

DEMOCRACY AS AN IDEAL FORM OF GOVERNMENT: ITS CHALLENGES AND PROSPECT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Of all the traditional names for forms of government 'democracy' has the liveliest currency today. Far from its original practice of the citizens of a democracy taking part in government directly most modern democracy is representative democracy. Since democracy is conceived as a constitutional government any other form of government as despotism, oligarchy, aristocracy, monarchy and even military are considered not to be an ideal form of government. Democracy has been described by some people as a lawless rule of the mobs and extreme perversion of government and ineffective. Despite this entire shift in meaning and values, representative democracy founded on universal suffrage is absolutely speaking, still the most acceptable one of the several forms of government suited to Nigeria. Therefore, people whose accidental circumstances temporarily justify any forms of government rather than democracy must not be perpetually subjected to it or be disfranchised, rather than democracy must not be perpetually subject to it or be disfranchised, rather they should be raised by education and economic reforms to ideal polity – democracy.

Introduction

Democracy has a long history in the literature of political thought. Though the characteristics of democracy vary from one country to another, certain basic features are more or less the same in democratic societies. These features or principles that go with democracy make it a workable system of government. Some of these principles and practices are, to encourage exchange ideas and there must be freedom of expression, freedom of election which give people free chance to choose their leaders.

Elections are held periodically to ensure that elected officials truly represent the people and making them pay attention to public opinion and answering to the people at frequent elections. Political parties are a necessary part of democratic government that make election meaningful by giving voters a choice of candidates who represent different interest parties out of powers to serves as loyal oppositions. Division of powers is necessary to spread out political power in order to prevent an individual group or branch of government becoming too powerful, constitution states the power and duties of government and limits what the government does.

Protection of these rights is not left to the whims of government officials or even to the will of majority of the people; it is written into and guaranteed by the constitution of the state. The belief is that government are instituted among men to secure those rights. Democracy therefore means more than popular rule, it suggests government within the constitutional rule, this poses a challenge to modern democracy in Nigeria. The call in all democratic countries like Nigeria is the need for constitutional restraint to prevent majority abusing their power.

For Nigeria as a whole, that may mean strengthening the majority, improving the constitution and electoral process; developing a strong party system and the consolidation of civilian control over

the military. There are many such building blocks or democratic institutions in place in Nigeria which are panacea for sustaining and strengthening Nigerian nascent democracy.

However, if these democratic institutions exist merely in theory, it is a sham and it could be subjected to manipulation by those that have access to power and economic resources. In the Nigeria context, out type of democracy practiced is usually for the elite of the apex of various pyramids of power in the society.

However as an ideal form of government, democracy is not an event but a process that takes years even decades to mature just like other human institutions. Nigerian nascent democracy requires patience as progress is measured little by little. Despite these challenges the prospects for the survival of democracy in Nigeria is still high as democracy is a political ideal founded on the dignity of man, not on the dignity of some rich men, of educated, of noble birth or propertied class but of all.

Conceptions of Democracy

Democracy exists according to Montesquieu. (1799, P.45) “When the body of the people is possessed of the supreme power”. As the root meaning of the word indicates, democracy is the rule of the people. But the controversy is the meaning of the word “the people” Traditionally the word was associated with the doctrine of popular sovereignty as a basis of political authority. In the course of its development, this has been accompanied by the emphasis of safeguard for the rights of man to assure that government actually functions for the people and not merely for one group of them. Despite the shifting of meanings and values the common thread is the notion of political power in the hands of many rather than the few or one.

The extension of the franchise and a system of representations mark the basic difference between ancient and contemporary institutions of democracy, that is, what Aristotle asserted that only by taking part in the affairs of the state could a man fully realize his innate potentials. That was the idea behind Greek pure and direct democracy.

