and can have far-reaching implications for human rights, democracy, social cohesion, and sustainable development. Protecting and expanding civic space is crucial for fostering inclusive, participatory, and resilient societies especially in Nigeria.

Some instances of shrunk civic spaces during Buhari's administration in Nigeria

Certainly, there are some examples of how the shrinking civic space has affected citizens' ability to participate in the democratic process in Nigeria during the President Muhammadu Buhari administration: Some researchers, including Ibeanu Adejumobi (2018) and Ibeanu (2018) highlighted the following cases:

1. Nigeria's National Assembly complex: Under the Buhari administration, there have been instances of heavy security presence and restricted access, limiting the civil space for engagement and protests.



2. The Abuja Eagle Square: The Eagle Square, a popular location for public gatherings and protests, has been increasingly restricted and monitored by security forces, reducing the available space for civil society activities.
3. The Gani Fawehinmi Park in Lagos: This public park, often used for protests and demonstrations, has been subject to increased security presence and limitations on access, reducing its civil space.
4. The Unity Fountain in Abuja: Another popular gathering spot for protests and public demonstrations, the Unity Fountain has faced restrictions on access and civil activities during the Buhari administration.
5. The Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos: After the EndSARS protests and the subsequent crackdown by security forces, the Lekki Toll Gate has become a heavily monitored and restricted space for civil activities.
6. The National Stadium in Lagos: This public space, which was once a popular gathering spot for protests and rallies, has faced increased security presence and restrictions, limiting its availability for civil society activities.
7. The Freedom Park in Lagos: This public park, once a hub for social and cultural events, has faced limitations on access and use due to increased security measures.
8. The Murtala Muhammed Airport in Lagos: The airport has been subject to increased security and surveillance, limiting the civil space for public gatherings and protests.
9. The University of Lagos: The school administration has imposed restrictions on student gatherings and protests, shrinking the available civil space for student activism.
10. The National Mosque in Abuja: Security measures and restrictions have been imposed on this public space, limiting its availability for public gatherings and protests.
11. Restrictions on Freedom of Assembly: The Nigerian government has restricted the right to peaceful assembly, with reports of police violence against protesters and civil society activists. This has made it difficult for citizens to organize and participate in protests and demonstrations, which are essential forms of political participation.



12. Crackdown on Online Expression: The government has cracked down on online expression, with arrests and detentions of bloggers, social media users, and online journalists. This has created a chilling effect on online political discourse and has limited the ability of citizens to express their views and opinions freely.

13. Intimidation of Civil Society Organizations: Civil society organizations have faced harassment, intimidation, and arrests, particularly when they criticize government policies or expose corruption. This has limited the ability of civil society organizations to hold the government accountable and to advocate for citizens' rights.

14. Limited Access to Information: There is limited access to information, particularly in rural areas, which hinders the ability of citizens to hold the government accountable and to participate fully in the democratic process.

15. Inadequate Protection of Human Rights Defenders: Human rights defenders, including activists and journalists, have faced harassment, intimidation, and violence, but the government has not provided adequate protection or redress for these attacks. This has limited the ability of human rights defenders to advocate for citizens' rights and to hold the government accountable.

16. Lack of Access to Justice: Many Nigerians, particularly those living in rural areas, have limited access to justice, particularly due to financial constraints and lack of infrastructure. This has limited the ability of citizens to seek legal remedies for human rights violations and to challenge government policies and actions in court.

17. Limited Participation in Political Process: The government has not taken adequate steps to ensure inclusive political participation, particularly for women, youth, and marginalized communities. This has limited the ability of these groups to participate fully in the democratic process and to advocate for their rights and interests.

18. Inadequate Protection of Children's and Women's Rights: Children's and women's rights have been neglected, particularly in the areas of education, healthcare, and protection from violence and exploitation. This has limited the ability of these groups to fully participate in the democratic process and to advocate for their rights and interests.



19. Inadequate Protection of Human Rights Defenders: Human rights defenders, including activists and journalists, have faced harassment, intimidation, and violence, but the government has not provided adequate protection or redress for these attacks.
20. Lack of Accountability: There is a lack of accountability for human rights abuses and other forms of corruption, with few perpetrators held accountable for their actions.
21. Inadequate Access to Justice: Many Nigerians, particularly those living in rural areas, have limited access to justice, particularly due to financial constraints and lack of infrastructure.
22. Discrimination against Marginalized Communities: There have been allegations of discrimination against marginalized communities, particularly in the areas of education, employment, and political representation.
23. Limited Access to Information: There is limited access to information, particularly in rural areas, which hinders the ability of citizens to hold the government accountable for its actions.
24. Lack of Transparency: The government has been criticized for a lack of transparency in its decision-making processes and the management of public resources.
25. Inadequate Protection of Children's Rights: Children's rights have been neglected, particularly in the areas of education, healthcare, and protection from violence and exploitation.
26. Inadequate Protection of Women's Rights: Women's rights have been neglected, particularly in the areas of gender-based violence, equal pay, and political representation.
27. Limited Access to Healthcare: Many Nigerians, particularly those living in rural areas, have limited access to healthcare resources, including well-equipped hospitals and qualified healthcare professionals.
28. Limited Access to Education: Many Nigerians, particularly those living in rural areas, have limited access to quality education, particularly due to inadequate funding and infrastructure.



