

# HIGHER EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

Exploration of the Nigeria political experience in (the post-colonial era reveals a very complete but saddening reality. This failure is exemplified by the political crises that wrecked the country, since the return of the country to democratic, civilian rule, on 29<sup>th</sup> may, 1999. Some of the crises include the violation of human rights, and electoral laws, flagrant disobedient of court order, continued civil and ethnic strife, and assassinations and politically motivated killings. The conclusion one draws is that Nigeria had not imbibed democratic values. Many factors could be attributed to this glaring failure. The submission of (his paper however, is that Sack of requisite education could only be acquired at higher level of the educational institutions. Thus, higher education is current federal government support •for universal basic education, higher education remains vital to Nigeria's democratic aspirations. Hence increased attention to, and expansion of higher education has great potentials for sustaining literacy levels attained, raising political awareness and thus, advancing democracy.

## **Introduction**

The aspirations of many Nigerians at the time of independence were that, the independence will usher in: "A free and democratic society, a just and egalitarian society, a united, strong and self-reliant nation, a great and dynamic economy, and a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens (FRN)". However, when Nigerians took over political power following the independence, these hopes were dashed by the politician and other political actors. The political crises that bedeviled the first republic led to military intervention and subsequently towards the attempt to political succession, with attendance mindless killings of the citizens in civil war that engulfed the country for thirty months (1967-70). These monumental problems could be attributed to low level of educational attainment by majority of Nigerians. Democratic habits must be learned, which means they must be taught. Also, democracy can only be sustained in an enlightened and well-educated society. The survival and advancement of democracy depends greatly on the quality and quantity of education attained by the overwhelming population of the country. In order to be able to vote effectively, the voter must be able to understand and appreciate the issue involved and cast his lot with one of the alternatives. The citizen of any democratic society must know that the constitution is supreme; having binding force on all authorities and persons, and the country shall not be governed except in accordance with the provisions of the constitution (1999 Constitution FRN). This means that, education is central in the enthronement and sustenance of democracy. However, the basic question that arises is which level of education can best address the contemporary Nigeria democratic practice. This paper attempts to critically appraise the role of higher education in strengthening democracy. It argues strongly for the increase attention to colleges and universities, since they constitute a touchstone in any country's effort in human capacity building, with implication for building and sustaining a democratic society. Structurally, the paper first tries to clarify the concepts; education and democracy. The second section deals with the history of Nigerian democratic practice, while section three discusses the role of higher education in sustaining democracy.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

The word education has no simple universally accepted definition. But for the purpose of this paper, education is defined as the process by which persons develop their intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical power so as to become more fully participating members of the society to which they belong. It is the process of training and developing the mental potential, physical knowledge, skill and character of individuals to enable them live efficiently and effectively in their environment (Koroma, 2006). Education is therefore, seen as the direct means by which people seek to shape their destiny and transform them from what they know themselves to be into what they hope to become. For any nation that cherishes the freedom of its people, education provides the moral foundation for democracy guided by respect for dignity and the rule of law.

Higher education is the education given in the tertiary institutions. It comprises of Polytechnics, Monotechnics, Colleges of Education, Colleges of Technology, Correspondence Colleges, Universities and such institutions as may be allied to them. These colleges and universities offer courses in science, technology art and humanities. Higher institutions are also designed to be catalyst for overall national development, equip the students with the skill, learning and values that will promote political

change. Going by the National Policy on Education (NPE) the aims of higher education include:

- a) The acquisition, development and inculcation of the proper value-orientation for survival of the individual and society.
- b) The development of the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate their environment.
- c) The acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills, which will enable individual to develop into useful members of the community.
- d) The acquisition of an objective view of the local and external.
- e) Environment.

These aims are to be achieved through teaching, research; dissemination of existing and new information; community service (FRN, 2004:36-39).

Historically, higher education is part of the schooling system otherwise known as "western education" bequeathed to Nigeria by the erstwhile colonial authorities. At the base are the primary and secondary schools. The aims of primary education are to inculcate permanent numeracy, and lay a sound bases for scientific thinking. After graduation a person can proceed to secondary school. At this level, the broad aims are to prepare person for useful living within the society and to prepare him for higher education (FRN, 2004).

However, it is pertinent to observe that the use of the word "western education" which is the dominant concept use by many educationists and other social analysts in describing the system of education introduced by colonial authorities is inappropriate. This is because when we examine the categories against the realities of the education that it is support to define by going into it essence and substance, we find that it only hint at the mere appearance, and even that, at a general level. The way it is used as fixed, block our comprehension of the general nature, significance and purpose of the education, which the colonial administration introduced. For instance, right from the beginning of the colonial period when "western education" was introduced, with its curriculum centered on three Rs till date when there are substantial changes in the curriculum contents of the education, it is still referred to as "western education". It is even wrong to associate education with particular section of the globe, but to the socio-economic system, which can reflect the dynamic nature of any society. Our suggestion here is that the words "colonial/neo-colonial education" should be used. It is only with this conceptual framework that the specific nature of the educational system can be well understood.

## **Democracy**

Democracy has been defined variously in the course of its practice that almost everybody has his own definition. For example, one time president of America, Abraham Lincoln in 1863, defined democracy as the "government of the people, by the people and for the people" (cited in Tohuli, 2001). However, this classical Greek definition cannot stand the test of time, population and ethnic composition. Thus, the definition is no longer practicable. Harvey (1974) sees democracy as a society in which ordinary citizens exert relative high degree of control over his leaders. Another definition is that, it is a system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representatives, periodically elected by themselves (Ezekiel, 2004). Due to the numerous definitions of the word democracy, we are not going to adopt working definition, rather we shall mention the essential criteria on which democracy is based, such as:

- The ultimate political decision-making rests on the people.
- The existence of periodic, free and fair elections in which coercion is relatively un-known.
- The existence of political parties.
- Free press, where people will have the opportunities of freely articulating their opinions and views.
  - Respect for the rule of law.
  - The existence of independent and impartial judiciary.
  - Equal opportunity for all in decision making process, i.e. one man, one vote.
  - Minority rights are protected, Toluhi 2001; 28.
  - Respect for individual and group differences.

