

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA TODAY AND THE QUEST FOR NATION-BUILDING: WHITHER NIGERIA?

Ogene A. Oyibe, Ph.D
Department of Arts and Social Science Education,
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki
email: buikeoyibe@gmail.com

and
Josephine Obioji, Ph.D
Department of Public Administration and Local Government,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
email: josephine.obioji@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

Democracy is described as a political system where the general populace is permitted to engage, to varying degrees, in the day-to-day running of their own countries, whether through representative democratic elections or actual direct democratic actions, such as referenda. This article sets out a number of instances which should be kept in mind in any discussion of the relationship of Nigeria democratic governance and the quest for nation-building. Democracy aims at the exclusion of either violent action or use of force in championing supposed State policy and theoretically should render violence or use of force unnecessary, since all groups and individuals are expected to express their views and interests through a process of rational deliberation. Yet, this is obviously not always the case especially in today's Nigerian democracy. Since there is no meaningful participation of the masses in public policy or key decisions, one may likely ask 'is there any hope of building the nation (Nigeria) via these snobbish attitudes our leaders'? Nation-building entails concerted effort by political leaders to integrate citizens who are naturally diverse in terms of culture, language, religion, economy, and education to form one united and stable nation. The reversed is the case of Nigeria today, instead integrating the populace for nation-building; the leaders are disintegrating them the more. In this article, antithesis of democratic practices and its danger in building the nation as presented with subheading 'Nigerian democratic governance and quest for nation-building: an aberration were also discussed and some steps if considered would make things aright were suggested such as institutional reformation and restructuring and a new discourse of politics of inclusion should be important elements of our democratic governance which enhances nation-building.

Keywords: democracy, nation-building, and democratic governance

Introduction

Nigeria became a sovereign nation after achieving international political recognition from Britain in 1st October, 1960. In October 1, 1963, Nigeria attained a republican status which gave her political freedom to elect the first indigenous president in democratic arrangement. Since after then, the country's socio-economic and political landscape has been plagued by frequent coups and counter coups with a concomitant frightening propensity of abuse of the law. Millions of Nigeria citizens were made to live in fear since opposition in form of criticism was returned as rebellion. Until 29th May, 1999, Nigeria returned to democratic governance with the hope of assembling all intellectuals, trade unionists, students, workers, journalists and populace to work towards promoting democratic living and governance. Since then, Nigerian political leaders have tied their hands at democracy, they have tried to fashion out political culture directed to define leadership and forge unity among the people with multiple cultural backgrounds in order to achieve a new united and political stable nation. These concerted efforts should be referred to as Nation-building.

Presently, Nigeria has witnessed general instability in the economic and political sphere occasioned by an attempt to clamp down the national legislature by the executive which resulted to mass movement of politicians from one political party to another, thereby making the country to remain backward in the scheme of things, if compared to other international communities. In Nigeria today, dissenting politician, journalists, trade Unionists, workers and private individuals are swiftly arrested, at times, kidnapped, detained and in some cases incarcerated. All these become re-occurring phenomena in the Nigeria politics especially at the present dispensation when the country has gone through the harsh experience of constant mass destruction of human lives and property in middle-belt and north-east states. These actions appear to be violating fundamental human rights and flagrant violation of the Nigerian constitution. Despite all these incessant gruesome killing of innocent citizens, soaring state of unemployment, mind-boggling, corruption in high quarters and lack of priority on the choice of democratic values and constitutionality, Nigeria is still yearning for effective leadership that has the capacity and will to assemble all the required resources to building the nation. Indeed, a Machiavellian principle has become the order of Nigeria politics. The end justifies the means. This paper is therefore aimed at reviewing the democratic process, governance in Nigeria today, and searching

inherent factors that undermine nation-building with the hope of proffering solutions.

Meaning of Democracy

Democracy generally is the word used to represent the type of government that provide equal rights of participation to the citizens of a country to determine the structures and components of the government of their nation. Madu and Udezo (2010) refer to democracy as the commitment of the stakeholders to the ideals and values of the democratic process. This commitment anchors on the spirit of democracy as gleaned from Abraham Lincoln's statement at Gettysburg battle fields as captured by Odey (2001) in these words: "that the only justifying reason why so many Americans can lay down their lives without counting the cost was their abiding faith that they were fighting for democracy. He then defines democracy as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. This entails that democracy is the type of government that gives credence to individual's fundamental rights and rule of law.

