

## **Democracy and the Dialectics of Mass Poverty: the Nigerian Experience (1999 – 2006)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

It is generally agreed that democracy remains the best system of governance, and that it has the attributes of promoting human rights and engendering social development. This paper argues that this “conventional wisdom” about democracy can be challenged if the performance of the regime in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic is critically assessed. It is posited that “democracy” as practised during this period has not brought about the much-desired development and progress. The point is made that the policies and programmes of the regime have led to increased poverty and misery among the Nigerian masses. It is also reasoned that the overall performance of any administration can be better assessed through the evaluation of the consequences or outcomes of the policies and programmes of such administration and not by relying on the assertions of the administration’s spokespersons.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

*In fact, I rate the performance of the Federal Government low. Democracy, instead of bringing succour, has brought pain, social injustice and poverty”.*  
– Cardinal Olubunmi Okojie (in “Point Blank”, N.A., 2004:9)

The above assertion underscores the degree of despondency which is very often expressed by a greater majority by the inhabitants of Nigeria. It is generally believed that a country’s mode of governance could immeasurably contribute either to the betterment and uplift of the overall welfare of its people or the deepening (or even precipitation) of the misery of the masses. It is against this backdrop that the widely expressed preference for good governance and democratic values can easily be understood. Democracy is said to have the capacity to engender good governance and ultimately promote the overall developmental transformation of the society.

In this essay, we argue that the “conventional wisdom” about the development – inducing attributes of democracy could be effectively challenged if Nigeria’s experience in the Fourth Republic is critically examined. We posit that what has been witnessed in Nigeria since 1999 is counterfeit democracy and a complete travesty of good governance. Indeed, what members of the ruling class have dramatized in the Fourth Republic have been charlatanism, hypocrisy, and egomania masquerading as Messianism (Akinola, 2004:21). To nourish the analysis in this essay, it is appropriate that a brief conceptual discourse be presented on the term “democracy”. To this, we now turn.

## II. WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

In an attempt to answer this question, we are not oblivious of the mammoth encumbrances which can confront any endeavour to define any social concept. In any case, definition is often said to be the impression of the person defining a concept. The person defining a concept is usually a product of a particular socialization process based on a unique intellectual tradition. His explanation of the concept is largely influenced by such tradition (Ujo, 2001:1).

It is difficult to state precisely what democracy means. In other words, a comprehensive definition of democracy is a conceptual and theoretical impossibility (Williams, 1995:65). Little wonder that an author has observed that "when a word acquires a universally sacred character...as has today the word democracy, I begin to wonder, whether, by all its attempts to mean, it still means anything at all" (T. S. Eliot in Williams, 1995:65).

In spite of the definitional problematique which engulfs the concept of democracy, there is a modicum of consensus on the building blocks of democratic rule. These include free and fair elections through which the people may hold their representatives accountable for their actions or inactions; the rule of law which acts as a protective shield for the citizens and guarantees their access to the judiciary; human rights which, at the very least, entails the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association; separation of powers between the three branches of government; majority rule which protects the rights of minorities, etc (Obadan, 1998:3-4).

In his analysis, Adam Przeworski (in Amuwo, 1992:6-7) is of the view that at a minimum democracy involves both the provision of means to pursue the representation of diverse interests in government and the institutionalization of mechanisms to hold rulers accountable to the public will – including mechanisms that allow for the peaceful removal of governments from power. Democracy can also be regarded, according to Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl (in Amuwo, 1992:7), as a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives.

An interesting dimension has been added to the discourse on the meaning and genesis of democracy by Nzongola – Ntalaja (2000). According to him, much of the debate on democracy in Africa is distorted by fallacies: on the Western, and specifically Greek, origin of democracy; and on the exclusive identification of democracy with its liberal incarnation. He argues that many have erroneously traced the origin of democracy to Athens, because of the Greek word *demokratia*, which combines *demos* for people and *kratia* for rule. But, in his opinion, the history of the phenomenon can be traced much farther than when the word "democracy" was first used, even by the people from whom the Greeks may have borrowed the term.

Nzongola – Ntalaja also reasons that it is possible that the Greeks were not the first to use the concept of democracy, and that democratic norms and principles are universal, although institutional forms and procedures may vary through historical epochs and from one country to another. He equally underscores the fact that democracy as a political practice is a mode of governance based on the principles of popular sovereignty, the rule of law, accountability, participation and the right of resistance to unlawful or tyrannical rule (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2000:14-15).

