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The Essence of Democracy

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Abstract

This paper highlights the essence of democracy and examines the reasons why democracy continues to be relevant and attractive to many people, including Nigerians. In particular, the paper reports what Nigerians mean by democracy and their expectations from their democratic government. The paper is empirical. It also reports on the current lack of the benefits of democracy and cautions on the consequences of the people's seemingly endless wait for democratic dividends in Nigeria.

Key words: Popular Participation, Sovereignty, Equality, Legitimacy, Political Evaluation, Political Succession, Political Initiative, Political Accountability, Citizen Empowerment

Introduction

“Why Democracy?” That was the question Richard Joseph asked in his highly scholarly book, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: the Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*. “Why democracy?” when, as Joseph put it, “a significant proportion of national wealth was directly invested between 1975 and 1979 by the Nigerian Federal Government and by private institutions through a variety of avenues for the purpose of re-establishing a system of government that has failed far more often than it has succeeded in the developing world.” “What can justify that?” when if we estimate or add what was expended by the Babangida regime from 1986-1993 how frightening the figure could be, not to talk of the pains passed through by the Nigerian people – pains which cannot be quantified. Yet, we were even saddled with those of late General Sani Abacha and General Abdulsalami Abubakar. And the struggle seems to be still on.

Actually, the story of democracy, its experience and failure in the Third World, particularly in African countries, is so pathetic that it is necessary to try and draw up a list for Africa. Again, according to Richard Joseph (1991:19):

Prior to the 1979 transitions from military to civilian rule in Ghana and Nigeria, only the relatively small states of Botswana, Mauritius and the Gambia could be called democratic without the necessity of affixing a list of qualifying adjectives.

(It should be recalled that The Gambia has since also fallen by the wayside, with the intervention of the military in the democratic process or whatever you may wish to call it, in that small country). So why really should we continuously bother ourselves “with returning to a political system which has a poor endurance record in developing countries?” (Joseph,1991:19). Finally, why democracy when politicians only glibly “appreciate democratic phraseology... while ‘crushing’ opponents in the name of the people” (Schumpeter,

1942:269 cited in Joseph, 1991:19) or cancelling an election result and jailing its winner in the name of the people or in the national interests and the preservation of the territorial integrity of the state as was the case with Moshood Abiola in Nigeria's June 12, 1993 Presidential elections?

Is 'democracy' then 'merely' an attraction? Is it an impossibility? Is it irrelevant? Is it just an ideal? Even if, are ideals of no relevance? These are not just philosophical questions. In fact, we do not want to share in the pessimistic picture painted by Richard Joseph in response to the question he posed: "why democracy?" even though the picture is necessary and the question relevant at least for the reassessment of operational strategies and evaluation of concept or thought process. Neither do we wish to be swayed by J.A. Schumpeter's conviction that "the classical tenets of democracy were inapplicable, and even in contradiction to the basic facts of political life," though he attempted to advance the reasons for the resilience of the concept. The four reasons he identified has been summarized by Joseph as follows:

the historical association of democracy with religious belief; the association of the forms and phrases of classical democracy with certain events and developments in a people's history; the fact that in some small and primitive societies the democratic doctrine actually fits the facts; and finally that politicians appreciate democratic phraseology even while "crushing opponents in the name of the people" (Joseph, 1991:19, citing Schumpeter, 1942:269).

While we do not intend to swallow, per se, or even contend the reasons enumerated by Schumpeter as summarized above by Richard Joseph, we would rather concern ourselves with the intrinsic value of 'democracy' which makes its doctrine "actually fits the facts," that is, that appeal that makes the call for democracy irresistible; that quintessential element that makes the demand for democratization

unstoppable. In other words, why, fundamentally, the contemporary democratic fervour or upsurge?

This paper highlights the importance of democracy. It examines the reasons why democracy continues to be seen as relevant and attractive to many people, including Nigerians. In particular, the paper reports what Nigerians mean by democracy and their expectations from their democratic government. But, first, let us quickly go to the basic issue of how democracy is defined and explained. The paper ends with a conclusion.

Democracy Defined and Explained

Democracy simply means people's government. It is participation by the people in ruling themselves through majority vote in taking decisions or making rules or laws for their community. It should be noted that the largeness of communities has necessitated choosing or electing representatives to take decisions and carry out the affairs of the people on their behalf.

Abraham Lincoln defines democracy as 'government of the people by the people, and for the people.' This has perhaps become the most popular definition of democracy today. However, in practice, governance is hardly carried out by rulers for the benefit of the people, especially in Africa, where rulers are mostly on their own and the people complain and lament endlessly. This is really not democratic governance. This act of insensitivity and misrule is really not democracy but only perpetrated in its name. It is simply something else. According to Akinyemi (2006), democracy is "a system where the government is dependent on the governed both for becoming the government and for the continuing legitimacy of governance."