Nation-Building

Nation-building is a multi-faceted complex process of building the socio-political and economic dynamics of political society in such a way as to facilitate the policy of continued independent sustenance, development and growth (Mezieobi, 1994). Anyways, from the socio-political view point, nation-building refers to an attempt by nation's leaders to move the nation steadily and permanently in the direction of self-reliance and development through dedication to excellence in leadership, discipline, orderliness, honesty, mutual respect to rules of law and tolerance in national affairs. It involves changing of attitudes of the citizens from tribalism and statism to nationalism, patriotism and globalism

Democratic Governance

As earlier stated, that democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people which implies that in democratic governance, the people has the final say in the State's policies and programmes. This is in line with content of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Chapter II which stipulated the "Fundamental objectives and Directive principles of State Policy" as specified in section 14 and 23, government's relationship with the people and

the National Ethnics respectively. Highlighting on government's relationship with the people, Section 14, Sub-section 1 and 2 (a) contained that the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be a state based on the principles of democracy and social justice. That sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria from whom government through this constitution derives its powers and authority". And section 23 spelling out the National Ethics say: "The National Ethics shall be discipline, integrity, dignity of labour, social justice, religious tolerance, self-reliance and patriotism".

Madu and Udezo (2010) maintained that indeed, these are noble and beautiful constitutional provisions which Nigeria leaders are singing in season and out of season. The idea and spirit of democratic governance supposed to be replicate of the view of Okere (2005), according to him, democracy has been translated in Igbo language as "Ochichi onye kwuo uche ya" which means a free speech regime. Though, this is one aspect of democratic process but freedom of speech is one of the major characteristics that make democratic governance possible. This might be the reason Aron in Gana (2015: 47), described democratic governance as one in which "the peaceful rivalry for the exercise of power exists constitutionally. This means that in democratic governance, who gets what, how and when are stipulated in the constitution which in most cases held to be supreme to any person, institutions, positions or organs of government. Therefore, every person, institution, other constitutions or laws and constituted authority derived their powers from the constitution and to be control by the same.

Explaining further, Bobbio in Mensah (2000: 87) stated that democratic governance entails first and foremost set of procedural rules for arriving at collective decisions in a way which accommodates and facilitates the fullest possible participation of interested parties. It is not only that this set of procedural rules provides ground for healthy participation of interested parties in the politicking of the nation but also provide platform in which political leaders are held accountable for their actions in public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives. Democratic governance allows the populace a significant voice in decision making through the right of franchise.

Antithesis of Democratic Practices

In a true democratic practice, Ikwumelu, Oyibe and Eluu (2014) maintained that leaders are just in power but not with power unlike what is obtainable in Nigeria where the political leaders seize the power from the people and are using it as an instrument for which hunting those who might have had some individual disagreement at one time or the other. As we may know that it is not the word democracy that guarantees the actual transformation expected by the people in a democratic practice, what is more important is the attitudes of those entrusted with the responsibility of manning the tools of democracy and how much they respect rules of law and other basic principles of democratic practices. In today's Nigeria democracy, there is gross disrespect to rules of law and constitutionality. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended strictly spell out the functions of all organs of government and of all the political positions stated therein but as we may observe, those in the corridor of power are clamping on the rights and functions of others officers. This is not a democratic practice that is organized on the principles of equality before the law. The situation of the present Nigeria so called democracy is what George Orwell captured in his book entitled "Animal Farm". According to him, "all animals are equal but some are more equal than the others"

Presently, some of the president's deviations from democratic and political norms slap everyone in the face. Attacks on federal judges for decisions that don't go his way or decision meant for the benefit of the public. For instance, the case of former senior special adviser to former president Goodluck Jonathan on internal security, Gen. Dasuki which both international and national courts have granted bail is still in the cell of Directorate of State Security till now. Also, attacks on news organizations for stories that portray him or his administration in a bad light. These amongst others bring about misstatement piled on misstatement which has made some parts of the country to clamour for secession and pointing accusing fingers on the president for running nepotism instead of democracy. The case of the present governor of Benue State will serve as an example where 1/3 of the members of the State House of Assembly convened with the aid of Nigeria police after court order served impeachment notice to the governor against constitutional prediction and the president merely said he knew nothing about it and that is all (Stateman, 2018).