The universality of democratic norms and values which Nzongola-Ntalaja articulates in the foregoing passage had earlier been amplified by some scholars and writers. C. Northcote Parkinson, a British historian, for instance, had earlier demonstrated the universal character of democracy. As he put it, in commenting upon the course of history, St. Augustine is shrewd enough to suggest (as did Sallust before him) that the Athenians exceeded other people more in their publicity than in their deeds. Most subsequent scholars have been more credulous, one result being a surprisingly widespread belief that the Athenians were the inventors of democracy. That they were nothing of the kind is tolerably clear. What we owe to the Athenians is not the thing itself or even its name but the earliest detailed account of how a democracy came into being, flourished and collapsed. Of the Indian democracies, which were probably older, we have all too little information. There is, however, a sense in which many people have had a measure of democracy in their village life (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1997:10).

Democracy has also been conceptualized as a political concept founded on three ideas, namely, democracy as a value, a process, and a practice. As a value, democracy is said to be a moral imperative, that is, a basic need, a necessity, and therefore a political demand of all freedom – loving human beings. This imperative is seen as basically a permanent aspiration of human beings for freedom, for a better social and political order, one that is more human and more or less egalitarian. As a social process, it is argued that democracy is never perfect, and that it is a continuous process of promoting equal access to fundamental human rights and civil liberties for all. These freedoms, it is pointed out, include: the fundamental rights of the human person to life and security; freedom of religion, assembly, expression, press, association, etc; and the rights of peoples, including the inalienable right to self-determination.

Finally, as political practice, democracy is said to refer to a specific manner of organizing and exercising power in accordance with certain norms and principles. And some of these principles, it is contended, include: the idea that legitimate power or authority emanates from the people; the concept of rule of law; the principle that rulers are chosen by and are accountable to the people; the right of citizens to participate in the management of public affairs through free, transparent and democratic elections; and the right of people to change a government that no longer serves their interests, or the right to revolution (Nzongola – Ntalaja, 1997:11-14).

In his own analysis, Otite (in Eukoha, 2004:546) regards democracy simply as:

a theory of government and governance which sanctions the equality of individuals and of structural units in participating freely in the decisions which affect the lives of the individual and collectivity, and in the determination of the values and fortunes of society. It is a theory of governance which respects the will of the people and of the opinion of the majority at the moments of election – selection for example, to high offices. It supports the equality of citizens and the structural units, such as the ethnic groups, before the law, with freedom of speech, religion, the press and other civil liberties.

### III. POVERTY: SOME THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Like democracy, poverty does not enjoy any unanimity in intellectual circles – as to what its most appropriate definition is. In fact, as Aboyade (in Tella, 1997:74) aptly observed, poverty, like an elephant, is more easily recognized than defined. The point has been made, however, that a concept is defined, no matter how crudely, at least to provide a focus by which we can determine the limits of our understanding (Tella, 1997:74).

Poverty is multidimensional. Not only do the poor have little money, few material possessions, they are often deprived of basic needs such as food, education and health services. Furthermore, they lack access to knowledge, a source of income earning opportunity, and to political visibility and influence, which reinforces their social and economic vulnerability. These conditions drive the poor into social exclusion, powerlessness and poverty traps (Nweke, 2005:104). Essentially, it is not difficult to recognize the poor. The poor are those who are unable to obtain an adequate income, find a stable job, own property, or maintain healthy living conditions. They also lack an adequate level of education and cannot satisfy their basic health needs. Thus, the poor are often illiterate, in poor health and have a short life span.

They have no access to the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing and decent shelter; are unable to meet

social and economic obligations; they lack skills and gainful employment; have few, if any, economic assets; and, sometimes lack self-esteem. Very often, the poor lack the capacity to escape from their situation by themselves. This characteristic is what causes the social conditions of extreme poverty to persist and to be transmitted from one generation to the next. Frequently, those most affected by extreme poverty are young children, pregnant women, the elderly, the inhabitants of rural areas and marginal urban zones and those groups of people who have not been integrated into the society (Obadan, 1997:2).

On their part, Englama et al (in Ekot, 2002:489) regard poverty as a state where an individual is not able to cater adequately for his/her basic needs of food, clothing and shelter; is not able to meet social and economic obligations, lacks gainful employment, skills, assets and self-esteem, and has limited access to social and economic infrastructure such as education, health, potable water and sanitation,

and as a result has limited chance of advancing his/her welfare to the limit of his/her capabilities.

