

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: MYTH OR REALITY?

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## Abstract

*The paper examines the extent to which democratic values and practices have permeated politics and administration at the grassroots in Nigeria. Having discussed the viewpoints of scholars on the concepts of democracy and grassroots democracy, the paper identifies the disparities between democratic ideals and actual practices at the local government level in Nigeria, especially in the areas of election, accountability and responsibility. The paper also suggests ways of ameliorating the observed problems.*

One major ground, on which the existence of local government has been justified by scholars, is its essentiality for democratic climate. The existence of local government it is argued, promotes the spread of democratic norms: representation, participation and accountability, to mention just a few at the grassroots where majority of the people live. Although, this position has been variedly challenged by Marxist scholars, who for reasons of ideological learning posit that both local government and democracy are two strange bed fellows that are incompatible.

Our intension in this paper is not to join issues in this ideological confrontation but to examine critically, the extent to which democratic ethos have permeated grassroots administration in Nigeria since the inception of representative local government system in

the 1950s. This paper therefore, proceeds by first examining the concepts of democracy, and grassroots democracy before discussing other related issues.

### **The Concept of Democracy**

Democracy is one of the variedly defined concepts in social sciences that have attracted many interpretative connotations. So elusive is the concept that attempts at postulating a precise definition of it may prove herculean task because "there are almost as many definitions of democracy as there are writers on the subject". (Salami, 1994) We can take a brief look at some of these definitions and see the extent we can harmonize them.

The Webster's (1980) dictionary defines democracy in the following words:  
"popular government, from *demos*, the people, and *kratein*, to rule... (i) Government by the people, either directly or through elected representatives; (ii) A country, state, community etc; with such government; (iii) Majority rule; (iv) The acceptance and practice of the principle of equality of rights, opportunity and treatment."

This definition appears to have combined both the ancient and modern terminologies of democracy. Democracy it would be recalled evolved from two Greek words: *demos* and *kratein*, meaning the people and to rule respectively, which translates into direct rule by the people. Democracy in its original form as experimented in Athens, Greece, was directly practiced through direct participation of every male adult in decision making process. It is perhaps in this context that Cohen (1911:62) defined democracy as; "that system of community government in which by and large the members of the community participate or may participate directly in the making of decision which affect them all"

Cohen's definition of democracy be that as it may, emphasizes the notion of equality and direct participation which, in recent time has become obsolete and highly impracticable. Subsequently, and for reasons of complexities in governance arising from increased population, urbanization and industrial revolution, democracy in its modern form could not be practiced directly, but indirectly through the people's representatives, hence, representative democracy. Thus, in order to keep in tune with the ancient conceptualization of democracy, modern practice of democracy, despite its adulteration had imbibed certain prerequisites such as majority rule, political equality, fundamental liberties and popular participation to make the practice of democracy worthwhile. Most recently, the definition of democracy given by scholars and authors seem to comply with this assertion. For instance. Schmitter and Karl (1954:12) have in the spirit of modern democratic practice defined democracy 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 co-operations of their elected representatives." Based on the definition of democracy given so far and for democratic practice to prevail in a country the following elements are essential:

1. Ascendance to political authority must be through periodic elections determined by the majority of people

2. The popular sovereignty of the people must be recognized and respected at all times.
3. Respect for the rule of law as it relates to equal treatment of all before the law and guarantee of individual fundamental human rights and liberty.
4. Strict adherence to the provision of the constitution and accountability of those that occupy public office.
5. The institutionalization of a fearless and autonomous judiciary, as well as, uncensored press.
6. The interest of the minority in all forms and dimension, either ethnically, or religious wise must be recognized and adequately protected
7. The socio-economic atmosphere must be made conducive for human existence (Awofeso, 2000)

Considering the diverse interpretation of democracy and its varied outlooks, the concept of 'grassroots democracy' is bound to pose some confusion. We can therefore ask, by a way of throwing more light on the concept.