Democracy, ancient or modern is conceived as a lawful form of government which may not be democratic; the principle of constitutionality and the status of citizenship. However, democracy differs from other forms of government as according to Hobbes (1954):

- a. Monarchy (the rule by one)
- b. Aristocracy (rule by the best or noble)
- c. and other oligarchy (rule by a few),
- d. Military (rule by decree);

In the sense that democracy has three basic differences but related meaning:

- a. a form of government which those who control the government are elected by the people and are responsible for their actions to the people.
- b. a form of society in which there is no privileged class and which individuals may rise by ability to positions of power and influence and
- c. an ideal or way of life that stresses equality, liberty, individual rights tolerance, freedom of discussion and association etc.

Democracy is derived from Greek word demos, meaning people and crania, rule or authority. Democracy therefore stands for people’s rule or authority which the Greek political thinkers stressed the idea of law.

In ancient Greek experience of direct democracy, each male adult citizen had the duty to serve permanently in the assembly which passed law and decided all important government policies. There was no division between the executive branches of government. However, slaves made up a large part

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of the Athenian population, did almost all the work. Neither the slaves, foreigners nor the women could vote. However, direct democracy continued to be used in New England town meeting in the United States of America to serve as legislative on the local issues. Such still exists in Swiss cantons. Voting was by a show of hands. This form is possible only in a small area with a small population.

Representative democracy gradually developed as the size of population and the area to be governed increased. In this context, Africans have been proud of the fact that an indigenous form of democracy existed in a number of traditional ethnic system. (Igbo, Tiv); in pre-colonial Nigeria. They sit together and discuss common problems until consensus was reached.

Some countries come near in realizing democratic ideals in terms of the majority active involvement and the conditions of participation that are equal and open to all. In some states, there are restrictions of some types. For example, until the late twentieth century, Negroes were prevented from exercising the right of franchise in the U.S.A, likewise in UK, until 1918 in Switzerland until 1971.

Even civilian constitutional regime does not mean that a country has democracy and some times a country has to go through a period of semi-democracy or quasi-democracy before they get to the democracy. I think Nigeria is somewhere in that gray zone. But one significant thing is that Nigeria is more democratic today, than it was under the military. At least it provides an opportunity for Nigerian people to freely and without fear to struggle for a better form of government and to try to reduce corruption which is very difficult to under authoritarian rule.

Acceptance of Democracy As One of Several Good Forms of Government

Through the centuries, political philosophers as Aristotle (1926), John Locke (1924), Rousseau (1913), have developed democratic theory, people as Jefferson in the United States of America had applied these ideas to make democracy a working political institution.

In proposing what one considers as the ideal form of government, some political philosophers admitted that the ideal might not necessary be the best or realizable under existing circumstances but we also consider what kind of government is adapted to particular state. Most importantly of all, it is necessary to know not only what form of government is best, also what is practicably possible.

In democracy, a supremacy of government is believed to remain limited by the fact that all its powers are delegated and can be withdrawn or changed at people's will. The belief is that, it is the people that rule the government not the government that rules the people. However, the notion that the people or majority of the people rule has been criticized by the critics of majority – rule principles as being a Sham and that whatever form of government, the effective rulers constituted narrow elite. Therefore, majoritarian democracy in a strict sense of the term is impossible as confirmed by history.

The sophists, the itinerant teachers prominent in Greece 5B.C adopted critical criticism towards the legitimacy of political authority. It taught that man is naturally selfish and that if a man follows nature he will do what he thinks as in his own best interest and that each government frames laws to suit the interest of those in power. According to this school of thought, law then represents artificially created conventions to control the actions of the individuals in the interests of those who run the state.

This theory agrees with Marx's idea that the political power is merely the organized power of one class to oppress another. To him, this class he said, will set up kind of government most suitable for maintaining its control and will pass Laws to protect its vested interests in the existing social order. For example, when a citizen of a republic peaks of a government, they usually refer to the officialdom and not body of citizens as a whole, but only those for time hold public office.

However, according to Aristotle, (1892 P.16), “in a true state, the governing class must rule according to the Law, since Law reflects the collective wisdom embodied in custom and afforded a basis for political authority”. Government, to some writers is classified according to the presence or absence legal restraints upon the will of those men who govern. Autocracy for example is a state governed by power of men and not law, while democracy however, means more than popular rule – it suggests government within constitutional limit. That is why Aristotle, (1892, P.16) expresses that “when the representative is the common-wealth a monarch; when the assembly of all come together, then is a democracy”. In Mill’s (1946, P. 10), “in representative government we find democracy identified with “ideal state, the ideally best form of government”.