There is no hope for true democracy, respect for rule of law and responsible governance in a country where politicians, high-ranking civil and military officials and judges get state lands as bounties and do not make public declaration of assets owned by them and their relatives. The president in his inaugural statement made it known Nigerians on 29th May, 2015, that his administration is set to fight corruption and in his bid to achieve that, he (the president) belong everybody and belong to nobody. With this declaration, the hope of Nigeria citizens were raised high with anticipation that the Messiah is right on the corner. They shower him with praise for the arrest of Olisa Metu, the former publicity secretary of People Democratic Party, and Gen Dasuki in connection to armed deal and Sen. Bukola Saraki, the senate president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria for failure to completely declare his asset by the Code of Conduct Bureau (Oyibe and Anukaenyi, 2021).

At time in the past, Jonna (2018) reported that the secretary of the government of the Federation 'Engr. Babachir David Lawal' was accused of using one hundred million naira (#100,000,000) to clear grasses in Internal Displaced Persons (IDP) camp and was neither arrested nor prosecuted for such bounty lies and fraud. Recently, the former Minister of Finance 'Mrs. Kemi Adesina' under PMB lead administration was accused of certificate forgery and the government is handling it with executive treatment and we are fighting corruption. Which way Nigeria? Though, there are other shifts, equally audacious and troubling, take a more subtle form. They unfold slowly until, perhaps too late, the change becomes blindingly apparent. So it is with the president's dealings with the media, and the effective disappearance of public accountability. Authoritarianism does not announce itself. It creeps up on you. Like his predecessors, Tokumbo (2018) reported that President Mohammadu Buhari (PMB) has also answered a few questions at joint news conferences with foreign leaders although he has had a smaller number of such events than his predecessors and, unlike them, has made a habit of directing questions to friendly conservative news outlets.

Rather than hodgepodge or decorative changes, Nigeria needs massive reforms in all spheres of governance. This is because; Nigeria is a strange country where custodians are themselves complainants. Those who head institutions, instead of reforming the same, complain and express helplessness about their malfunctioning, inefficiency and non-performance or under-performance. In

recent days, people have heard a lot about paralysis of our legislative, administrative and judicial systems, and that delivery to public is not possible without reforming the existing institutions. We all know what ails Nigeria yet everyone feel indifferent.

Haq (2018) maintains that in every society, administration and dispensation of justice should be the top most priority. A society without a sound, reliable and speedy judicial system like ours (Nigeria), which does not ensure effective dispensation of justice, can never progress or prosper. It is imperative that administration and dispensation of justice under various laws in Nigeria need serious attention. There is a consensus that the entire justice system is on the brink of collapse. There is an urgent need to revamp the justice system to ensure justice for all, rule of law, fairness and equity. As pointed out by the president of Igbo socio-cultural group (Ohaneze), Chief John Nnia Nwodo in recent speech as they visit National Assembly, the legislature has failed to perform its duty in this regard and that he is ready to interact with them to frame out strategies to achieve the goal of reformation of the entire justice system in particular and restructure the country in general (Nwodo, 2017)

In present discourse of what be weak Nigeria initiated by Nnia Nwodo and others, conspicuous by its absence is mentioning of the fact that we have failed to democratize our National apparatus. The existing system is inherently exploitative and anti-people. The ruling classes thrive on people's hard-earned money using custom officers, police force, taxation and judiciary to keep them under control and for their vested interest. Empowerment of the people, both politically and economically, is the real essence of a true democracy geared toward nation-building but this would be a deathblow to the ruling classes. Thus, they work hand-in-hand to safeguard their mutual interests. They hoodwink the masses by arguing that 'system' is important. They know that perpetuation of the existing system alone can help them to keep the masses subjugated.