According to Aluko (1975), Edozien (1975), and Uniamikogbo (1997), the poor could be identified as:

- (a) those who possess limited ability to contribute to the productive process to warrant an income that would raise them above the poverty line;
- (b) those for whom the economy has failed to provide jobs. These are people who are able and willing to work to earn adequate income if jobs were available;
- (c) those whose opportunities to participate in the productive process are restricted by discrimination of various kinds: sex, age, race, etc (Ekpo, 2000:340-341).

In her contribution, Uschi Eid (2004:13) has opined that extreme poverty, affecting more than one billion people world-wide, is one of the greatest global challenges. She points out that in purely economic terms, people living in extreme poverty must manage on less than one US dollar a day. However, she believes that poverty means more than just low income. According to her,

Poverty means not having a voice and hence having no influence on important decisions which have impact on the lives of the poor.

Poverty means hunger: each day 25,000 people, most of them children, die as a result of hunger and malnutrition.

Poverty means suffering from disease: since the outbreak of HIV/AIDS, 58 million people throughout the world have been infected.

Poverty means lack of educational opportunities: 113 million children of school age are not able to attend school. The number of adult illiterates is estimated to be 860 million worldwide (Eid, 2004:13).

Relying on the work of Townsend (1993), Ignatius Ukwaba (2003:298-299) has pointed out that there are three conceptions of poverty. The first, which is the subsistence poverty, sees families to be in poverty when their incomes are not sufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for maintenance of merely physical efficiency such as food, shelter and clothing. However, the argument goes, poverty should not be restricted to food, shelter and clothing for people are not simply individual organizations requiring replacement of sources of physical energy, but are social beings expected to perform socially demanding roles as workers, citizens, parents, partners, neighbours and friends.

The second conception of poverty focuses on basic needs which may include two elements: the minimum requirements of a family for private consumption which are adequate food, shelter and clothing as well as certain household furniture and equipment, and provision of essential services by and for the community such as safe drinking water, sanitation, public transport and health, education and cultural

facilities. In this way, emphasis is placed on minimum facilities required by local communities as a whole and not only individual and family needs for physical survival and efficiency.

The third conception which is relative deprivation stresses the importance of distinguishing conceptually, between inequality and poverty. It is argued here that intellectual and scientific attention should equally be focused on the deprived conditions experienced by the poor as a necessary component of all study and analysis of poverty. Therefore, it is reasoned, the use of relative deprivation as a criterion of poverty becomes necessary.

An appropriate and lengthy characterization of a poverty stricken person has been offered by Nepal's king Birandra Vic Bikram. According to him, a poor man in a least developed country suffers from poor nutrition. He is vulnerable to diseases. His average life span is short. He lives in huts where squalor perpetually surrounds him. He is illiterate both in letter and skills. He does not get his meal regularly, but when he does, he is haunted with the fear of where his next meal will come from. He lives most in villages remote and inaccessible to the rest of the world or in slumps or shanty towns. The water he drinks is neither safe nor clean. He is either unemployed or underemployed. When he is employed, he is over worked and underpaid. He suffers from apathy and ignominy. From birth to death, he remains a destitute. Usually, he dies an infant, but if he does survive, dearth and want haunt him till the end. He cannot buy books for his children, nor pay fees for the school. When he falls ill, he cannot pay fees to a doctor nor can he buy medicines for himself. And when death comes to him finally, he seems to be happier than those he left behind (Ajadike, 2003:29-30).

In his own analysis, Noah Yusuf (2000:199) surmises that generally, poverty is usually conceptualized in either of two ways. According to him, in absolute term poverty relates to the inability to provide for physical subsistence to the extent of being incapable of protecting human dignity. In this respect, poverty is in terms of the distribution of the population based on minimum subsistence income level. An individual is therefore said to be living in poverty if he falls below such standard. On the other hand, the argument goes, the relative approach holds that an individual is poor if he has significantly less income and material wealth than the average person in his community. In this sense, poverty is said to exist when the resources of the family or individual are inadequate to provide acceptable standard of living. This approach, it is reasoned, takes into consideration the position of various groups on a scale of income. An individual's position in this scale is then compared with the rest so as to ascertain whether he belongs to the poverty group or not.