29. Inadequate Infrastructure: The government has not invested adequately in infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, which hinders the ability of citizens to access basic services such as clean water, electricity, and transportation.

However, Ezeani (2019) emphasized that these are just a few examples of how the shrinking civic space has affected citizens' ability to participate in the democratic process in Nigeria during the Buhari administration. By understanding these challenges, it is possible to develop strategies to address them and to promote a more inclusive and sustainable democracy in Nigeria (Giorgini, 2013; Dhivyadeepa, 2015). While these examples highlight specific instances of civil spaces that have been shrunk or restricted during the Muhammadu Buhari administration in Nigeria, it is important to note that many of these measures have been put in place under the guise of maintaining law and order (Anyadike, 2017; Buyse, 2018). Critics argue that these efforts have infringed upon the rights to freedom of assembly, expression, and association, which are guaranteed by the Nigerian constitution. Furthermore, these restrictions on civil spaces have led to concerns about the overall state of democracy and civic engagement in Nigeria. Human rights organizations and civil society groups have called on the government to ease restrictions on public gatherings and to respect the rights of citizens to peacefully assemble and express their opinions. It is worth mentioning that the situation regarding civil spaces is complex and can vary depending on the specific location and context. However, the examples provided demonstrate a trend towards the shrinking of civil spaces during the Buhari administration in Nigeria.

The concept of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

According to Alubo (2018), the concept of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) refers to non-governmental and non-profit entities that operate independently of the state and commercial sectors. CSOs are driven by a common purpose or mission, such as promoting social welfare, advancing human rights, or addressing environmental issues. Ayoade (2015) suggested that they play a vital role in society by advocating for policy reforms, undertaking community development initiatives, fostering civic engagement, and providing services to marginalized groups. CSOs often operate in the public interest, aiming to address societal challenges and contribute to positive social change (Akinola, 2020).



Roles of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Promoting and Safeguarding Civil Space

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) help in promoting and safeguarding civil space by advocating for policies that protect civic freedoms, monitoring and reporting on human rights violations, empowering citizens through capacity building, civic education, and providing legal support, and fostering dialogue and collaboration among different stakeholders to ensure an inclusive and vibrant civil society. Agreeing with Agwuegbo (2021), here are some key roles they fulfil:

1. **Advocacy and Policy Influence:** CSOs advocate for policies and legal frameworks that protect and promote civil space. They engage in research, analysis, and evidence-based advocacy to influence policymakers and shape public opinion.
2. **Monitoring and Reporting:** CSOs monitor and report on human rights violations, civic freedoms, and infringements on civil space. They provide independent assessments of government actions, hold authorities accountable, and raise awareness about threats to civil society.
3. **Capacity Building and Training:** CSOs provide training and capacity-building programs to empower citizens, activists, and grassroots organizations. They enhance skills in advocacy, human rights, organizational management, and civic engagement, enabling individuals and groups to effectively participate in civil space.
4. **Civic Education and Awareness:** CSOs promote civic education to foster an informed and engaged citizenry. They raise awareness about democratic rights, responsibilities, and the importance of active participation in public affairs. This helps to cultivate a culture of democratic values and principles.
5. **Service Provision and Social Welfare:** Many CSOs deliver essential services and support to marginalized communities. By addressing social and economic challenges, they empower individuals and communities to exercise their rights and participate in civil space.
6. **Coalition Building and Networking:** CSOs collaborate and form alliances to amplify their impact. Through coalition building, they combine resources, expertise, and advocacy efforts to address common goals, strengthen solidarity, and maximize their influence.



7. Legal Aid and Support: CSOs provide legal aid and support to individuals and groups facing human rights abuses or legal challenges related to civil space. They offer legal representation, advice, and assistance, ensuring access to justice and protection of rights.

8. Research and Documentation: CSOs undertake research and documentation to generate knowledge and evidence on issues affecting civil space. Their findings contribute to policy development, public discourse, and advocacy efforts.

