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Democratic Ideals and the Nigerian State: What Hope for the Future

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Abstract

An analysis of the principles of democracy was carried out. The objective was to delineate the extent to which the Nigerian state is democratic and how its current democratic ideals could impact on its future existence as a state. The method adopted for the study was that of content analysis, which involved conceptual and historical analyses of textual data. It was discovered from historical data that the Nigerian state runs a system of government, which promotes internal colonialism of the minority groups by the major ones. This political imbalance was shown to create social and political tension, where the peripheral groups were hostile to the core regions. It was recommended in the study that if the Nigerian state is to subsist in the future, then it has to restructure its political institutions to promote true federalism as well as imbibe and practice standard democratic ideals.

Key Words: Democratic ideal, Nigeria, Hope, Future.

Introduction

The concern of this paper can be properly grasped when attention is paid to the character and feature of democracy as shared by vast majority of people, who draft, interpret and enforce law within any given state or system. But pronouncements on the fate of democracy as a better form of government, to a large extent are alive to rather, the historic responsibility inherent in such system. Where this pronouncement is made consistent with concrete actions, the state appears to be the better for it. Hence, it could be taken as an axiomatic position in the paper that democracy is a better system of government than any other form of government that currently obtains in any part of the world. It should be noted, however that, in any purported system of democracy, if societies, economics and the judiciary are not democratic, then the state in focus cannot be said to be democratic.

Beyond this, it could be argued that the pervasive lack of democracy, mindless repression and abusive misuse of power is the major root of the idiom of crisis, retrogression and decay all over the world. For the avoidance of doubt, the point need be made quite fundamentally that, the topic cannot be treated as

an idealistic concept. Hence, it is canonized on the post-colonial status in Africa, where an authoritarian caricature of its brutal and repressive colonial predecessor was the in-thing. While the modern state industrial societies are popular, democratic and participatory features endear democracy to the mind of state. Africa's post-colonial state is a parasitic oligarchy dominated by a "small clique" in power; despotic and exclusive. This later feature has also hampered proper accountability, breeds corruption and banality within a given system and has also been the major thrust that has given legitimacy to the cravings for democracy as a better form of government. But how this is achieved or carried out for the benefit of all is what this paper will be attempting to unmask.

Explication of Concept: What is Democracy?

Democracy like other political terms connotes different things to different people at different times. The word, to be precise, is nebulous and consequently carries with it the unprecedented problem of universally acceptable definition.

Etymologically, it is derived from Greek words, "demos" which means "people" and "kratia" meaning "rule". Literally however, it means, rule by the people, or of the people. But these definitions have triggered off some intractable questions such as: "who are the people, and who do they rule?" The question in itself cannot be a causal currency since every government, whether military, despotic, totalitarian, oligarchic etc., claim to have the legitimate support of the people.

In order to do justice to the question, it will be expedient to call to mind some of the definitions proposed for the concept of democracy. Firstly, is the popular definition by Abraham Lincoln, according to which democracy is: "the government of the people, by the people and for the people" (Jack, 1975, p. 238). This simple definition carries with it a three-fold implication namely; it is a government of the people – meaning: a government held in trust for the people. Secondly, it is a government by the people – meaning: a representative government. Thirdly, it is a government for the people with such evocable meaning – it is a government in the interest of the people. One important fact that is deducible from the above definition and its corollaries is that, democracy as a form of government involves all the people or that such a government carries all the people along with it, directly or indirectly, through representation done in the best interest of the people. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), an American political theorist defines democracy as "the government by the consent of the governed".

Again, the main thrust of this system is mainly carried out through election, which enables electors or the people to choose their representatives from those, who may show interest and are recommended usually by political parties. This invariably explains the use of the term "the people", in the definition. But let it be quickly added that the term, "the people" does not also mean every individual in the polity. Every person in the country may not have the right and/or the opportunity to participate in decision-making or be fully involved in governance. If this were the case, the act of governance will be too cumbersome.

In the earlier attempt at the delineation of the concept, it was mentioned that it connotes different things to different people at different times. It explains why the most dictatorial forms of government claim to be democratic. Democracy as a political theory has posed a problem of definition to political theorists. It is therefore difficult to understand what the concept actually stands for and how it could be applied. But in an attempt at resolving this problem, some theorists have attempted some definitions.