From the foregoing conceptual analysis, there is no gain saying the fact that poverty whether it is regarded as a phenomenon or as a condition signifies a state of complete deprivation, want and inadequacy. What has been the fate of the masses of Nigeria vis-à-vis the poverty level in the country since 1999 when it (Nigeria) supposedly became democratic? In other words, since the members of

the military wing of the ruling class handed over the baton of misrule to their civilian counterparts, has poverty as a social malady been effectively tackled, or has it been catalyzed to blossom? Our thesis is that the efficiency and effectiveness of any regime can be properly measured by evaluating the consequences of the policies and programmes of such a regime. That is, the performance of an administration can be assessed not by relying on the propagandistic effusions of its spokespersons, but by critically examining the results or outcomes of the policies and programmes implemented by the administration, and how these have impinged on the welfare of the citizenry. It is against this backdrop that the excruciating poverty and misery that have become the daily companion of most Nigerians under Obasanjo's "democracy" can be properly situated

#### IV DEMOCRACY AS AN END IN ITSELF: THE NIGERIAN EXAMPLE

While the validity of the age-long assertion by Dankwart Ruston that "democracy... was sought as a means to some other end or it came as a fortuitous by product of the struggle" (Omelle, 2005:1) may not be challenged, it can be emphatically argued that democracy as a mode of managing the affairs of a people or society is desired not as an end in itself, but as a means through which freedom, good governance and social development can be attained. If democracy were an end in itself-as members of the political class in Nigeria would want us to believe-it would have been difficult to understand why some people are even prepared to lay down their lives for the cause of democracy.

There is no doubt that for the vast majority of human kind, the equation of democracy with good governance is a categorical imperative. For whatever deficiencies there are in liberal democracy it must be credited with the great avenue it provides for individual and group self actualization. It can be stated that of all forms of governance ever devised by man, democracy remains the best form of governance (Omelle, 2005:1). However, the validity of this age-long thesis can be attenuated if the performance of the government in Nigeria's Fourth Republic is critically examined.

When it became clear in 1998 that the long period of military despotism and authoritarianism was about to end, there was a widespread expectation in Nigeria that the elected civilian administrators would set to work immediately to improve the living standards of the people. Nigerians expected that the termination of military rule would lead to a drastic reduction in corruption, criminality and wanton violations of human rights. They also expected that public institutions and infrastructure which had been left in a state of utter despair by the military would be rehabilitated to provide needed social services. A civilian administration was expected to lead to a better management of the nation's resources and with good governance, unemployment, insecurity and criminality would be reduced. Indeed, Nigerians were expecting that the new civilian rulers would use power responsibly and efficiently for the benefits of the people and not for the illegitimate accumulation of public resources by those with access to political power (Agbese, 2005:xiv).

In his inaugural address, President Obasanjo had captured the terrible state of affairs in the country and acknowledged Nigerians' right to demand good governance and quality public service from their rulers. In his words:

Nigeria is wonderfully endowed by the Almighty with human and other resources. It does no credit either to us or the entire black race if we fail in managing our resources for quick improvement in the quality of life of our people. Instead of progress and development, which we are all entitled to expect from those who governed us, we experienced in the last decade and a half, and particularly in the last regime but one, persistent deterioration in the quality of our governance leading to instability and the weakening of all public institutions. Good men were shunned and kept away from government while those who should be kept away were drawn near. Our infrastructures – NEPA, NITEL, Railways, Education, Housing and other social services were allowed to decay and collapse. Our country has thus been through one of its darkest periods (Olurode, 2005:116)

The situation in Nigeria since 1999 cannot be honestly said to be better than what Obasanjo described in the above passage. One of the first “dividends of democracy” (a deceitful phraseology coined by the regime’s demagogues) which Nigerians got took the form of incessant and arbitrary increases in the pump prices of petroleum products. Since 1999, the Obasanjo-led regime has increased the pump prices of petrol at least seven times. From about twenty naira (N20) per liter in 1999, Nigerians are now paying between N65 and N70 for a liter of petrol. Given the multiplier effects of these increases on the costs of goods and services, the consequences for the lives of ordinary Nigerians are devastating.

As an outcome of the policies of the Obasanjo-led “democracy”, poverty has increased immensely among Nigerians. It is clear that in spite of the government’s policy on economic emancipation and development, the level of poverty of the majority of Nigerians is actually on the increase as wealth continues to be concentrated in a few hands. Amidst deepening poverty, unemployment is on the rise, and corruption is thriving, social welfare institutions, health care and education have continued to decay. Indeed, life has become more nasty, more brutish and much shorter for the majority of Nigerians (ASUU, 2004:62-63). The situation has even been captured more vividly by the venerable Gani Fawehinmi. According to him,

the president is living in a cocoon world of self delusion, if he does not know that most of his reforms have brought untold hardship, abject poverty, rampant unemployment, high cost of fund (interest rate), collapsing education and its standards, degenerating infrastructure, traumatizing health problems, gross insecurity of life and property, lack of water, lack of electricity, to mention a few (Nmodu, 2006: 27-28).