9. Dialogue and Mediation: CSOs facilitate dialogue and mediation between different stakeholders, including governments, communities, and civil society actors. They promote peaceful resolution of conflicts, bridge divides, and foster inclusive decision-making processes.

10. International Advocacy and Networking: CSOs engage in international advocacy and networking to promote civil space at regional and global levels. They collaborate with international organizations, participate in forums, and leverage international mechanisms to advocate for human rights and democratic principles. Generally, civil society organizations play an essential role in promoting and defending civil space by advocating for policies, monitoring human rights, empowering citizens, raising awareness, providing services, and fostering collaboration. They serve as a vital force in safeguarding democratic values, promoting inclusivity, and ensuring the active participation of citizens in shaping their societies.

The Setbacks of CSOs in Safeguarding Civil Space during Buhari's Administration

Specific information regarding the efforts made by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) during the Muhammadu Buhari administration and their perceived failures can vary depending on different perspectives and sources (Aghemelo & Olorunmola, 2019). However, here are some general examples of challenges that CSOs in Nigeria have faced in promoting and safeguarding civil space in tandem with the findings of Aghedo and Osumah (2017):

1. Restrictive Legislation: CSOs have faced restrictive legislation that hampers their operations and limits their ability to advocate for change. The Buhari administration introduced the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) in 2020, which raised concerns among CSOs regarding potential government interference and constraints on their activities.



2. Crackdown on Activists: Some CSOs have faced instances of harassment, intimidation, and arrests of activists and human rights defenders during the Buhari administration. This has created a chilling effect on civil society engagement and limited the space for dissenting voices.

3. Limitations on Freedom of Expression: CSOs have confronted challenges related to freedom of expression, including restrictions on the media, online censorship, and the passage of laws that discourage criticism of the government. These limitations have stifled open dialogue and hindered the work of CSOs in promoting civil space.

4. Funding Constraints: Many CSOs in Nigeria have experienced financial challenges, including limited access to funding and resources. This lack of financial support can impede their effectiveness and sustainability in promoting and safeguarding civil space.

5. Limited Government Engagement: CSOs have encountered difficulties in engaging with the government and having their voices heard. Some organizations have faced barriers in accessing government officials, participating in decision-making processes, and influencing policy development. However, it is important to note that while CSOs may face challenges and encounter setbacks in their efforts to promote and safeguard civil space, they also have achieved significant successes in advocating for human rights, transparency, and democratic governance in Nigeria. The overall impact of CSO efforts during the Buhari administration would require a comprehensive assessment based on specific cases and context.

Some Examples of Civil Society Organizations in Nigeria

Civil Society Organizations in Nigeria were formed through the voluntary association of individuals or groups driven by a common purpose, such as promoting social welfare, advancing human rights, or addressing specific societal issues. Agbaje and Adejumobi (2017) listed some of them including:

1. Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP): SERAP is a non-profit organization that focuses on promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance in Nigeria. They advocate for human rights, tackle corruption, and engage in public interest litigation.



2. Enough is Enough Nigeria (EiE): EiE is a youth-led organization that advocates for good governance, citizen engagement, and active participation in the democratic process. They have been involved in campaigns and initiatives to promote electoral integrity and youth empowerment.
3. Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA): WRAPA is a women's rights organization that works towards the promotion and protection of women's rights in Nigeria. They engage in advocacy, legal support, and awareness-raising activities to challenge discriminatory practices and promote gender equality.
4. Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD): CDD is a research and advocacy organization that focuses on democratic governance, peace building, and conflict resolution in Nigeria. They conduct research, provide policy recommendations, and engage in civic education and capacity-building programs.
5. BudgIT: BudgIT is a non-profit organization that promotes transparency and accountability in public finance management. They analyze government budgets, simplify complex financial information, and engage citizens in budget monitoring and advocacy.
6. Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NWTF): NWTF is an organization dedicated to promoting women's political participation and leadership in Nigeria. They provide support, training, and resources to women aspiring for political office and work towards gender-responsive governance.
7. Human Rights Watch (HRW) Nigeria: HRW is an international human rights organization that conducts research, monitors human rights violations, and advocates for human rights protection in Nigeria. They investigate and document issues such as police brutality, freedom of expression, and access to justice.
8. Connected Development (CODE): CODE is a non-profit organization that uses technology and data for social accountability and citizen engagement. They promote transparency, track government projects, and empower communities to demand better service delivery.
9. Nigerian Bar Association (NBA): The NBA is a professional association of lawyers in Nigeria. It plays a crucial role in promoting the rule of law, advocating for legal reforms, and protecting human rights.