### **What is Grassroots Democracy?**

The concept, 'grassroots democracy' is not a negation of the concept of democracy as wrongly posited in some quarters. In fact, grassroots democracy is inextricably linked with the larger concept of liberal democracy. Grassroots democracy in our view, has a two-way analytical expression, namely, structural and philosophical, both of which are directly connected with liberal democracy. Structurally, democratic value (such as liberty, accountability, equality, etc) and practices (such as separation of powers and checks and balances) in a full-blown democracy find their way to the grassroots by some kind of structural arrangement or reformation which links levels of government- the federal, state and local in a complex whole. For instance, before the 1991 local government reform which extended presidentialism to local government in Nigeria, presidential system of government was restricted only to the federal and state governments. The extension of presidentialism and the principle of separation of power to local government helped to enhance democratic values at the grassroots.

Philosophically, grassroots democracy implies an ideal and acceptable democratic practices congruent with the people's culture and social values in a particular environment, and akin to what the centre for democracy in Nigeria describes as 'indigenous democracy'. In this regard, Muggenyi (1988:78) sounds a note of warning:

*Democracy, like any other political style, must be adjusted to the conditions of the countries that choose to practice it. Such conditions are complex and diverse. And the countries which opt for democracy are under no obligation to adopt a peculiar version of it. Some of the tenets of democracy may fit many countries, but it is unlikely that they could fit all countries in the same way.*

Compressing both the structural and philosophical viewpoints of grassroots democracy, Akindele (1995:47) explains grassroots democracy in the following words:

*Grassroots democracy is that type of democracy that emerges from an inward looking set up, it connotes that local dwellers are governed at the local level in manners-conducive to feeling the impact of the existing government in terms of inputs and outputs and, the relationship between political actors and the governed within the political culture. Through this type of democracy, government is representatively brought nearer the grassroots.*

## **Relationship between Local Government and Democracy: A Theoretical Exposition**

A major theoretical exposition on which the existence of local government have been justified was its ability to enhance grassroots democracy through popular participation, effective accountability and political representation. These three elements: (participation, accountability and representation) incidentally, are the tripod on which an enduring democratic practice is erected in any civilized society. So inextricable is the relationship between local government and democracy that Adeyeye (1995) declared that only a democratic local government system can usher in full-blown democracy. To this end, many scholars have elaborately theorized on the relationship between local government and democracy. Notable among such scholars is Mill (1975) who justified the existence of local government on three major grounds, each of which has fundamental relevance to democratic practice.

The first, was the need for certain concerns or interests which are commonly shared by a section of the community, as against those interests shared by the entire country men, to be managed or administered by the people's representatives who by no means also share the communities interests. This argument posits that there are certain desires or wants which are of utmost priority to all community, and the provision of which can best be appreciated by their elected representatives who possibly understood them most, since they form part of the community. On the contrary, it is believed that an 'outsider' such as a deconcentrated agent of the federal or even the state government, who does not share this common aspiration with the community might misinterpret them to the extent of presenting them inaccurately which in the long run can invite chaos. This position was equally amplified by Gboyega (1987:26) when he observes that:

*Since not all local needs and wants can be met, choice and the determination of priorities are important functions that have to be performed on behalf of the community. If these functions are performed by agents of the central government, the subjective needs of the community may not be accurately reflected. This could produce adverse reactions such as frustration or alienation.*

The point being stressed here is the imperative of political representation via periodic election of chairmen and councilors by the local people themselves. And that, the chairmen and members of council must reflect local representation, who must share of the community aspiration. That way, consultation and the principle of consent which are very central to representative democracy are guaranteed. An

extension of the principle of representation in a full blown democracy is the requirement of equal representation of diverse interests at the central decision - making for equal accessibility to points of power. This helps to promote equality among various section of the country. People welfare and liberty at the grassroots are equally enhanced by effective representation at points of power.

The second ground on which the existence of local government was justified by Mill is that local government provides political education, which according to Charles Wilson, is a function of participation. This implies that participation in local government affords political education, and by extension in the views of Mackenzie (1961) among others constitutes a training ground for national politicians.

Local government it is argued affords the opportunity for a greater number of people who could not participate in national politics, for one reason or the other, to participate in politics at least, at the grassroots. Such level of participation could be in form of election of their representatives, contesting for election, occupying political or party offices and contributing directly or indirectly to the process of decision-making at the grassroots.