It is an agonizing paradox that Nigerians are experiencing their grimmest times under a regime that calls itself a democracy, a regime that made more revenue than any other administration in the history of post colonial Nigeria. According to Peter



Claver Opara (2006:16), the Obasanjo government has made over twenty trillion naira from the sale of oil alone since 1999. But, in his words, the bulk of these have ended up in the pockets of ultra-corrupt governors, ministers and officials of the federal, state and local governments. There is no doubt that under Obasanjo's "democracy", life in Nigeria is akin to Hobbes' state of nature. Internecine poverty, unbridled hunger, industrial mortality, a decaying infrastructural reality, a collapsed health sector, a compromised educational sector, near total power outage, worsening unemployment situation, permanent state of insecurity, ethnic conflagration, rise in irredentism, plunge in living standard, worsening inflationary spiral, a burgeoning corruption industry, increasing cases of official lawlessness, rabid outlawry, arbitrariness, wanton brigandage, and impunity are some of the notable landmarks of the Fourth Republic (Oparah, 2006:16).

The poverty of most Nigerians is demonstrated in concrete terms by their inability to afford the outrageous costs of goods and services occasioned by the largely irrelevant and anti-social policies of the government. For the urban working class, for example, his minimum wage is N7500. In some states, it is N4500. It is well known that a bag of rice which used to sell for between N1000 and N1500 in 1999 now sells for about N7500. Indeed, in Nigeria's democracy, life has become impossible (Odion-Akhaine, 2006:51).

## V. CONCLUSION

The point has to be made that democracy is the most preferable mode of governance in human society. But this axiom can be vitiated when managers of the society do not conduct state affairs in a way that would improve the living conditions of the citizenry. "Democracy", as practised by the ruling class in Nigeria since 1999 has failed to uplift the overall welfare of the masses. Even though such things as the introduction of GSM services, war against corruption, Nigeria's re-admittance into the "international community", and the so-called economic reforms are often cited as "gains" of this "democracy", our contention is that in concrete terms, poverty and misery have been the lots of majority of Nigerians. Nigeria, sadly, has not had the luck of being governed by a true leader. As Okey Ndibe (2005:51) has eloquently surmised, a leader who eats while his followers starve, who flies abroad in a plush private jet for medical check-ups while millions of fellow citizens are decimated by disease, who secures his private property with well-armed police and soldiers while leaving public property to be ravaged by arsonists, and who shields big-time criminals while incarcerating pick pockets – such a leader is anathema. Unfortunately, this is the kind of person who has led the Fourth Republic.

There is no gain saying the fact that members of the political class have criminally dashed the hopes of Nigerians for good governance and socio-economic upliftment. As a leading member of the political class has pointed out,

...any government, whether in Nigeria or anywhere else that fails to address the fundamental issues of governance as they relate to the welfare of the citizens, that government has failed. You might have a lot of money, you might have the petrodollars or petro-naira, but you don't see it on the Nigerian. You don't see it on our rural areas, where still there is no water, or electricity or good schools or good

medical services for the citizen. You don't see welfare services for the ordinary person or for all persons or for the under-privileged and disadvantaged. You also don't get any explanation on why these things are not forth-coming. The Nigerian today is much worse than he was in 1999 before the advent of this so-called democratic dispensation (Abubakar Rimi in Dan Abu, 2006:15).

However, Abubakar Rimi's sanctimonious effusions cannot absolve him from guilt for the crimes committed by the political class against the Nigerian people. After all, he is a key element of this discredited and extremely kleptocratic and prebendalistic group.

While the conclusion that "on every count, Obasanjo administration represents a curse on Nigerians; its policies are attacking the poor, spreading and consolidating poverty; they are making the people hungry and homeless..." (Odiun-Akhaine, 2006:51) may be regarded by lackeys of the administration as being too harsh, it is our conviction that the fate of an ordinary Nigerian and the attitude of the government under the fake democracy of the Fourth Republic can be depicted by the following words of an anonymous writer:

I was hungry and you formed a committee to investigate my hunger. I was homeless, and you filed a report on my plight; I was sick, and you held a seminar on the situation of the under-privileged; you investigated all aspects of my plight and yet I am still hungry, homeless and sick (Ugwuoke, 2003:198).

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