10. Media Rights Agenda (MRA): MRA is a non-profit organization that advocates for press freedom, freedom of expression, and access to information in Nigeria. They monitor media rights violations, provide legal support, and advocate for policy reforms. However, these are just a few examples of the diverse civil society organizations operating in Nigeria. Each organization focuses on different areas of concern, ranging from human rights to governance, gender equality, transparency, and social justice.

Connectivity between Marxism and Liberalism theory in Nigerian civic space

The connectivity between Marxism and Liberalism theory in the Nigerian civic space can be understood through their shared emphasis on certain aspects of democracy and social justice, albeit from different perspectives. Some researchers explained that Marxism, rooted in socialist ideology, focuses on addressing class struggle and economic inequality (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2016). It critiques capitalism and advocates for collective ownership of resources, redistribution of wealth, and the elimination of social hierarchies. In the Nigerian civic space, Marxist principles may resonate with individuals and groups that highlight socioeconomic disparities, advocate for workers' rights, and challenge the concentration of wealth and power.

On the other hand, Liberalism is a political philosophy that emphasizes individual liberty, human rights, and limited government intervention. It promotes a market-based economy, pluralism, and the protection of civil liberties. In the Nigerian context, Liberalism may find support among those who prioritize individual freedoms, democratic governance, and the rule of law. Despite their differences, Marxism and Liberalism intersect in their concerns for social justice, democracy, and inclusive governance. Both ideologies recognize the importance of equal opportunities and the elimination of systemic barriers that impede citizens' full participation in society. They also share a commitment to addressing power imbalances and ensuring that marginalized groups have a voice in decision-making processes.

In the Nigerian civic space, these ideologies can inform discussions and actions related to income inequality, access to basic services, labour rights, and political participation. Eboh (2018) submitted that while Marxism may emphasize the need for structural change and collective action to address socioeconomic disparities, Liberalism may focus on protecting individual rights and freedoms within a democratic framework. It is important to note that the Nigerian civic space is diverse, encompassing a range of ideologies, perspectives, and



interests. The connectivity between Marxism and Liberalism reflects the complex and evolving nature of democratic discourse in Nigeria, where various theories and ideologies are engaged with and adapted to local contexts (Okeke, 2018).

Steps for Rekindling Civic Space in Nigeria

Rekindling civic space in Nigeria involves revitalizing and expanding the realm of civic engagement, participation, and public discourse. According to Abbah (2018), here are some steps that can be taken to foster a vibrant civic space.

1. **Legal Reforms:** Review and reform existing laws and regulations that impede civic space, ensuring they align with international human rights standards. This includes revising restrictive legislation, such as the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA), to protect the rights of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and facilitate their operations.
2. **Protection of Freedom of Expression:** Safeguard freedom of expression and press freedom by promoting an enabling environment for independent media and journalists. Encourage the repeal or amendment of laws that stifle dissenting voices, and support initiatives that enhance media professionalism and ethical standards.
3. **Participatory Governance:** Implement measures to enhance citizen participation in decision-making processes. This can be achieved through mechanisms such as town hall meetings, public consultations, and participatory budgeting, allowing citizens to voice their opinions and contribute to policy development and implementation.
4. **Strengthening CSO Capacity:** Provide support for CSOs through capacity building programs, training, and technical assistance. This will enable them to effectively carry out their work, including advocacy, monitoring, and service provision. Financial support, grants, and access to resources should also be made available to enhance organizational sustainability.
5. **Dialogue and Collaboration:** Foster meaningful dialogue and collaboration between the government, CSOs, and other stakeholders. Establish platforms for constructive engagement, where diverse perspectives can be shared, and solutions to societal challenges can be collectively developed. This includes regular consultations, partnerships, and joint initiatives.



6. Civic Education and Awareness: Promote civic education and awareness programs to enhance citizens' understanding of their rights, responsibilities, and the importance of active participation in public affairs. This can be done through school curricula, public campaigns, and community outreach initiatives to foster a culture of democratic values.

7. International Engagement: Engage with international organizations, regional bodies, and networks to advocate for the protection of civic space in Nigeria. This includes leveraging international mechanisms, sharing best practices, and learning from experiences in other countries facing similar challenges.

8. Monitoring and Reporting: Establish mechanisms to monitor and report on human rights violations, including infringements on civic freedoms. Independent bodies, including CSOs, should be empowered to document and raise awareness about abuses, ensuring accountability and promoting transparency.

9. Public-Private Partnerships: Encourage collaboration between CSOs and the private sector to address societal challenges and promote social responsibility. This can involve joint initiatives, corporate social responsibility programs, and collaborations on social and environmental issues.