First of such theorists is A. Appadorai (1974), who defined democracy as: "the system of government under which the people exercise their governing power either directly or indirectly through representatives periodically elected by themselves" (p. 233). For him, a state may be termed democratic if it provides institutions for the expression (in the last analysis) of the supremacy of "popular will" on basic questions of social direction and policy. It is important to note that, the salient point of Appadorai's analysis centres on the supremacy of the people but not the government.

Hook (1967) defined democracy as: “one in which the basic decisions of government rest upon the freely given consent of the people” (p. 468). Again, the governed is supreme and the government is only but a servant. This is akin to the contractarian’s contention pictured in Appadorai (1974) as follows: “I authorize and give up my right of governing myself to this man or this assembly of men (government) on this condition that thou give up thy right to him and authorize all his actions in like manner” (p. 233). The sum total of this writing is that any democracy like a state is a human creation, whose survival rests upon the freely given consent of the people, which subsequently makes them part and parcel of the decision process.

Arnold Lyphart (1982, p. 4) described democracy as a “system of government that hardly embodies all democratic ideals, but one that approximates them to a reasonable degree.” Lyphart’s definition falls in line with what Robert A. Dahl (cited in Lyphart 1977, p.10) calls ‘Polyarchy’; a system of having more than one definition. Lyphart’s conception of democracy notwithstanding, his acceptance of Dahl’s Polyarchy, which falls short of democracy shows that there is democracy, which lies out there which is incapable of definition.

Democracy is that form of government that must of necessity seek and act in accordance with the “will” and “consent” of the citizen as to who should rule and how. The implication of this is that, no man or ruler can impose himself on the people. The people must approve of such ruler’s capability and ability to rule democratically. This is usually done through election. This view tallies with Manegold’s popular liberties in the middle age, which sought to resist the claim of rulers to an absolute dominion: Schallschneider (1975) opined that democracy is:

the competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that, the public can participate in the decision making process . . . and the ingredients of working definitions of democracy are conflict, competition, organization, leadership and responsibility (p.138).

In a dramatic search for a suitable definition, Schutz opined that: “numerous definitions of democracy have been formulated, some are extremely brief, such as government of, by and for the people; a form of government characterized by the responsibility of those, who govern to those who are governed or government by discussion” (Schutz 1966, p. 3). For Schutz, these and other definitions suffer undue brevity yet attention is drawn to some of the features commonly associated with democracy.

Democracy has also been defined as the rule of the majority over the minority. This definition expresses the fact that in a democratic government, the office holders must be given consent by a majority of the people in a given society. This is however contrary to what it used to mean to some people that majority of the people must be in the government circle. This definition has drawn the anger of many people to democracy as the tyranny of the majority over the minority. This is based on the assumption that the decision of the majority always supersedes that of the minority. Yu Shabanon, summaries democracy in the same vein as Schutz — as the subordination of the minority to the majority in all spheres and areas of political life.

To accept Shabanon’s definition is by no means out of place within the framework of discourse. Shabanon and his colleagues’ definitions are limited in scope for they do not in any way state all that go under the ramification of democracy. Irrespective of diverse definitions, the concept of democracy is basically associated with the features of formation and existence of political parties, election, electorates, equality, freedom, liberty, rule of law etc.

Basic Structures of Democracy

In any democratic system of government, as shown above, there must be governmental organization and structures, which could enable the people to exercise effective control over the government and its

policies. Another point worth mentioning is that in any democracy, election must be free and fair to reflect the mode and aspirations of the people. This will in turn make the elected officials responsible to the electorate.

Political equality is indispensable in the democratic system of government. This is a situation whereby each citizen has the right to run for office in government. In fact, equality is an essential ingredient for the survival of democracy. Equality here means the policy of treating every citizen equally in all political transactions. Equality demands that the career of leadership, like all other careers be open to all whose rational or acquired talents qualify them. Everyone should have a say in the process of electing leaders.

There is the provision of the fundamental human rights which are entrenched in the constitution. These rights include: freedom of expression, speech, association, press, religious affiliation, assembly, movement etc. There must be equal political right (that is, each person should count as one and that all of them should have equal opportunity of participating in the decision of government).

