

# **SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL STABILITY IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF HISTORY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Democracy has not gained firm root in Nigeria because it has not been given the chance to do so. It was tried from 1960 to 1966 to 1979 to 1983 and in each case, the army had forcefully dismantled it making the government very unstable. Now, that a new experiment on democratic rule has started, the present study intends to examine the contributions history can make to sustain democracy and political stability in Nigeria. Since history promotes national unity, gives leadership training and political education, instils national consciousness and patriotism, discipline and morals, and since it promotes economic development which in turn improves standard of living, it has a lot to contribute to durable democracy and political stability.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The independent Nigeria took off as a democratic state practising the British model of parliamentary government, which she inherited from her master. Not so long after 1960, and precisely on January 15, 1966, the army seized political power, suspended the constitution and established a dictatorial kind of government characteristic of military leadership. This was the real beginning of political instability in the country. Seven months later the army overthrew itself. Another group of military officers sent Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi's military government was sent packing and Gen. Yakubu Gowon took over as the head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

The first military coup and the counter coup that followed generated a lot of problems in the country leading to ethnic conflicts and violence of an unprecedented scale. These ethnic conflicts produced a thirty-month civil war in which too many atrocities were carried out. Millions of Nigerians lost their lives in the war and property worth billions of Naira were destroyed. The war created too many problems, which have widened social distance between Nigerian ethnic groups, especially the principal participants in the war, the Igbo and the Northern ethnic groups.

The involvement of the military in Nigeria politics exposed the soldiers to a life of luxury, politicized them and made them more vulnerable to manipulations by politicians, ethnic missionaries and religious jingoists. The result was that military coups became frequent and ethnicity and religious conflicts became more destructive. Nation building has become more difficult and the soldiers are no longer attracted to the barracks. Every Nigerian soldier now dreams of the day he will become the landlord of a Government House. For this reason, even when in 1979 gen. Olusegun Obasanjo established a democratic government handing over the baton to Alhaji Shehu Shagari, other army officers refused to allow democracy grow in the country. In 1983. the regime was overthrown and the soldiers continued. In 1993 when Nigerians, tired of military dictatorship, elected Chief M.K.O. Abiola the President of the country, the Gen. Ibrahim Babangida - led military junta annulled it and chaos and violence greeted the decision. Everything stopped working.

Nigeria is thirty-nine years now out of which the military has ruled for about thirty years. Now that we have got a new democratic government established it is good to make it strong and help it last. Good enough, the man at the helm of affairs is a soldier-civilian. He knows the tricks and he has the experience - the lessons of history.

## **Definition of Concepts**

Clarification of concepts is essential to help readers understand the knowledge, which this study intends to impart. There is therefore the need to briefly explain the meaning of such concepts as democracy and political stability. We begin with democracy.

**Democracy:** Abraham Lincoln, one time President of the United States of America, gave the most popular definition of democracy. He defined it as "government of the people, by the

people, and for the people". It is a form of government in which the people do not only decide how they should be ruled but also determine who should rule them. Democracy may be direct or representative. In the former, all the people, especially the adult members of the society, are allowed to participate directly in government, as in Igbo traditional government and Athenian government. In the latter, the people elect or nominate their members to represent them in government. Olisa et al. (1990:25) has representative democracy in mind when they defined it as a form of government "which is based on popular election and representation". Democracy according to Jordan (1978:26) "is one of the most common practical political devices for limiting the authority of government and preserving the liberty of the individual". In a democratic society, public elections are periodically organized where all eligible voters cast their votes to choose the best candidates who will represent them in government. Democracy is not practiced in correct form where few people will carry a ballot box to one corner and fill it with voting papers. Where candidates' scores are changed arbitrarily or where, at gunpoint, electoral officials are forced to hand-over ballot boxes to hooligans or thugs either for destruction or falsification. These are what we see in Nigeria but they are not features of pure democracy. We now turn to political stability,

**Political Stability:** This refers to a condition of political peace, continuity and harmony. It involves steadiness and continuity and harmony. It involves steadiness and continuity of government policies and change of government through constitution means not by hurried or forceful method. *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines stability as "the quality or state of being stable". A state that enjoys political stability should have dependable and purposeful government. There will be no frequent military coups, violent political crises and lack of continuity in policy execution.