Nigerian Democratic Governance and Quest for Nation-Building: Aberration

True democratic governance geared towards nation-building should be a system that supposed to allow the electorates significant proportion of participation in the State's decision making process. Keorapetse (2012) rightly observed that,

participatory democracy is a vital mechanism for controlling ruling classes. This argument is on the belief that, in a democracy all should govern, in the sense that all should be involved in law making, in deciding of public policy, in applying laws and in governmental administration. All should be personally involved in vital decision making, that is to say, in deciding laws and matters of public policy but in the Nigerian context, our situation is familiar with the slogan of 7up bottling company 'the Different is Clear'. The different is clear because instead of liberal democracy that is the predominant form of government preferred in the twenty-first century and it is largely characterized by snobbisms in most countries of African especially Nigeria. These select few have become celebrities and the people become spectators in the political theater of our dear country. There is no meaningful participation of the masses in public policy or key decisions, how then can we be clamouring for nation-building.

Nigerians have been denied universal adult suffrage as contained in the constitution, albeit with limitations, which could have been the only way in which people participate meaningfully in the political process for the purpose of building sustainable and stable nation. The limitation of common suffrage as practiced in Nigeria is worrying; our electoral processes have been characterized by irregularities and this denies the people the right to confer legitimacy or otherwise on the elected. The sitting president and the state governors somehow determine who succeeds them. It is an aberration to democratic practices and nation-building. This participation if given would have ensured that rulers act in the interest of the ruled and are accountable to the ruled or at least to the representatives of the ruled. Ikwumelu and Oyibe (2011) are of the view that a direct opposite of participatory democracy is classism. Classical and contemporary influential theorists propagated the view that real democracy, where the people govern, is always and everywhere impossible and that the people could never rule.

And Keorapetse (2012) pointed out that these scholars, including Plato, Robert Michels, Vilfredo Pareto, Max Weber, Gaetano Mosca and Joseph Alois Schumpeter among others, argue, even though in different ways, that government ought in principle, always and everywhere, to be controlled by elites of education, wealth and social status. Some of them argue that elites dominate because the masses lack education, resources and are lethargic, passive, unsystematic and

unimportant. Elitists believe that government is in practice confined to elites. But there is no time or place these scholars said that the ruling classes should distance themselves from the electorates who supposed to own the power they control. In the case of Nigeria, it is the handiwork of Jacob on Esor. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria vest executive powers on the president and did not empowers him to decide alone, consequently not authorizing dictatorship but, after elections, the masses are reduced to mere spectators as all decisions are made for them. Is there any hope for nation-building in this situation since nation-building as captured by Ukpom in Oyibe and Nnamani (2017) is a concerted effort by the political leaders to integrate citizens who are naturally diverse in terms of their culture, religion, language, economy, education, and politics so as to form a united and stable society.

Nigeria national assembly and states houses of assembly, which are supposed to be the barometers of public opinion, have been reduced to rubber stamps of executive decision and those of the ruling party. Nigeria parliaments do not have real powers to adequately exercise its oversight function. The incidence of 24th July 2018 that Nigeria Police held siege at senate president (Sen. Bukola Saraki) and his deputy's (Sen. Ike Ekweremadu) residences express no doubt that the Nigeria parliament doesn't have real powers to adequately exercises its oversight function. This is due to strict party discipline and binding ruling party caucus and numerically weak opposition in parliament. Laws are made by the executive and passed through parliament and not passed by parliament. The government only informs, as opposed to consulting, the people on key decisions.

In Nigeria, political parties lack the culture of disagreement(s) and working unanimously for agreed agenda after proper debate and winning majority vote. All parties have an authoritarian, single-person-dominant model that itself is a negation of democracy. It is a situation by which all other organs of government, Ministries, departments and Parastatals are accountable to the Chief Executive only. Instead of clear separation of Power, it is otherwise unification of power and functions of organs of government under the control of one man known as the Chief Executive. The interest of the Chief Executive determines who hold one political position and either who should be elected or not elected by political parties. There are no *bona fide* elections within parties and no process for accountability. This lack of democratic values within political parties is the root

cause of their failure to deliver. Sadly, despite criticism from all corners, parties are still not ready to introduce democracy within their ranks. In all established democracies, political parties regularly hold elections and meetings of workers, publish their audited accounts, file tax returns, and disclose details of expenses and names of donors. But these elements are totally missing in Nigeria political milieu. The commitment to do work at the grass root level and empowering the masses is completely alien to all our political parties.