In any democratic setting, there is the need for the independent judiciary. This must be guaranteed. In fact, the rule of law is the equality of all citizens before the law according to the constitutional provisions.

Organized opposition to the government is allowed in a democratic government. The opposition if organized as such serves as check on the government for the development and progress of human and material resources. This organized opposition is a legitimate action. At times it is termed civil disobedience — that is, the violation of a command issued by an authority such as government, which has a claim for the obedience of the citizens. In a democratic setting this act of disobedience is captured by Morris L, an American legal theorist, when he opines that, it is an unconstitutional political tactics by a minority, whose intent is to persuade the majority by a show of force and to win political concessions through mass pressure¹². The right of the minority in any democratic setting must be guarantee irrespective of civil disobedience since it is in the fulfillment of these requirements that citizens (majority or minority) will be willing to abide by the rules of the democratic process.

From the foregoing, we can summarize and rightly too, that even though it poses some problem to arrive at a universally acceptable definition for democracy, it is a political concept that is aimed at describing ways a society should be organized for the well-being of its citizens. It aims at spelling-out the rights and limitations of the government and citizens for proper functioning of the society. In other words, democracy tends to describe the condition under which one should be ruled, who should rule, the how and what is expected of the ruler and the ruled, the extent of political obligation and their justification within the ambit of a well laid out governmental structure. If this reading is correct, then it will form the plank upon which the democratic structure in Nigerian will be examined. Before the analysis is conducted, it would be necessary to examine Nigeria's political history.

Nigeria: A Panoramic Historical Examination

The first Europeans to impinge upon the African were the Portuguese, whose explorers and traders had in the 15th century landed at Cote d' Ivoire. They monopolized West African trade up till the 16th century when the attendant flamboyant and lucrative growth of the Atlantic slave trade beckoned on other European powers to challenge their monopoly. There followed the rise of the trading cities of the Niger Delta, first as a result of the slave trade and second as a result of the palm oil trade. The 19th century also saw growing contact between the Muslim North and the Southern Kingdoms and the emergence of the British as the dominant European power in the area today known as Nigeria.

The British annexation of Lagos in 1861 might be taken as the forerunner of the colonial rule in Nigeria, even though their traders, missionaries and government representatives were long involved in the

Western coast before 1861. By 1871, long before Sierra Leone, which was established in 1787 for the sole aim of settling African slaves, Lagos had become self-sufficient. By the late 1870s, however, four companies had begun operation in the Delta region alone. And it was at this time that Sir Taubman Goldie emerged at the scene to consolidate the companies into united African company (U. A. C.). In the early days of United African Companies (U. A. C.), Goldie had powers to make treaties with the various chiefs at the Delta region when convenient and with the British gun-boats at his disposal. He suppressed the so-called recalcitrant chiefs and their territories, where possible thereby laying foundation for the partitioning of African continent and eventual takeover of the territory today called Nigeria by the British.

Having partitioned the African continent at the 1884-1885 Berlin conference, the whole of what became Nigeria was, however, conceded to Britain by other imperial powers owing to Goldie's United African Company's activities in the Delta area. Shortly after, a charter was granted to Niger Company in 1886, with an accompanying political authority. In 1897, the company took over Nupe and Ilorin, and the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) was formed to protect British interest. In the same year the charter was granted, the company was re-christened Royal Niger Company (R.N.C) with added powers to administer Justice as well as maintain order in the area. Consequently, in 1887, as stated by Fage (1976),

The British government took over all the company's territories upon paying it some compensation..., and protectorate was formally proclaimed over those territories, whose rulers had signed treaties with the company's agent (p. 72).

Three protectorates of the Royal Niger Company of the Niger coast, the Lagos Colony and the Northern protectorates were to form the nucleus of Nigeria.

The Nigerian State and the Practice of Democracy

As has been observed above from the panoramic historical antecedent Nigeria did not emerge as an ideal state. The quest for the discovery of Africa including Nigeria was necessitated for the development of Europe and its citizens. Nigeria is more or less a geographical nomenclature, a medley of culturally asymmetrical nationalities concatenated in the European imperialist interest. Therefore, the democratic question in Nigeria can best be understood by viewing it from the total package of the democratic stride or programme by the Europeans of Africa in general. The state has failed to emerge as a nation - state; it is rather a "state of nations, which before the 1914 Amalgamation had existed as autonomous political entities having their own political systems, social and religious values¹⁴. The force that brought them or the peoples together is not able to agglutinate them anymore.