Political stability produces social and economic stability both of which are also vital to the over all national stability. Enem (1998:63) asserts that national stability can be facilitated by such factors as "good leadership, enlightened followership, nationalism and patriotism, adequate national security, a stable economy, adequate medical care, a social and political milieu where people enjoy equality and where differentiation according to sex, class, wealth and religion is not in existence or pronounced". A politically stable state has to enjoy peace and should be progressing.

### **The Contributions History Can Make In Sustaining Democracy And Political Stability:**

History has a lot to contribute in ensuring that democracy and political stability is sustained in this country. Before we examine these contributions and show how they can be made, it is important to state the necessary conditions for sustaining democracy and maintaining political stability. First, there must be peace and unity among the ethnic and religious groups in the country. Secondly, the national leadership has to be responsible, purposeful and selfless. This will make possible the emergence of obedient, nationally conscious and co-operating followership. The followers have to be politically educated. Also, the economy should be stable

and the standard of living of the citizens has to be well improved. There should be equal opportunities for all citizens in all national affairs and marginalization of any group should not be allowed to exist.

A close look at the above conditions quickly reminds one of the relevance of history in bringing stability in Nigeria. History promotes national unity, gives leadership training, offers political education to people and promotes national consciousness and patriotism. History can also make useful contributions to economic development of the state. All these are essential ingredients for durable democracy and political stability.

### **History as an Instrument for National Unity**

A nation cannot in any way be stable if there is no unity among the various ethnic groups that make it up. In the case of Nigeria where over two hundred ethnic groups exist, national unity or national integration must be achieved before one can start talking about sustainable democracy and political stability. In addition to uniting the multifarious ethnic groups, curbing of religious intolerance and conflicts and creating greater understanding of religion among Nigerians have to be embarked upon. Nigerian Muslims and Christians by the way they practice their religions and relate to one another have made religion a destructive force in the country instead of an integrative force, which it should be. The need for addressing the issue of unity in the country cannot, therefore, be questioned. History gives us the knowledge that can enhance national unity in Nigeria. We can learn from history of the existing areas of contact among Nigerian groups long before the Europeans came to this area. The various Nigerian ethnic groups interacted through various means in the pre-European period.

Many Nigerian ethnic groups were linked together during the pre-colonial era through trade and other channels of inter-group relations. Commercial intercourse occasioned cultural contact and borrowings, which increased their understanding of themselves and, therefore, enhanced integration and cordial relationship. The Igbo of Nsukka traded for many centuries with the Igala and Idoma people before the British intrusion. Isichei (1976:91) observed that "the states of Nsukka area were for centuries closely linked with Idah (capital of Igala kingdom) by trade, importing horses and later. European products in return for textiles and slaves". Supporting the above claim, Afigbo (1987:59) remarked that "there were at least two main land routes, with many inter-connections, which ran from central and eastern Igboland into Nsukka, from where they entered Igala and Idoma". "He added that when the British penetrated northern Igboland by about 1903 or so. they encountered Hausa and Igala traders around Udi and Enugu." The people sold and bought in various markets found on both sides.

Commercial intercourse between the Igbo and their Delta and Cross-River neighbours has a very long history and went on undisturbed throughout the pre-colonial period. History has also shown that Yoruba settlements existed in some Hausa states before the European rule and that there was flourishing trade between the Yoruba and the Hausa people during the period. There as for example, according to Ezeh (1999:103) "a Yoruba settlement in the city of Kano believed to be descendants of traders from Ogbomosho who settled in the area in the 18<sup>th</sup> century". By the 18<sup>th</sup> century and up to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Oyo trade with the coast was on a large scale. One important contribution of trade to unity among the peoples was that it created avenue for them to interact, study and understand one another. This contact encouraged culture transfer and inter-marriage, both of which are vital elements for unity and harmonious living.

