

Politics and Development

Functional Democracy in Nigeria: A Philosophical Evaluation of Democratic Ethics

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Abstract

This paper centres on a philosophical evaluation of democratic ethics vis- a- vis its functionality in Nigeria. It outlines the qualities of a genuine democracy having adequately conceptualises the term and its associated problems in the Nigerian context. The paper concludes with suggestions that would improve the democratic system against the background that the operators would have a change of heart in the practice of democracy. It is the position of the paper that it is not the system that is fundamentally faulty but the operators. Democracy will be functional in Nigeria if and only if the operators are determined to make it so.

Introduction

Democracy as a representative government did not come to Nigeria entirely as a foreign Institution. This is on account of democratic traditions of the people of the country and their pragmatism. Autocratic tendencies, it is pointed out, were seriously resisted in Nigeria in the past because the people were essentially democratic. The above makes Nigeria a special case and ought to be a trailblazer whenever the subject of democratisation and its functionality in Africa is taken up for discussion.

The character of the transition to what has been known as Nigeria's 'nascent democracy' did create considerable appreciation among various segments of the Nigerian polity. As the said 'nascent democracy' is ageing, popular apprehension regarding the economy, and social services (education, job, health care delivery etc.), increased. Recently, the Nigerian public has been introduced to some terms that are relatively new both in the economic and political sectors. This gained grounds especially in the administration of former President Obasanjo. Examples of such terms include: 'Dividends of democracy', 'nascent democracy', 'deregulation', etc. However, Owolabi (1999), posits that democracy involves a whole series of processes and cultural values which relate to the selection of leaders at all levels of society; the behaviour of groups and individuals vis-à-vis those who hold different views on issues under consideration, as well as the use of power by those the selection process has placed in decision- making positions. This, by extension, includes the existence of the rule of law, which relates to the equal treatment of all before the law and the curbing of the excessive power of those in control of affairs at all levels of society.

The cardinal thrust of this paper is to critically examine the functionality or otherwise of democracy in Nigeria. The paper will attempt providing answers for the following questions: what is democracy? Is democracy functional in Nigeria? Is it that the system is faulty or the operators' unethical dispositions are the problems? The section is expected to

do an extensive evaluation of the problems involved and propose workable solutions. On the question of what is democracy Owolabi (1999), argued that it is problematic. The problem begins at the level of proper comprehension of the concept. He went further to state that various scholars have expressed the problem that surrounds the attempt of defining it; in a recent essay, he reported that a writer made the following comment about this problem: But it is a matter of regret that, whereas an almost inexhaustible Literature exists on the concept (democracy), there is glaring absence of consensus by scholars on the appropriate definition of the nature and contours of the term such that it is rather difficult to argue for a specific conceptualisation of the term as the proper meaning since democracy is now generally seen as a term with many meanings.

There are two reasons for the lack of consensus among scholars on what democracy is. The first is that democracy has become in current usage, another word for political decency and civilization. As an idea, democracy today has become an honorific title; the concept has “passed into the catalogue of universal virtues.

Another reason why democracy is difficult to define Owolabi (1999), says, is because of its ideological connotation. The ideological struggle between the socialists and the capitalists has generated a situation in which regimes are conferred with the democratic title not because of its participatory tendency but mainly because of its ideological persuasion. Explaining this problem, Gitonga (1988), as quoted by Owolabi says: “There is no doubt that the substance or content of what is described as democratic is a function of the ideological bent of the term. As the ideological bents or political families are many and diverse, so too are the meanings attached to the term”

In the context of this discussion, democracy will be defined following the Greek original meaning attached to it thus: The original essence of the concept etymologically, as *demo-‘kratia’* (rule of the people). It follows necessarily that democracy as a concept must always be defined based on its original essence. The institutions and norms on the ground are not all that are to be considered but emphasis has to be placed on the origin of the concept as a Greek word. Thompson (1994) as quoted by Owolabi maintains that, if we define democracy as the “rule of the people” or “sovereignty of the people”, without defining it on the features prevalent among democratic regimes in the contemporary world, then the concept will not be shrouded in mystery.