McLean (1996:129) equally notes that, by democracy, the Greeks meant "rule by the people." He argued that since the people are rarely unanimous, democracy as a descriptive term may be regarded as synonymous with "majority rule." Similarly, democracy has been conceived of as "government of the whole, by the majority, generally

through representatives elected by secret ballot of adults.” It is explained that given the rise in population today, everybody can not be in government at the same time, thus, only elected representatives can rule, as members of the executive or parliament (legislature) (Caritt, 1947:150 cited in Ogomudia, 2002:4-5).

Furthermore, democracy should be seen in terms of due process, devoid of arbitrariness and coercion, for example, in decision-making or enforcement of rules. As Barry (1991:25) has contended:

I follow here those who insist that ‘democracy’ is to be understood in procedural terms. That is to say, I reject the notion that one should build into ‘democracy’ any constraints on the content of outcomes produced, such as substantive equality, respect for human rights, concern for general welfare, personal liberty, or the rule of law. The only exceptions (and these are significant) are those required by democracy itself as a procedure. Thus, some degree of freedom of communication and organization is a necessary condition of the formation of expression, and aggregation of political preferences.

Besides, democracy embraces the following, among others:

- (i) meaningful competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties) for all elective positions of government power at regular intervals and excluding the use of force.
- (ii) a high level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies at least through regular and fair election.
- (iii) a level of civil and political liberties – freedom of expression, freedom to form and join organization – sufficient to ensure the integrity of political participation and competition (Diamond, 1990:7 cited in Babawale, 2002:2-3).

In summarizing his conceptual analysis of democracy, it has been stated that the mainstay of democracy relates to the following:

1. Sovereignty of the people
2. Government based on the consent of the governed.
3. Majority rule.
4. Minority rights.
5. Guarantee of basic human rights.
6. Free and fair elections.
7. Equality before the law.
8. Due process of law.
9. Constitutional limits on government.
10. Social, economic, and political pluralism.
11. Values of tolerance, pragmatism, and compromise
(<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/whatsdem/whatdm2.htm> cited in Akinyemi, 2006)

Finally, democracy represents the effective participation of people in their own affairs. It is majority rule and minority rights. It involves the due process of law and respect for fundamental human rights. Democracy epitomizes the dignity and regard for the individual; it seeks his/her consent in decision-making or governance and recognises and celebrates his/her ability to order his/her own life.

The Essence of Democracy

One basic value of democracy is that of the intrinsic satisfaction, worth, dignity and fulfilment the individual derives from taking part in the affairs that govern his own existence and welfare, as nobody would naturally work against his or her own interest. It is through this personal participation in public decision-making that the individual ensures his own freedom, well-being and generally pursues his aspirations. It is in this wise, Carlton Rodee and others in their simple and straightforward work, *Introduction to Political Science*, assert that democracy – direct democracy though “is, in principle, the perfect expression of popular sovereignty” (Rodee, et al, 1983:44). It is, likewise, on this score, perhaps, that, “popular participation in the

making of Rousseau's social contract also means that the government is legitimate only insofar as it operates according to the principles of popular sovereignty" (Rodee, et al, 1983:26; see Adamolekun, 1985:5).

Flowing from the above is that, apart from the notion of equality of individuals in democratic practice, governance must necessarily be based on the desires of the people – that is, government decisions must reflect the will of the people, of which it is a part as in representative government (cf: Saward, 1994).

Besides, because democracy ensures that government is a product of the people, the continued exercise of power by such a government is based on its responsiveness, trustworthiness and performance – and consequently, societal progress (see Burns, Peltason and Cronin, 1984:566-570).

Moreover, the determination of the government's continued hold on power by the people through election, even though this may not be that regular, provides an avenue for control of such government's decisions and actions (Mass Mobilization for Social Justice and Economic Recovery, MAMSER, 1989:51). Therefore, restraints on such a government's policies and behaviour no matter how limited this might be, is provided for.

In addition, the practice of democracy provides a legitimate basis for support of government through people participation. Such support is manifested through voluntary payment of taxes, and general support for government effort, policies and programmes.

Furthermore, the democratic practice provides a platform for the evaluation of those who rule, by the people. Such assessment ensures that those who govern are, on the average, of high calibre.