The relationship between participation and political education on one hand, and participation and training ground for future politicians on the other, are so obvious. For one, participation enables the local politicians to be properly groomed or socialized in the art of politics to face challenges at the centre if they eventually opt for national politics. This way participation, it is argued provides a training grounds for national leaders. Also, participation sharpens the 'political man' in the entire local citizenry to the extent of creating political awareness or education in citizenship. The local citizens get themselves either consciously or unconsciously aware about political events in their localities through discussion of political issues, directly or indirectly contributing to public policies or decision - making process. Besides, the very act of voting at local elections, involvement in public debates which boarder on political matters, are all ingredients of political education which participation affords.

The third ground on which the existence of local government was justified by Mill is that local government enhances accountability. Local officials (councilors and chairmen inclusive) are susceptible to local control and easily held accountable for their actions while in office by local voters because of the short lines of communication that exist between them, and the very fact that local officials depend on the electorate support to retain their political offices.

The logic behind this is that people at the locality are in a better position to exercise more effective check or control over their representatives who are part and parcel of them, as against agents of national government who are likely to be more remote, responsible and accountable to the national government instead of the local people. A concise summary of theoretical justification for local government existence on democratic values was presented by Olowu (1995:68)

*Local governments are reputed to help to educate citizens in the art and discipline of democracy. They also help to recruit and train the political leadership... Local governments also make it easier for citizens to demand*

*accountable performance from their officials because of their geographical and psychological proximity to the people compared to the national government ... In short local governments provide an atmosphere that is conducive to democracy.]*

The first attempt at democratizing local government in Nigeria following the long period of colonial authoritarian Native Authority System was in 1950s in the former Eastern and Western regions in 1950 and 1952 respectively. In both regions, the representative or democratic local government system replaced the colonial native authorities. However, the democratic local government system lasted only for a short period as they were later modified in 1955 and 1958 in Eastern and Western regions respectively.

The advent of the military in Nigerian politics in 1966 with all its dictatorial and authoritarian administrative culture to worsened the already pitiable condition of local government, which at that point in time had been stripped off of all hitherto existing democratic ethos bestowed on it in the 1950s. Consequently, and as observed by Mukoro (1995:14) the "running of local governments was now based strictly on government appointments by state governments, and the viability of local government began to deteriorate alarmingly in the country which led qualified personnel abandoning the place for mediocre to handle". Local governments were reduced to a mere appendage of the state government via its deconcentrated agents at the grassroots - the Sole Administrators.

The post-independence attempts at democratizing grassroots administration in Nigeria came mostly through intermittent military reforms of local government administration which were directed toward enhancing local participation in politics, ensuring political accountability of leaders, enhancing local autonomy, both politically and financially etc. Interestingly too, these reforms were in part, expected to usher in a democratic government at all levels of administration, through military transition to civil rule programmes.

The first of such reforms was the 1976 local government reform which one of its aims is: "to facilitate the exercise of democratic self-government close to the local level of our society, and to encourage initiative and leadership potentials."

The above aim was to be achieved through another clearly stated aim of the reform: "to make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representative bodies." The 1976 local government reform made frantic efforts via its various recommendations to stimulate democratic self-government at the local level. In theoretical term, the reform seeks to ensure the existence of an autonomous and distinct level of government at grassroots and a definite boundary of its own as well as functional responsibility over which it could exercise decisional autonomy. This attempt at reducing central control over local autonomy would, in the wisdom of reformers, enhance the practice of democracy at the grassroots by ensuring that the choices of local people prevail

Another way the 1976 local government reform stimulated democratic self-government at the local level was through local elections. Efforts were made to ensure

local participation and representation through local government election of 1976. It was logically presumed that, the linkage of electorate at the grassroots with the council via election would enhance responsibility and accountability. Local representatives and leaders would easily be made accountable for their stewardship and responsible to the needs and preferences of local population. Apart from the prescription that local government be administered by their locally elected representatives who formed the bulk of decision-making apparatus and an avenue through which the local people participate in politics and decision-making process, other recommendations made by the 1976 local government reform which can be seen as promoting democratic ethos include:

- (i) The granting of legal and financial recognition to the local government coupled with constitutionally identifiable functional responsibilities was a remarkable attempt by the 1976 local government reform at making local government truly the third tier of government. For one, local government can now participate in revenue sharing with other higher levels of governments - the state and federal governments, as against earlier practices where local government were not given statutory financial allocation by either the federal or the state government. Secondly, local governments can contest and defend at courts of law over what they consider a breach of their right or liberty in functional or administrative areas when encroached upon by higher levels of government.
- (ii) The unification (hence, uniformity) of local governments in Nigeria into 301 single-tier, multi-purpose local units has its democratic importance in equality of purpose as well as efficiency in social services delivery and vial healthy competition. Besides, the population sizes of local authorities were limited to average minimum size of 150,000 and maximum size of 800,000. Except in special cases could the number exceed 800,000 maximum population sizes. This was aimed at achieving two major objectives - to ensure the economic viability of local governments and avoids their being remote to the local citizens.
- (iii) For the avoidance of doubt of these democratic objectives as prescribed by the 1976 local government reform, the 1979 constitution (section 7) (1) further hammered on the democratic status of local government:

*The system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under the constitution guaranteed, and accordingly, the government of every state shall ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils.*

Subsequent reforms in 1984 and 1988 further attempted to enhance democratic practice at the grassroots. Although, the Dasuki local government reform of 1984 could not make much impact in this area partly due to its corrective objectives, as well as the early overthrow of the regime that initiated it. It however, re-

emphasized most recommendations made by the 1976 local government reform which were flouted at will by the Shagari administration.

The application of the 1988 civil service reform to local government administration in Nigeria was expected to have democratic impacts in grassroots administration, both structurally and practically. Firstly, the provision that "the chairman of each local government shall be the Chief Executive and accounting officer of the local government provided his role as accounting officer shall exclude signing vouchers and cheques" was an essential democratic element which aimed at institutionalizing in-built checks and balances and accountability. So also was the establishment of the office of the Director of Local Government Audit and the setting up of the Local Government Audit Alarm Committee. Both bodies could prevent the payment of any money suspected to be illegal or inflated. Besides, local government officials could be called upon at anytime to give account of their stewardship even after leaving office. Secondly, just like the 1976 local government reform, the 1988 reform equally aimed at encouraging participatory democracy by subjecting both local government councillors and chairmen to a general election. A major departure from earlier practice here was that, "Local government chairmen were for the first time elected directly by the electorate of the entire local government areas" This by implication made local government chairmen responsible and accountable to their local people. Thirdly, the extension of presidentialism to the grassroots by the 1991 reform was also expected to enhance certain democratic practice among which are separation of powers, checks and balances and rule of law. For instance, the legislative arm of local government was for the first time established following the 1991 reform. Consequently, the legislative arm was separated from the executive arm and was empowered to make bye-laws, debate and approve local government policies, check the excesses of local government executive through the approval of political appointments, annual budget and even, the impeachment of the chairman or the vice-chairman on account of gross misconduct. The 1989 constitution it could also be recalled equally conferred the power of recall on the electorate which empowered them to remove the chairman, vice-chairman or any member of the local council before the expiration of their term of office. General Babangida regime equally took some steps in the early 1990s to enhance local governor autonomy by creating more local government areas an increasing local government statutory allocation from the Federation Account from 15% to 20%.

### **Local Government and Democratic Practice in Nigeria: Myth or Reality?**

Attempts at democratizing local government in Nigeria since independence till date, appear to have witnessed a tragic history of democratic ups and downs. By this, we mean to say that, the inputs of successive administrations, both during and after colonialism, to ensure democratic practice at the grassroots are yet to fully elicit behavioural attitudinal disposition which are congruent to democratic ethos to actually justify these efforts.



Needless to reiterate here the attempts made by successive administration at democratizing grassroots government as earlier demonstrated in various reforms of the 1950s in the Southern Nigeria, the 1976, 1984, 1988, and 1991 local government reforms, it is interesting to know that these efforts were either short-lived, aborted or manipulated by those who were supposed to practicalize these ideals. This goes to confirm the popular truism that, no matter how good or efficient an imported structure or an ideology looks, it is the people that would make it work. In this regard, it appears that grassroots governance in Nigeria had witnessed a catalogue of democratic failure to the extent that democratic ideals such as political representation, popular participation and accountability are still battling hard to survive.