There were in Nsukka area, at the beginning of the British colonial rule, traders from the north especially the Nupe people, who had already settled among their friends in the area. Some of these Nupe traders were made warrant chief in some Nsukka communities. One Adukwu was made a warrant chief there is an evidence that ethnicity was not present in Nigeria before the colonial rule. Other lessons from history that encourage unity include the traditions of origin of many Nigerian groups which suggest that they were related and may have even lived together as one people. And the composition of some empires that had existed in the past whose boundaries cut across ethnic boundaries yet good government and stability were achieved.

The implications of what have been described above to national unity, development and stability is that various Nigerian ethnic groups can live together peacefully and collectively contribute in building a stable Nigerian nation. It is only in a united Nigeria that one can expect good government and stability to be achieved. Were there is disunity among the groups that make up a polity especially the one that is based on ethnic or religious line, democracy cannot thrive because there will be divided loyalty as some may become chauvinistic in the case of ethnic question and fanatical religiosity. Under this condition, democracy cannot work because both the leaders and the followers will act with bias in most national matters. Election malpractice will continue and wrong leaders will continue to emerge creating chance for misrule

and military intervention in politics.

### **History Gives Leadership Training:**

Good leadership is very much needed for the enthronelement of durable democracy and maintenance of political stability. History gives leadership training to people in various ways. These as outlined by Ezeh (1998:87) are:

1. It makes available to man the experiences of the past.
2. It helps man to tackle various administrative problems that may confront him as a leader.
3. It promotes national consciousness and patriotism.
4. It gives political education, teaches morals and instils discipline.
5. It enables man to apply historical approach to issues relating to political, social and economic decision making, among others.

Most leaders fail because they rely on their own short experiences. Barraclough (1957:22) has advised that we must endeavour to "extract from past experiences the lessons, warnings and inspirations which may serve as a light to our feet, to illuminate our path". Bad leadership is Nigeria's chief problem. If history can bring about good leadership in Nigeria through providing leadership training, it will certainly be indispensable in the enthronelement of durable democratic government and political stability.

Proper application of historical knowledge in solving leadership problems will save time and money sometimes-wasted in trial- and error leadership approach. Leaders armed with the knowledge of history will know what to do, how to do such things and when to do it. Cicero, an eminent roman citizen as quoted in Ifemeje (1988:111) once said, "not to know what happened before one was born is always to be a child". Fafunwa (1974:13) concurred by pointing out that "A people with no knowledge of their past would suffer from collective amnesia, groping blindly into the future without guide-posts of precedence to shape their course".

History also promotes national consciousness and patriotism. This is done through the teaching of the history of great men and women who served the country well, and events of the past which make the citizens know the importance of serving their country well. Nwankwo (1985:15) observed that national consciousness is the bedrock of nationalism and argued that no

national policy or its implementation can be successfully achieved without it. National consciousness involves a set of cultural attitudes and beliefs, which are intended to give order and meaning to the state's political, economic and social processes.

History also helps man to develop power of thinking and judgement. Besides through human experiences of the past it makes available to man, history gives this knowledge to people as they battle with the task of selecting historical materials which provides opportunities for practising the skill of criticism. Nigeria needs leaders who can think critically and logically to be able to handle the complex problems which rear their heads everyday in the state.

### **History Offers Political education:**

Nigerians have to be enlightened and become politically conscious before they can participate actively in democratic political arrangement., which has now been established. Political education simply refers to the process by which the citizens of a state are made to understand the political culture of the country. Akude (1991:166) understands political education as "a process of getting the citizenry fully socialized into the prevailing political culture of the country". It is according to this Federal government of Nigeria as quoted in Akude (1991,166).

A process of mental liberation which breaks down apathy and the culture of silence of the vast majority of Nigerians, and empowers them to participate effectively and meaningfully in the process of nation-building.