A state as have been noted earlier is, normally presupposed to be the product of a social contract. The people or groups constituting a new state, like the parties in a formal contract, comprise autonomous human beings with convergence of interests, which the constitution safeguards. No people ought to be coerced into consenting to the terms of the constitution. However, once the constitution has been adopted in good faith, one is obliged to obey and to defend it.

A State's constitution should, therefore, define the national interest, which constitutes the "Common Good". It should also protect fundamental rights of the individual be it rich or power, strong or weak, highly placed or mawkish, the majority or the minority, which include: political, economic and religious rights.

On the contrary the Nigerian constitution does not protect these rights. Ours is a country where the ruler can connive with others to interpret the constitution to his ethnic or elitist advantage. Saro-wiwa (1996) observed that the Nigerian constitution:

vested the entire mineral resources in the country in the parliament to share as it pleased. In a situation where the ethnic minorities provide most of the mineral resources and yet were a

minority in parliament and where oil was the be-all and end-all of Nigeria's politics and economy as well as the central focus of all budgetary ambitions, there was no way the ethnic minorities could protect their inheritance (p. 55).

The fear that Saro-wiwa expressed over the 1979 constitution is not different from the fear that grip minority groups concerning other constitutions. In fact, all the Nigeria's constitutions have been plagued with the same defects and that is the more reason why minority groups are deprived of their inheritance with impunity in the name of 'continental shelf redefinition' that will continually seek an elusive political resolution.

Saro-wiwa also observed that British colonialism had caused social dislocations and economic disarticulation in Nigeria, thus creating a fertile ground for domestic colonialism. In a keynote address to the Kagote club at its inaugural luncheon he holds that:

The advent of British colonialism was to shatter the minority society and inflict on us a backwardness from which we are still trying to escape. It was British colonialism which forced alien administration on us and herded us into the domestic colonialism of Nigeria (Saro-Wiwa, 1996, p. 72).

Like we have seen, all the peripheral groups in Nigeria, especially the minorities have been subjected and subjugated to unspeakable and dehumanizing effects of indigenous colonialism. And this has engendered gruesome economic exploitation, political marginalization and ecological devastation. Domestic colonialism also enforces a cultural perspective to the division of labour. This is a view expressed by Henchter (1990). According to him, "in a situation of internal colonialism, there will be a social stratification of ethnic or cultural groups, with the *core* group occupying the best class positions and the peripheral groups the inferior positions" (p. 46). Henchter's theory captures the Nigerian democratic setting in a better way and forcefully too as paraphrased by, Saro-wiwa thus:

Downstairs, you would meet men and women from the slave area called Nigeria. Upstairs were (are) the indigenous colonizers. They were not necessary well spoken or well educated either. But they had power at the fingertips and knew it (Saro-Wiwa, 1996, p. 83).

But the discriminatory treatment described above is only a tip of the iceberg; a microcosm of what obtains in the Nigerian society. As a society that purports to practice democracy, it is saddening to note that what obtains is only lip service to the concept. Democracy is far from being a reality in Nigeria.

Discriminatory practices in democratic system breed ethnic dissension, which often translates into political violence as is the case in contemporary Nigeria. Indicators of political violence that draw strength from discriminatory practices in Nigeria are found in the Nigeria Delta militancy and renewed agitations for the sovereign state of Biafra by the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB). Henchter (1990) asserted that:

The inequalities between the regions in a country will relegate peripheral regions to an inferior position, leaving the core regions dominant. The reaction to this in the peripheral regions will be hostility to the core (p. 46).

If conflicts result from internal colonialism, which in-turn is fostered by the structure of the state, then political restructuring becomes logically imperative. It is in fact this internal colonialism, which has resulted into persistent call or agitation for 'sovereign national conference' or 'political restructuring conference', where ethnic nationalities could decide the new mode of national integration. If democracy is the rule of the people predicated on their "free will" or consent, then Nigeria could not be said to be a democratic state. This is because the tenets of democracy, which tend to place all on equal pedestal in the application and operation of state policy cannot be said to be operational in Nigeria. The Nigerian brand of democracy is that, which described as the rule of the majority over the minority subjects and

subjugates the vocal and the restive minority to an unspeakable cruelty and inquisition. Nigerian democratic system is one, which considers rulers as omniscience and the citizenry as absolutely ignorant, thereby destroying the political consciousness of the latter. If this reading is correct, then the question that immediately comes to the mind of an analyst is: ‘what does this brand of democracy portend for the future of the Nigerian state?’