Though we recognize the infirmity of democracy and that it may not be not be the best government for all peoples under all circumstances, our argument for its superiority to all other forms of governments remains substantially unqualified.

Challenges and Prospects of Democracy in Nigeria

There are challenges, which are inherent in democratic system. Due to the size the of the territorial and population increase of the modern nation states, unlike the Greek direct democracy, modern democracy has become representative democracy. In view of this, representation has become indispensable when the people are too large and dispersed for continuous assembly and direct participation in nation’s affairs for the effective operation of federal or national government as Nigeria, representative democracy is only practicable.

A challenge to modern democracy is of various forms, one is the whole problem of the nature of representation. How does it express the will of the public in the process of self-government since individual interest supersede common interest; there is possibility of passing Laws in such interest. But according to Madison (1893, P.12), “it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public goods that is been pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose”. That is by given people too much power may lead to mobs. Burke (1861, P.40), “the representatives serves his constituents by making independent decisions for the common goods not by doing their bidding”

One challenge that confronts democracy in Nigeria is the danger of low grade of intelligence in the representative body. Wide spread participation in politics does not necessarily ensure good government; the quality of government depends on the quality of participation. Well informed and well educated citizens are able to participate more intelligently in their government. History shows that democracy is likely to succeed in countries with high levels of literacy and good educational opportunities. A democracy needs educated citizens who can think and reason for themselves intelligibly. Satori (1970,P.17), in his own view of democracy, said that “people assume governmental rule at elections moreover, it is not to promote popular participation, but elect leaders and the best election would be that which elects best qualified leaders”. The failure of contemporary society like Nigeria to achieve such goal is a big challenge to our democratic process. Our future representatives should be trained to acquaint them with the task of governance in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria as this would help to produce a highly cultured representatives irrespective of his financial strength, his ethnic origin, religion affiliation, or his socio-geographical background. This then would expose them to the programme of the party and the project, the image of both the party and the country and to the world at large. The appeal still stands, the importance of widespread political participation on the part of the democracy like Nigeria; as this is an integral part of ideal and indeed part of democracy.

The Nature of Representation

“Nigerian politicians are generally lacking in the right democratic attitude necessary for sustainable governance. Their primary motive for politics is money, wealth and fame. Most politicians use any means necessary to achieve their world ambitions” (Anele, 204, P.13). This is the brief description of an average Nigerian politicians. That political power as a means of alleviating the suffering of fellow citizens is hardly in the mind of the typical Nigerian politicians. This shows clearly that genuine democratic culture is yet to be evolved in Nigeria.

Education: Education as a challenge to the success of sustainable democracy; to individual, education is the ladder of opportunity, for the society, it is the base of common values, that hold diverse people like Nigerians together as well as engine of economics growth. (Fanton, 2004, P.16), “education provides moral foundation for democracy by respecting individual dignity and the rule of law. Apart from making people participate effectively in democracy, effective education opportunities for the Nigerians, help to solve chronic problems of poverty, ill-health and illiteracy that is the bane of Nigerian democratic governance. Democracy is not some abstract theories, it depends on everyday action by the ordinary people. However, in a large illiterate polity like Nigeria, it is an uphill task. It is important to note that the way in which Nigerian State recognized and discharged its educational responsibility tests the sincerity of emerging modern democracy. According to (Mill, 1946, P.16) “whereas, despotism may be preserved by civic virtue”. Equal educational opportunity for all Nigerians is test of our sincere democracy.....

Quality of Government - Democratization has to do, not only with the creation of basic institutions of democracy, but also creating the right environment for these institutions to function”. (Anyim, 2002, P.17). To control and strength democracy are the big problems that Nigerians have been struggling to contend with. The quality of governance like that of the leadership is dependent on the choice made by the people, which must be built on credible election to ensure development. The question is (Ajayegba, 2009, P.9) “how can we expect political leader on stolen mandate to make positive reforms, canvassing against manipulation of election when there are guilty of electoral malpractice. That the elections have not failed the people in power, it is we, the masses that the elections have failed”.