The knowledge of the country's constitution especially how it has developed and the knowledge of the evolution of the Nigerian state are part of what history imparts on people and these are vital elements in political education. Proper understanding of the country, its peoples

and its body of rules can bring order the country and adequately prepare them for political participation. Very little should be expected from the citizens who do not understand their country and its laws with regard to political order. Also, through giving opportunities to man to interact with the experiences of the past, history makes people fit to understand political structures and procedures, the constitution, or simply put, the country's political, economic and social affairs leads to national pride which in turn promotes patriotism.

History according to Onyejekwe 1996:7) can help Nigerians "learn to understand and appreciate the backgrounds and antecedents, merits and defects, similarities in institutions, customs and traditions of others". This is very important in a state that is highly heterogeneous in ethnic and religious composition. History can also promote political education and encourage good governance through its teaching of morals and discipline. National leaders should be disciplined and morally upright. History is quite at home in this regard. Espie (1965:3) states that "History when well taught is a school of morals for all men... History, he elaborates, describes vices, it unmasks false virtues, it exposes errors and prejudices, it dissipates the enchantment of riches and of all the vain pomp which dazzles man". Giving credence to the above claim, Arnod in Crookall (1975) asserts that every history lesson is a lesson in moral and virtue, and every great figure of the past is either a model of what a boy should be or an example of what he should not be. History disciplines the mind and instils self-control and obedience in man. While studying history people learn how to discover the truth. They learn how to identify the truth in number of conflicting statements and also learn how to identify prejudices and to take a stand on issues. All these are essential for one's effective participation in politics. Another aspect of political education which history can give is making available to us the knowledge of different administrative and political experiences of the empires, kingdoms, city-states and *village* republics that had metamorphosed into the present Nigeria. They can be of immense use to us now.

### **Promoting Economic Development and Raising Standard of Living:**

The standard of living of Nigerians can become better if a strong and stable economy can be achieved. When the living condition of the people is good, they will be happy, peaceful and dedicated to the task of making Nigeria great. A hungry man, they say, is an angry man. It is easier to control a happy and well-fed person than a hungry person. To whom much is given, much is also expected. History can promote economic development by making available to modern Nigeria the knowledge of the economic systems and practices of the pre-colonial Nigerian societies that were able to sustain such vast and powerful states that flourished during the period.

We are all aware that the traditional economy of our pre-European societies was vibrant, self-reliant and stable. Much can be borrowed from that period and history makes such knowledge available. History can liberate Nigeria from the current mentality of borrowing everything from Europe and America, none of which has helped the country to move forward. The pre-colonial economy did not know unemployment or inflation but today these have become the order of the day. Our economy will certainly be better if we can look into our economic history including our indigenous technology and build from there. Not much has been gained from a lot of money and time we have wasted in order to get western technology transferred to us. By doing this, we are only enslaving ourselves to the developed world. At the end nothing is transferred because only few people can willingly transfer what is precious to them to another person. In this case, the developed western nations are not willing to transfer technological skills to us because their survival is strongly attached to the restriction of the knowledge. Usman (1994) believes that at present we are enslaved by this borrowing mentality and that history can liberate us from the enslavement.

European technology was not superior to that of Africa before the Lancashire miracle in the 18 century and this is testified by what history has shown with regard to the products of the two technologies. For example, Egboh (1960) observed that up to the early colonial period, the

products of the indigenous cotton manufacturing industries in Northern Nigeria were superior to those of the British textile industry despite the latter's advantage of more advanced technology and the support offered it by the British colonial authorities. Historical antecedents of whatever action we are taking now should be given serious consideration in the process of decision making. True development according to Dike (1953) can only take place on a basis of profound self-knowledge, which can only be found in history.

## CONCLUSION

Sustainable democracy and political stability can be achieved in Nigeria. This, however, depends on the type of leaders we have, the extent to which the citizenry have been educated politically and the ability of the economy to support national stability in general. History as a school discipline should be given a priority position in the curriculum because Nigerians need to know about the past especially the nation's past to be able to understand what is happening today. They need to know about leadership and to know their rights as citizens and history provides opportunities for all these. It is time the study of national history is made compulsory in our secondary and tertiary schools because it can help Nigeria establish firmly a democratic culture.

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