In any conceptualisation of democracy, following Owolabi’s standpoint, the realities of democracy must always be moderated by its ideals in order to arrive at a satisfactory conceptualisation. In his words,

What democracy is cannot be separated from what democracy should be. A democracy exists only in so far as its ideals and values bring it to being.

There exist some differences between the ancient conception of the meaning of democracy and that of the modern times. Thus, unlike in modern times, ancient democracy was direct, primary. That was the ‘golden age of Athens’ as epitomised by Pericles. Pericles of Athens was one of the greatest democratic Statesmen of all times.

In the light of the above, we can say that the ideal definition of democracy is that which gives recognition to the essence of the concept as “rule of the people”. By this, democracy implies a system of government in which every individual participates in the process of governance. The principle of participation is therefore the essential meaning of democracy, which must be reflected, in every genuine definition of the concept. Following

Dahl's (1956) position that it is necessary for us to point out that the principle of popular participation in the maximum sense of the word because it may not be realistic today as it was when the idea of democracy was originated; because of the size of the contemporary polity which is far bigger than the Athenian city-state, the nearest to the realisation of the ideal of popular participation. In this respect, rather than the full participatory democracy, what we may have today is minimal participation and representative democracy.

It is the institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of competitive struggle for people's vote. Here, Schumpeter (1943) as reported by Owolabi (1999), pays attention to the view that in democracy, means are the activities that are necessary to attain ends that are necessary to provide candidate for leadership. The concept of means in a democratic system is best understood and articulated in the procedure of elections. Apparently, the popularity of democracy as a political system dwells largely on the procedure of elections and the ends this procedure attains.

We will conclude this paper by pointing out that, though it is difficult to have a universally acceptable definition of democracy, the ideals that would be enunciated below ought to be the defining characteristic features of any democratic system. And to the extent that a system exhibits or has these ideals, then to that extent will it be called a democratic system.

Qualities of a Democratic System:

Any democratic form of arrangement should have certain basic ideals that are important for it to be called a democratic state. These ideals according to Lively (1975), are freedom, equality, accountability to people, right to vote and to be voted for, etc. The ideals of democracy are taken as necessary preconditions for democracy, though they should not be mistaken for democracy itself. These principles/ qualities will be discussed one by one.

Liberty or Freedom: Freedom as used here, refers to the ability to act without any compulsion that is itself limited in specified or least specifiable ways. Freedom conceived this way is the most general term and refers to all aspects of unfettered action. It must be noted that freedom or liberty is also specifically social and political in nature and it is related to certain rights, which are legally guaranteed. A distinction could be made between rights that are derived from the legal system or from the constitution. It is not our intention to go into that aspect of the discussion here. We should note however, that freedom is viewed from many perspectives. In any democratic order, people are expected to enjoy freedom of speech since in any democratic system people could voice their views on any governmental policy or anything that concerns the society. One other aspect of this principle is the freedom of the press and also freedom of religion, movement, and assembly as well as freedom from arbitrary treatment by the political and legal system. These forms of freedom are legally enforceable. They foster tolerance in the society.

Equality: The notion of equality contains five separate ideas that are used in varying degrees or combinations by democratic theorists. These are political equality, equality before the law, equality of opportunity, economic equality and social equality. Not all these ideals are thought of generally, in the relevant respects. The most important among these five ideas of equality in terms of democracy is political equality. This involves two separate points, which are that everyone is equal in terms of the voting system. That is, the electoral

system must be based upon universal suffrage and the idea of “one person one vote”. What this means is that each vote must be given the same weight as any other one. This also means that no one is discriminated against on grounds of gender, religion, economic status or whatever. If there is a situation in which anyone is denied the vote on account of any of these, then, the system fails the democratic test.