10. Public Support and Engagement: Foster a culture of civic engagement and active citizenship by promoting public support for civil society and democratic values. This can be achieved through public campaigns, media advocacy, and community mobilization efforts.

11. Uphold Freedom of Expression and Press Freedom: Ensuring that freedom of expression is protected, and press freedom is respected is crucial. The administration should actively promote an environment where journalists, media outlets, and citizens can express their opinions without fear of reprisals or censorship. This can be achieved through legal reforms, fostering a culture of open dialogue, and engaging with media and civil society to address any concerns.

12. Foster an Inclusive and Participatory Governance Approach: The administration should actively engage citizens and civil society organizations in decision-making processes. This includes creating avenues for public consultation, seeking input from diverse stakeholders, and incorporating their perspectives into policy formulation and implementation. Encouraging



citizen participation strengthens democracy, promotes accountability, and helps build trust between the government and the people.

13. Strengthen Rule of Law and Independent Judiciary: A robust and independent judiciary is essential for safeguarding civic space. The administration should ensure that the rule of law is upheld, judicial independence is respected, and access to justice is available to all citizens. This includes appointing qualified and impartial judges, protecting judicial autonomy, and addressing systemic challenges that may impede the effective functioning of the judiciary.

14. Promote Transparency and Accountability: Transparency and accountability are vital in maintaining an open civic space. The administration should prioritize transparency in governance processes, including budgeting, procurement, and public service appointments. Implementing effective anti-corruption measures, ensuring public officials are held accountable for their actions, and fostering a culture of integrity can help rebuild public trust and strengthen democratic institutions.

15. Respect Human Rights and Protect Civil Society: The administration should uphold human rights and protect the activities of civil society organizations. This includes creating an enabling environment for civil society to operate freely, without undue restrictions or harassment. The administration should also engage constructively with civil society actors, recognizing their role as partners in promoting social justice, democracy, and good governance.

16. Foster Dialogue and Constructive Engagement: Encouraging dialogue and constructive engagement with opposition groups, civil society, and marginalized communities is crucial. The administration should actively seek to bridge divides, address grievances, and find common ground through inclusive dialogue. This can help build consensus, reduce tensions, and promote a more cohesive and inclusive society. By implementing these steps and more, the president can work towards avoiding the shrinking of civic space in Nigeria, fostering a vibrant democratic environment that respects human rights, promotes citizen participation, and upholds the principles of good governance.



Conclusion

Conclusively, the study on challenges of shrinking civic space and sustainable democracy in Nigeria, focusing on the experience of President M. Buhari's administration, highlights the urgent need for safeguarding freedom of expression, strengthening civil society engagement, enhancing transparency and accountability, and fostering dialogue and reconciliation. These measures are crucial for nurturing a vibrant democratic environment that upholds citizen rights, promotes inclusivity, and fosters the long-term sustainability of democracy in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The followings were recommended thus:

1. The Nigerian government should prioritize the protection of freedom of expression and association as fundamental rights. Measures should be taken to ensure that individuals and civil society organizations can freely express their opinions, engage in peaceful assembly, and associate without fear of reprisals. This can be achieved through legal reforms, adequate safeguards against harassment and intimidation, and fostering an environment that values diverse perspectives and dissent.
2. The Buhari administration should actively engage and collaborate with civil society organizations to foster an inclusive and participatory democracy. Civil society plays a vital role in advocating for citizen rights, promoting transparency and accountability, and providing critical checks and balances. The government should create enabling conditions for civil society organizations to operate effectively, including by streamlining the regulatory framework, ensuring transparency in funding, and actively seeking their input in policy formulation and implementation.
3. The government should prioritize transparency and accountability in its actions and policies. This includes promoting access to information, ensuring public officials are held accountable for their actions, and combating corruption. By promoting transparency and accountability, the government can build trust with citizens, strengthen democratic institutions, and create an environment conducive to sustainable democracy.
4. To address the challenges of shrinking civic space, the Buhari administration should prioritize dialogue and reconciliation. Engaging with different stakeholders, including



opposition groups, civil society organizations, and marginalized communities, can help foster a culture of inclusivity and pave the way for constructive engagement. By promoting dialogue and reconciliation, the government can work towards addressing grievances, bridging divides, and building a more cohesive and resilient democratic society.

These recommendations aim to address the shrinking civic space in Nigeria and promote sustainable democracy during the President M. Buhari administration. Implementing these recommendations can help create an environment that upholds democratic principles, protects human rights, and ensures the active participation of citizens in shaping the nation's future.

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