

SPORT: A PRO-DEMOCRACY PARADIGM

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ABSTRACT

In this article the author examines sport, drawing parallels between it and democracy. He also identifies many elements of sport that are of utility in fostering mass participation in the conduct of public affairs and political stability. He does these through an integrative review of literature, suggesting ways and means of consummating their mutually reinforcing potentials.

INTRODUCTION

That the yearning for democracy is global attests to its desirability. The struggle for democratization and consolidation of democratic governance in Nigeria, spanning the time space of 1914 to the present, is an indication of Nigeria not being exempt from the global trend.

An examination of established democracies reveal that sport and democracy bolster each other in a myriad of ways. They also have many elements in common.

A general definition of "democracy" appears to be infeasible. Yet, common elements run through definitions of democracy that issue from quarters ranging from the scholarly to the popular: mass participation, equal rights, majority rule and so on.

In the closing lines of his famous Gettysburg Address as the American Civil War raged, United States President Abraham Lincoln alluded to democracy, saying: "... government of the people by the people for the people shall never be erased from the face of the earth (Caughey and May, 1964:256).

Ake (1991: 32 - 34) proffers an elemental definition of democracy that included widespread participation, consent of the governed and public accountability.

In essence, democracy is a system of government that is based on mass participation in the conduct of its business and political equality.

By "political stability" is meant the state of a polity in which social, political and economic changes are orderly and in harmony with the laws of the land, rendering change a predictable development in the society.

Although political stability goes with the establishment of democracy in a state, the presence of political stability in the state does not necessarily imply that the state exists as a democracy. The police state, for instance, is only seemingly stable politically. Its subterranean political restiveness may bring unpredictable change to the fore without warning.

In essence, non-democracies may experience political stability of the unsustainable variety, that is a culmination of the elimination of opposition and the intimidation of the citizenry by the state. That political stability in the non-democracy is unsustainable is evident in Pre-Revolution and Napoleonic France; and in 20th - Century Soviet Union (now defunct), China, North Korea; Cuba and Nigeria under military rule; their history is characterized by violent power struggles, succession troubles, purges, witch hunting, forced labour, mass murders and other gross human rights violations.

It is when a nation state has a long history of orderly, peaceful transition in which the political party in government hands over the reins of government to another political party in obedience of the wishes of a majority of the citizens in a free and fair election that a democracy can be said to be established.

The Athenians of antiquity originated democracy that was of a pure, direct variety. Direct democracy was suitable in their circumstances because of the relatively small size of the Greek City State. Representative democracy or indirect democracy in which elected rulers govern on behalf of the people is the vogue in contemporary times. With advances in

information technology and the world shrinking in size intermittently communication - wise, however, world return to direct democracy is not improbable.

Nye and Morpurgo (1968) notes that the founding fathers of the United States surmised, in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789, that had the Bourbons been less aloof and had they played with and closely related with their subjects, they (the Bourbons) might not have gone to such gruesome end and the account of that era in French history might have been different. This perception, only portrays an oversight on the Americans part, as to the nature of an aristocratic monarchy vis-a-vis democracy: the former is undemocratic, with political equality and mass participation in the conduct of public affairs not being its features. Therefore, the Bourbons behaved true to their way of life by not condescending to sharing the sport experience with their lowly compatriots.

Ajisafe (1991: 3) considers sport as an institutionalized activity that requires rigorous exertion, based on fixed rules and regulations, and motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. In offering another view of sport, Adedayo (1999 : 5) writes:

... A sport is a competitive game which provides situations in which individuals, and teams of players seek to exhibit superior skill, strategy, determination and fitness by defeating or out-performing the opponent(s) according to already accepted rules. Sport is motivated by material and non- - material reward. It is also characterized by governing bodies, which enact rules and regulations regarding play, and organization and administration...

THE SPORT - DEMOCRACY FIT

Sport and democracy are fitting pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that is life. The two aspects of human culture share a broad spectrum of elements and requirements.

Harik (1994, p. 43) writes:

Democratic governments function poorly, if at all, in the absence of certain explicit and implicit cultural practices and assumptions. A number of attitudes must be first ingrained in the social order, such as a certain degree of individualism, public - spiritedness, respect for and tolerance of others, and acceptance of winning and losing according to "the rules of the game"

The foregoing statement of Harik's anticipates the kernel of a thesis put forth by Ojeme (1998 : 75) to the effect that similarities in the social processes of democracy and sport are such that sport is of significant transfer-of-learning value for democratic way of life. He undertakes an exploratory analysis of the potentials of sport as a facilitating agent of democracy, identifying the following as some of the elements that are common to sport and democracy: (a) free and fair competition;

- (b) rule of law;
- (c) social context-based action, evocation of strong emotions, tension and conflict;
- (d) involvement of umpires;
- (e) emergence of losers and victors;
- (f) freedom of association; and
- (g) reward.