However, these conditions are rarely fulfilled since some people are discriminated against on grounds of gender and economic status in most states in Nigeria. The most telling informal avenue of inequality is the economic factor. Those who are rich can significantly affect the electoral process because of the financial resources at their disposal. The financial state of the participants matters a great deal.

Accountability: Accountability means being put in a position to give account of one’s stewardship. In this context, following Irele’s (1998) view point, stewardship implies both financial and representational accountability. The concept of accountability was introduced because of the recognition of the fact that when full participation of all is impossible, for democracy to retain its essence, the rulers who are representing the people must be accountable to the people they are representing. This is aimed at bringing about the essence of democracy as rule/sovereignty of the people.

The core of the democratic process is that the people can call their representatives or politicians to account for their activities. This is carried out through periodic elections which are open and, above all, competitive. There is thus political pluralism; open competition between political philosophies, movements, parties and so on, and this is thought to be the essential ingredient of democratic system. “Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more”. Accountability increases with the rise in responsibility.

By financial accountability, we mean the requirements that all public resources entrusted to elected leaders in a democratic setting, shall be judiciously used for the purpose they are meant and that public funds are not converted to private use. Representation is an important element of democracy regardless of the level of government. Every democracy is concerned with who is represented; and how representation is done?

The representation is primarily the carrier of the citizen’s decision and consequently he is bound by the mandate given at the grassroots and therefore, the representation must report to their constituencies. This is representational accountability. Accountability in this sense means that the councilor or senator, for example, is a representative of his party in government and the constituency of voters that put him in office. Every representative whether at local, state or federal levels is a flag bearer of the party since the 1989 constitution does not allow any person to be elected to public office as an independent candidate.

A major element of accountability is the “Recall” which is provided for in the Nigerian constitution of 1989, sections 68, 109, and 304. It gives the citizens, the right to initiate and effect a recall of any legislator including councilors who they believe lack the ability to properly and adequately represent their interests. This provision ensures that those elected to position of authority are not selfish but rather are bearers of the decisions of the self-assertive local citizens/electorates.

The two principles: participation and accountability are complementary concepts. We can in fact say that they are two sides of the same coin. The objective of both concepts is to make the people sovereign. Any regime is therefore democratic when it manifests

within its system the two principles amongst others. The controversy that surrounds the conceptualisation of democracy therefore disappears, because a regime or a political entity can only be democratic, if and only if it has institutions for the maintenance of the participation of the people as those who have liberty and equal on one hand, and on the other hand, the accountability of those chosen to direct the daily affairs of governance. Recognising the importance of these principles to any conceptualisation of democracy, Eghosa Osaghae made the following comments:

... in spite of the differences in conceptualisation, and practices, all versions of democracy share one fundamental objective: how to govern the society in such a way that power actually belongs to the people. In this connection, there is a general acceptance of the classical elements of democracy enunciated by the liberal-capitalists and even by hard core Marxists especially now that the strongholds of socialism are succumbing to pluralistic pressures.²¹

The impression that we can get from this is that a regime or polity is democratic not necessarily because it belongs to an ideological camp nor by paying lip service to democracy, but simply by entrenching the ideals of participation, equality and accountability within its political system. Dorothy Pickles as quoted by Owolabi, in recognition of the importance of the two ideals of participation and accountability to democratic governance defines democracy as a set of institutions that fulfils at least two essential requirements of participation and accountability.²² Democracy in conclusion, he says: is essentially a dialogue between rulers and ruled. Democracy as it is practiced in Nigeria, is grossly characterized with, 'thuggery' and assassination, (late Chief Bola Ige and Chief Sekibo's episodes, are still fresh in our memory); incessant increase in fuel prices without due consultations; non-payment of civil servants' salaries thereby promoting industrial crises, ostentatious display of ill-gotten wealth, et cetera. We at this point make haste to ask the all-important question: why is democracy not functional in Nigeria? How could one make it functional?