Nigeria governments, civil and military alike have been totally insensitive towards the poor and at present it is officially admitted that over 80 million Nigerians are living below the poverty line (Oyibe and Eluu. 2015). Income inequalities in Nigeria have increased sharply during the last three years and the trend continues unabated despite tall claims of poverty reduction. The main factors that govern personal income distribution include: distribution of assets; functional income distribution; transfers from other households, government and rest of the world; and tax and expenditure structure of the government. The single most devastating factor for increased income and wealth inequalities remains the regressive tax system. Mbam (2019) reported that incident of tax on the poor for some years now has increased substantively (35 per cent) as in the case of Ebonyi State while the rich owning 90 percent of wealth of the nation and pay less than 1 percent of total tax collection. We are facing chronic economic disparities and dearth of essential services. The 'great divide' in today's Nigeria between the rich and the poor is assuming alarming proportions but there is no debate about it in any quarter.

Putting Things Aright

In true democratic governance, the *sine qua non* is accountability for all. Accountability must start from the judges who adjudge others. Judges must be above board. They should be men of integrity, blameless, and free from all internal and external pressures. Since justice should not only be done but seen to have been done, the prime duty of a judge is to demonstrate this through his judgments and not by verbal exchanges in courts or statements on various occasions.

Politicians need to act responsibly in all spheres whether in power or in opposition. Their role is pivotal for effective working of institutions of the State. Being role models, it is imperative for them to show others by their conduct, the

supremacy of rule of law. If they indulge in corruption and malpractices, the entire system becomes discredited.

Every democratic government should operate by the dictate of constitution and rules of law. Gana (2015) is of the view that a true democracy is characterized by respect to rules of law and good governance. Good governance focuses on the responsibilities of governments and governing bodies to meet the need of the masses. This is cannot be achieve when there is low regard to rules of law and constitutional provisions as the case of Nigeria.

Presently, almost all political parties are dominated and controlled either by a single person or a handful of individuals with workers showing complete loyalty to their "chief" rather than to the party's manifesto/programme. Obviously, in return, they expect personal favours from the "chief" when the party gets power. This culture of nepotism within parties is the biggest failure of democracy in Nigeria and not the imaginary "interferences" by establishment that may be in security and foreign affairs but not in internal affairs of political parties. Another failure of politicians is non-establishment of an independent accountability authority that is accepted and respected by all. The way forward is that political parties should be forced to file tax returns and make their accounts public after audit. This will help the process of filtration within the parties.

A true democratic set-up ensures rule of law and accountability of all, especially of rulers, public office holders and government officials. Absence of rule of law (as is the case in Nigeria) is absolute negation of democracy and nation-building. Favouritism, nepotism, despotism, repression, fascism, bigotry, totalitarianism, oppression, tyranny, intolerance, denial of human rights, persecution of minorities and denial of access to justice are all, antithesis of democracy. Elections *per se* cannot guarantee a democratic polity or rule of law. Since abuse of power can only be checked through a proactive and impartial judiciary, dispensation of justice is a *sine qua non* for democracy.

The ruling classes work hand-in-hand to safeguard their common interests and despite occasional in-fights and pulling each other's legs for grabbing more and more benefits and privileges, they immediately unite to "salvage the system." They hoodwink the masses by arguing that the "system" is more important compared to giving them their basic rights. They know that perpetuation of the existing system alone can help them to keep the masses in eternal subjugation. In

other words, historically all subjects were ruled by one king but today, each subject has to bow before many kings.

The existing power structures, whether related to executive, judiciary or legislation, belie good governance and democratic norms. No political party wants to dismantle these structures. On the contrary, politicians vociferously protect the interests of civil-military bureaucracy, landed classes and unscrupulous businessmen. This unholy alliance not only denies empowerment of masses but also exploits them in the name of “democracy” and/or “national interest.” The real challenge is thus dismantling of this unholy alliance.

Conclusion

The above discourse revealed that Nigeria needs massive reforms and restructuring in all spheres of governance, rather than patchwork or cosmetic changes. The starting point should be accountability of all organs of government. In a country where politicians, high-ranking civil and military officials and judges get state lands as bounties and do not make public declaration of assets owned by them and their relatives, there cannot be hope for true democracy, rule of law and responsible governance. And when a broad-based alliance of political workers, civil society, media and intelligent actors are formed to force the parliament to abdicate all laws of secrecy and enact a comprehensive legislation for right to information, as enshrined in the constitution, coupled with strict accountability by an independent body that we shall clamour for nation-building in Nigeria.

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