Also, the free dissemination and competition of ideas, which is the hallmark of a democratic environment, improves the problem-solving ability of governors and policy-makers, aside from its general enlightenment value. "Only an educated and enlightened democracy

can hope to endure in the long run,” according to Thomas Jefferson (cited in Burns, Peltason and Cronin, 1984:570). As reported by James Burns and others, a striking difference between a democracy and every other form of government is that:

..... a democracy educates for continuous and active citizenship whereas other forms of government only for passive obedience – and technical skills. The sine qua non (the that without which) of a successful democracy is that all citizens think for themselves about all issues that may arise; the requirement of successful totalitarianism is that citizens obey those who think for them (Commager, 1943:76, cited in Burns, Peltason and Cronin, 1984:570).

Ike Oguine, similarly tells us that though democratic structures are by no means perfect, their myriad imperfections quite famous, and which sometimes produce distressing outcomes, the positive message which (American) democracy sends to the world is that:

the bitterest battles of principle and policy can be fought in legislative houses, the law courts, on the pages of newspapers and television, that you do not need armoured cars shooting down unarmed protesters and a river of draconian decrees to manage the affairs of human beings (Oguine, 1996:49).

Thus, democracy only allows verbal wars. It promotes freedom of speech and public debate of local and national issues. A democratic state fosters openness. It fosters social harmony and public understanding. A democracy is a market-place of ideas. A democratic society aggregates and utilizes these contesting ideas for its own benefit. Unfortunately, these are what military dictatorships and even civilian authoritarian rule repressively discourage. Omotoye Olorode was therefore right when he said that:

This plurality which makes democratic synthesis of various ideas mandatory in a civilized society is what military autocracy and the corruptibility of absolute power have sought to kill in our country, among the Nigerian elite, and, therefore, the generality of our people (Olorode, 1996:25).

Apart from the above, another value of democracy is that it is a device for relatively orderly and peaceful transition, change or leadership succession. As Ladipo Adamolekun observes, “perhaps the most important practical demonstration of a (Western) democratic system of government is the orderly succession of political leadership” (Adamolekun, 1985:5). This device or process promotes political stability, societal progress and non-military intervention. This point is significant in the light of our experience in Nigeria, especially from the angle or problematics of military disengagement from politics. In the view of H. Mayo, democracy offers:

voluntary adjustments of disputes, ensures peaceful change in changing societies, makes for orderly succession of rulers, recognizes the necessity for minimum coercion in the society, legitimizes diversity of beliefs, actions and interests, is best for the promotion of science, and ensures freedom (Mayo, 1980:218, 241, cited in Nwolise, 1992:99).

For his part, J. Lively, states that democracy ensures that:

a government pursues the general interest of the greatest number of the people in the society, serves as a safety valve for citizens’ liberty, makes for self government, helps mould a trait and desirable cast character, and provides for social and political equality (Lively, 1975:11, cited in Nwolise, 1992:99-100).

Another point worth mentioning is that democracy encourages initiative on the part of the citizen, because of freedom to contribute ideas as well as opportunity to participate, in whichever way, in the political process. Certainly, democracy cannot solve all the problems of the society; it has its own limitations. But it summons the individual to initiate action on his or her potentialities. As Pini Jason has beautifully captured it:

Democracy in itself is not a magical social mantra that transmits every social problem into a nirvana. It is rather an elixir which invigorates a people to greater heights. In contrast, military (or, as a matter of fact, civilian) dictatorships stifle and stultify initiatives (Jason, 1994:4).

Thus, while democracy is not a magic wand to be used to perform miracles on every perceivable societal problem, it, no doubt, fosters a relatively free inspirational environment for the citizens to aspire to contribute something 'new.' As such, Osisioma Nwolise contends that despite Aristotle's argument that the best form of government is relative to circumstance, and Thomas Paine's insistence that the form of government is best which governs best, many scholars still press that democracy is the best form of government despite its weakness like giving more room in society to ignorant and atomized poor people as well as the tendency to oppress the minorities (Nwolise 1992:100). Hence he says, scholars that press the natural rights case for democracy argue that democracy is the best form of government. As Wollheim (1958), has noted, for instance, "... everyone has a natural right to contact government... this right is recognized in democracy therefore democracy is the best form of government." (cited in Nwolise, 1992:100).

Because citizens have a natural right to contact government in a democracy, they have the opportunity to express themselves, make their demands and air their grievances to the authorities. Thus, the public space is widened and social pressure is reduced as the citizens

readily have the avenue to blow off steam and reduce temper. As such, the tendency for people to resort to 'self-help' or take the law into their hands is highly discouraged and the society is better or it, as a relatively more peaceful environment is ensured. Under the military, free expression was severely curtailed in Nigeria (see, for examples; Ogbondah, 1997; Agbaje, 1993; Olugboji, Aigbogun and Nwankwo, 1994; Saro-Wiwa, 1995; Dare, 1997; Article 19 and Media Right Agenda, 1997; Oloyede, 2004; Ibagere and Edosa, 2006; Ngwodo, 2008; Kalejaiye, 2009; and Uche, 2013).