The Unethical practices in Nigeria Democratic system

As earlier stated, democracy, as a representative government did not come to Nigeria entirely as a foreign institution. This is on account of democratic traditions of the people of the country and their pragmatism. Having said the above, there abound enemies of democratic culture in Nigeria thereby posing problems to her functionality. They include intolerance and violence, the misconception of governance by the political office seekers, the condition of poverty that has afflicted the people and many others. We shall discuss the aforementioned one by one and thereafter attempt some suggestive ways out of the problems.

Intolerance and violence: When we come to Nigeria, our concern goes beyond the mere elections held periodically to select those who will have the right to loot the treasury and wreck the economy of the country. We want to lay emphasis on the concept of tolerance of other people's views and their right to hold on to such views notwithstanding what the majority opinion may feel at any point in time. When so called democratic forces

are unable to grab the meaning and import of Rosa Luxembourgeois's assertion, as quoted by Eghosa Osaghae (1992)- that, "Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently." Then the seeds of a democratic culture cannot begin to be watered let alone germinate and later blossom.

Intolerance and violence are the enemies of a democratic culture just as the looting of treasury creates a feeling of disillusionment and desperation, which feed violent crime. At a lower level, most Nigerians have not yet accepted the concept of tolerance where it is indeed necessary to promote it so that the foundation of democracy is not weakened. We are not however referring to the so-called illiterate masses in the Nigerian context. This is because it has been shown clearly by those of them who consistently line up behind different candidates in about the past four years, that the tolerance level among them is higher than within the educated elites who fear persecution by their superiors if they go out to vote. Democracy cannot be said to exist except the majority has their rights recognized and protected by the majority²⁴. By extension, these intolerant dispositions, has bred serious ethnic suspicion among Nigerians. Plateau State is an example of this unhealthy development.

Lack of a Philosophy for the 'project democracy': The lack of a workable philosophy undermines the practicalisation and survival of democracy in Nigeria. Where governance is perceived as the chance or opportunity to plunder with reckless abandon and without accountability, the resources of the country concerned, thus creating unworthy multi-millionaire or billionaires, the willingness to give up power in a free and fair election is naturally absent. In the same manner, those wishing to unseat incumbent elected governments would not hesitate to use all means fair and foul to attain their objectives including massively rigging elections. In situations such as this, democracy cannot thrive no matter how many international observers are sent to monitor the electoral process. The stake is too high to leave anything to chance, especially as there is never a guarantee that the successors will not try to be punitive and to deprive the previous rulers of their wealth, whether legitimately gained or not.

Poverty Rate: In the Nigerian context, the condition of poverty has afflicted the people so terribly. This is yet another enemy of democracy. A hungry individual will demonstrate for the right to vote and to participate in the election of those who will rule him in the strong belief that the process will bring in those who would change his current poverty stricken condition. Thereafter, he will be no more reluctant to go out again if his condition is not seen to improve even after those he helped to elect have been in full control of decision-making. Disillusionment and cynicism very quickly replace the hope he had before and democracy therefore, loses a valuable ally.

Political Awareness: Until recently, the level of political awareness was relatively low in most parts of Nigeria. Where it is high, an equally high level of political consciousness even among the educated elite does not match this. This, no doubt, tends to undermine democratic values as the enthronement of ethnic particularism and chauvinism and consideration of crass material benefit tend to derail those very values like accountability, merit and dedicated hard work on the part of political leaders, which would otherwise have strengthened the democratic ethos.

Thus a large number of people may acknowledge the economic wrecking malfeasance of a government official but see nothing wrong in saying clearly that they will vote for him

in a free and fair election. The candidate's ability and willingness to deliver two bags of rice to villagers two weeks to the election, is considered more important in voting for such candidate than the realization that he had been a kleptocrat, who takes pleasure in ruining the economy of the country. This is unfortunate.