What Hope for the Future?

From our analysis, we discovered that man as a sentient, rational and political animal shaded some of his rights, which when retained would be incompatible with harmonious living, for the possibility of civil society. The society, therefore, is supposed to be a social milieu, which will afford all the right of existence, where the inclinations of brute force will give way to rational imperative, and where the strength of all will become the defense of each, to the effect that man will attain his full potential and self-realization for a humanistic excellence through civil society. This view is consistent with standard social contract theories.

Regrettably, however, most states have failed to offer these supposed benefits. The Nigerian state from the above analysis presents a clear dramatization of this irony, wherein, the existential realities of the average citizen are at variance with the objectives of life in the civil society. The Nigerian state as shown so far fosters the interest of a few over the *common good*. Its structure is inherently defective, and its institutions plagued with injustice. Structurally, the Nigerian state has assumed a hegemonic character and its institution smack of internal colonialism, which in turn has engendered economic strangulation, political marginalization, ecological devastation and abuse of fundamental human rights.

Highlighting the systemic and institutional anomalies of the Nigerian state does not take us an inch away from where we have started. To make progress, we must recognize the fact that even if there is a divinity that shapes our lives, there is also some margin left for man to be able to change his circumstance, either for good or bad, through some conscious effort.

Politically, the change in our circumstances cannot come short of an observance of democratic tenets. The Nigerian state could transform itself in this sense by creating an ideal democratic structure such as true federalism. Such democratic structure would not sacrifice its citizens for egoistic reason precipitated by ethnic divide. The state structure should also be such that the executive arm of government cannot be treated as an all powerful “Leviathan” that could veto the collective will of the people or of other arms of government. It must be a democratic structure that will uphold the principles of accountability, transparency and responsive governance. A democratic structure like in Hobbes word, knows that the *strongest* is never strong enough until he has transformed strength to service and obedience to duty. It will not be a system that will conceive democracy from Thrasymachean view point; “Might being Right”. But the Nigerian state appears to represent a direct contradiction of these democratic principles. Cases of intimidation of the citizenry through the use of state power are indicated in Odi, Zakibiam, IPOB etc. It will not be a democracy that will deport its citizen to another country on trumped up charges as was the case of Alhaji Shugaba in 1983. Neither will it be a democracy that will make politically motivated killings a state policy.

The hope of a democratic culture lies in the appropriate and fast reversal of the above negative tendencies. Genuine democratic governance must be a system that will protect the lives and property of citizens, irrespective political orientation and ethnic origin. The advocacy for true democracy in the Nigerian state is that man formed a society in other to escape from the Hobbesian state of nature, where life was solitary, nasty, short and brutish. To revert to those same primordial inclinations and attendant inconveniences is to say the least an unwelcome development. Hence, if Nigeria retains the unwholesome political practices outlined above under the guise of democracy, then the future of the Nigerian state is uncertain.

Conclusion

The above analysis of the concept of democracy has shown that the Nigerian political system could not be said to be democratic in the true sense of the word. Absence of equal opportunity for all citizens, political participation, accountable and responsive governance and transparency deprive Nigeria the status of a democratic state. The prevalent element of the use of state power, to facilitate the abuse of the rights of the indigenous people and minorities, shows Nigeria as an authoritarian state. Ethnic and class considerations have greatly interfered with its operational mechanism so much so that, it has led to foisting of a hegemonic structure, which in essence has reinforced internal colonialism and fuel crises within the state. Crises arise as various majority ethnic groups struggle for control of state power, while the peripheral groups direct their hostility to the core regions. Comparative historical and political analyses reveal that Nigeria can contain and almost obviate her teeming ethnic conflicts and political violence, through socio-economic development and institutional arrangement. Policies of economic development should be sensitive to the problems of marginalization, social inequalities and political disequilibrium, while institutional arrangement should consist of political restructuring—via the practice of true federalism, which is the hallmark of democracy.

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