As with democracy, excellent participation in sport is based on merit rather than the socio-economic background of the athlete. As such, sport offers limitless opportunities for internalizing social skills and values such as developing lasting social relationships, readiness to understand the views of others and reach a consensus with others.

Democracy and sport are characterized by the rule of law. Even though in numerable instances of attempts at circumventing the law in their operation abound, there are systems of checks in place in these social institutions that ensure equity and justice.

The Salisu Buhari perjury scandal Nigeria and the Salt Lake City 2002 Winter Olympic Games hosting bid scandal are examples of the rule of law in action in democracy and sport respectively (Akinkuotu, 1999; Sullivan 1999: 48 - 49).

The totalitarian state employs sport as a tool for mass mobilization and regimentation in so doing, the government of the non-democracy seeks to obliterate such democratic elements of sport as voluntary participation, freedom of association, accountability, openness and private ownership of the sport-industrial complex, fair play and rules of law.

On the other hand, sport and democracy are mutually reinforcing. Democracy, as established democracies such as Britain, United State, Canada, France, Germany and Japan show, is attended by liberalization, open communications and globalization, the synergistic 3 + 3 = 8 effect of which manifests itself in political stability, economic prosperity and enhanced opportunities for wholesome pastimes such as sport and tourism.

Van Dalen and Bennett (1971 : 53 - 54) note that Athenians of antiquity employed sporting activities that are of military utility such as foot race, javelin throw, archery, and equestrian sports, for military training of the Athenian youth to defend the polis against envious neighbours.

Ake (1992 : 34) identifies three attitudinal impediments in the way of democratization and democratic governance in Nigeria - diffidence, the need for a practical commitment to equitable sharing of the burdens and the rewards of citizenship; and the habit of preying on others that is expressed in a pecking-order system of oppression, fanatical zeal for political power and politics that is vindictive to a tragic degree in practice. Sport possesses the potentials to reduce these anti-democratic elements to insignificant levels by equipping members of the civil society with the social skills such as team spirit, tolerance, selflessness, fairness and obedience to the law.

SUGGESTIONS

Kakah (1999) asserts that democracy, once established, requires be constantly worked at, reinvented and monitored. The essence of his assertion is that there is no perfect democracy. As such, democracy is an evolutionary process, which entails the ideals of adaptive adjustment, critical appraisal and monitoring.

Proceeding from the foregoing is the need to plan the curriculum in all the tiers of the educational system with a view to using the school curriculum as a tool of social engineering in using sport to plant and nurture democratic values in the minds of the nation's youths.

The government and the private sector should provide the material and human resources in the schools to enable the conduct of school sports such that the students' wide variety of interests, abilities and developmental stages are catered to.

Physical Education should be made a core subject from the first year of primary education to senior secondary educational level, in order to equip youths with the motor skills for active participation in sporting activities for competition and recreation.

Fox (1991) touches on the direct relationship between physical activity and good health. A healthy democracy thrives on its productivity and defensive resilience. To this end a two -year military service for all Nigerians, on reaching the age of eighteen years, is an essential component of the mix of policies that will facilitate the institution of Nigeria as a virile, sustainable and stable democracy.

Local governments in the country should prepare and implement a ten - year, phased plan for the provision of modern infrastructure for sport in areas under their jurisdiction. The minimum standard should be a stadium complex in each council area headquarters.

Officials of the Inspectorate Division of the Ministries of Education at the federal and

state levels should ensure that the private - owned primary and secondary schools actually implement their building plans regarding the provision of open spaces and sport facilities, ensuring that they meet minimum standards to be set in the National Policy on Sports Development.

The National Policy on Sports Development was set in 1989 - it is ten years old now - is due for a review with a view to restructuring it according to a pro-democracy paradigm.

Students should be actively involved in discussions, negotiations and decision-making in the management of school sport programmes as a means of assisting them to learn democratic leadership skills such as communication skills, debate, selflessness, tolerance of criticism and respect for the opinions of others.

One particular aspect of co-curricular or school sports that facilitates social interaction better than the others is inter scholastic sport, for it widens the student's range of social contact beyond the walls of his school. Interscholastic sport is not as vibrant as it was in Nigeria up to the mid - 1970s. The boarding system should be restored in secondary schools and made affordable in order to afford the student the time and the discipline to actively participate in co-curricular sports.

A FINAL WORD

Democracy and sport are global phenomena that possess great potentials for enriching man in its all-round development and well being. As sport reinforces democracy, the latter strengthens the former by engendering the favourable conditions in which it thrives including political stability; responsive and responsible governance; and economic prosperity brought on by accountability, openness and prudent management of human and material resources.

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