In addition, it must be admitted that weak economic conditions and the struggle of the masses to merely survive from day to day cannot in any way be a solid foundation for democracy. This is a problem that those in authority have to deal with as it democratises the polity. The question that comes to mind at this juncture is: What are the ways out of these democratisation problems in Nigeria? Or do we resign to fate? This will be madness. The following are possible steps to be taken towards getting these problems solved or minimized:

There is need for significant numbers of the elite to accept that financial salvation does not lie in political power only. This becomes necessary if Nigeria will lay the foundation for a free and fair atmosphere in which elections to public posts can be held without rancour and violence coupled with massive manipulation of votes that have characterised most elections in Nigeria in recent times.

Those contesting for political offices ought to have the conviction that accountability is a serious concept not just in the realm of theory but also in practice, such that it becomes morally unaccepted for anybody to misappropriate public funds. Where there is not much to be gained materially from being in or holding a political office, the temptation to damn all, throw caution to the wind and bastardise the democratic process will be weak. Following this line of argument, Echekwube (1998), posited that those who are chosen to lead and govern as charismatic leaders do not have to vie for such positions. He further stressed that if he had his way; "all those who campaign for positions of responsibility ought to be neglected because invariably, they have personal and selfish reasons for desiring to get such positions".

The judicial arm of the state needs to perform its functions without fear or favour if the democratic spirit is to remain alive. The judicial process, which adjudicates in the event of dispute over the outcome of elections, must be seen by all to be impartial. Sadly enough, moral courage, boldness, impartiality and uprightness cannot be said to be strong assets of the majority of judges in Nigeria today. Yet an upright judiciary is needed if democracy is to thrive.

Conclusion

The problem of governance and functional democracy in Nigeria presents peculiar difficulties because we seem to have abandoned our traditional ways of doing things with honesty. There comes to mind a fundamental question: is it the system of governance in operation in Nigeria that is responsible for the dysfunctional nature of democracy? No is the answer. It could be said without fear of contradiction that the fault is not in the system but in the operators. Nigeria has for example practised both the British and American systems of government, which have failed woefully. If the British have survived with the Parliamentary system and Americans, with Presidential system, why has Nigeria failed to succeed with these systems? Anthony Enahoro (1986) as quoted by C.B. Okolo, has this to say,

The truth is that the operation of the Parliamentary system of government, or of the Presidential system of government in Nigeria has been subject to strains and stresses caused by the peculiarities of the Nigeria situation. For example, our sheer inexperience, the unwillingness of some political leaders to make the personal sacrifices necessary to unify the highest levels of government, the functionaries unfamiliar with the give-and-take of liberal democratic politics.

In spite of the above, it is a truism that Rome was not built in a day; a democratic culture cannot develop within a few years in Nigeria. Even in the so-called older democracies, Osaghae argued that debate continues on the modalities of getting more and more people involved in the electoral process and the type of election – whether proportional representation or other modes – which will more fully represent in a fair way, the views of all segments of the population in parliament. Democracy is dynamic a process. In the light of this, Nigeria need not accept definitions of democracy, which have not even been operationalized even in those countries that are said to be very old at practising it. It cannot be over emphasizes that our democracy must be rooted in our peculiar conditions which involve social ad political engineering at the same time that economic restructuring has to be undertaken.

How to ensure that in spite of disillusion borne out of the failure to satisfy expectations, democratic processes are still respected and the culture nurtured must be seen as the challenge which lovers of democracy must take up with courage and determination. The avoidance of pretentious dispositions will no doubt make democracy functional and the citizens will enjoy the much talked about dividends of democracy in its fullest measure. Hence, there is need for the people, which is in tune with their peculiarities in order to be able to implement the rules with facility. In British Parliamentary system for example, the Queen reigns while the elected representatives govern the country. In the United States of America, the Republican, Presidential system, thrives. The Supreme power is not held by a monarch but by elected representatives of the people. Such systems have succeeded because they emanated from the people's tradition and culture with direct affiliation to their past history and life experiences.

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