Yet, as Robert Darl has forcefully underscored it,

freedom of expression is required in order for citizens to participate effectively in political life. How can citizens make their views known and persuade their fellow citizens and representatives to adopt them unless they can express themselves freely about all matters bearing on the conduct of the government? And if they are to take the views of others into account, they must be able to hear what others have to say. Free expression means not just that you have a right to be heard. It also means that you have a right to hear what others have to say.

To acquire an enlightened understanding of possible government actions and policies also requires freedom of expression. To acquire civic competence, citizens need opportunities to express their own views; learn from one another; engage in discussion and deliberation; read, hear, and question experts, political candidates, and persons whose judgments they trust; and learn in other ways that depend on freedom of expression.

Finally, without freedom of expression citizens would soon lose their capacity to influence the agenda of government decisions. Silent citizens may be perfect subjects for an authoritarian ruler; they would be a disaster for a democracy (Darl, 1998:96).

Thus, democracy promotes popular control of government.

As early as 1951, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) carried out a survey study whose result showed the wide acceptance of democracy in Europe. In its findings, UNESCO observed that:

... there were no replies adverse to democracy. Probably, for the first time in history, democracy is claimed as the proper ideal description of all systems of political and social organizations advocated by influential proponents (UNESCO, 1951:527, cited in Nwolise, 1992).

Therefore, the unhindered practice of democracy could be viewed as a (standard) measure of civilized conduct, and as a measure of a political community or society that has 'arrived' or a political system that has fully developed.

Eghosa Osaghae has summarized the essence of democracy, especially from the angle of how democracy enhances development, as:

- (i) enhancement of the responsiveness and accountability of the state; and
- (ii) the empowerment of the citizens to participate in, and claim ownership of the state and the development project that it superintends (Osaghae, 2000:5).

He explains copiously that:

The overall import of these objectives is that democracy, in the context of the post-colonial state engenders the re-direction of the state to serve the interests of the citizens rather than that of the global capitalist system and its local clients, which has been the case since colonial times. Without this fundamental reclaiming and re-orientation of the state,

development (from above) will be as meaningless and irrelevant to the ordinary citizens as it tended to be in the past. This is not to discountenance foreign investment, a cardinal point of development strategies pursued in Nigeria over the years, but to make clear that the terms for even such a desirable strategy have to be determined by Nigerians themselves, in their own interests, rather than the interests of foreign capital. Only a democratic system that engenders a bond or (new) social contract between the governors and governed and makes the former accountable to the latter, is capable of effecting such a fundamental, if not revolutionary, re-direction of the state. Anything short of this, and democracy becomes highly formalist and disempowering of the ordinary peoples (Osaghae, 2000:5-6; Ake, 1994 cited in Osaghae, 2000:5-6).

Additionally, the essence of democracy as viewed empirically and specifically by Nigerians can be clearly seen from what democracy means to them – viz: good governance, free and fair elections, employment or jobs, providing security, good and affordable education, good roads, good and affordable hospitals with doctors, and good and affordable accommodation or housing. There is therefore no doubt that the Nigerian people want an accountable, responsive, transparent, sensitive and caring government; a government that addresses their basic needs and developmental concerns; a government that provides the now proverbial ‘dividends of democracy’ (Edosa, 2012:356-358).

But all these are currently largely absent or unavailable in Nigeria. So, the Nigerian people’s expectations are high. But what they get oftentimes are promises upon promises that are hardly ever met as well as bundles of disappointment. Consequently, the question is: How long will Nigerians have to wait for the ‘mirage’ called dividends of democracy? One thing however is almost sure: The longer the wait for these mystical and elusive democratic dividends, the more people could begin to lose confidence in the democratic

enterprise! The sad and painful memories of the excesses of past military regimes in the country may not linger forever!! (Edosa, 2012:358-359)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the essence of democracy encompasses the intrinsic satisfaction of the individual in personally participating in politics, the notion of equality in democratic practice, that government is based on popular sovereignty and that democracy promotes responsiveness, accountability, trustworthiness, societal progress, governmental control, restraint, support, evaluation and acceptability. Democracy also promotes public enlightenment and improves executive problem-solving skills.

Also, democracy promotes openness, peaceful conduct of government business, social harmony, public understanding, orderly and peaceful leadership succession, political stability, initiative, governmental responsiveness, accountability and legitimacy as well as citizen empowerment.

Finally, the essence of democracy, to the Nigerian people, should also embrace good governance, credible elections, provision of employment, security, basic infrastructure and means of livelihood as well as social welfare. In other words, the essence of democracy, to Nigerians, should include the delivery of the benefits of democracy in concrete terms and without much delay by the government.

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