What the United Nations considers as hindrance to free and fair election that can derail the nascent democracy like ours in Nigeria are:- partisan and dishonest administration that organized elective, dependency electoral commission appointment by incumbent administration, cowardly and dependent and corrupt judiciary that interpret electoral Laws. Others are material poverty of citizens, monetization of politics that determine election coming output, dependent and partisan security agencies, docile civil society, difficulty in getting corrupt officers, violence and intimidation of voters. This is the true picture and experience of Nigerian electoral conduct all these years of our democratic experience of Nigeria electoral conduct all these years of our democratic experience. However, Nigeria can still put in place fairly viable democratic governance. This can be achieved with credible election and leadership, based on credible democratic culture and environment and the application of rule of law based on well informed citizens.

The Principles of Majoritarianism, which is based on majority-rule has been subjected of criticism; that the majority might run roughshod over the wishes and the rights of majority. This poses a challenges to modern democracy. Albert (1966, P.60), “in light of fear that the majority will use its power to

“tyrannise the minority, it is understandably why the constitution restricts the peoples’ control of the government. Bayo (2001, P.12) “in modern democracy such as ours, the people can be a major force in ensuring good governance. However, in a largely illiterate polity like Nigeria the realization of good governance is an uphill task”. That is why thuggery, thieves in whatever forms, ethnic consideration, religious sentiments and falsification of figures rank high in voting and appointment in body politics. Transparency, accountability, rule of Law, respect for human rights and the welfare of the people without adherent to these provided in the constitution, democracy would be hollow and barren concept. Though total immediate departure from all these may not be total and immediate, Nigeria needs to take a step in such a direction.

Another challenge to Nigerian democracy is the notion of **universal Suffrage**. This raises at once the question of economic condition as pre-requisite to the perfection of political democracy. This expresses the possibility to men of exercising their political freedom from dependence. It is considered to be impossible in the case of Nigeria of abject poverty of the electorate. A power over a man’s subsistence amounts to a power over his will. The battle for Nigerian democracy would not be won, until the Nigerian electorate class is raised not only educationally but economic wise. Thus, democracy should be conceived in social and economic terms as well as political, otherwise what is democracy would permit social and economic injustice which vitiates individual liberty.

Poverty among the Nigerian electorate has created the possibility of vote purchasing from individual voters, or what is known as the monetization of Nigerian politics. The only condition for free and fair election in Nigeria is when the Nigerian people have the right and free to vote from their conscience and their votes counted accurately, then the most vital aspect of Nigerian democracy be protected and allowed to grow.

Conclusion

It is undeniable fact that words change in meaning and the term like democracy cannot be restricted to its original usage. In its original meaning, democracy implies that all men have equality in certain political, economic and social rights and treatment before the law.

The wind of democracy is blowing throughout the length and breath of the global community as is the trend no serious polity can ignore. No doubt, there is strength in democracy especially as it has the capacity to unite a heterogenous society like ours, engenders peace with accommodation capability of the majority, while harmonizing development along the inherent deficiencies of the minority. Democracy from the global perspective is the preferred form of government throughout the world. Most of the Western societies have succeeded in promoting democracy as the ideal form of government in our modern world. Most of these nations such as United States of America, Britain, Germany, Japan, have recorded remarkable political stability and economic development.

The major criticism against modern representative democracy is majority abuse of power. But democracy as opposed to other forms of government is based on the constitutional limits. Thus, individual rights are written into and guaranteed by the constitution of the country. For that, government is instituted among people to secure those rights. And without mass effective participation in politics, democracy withers away into possibly corruption and oligarchy, and that is the bane of the version of Nigerian democracy. Such mass and effective participation in politics would however be futile if the structure of society like Nigeria is not reformed so as to make such participation more meaningful to the individual Nigerians. Such sep would be towards the provision of educational opportunity for all and improve economic condition under which people live.

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