The efforts made in the 1950s, 1976 and subsequent reforms aimed at ensuring participatory and representative local government through election is highly commendable and a lofty attempts at democratizing local government, it is however surprising to note that such efforts were short-lived in the 1950s, while the democratic government that succeeded the Murtala/Obasanjo military regime in 1979 never conducted any election at the local government level following the 1976 local government election. Instead, elected local councils were being dissolved by state governments and replaced by appointed party loyalists. Alex Gboyega in his analysis of this development attributed this multitudinal disposition to a number of factors among which were legal and constitutional constraints, non availability of a revised voters list and the lack of political will on the part of the state governments to conduct local government elections. Of all the 19 state governments, then, only Lagos state attempted to conduct local government election.

The practice whereby electoral results in the entire polity do not reflect the people's wishes is another shortcoming to the principle of representation which had characterized local government electoral process. Thuggery and electoral violence are still being used by politicians to ensure their electoral victory at "all cost", even at the detriment of the people's popular choice. The consequence of this is no doubt severe on democratic practice at the grassroots. In this regard, professor Erne Awa (1996) once observes that:

Universal suffrage has been in operation in the country for a long time but this has little democratic value. For rigging in one form or another, had characterized the elections since independence, and severe violence had accompanied some. What this makes clear is that the voters are in fact denied the right to vote for the candidate of their choice. All these mean that those who rule are not truly representatives of the population of the country.

People's participation at the grassroots in a democratic society is commonly achieved through elections. But, most often than not, local government elections been characterized by low voters' turnout, a situation which signifies people's apathy and indifference to political activities arising from lost of confidence in the efficacy of the system; extreme poverty and ignorance which make the grassrootsers to

auction their votes to highest bidder and total feelings of neglect and distrust arising from the deplorable and under developed state of the local communities. This ugly situation was properly captured in the words of Ojofeitimi (2000:102) when he observed that:

*The recurring incidence of projects completed but not used, people's apathy and indifference, caused largely by the dismal performance of local government, and poor maintenance of facilities provided by local governments are clear indications of low level of participation of the people in grassroots government*

Responsibility and accountability in grassroots governance have become vague words only in theory but not in practice. In a random survey conducted by a researcher in one of the local government areas in Lagos state with a view to assessing the performance of the outgoing chairman of a local government in 1997, the reply of one of the respondents summarizes the attitudinal dispositions of some local government elected representatives who perceived "governance as an opportunity to plunder with reckless abandon and without accountability". According to him:

*The chairman had neither a vehicle nor a house when he assumed office. Less than two years he has three vehicles and two houses. I do not believe that the salary he earned during the period was sufficient to cover the acquisition of these items. I leave you to draw your conclusion .*

## **Conclusion**

Be that as it may, and against the background of a new wave of democratic culture which is gradually evolving in Nigeria today, following the 'termination' of the age long and intermittent period of military dictatorship, we wish to propose a re-orientation of attitudinal disposition of the entire leadership and followership towards democratic ideals. A good mixture of democratic behavioural orientation on the part of leadership and the followership without losing sight of the people tradition and culture, with adequate economic and educational empowerment of the grassroots, and the already existing democratic structure in our various local governments, would no doubt go a long way at enhancing the involvement of a 'home-grown, home-nurtured and home-sustained' grassroots democracy.

## **Recommendations**

From our discussion so far, it is obvious that democratic values are yet to be fully integrated into the grassroots administration in Nigeria. As long as elections are still massively rigged, corruption still pervasive, government officials still remain irresponsible and the masses still languish in abject poverty, democracy will continue to remain a mirage in Nigeria's lowest level of administration. It is therefore our suggestions that all efforts must be directed at ensuring that elections is conducted in a free and fair atmosphere; corruption is reduced to its barest minimum, government officials are legally held accountable while in office and after leaving office and poverty is reduced to a very insignificant proportion among the downtrodden masses.

This way, poverty, ignorance and illiteracy would have been highly reduced among the grassroots. Thus, a way would have been paved for easy mobilization of the general masses at the grassroots who by their new-found intellectual education and level of awareness are now willing to contribute to the socio-political and economic development of their environment. The result no doubt would be a vibrant society with an inhabited population that is always ready and willing to participate in the political and economic development based on the agreed upon values or rules of the game. The scenario explained above typifies what the Africa Leadership Forum describes as:

a bottom-up process that allows for popular participation and accountability and must be rooted in cultural fabrics of the society in a manner sufficiently dynamic to galvanize the process into a positive social force,

This is what the paper advocates.

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