One of the greatest advantage of democracy over and above dictatorship is that in democracy power is dispersed into many hands and right of all are guaranteed, while in a dictatorship, power is concentrated in the hands of few.

Undoubtedly, considering the above mentioned features of democracy, the smooth operation of democracy can only be achieved in an enlighten society with majority of its population well educated.

Hence, the challenge every democracy society faces is to provide the kind of education that will strengthen the democracy ideal. Nigeria with its fragile democratic institution, need the overwhelming majority of its population to be educated beyond primary and secondary levels.

## **Nigerian Democratic Experience**

For us to understand the need to give higher education necessary attention, it is important to be very clear of the historical processes that have produced and reproduce the contemporary democratic system we are practicing today. The period between 1922 and 1948 may be regarded as the formative period of introduction of participatory democracy in Nigeria. The Clifford constitution of 1922, introduced the elective principles into legislative system of the first time in the history of the British colonialism in Nigeria. The election, was basically on a franchise that was limited to "British subject "or" protected persons" who were registered electors in Calabar or Lagos, and met 12 months residency qualification and the gross annual income of 100 pounds (Essien, 2000). These provisions paved way for party formation and activity. Some of the early political parties that were formed on the heels of the legislative council election in 1923 were the Nigerian National Democracy Party (NNDP) and Union of Young Nigerians (UYN). The official of these parties were the educated elite like Dr. Curtis Ademiyi Jones, J.F., Shyngle, Dr. Mose da Rocha Ayodele Williams. The impending legislative council election of 1938, witnessed yet the emergence of other political parties the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) and Nigeria Union of Young Democrats (NUYD) under the leadership of Ur. J. C. Vanghan and Ayo Williams respectively. While in 1944, the National Council for Nigerian and Cameroon (NCNC) was formed in which Herbert Macaulay became the president and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, its General Secretary (Tamuno, 1966:41-1), the flurry of political activities which began in Lagos in 1920s, spread to much of the southern part during 1930s and swept the north in 1940s.

The Richard Constitution, which was enacted in 1947, provided for central government and tripartite regional governments. The constitution also provided for elections into the legislative council based on a franchise that was widened by the reduction property qualification of voters from \$100 under the 1922, constitution to \$50 gross annual income. The development led to the emergence of regionally based political parties that were to dominate the Nigeria politics for the rest of the colonial period. One of the parties was Action Group (AG) in the western region; Chief Obafemi Awolowo was one of the leading figures in the formation of the party. Other founding members included A.B. Oyediran, Abiodun, Akerele, S. O. Biobakes and Ayolunde Rosiji. In 1948, Sir Adeyomo Alakija was elected president, while Awolowo was chosen as the general secretary.

In the Northern region, the Northern People Congress (NPC) was the dominant political party. It is important to note that, the bedrock in the formation of political parties and party activities in the north were teachers association. They formed the educated elite in the region as teacher education was regarded as the most respectable kind of education. Thus, most prominent people in the democratic struggle in the north such as Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Aminu Kano, Setima Ajima and Ahmadu Bello (Sarduana of Sokoto) were teachers.

N.C.N.C. which dominated political activities in the eastern region was from its inception nationwide party. The early NCNC under, Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sa'ad Zungur, Michael Imodu, Raji Abdullah and others arouse millions of ordinary Nigerians youth to demand for an independent sovereign, and united Nigeria. Nevertheless, in 1950s, NCNC also became a regional party.

One of the useful lessons we shall be learning from the rich and complex experience of the Nigerian colonial participatory democratic history, for the sustenance of democracy in this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that, the actors and movers of the politics were doctors, lawyers, teachers and other group of educated elite. This is a clear indication that the more the population is educated the better, the democratic practice. Mere lies the need to promote higher education.

At independence, the Nigerian leaders opted for the adoption of the parliamentary democracy. But very few people were familiar with the workings of the parliamentary system; which provided for the offices of the Prime Minister, Members of the parliament, opposition leader, and the speaker, among others. On the eve of the independence, there were three institutions of higher learning: Yaba College; Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, based in Zaria with branches at Enugu and Ibadan; and the University College, Ibadan. These institutions produced relatively few people. If one therefore, considers the demand of the parliamentary democracy and the level of education of the people, the first Republic was bound to fail.

In 1979, Nigeria opted for presidential democratic system. In this system, there are three arms of government: legislative, executive and judiciary. Each of these organs is assigned certain functions and exercises some powers as specified in the constitution. Also, there are the principles of separation of powers and checks and balances. Democratic wishes are however, different from practice. The way the

politicians acted went contrary to the provisions of the constitution. Consequently, the second republic collapsed on 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1983. Without doubt, the development was indicative of the low level of politicians and the electorates. Again, this is why the higher education must be given much attention, just like other levels of our educational system. Primary and secondary educations are essential but not enough to cope with the challenges of democracy.

Furthermore, the spate of assassinations and political killings, and the flagrant disobedient of the court orders by those in authority, since the return of Nigeria to presidential democratic system on 29<sup>th</sup> may, 1999 is a clear manifestation of the low level of political education. The leaders and the electorate need to be trained on the skills, wisdom and vision required to develop strong party system, promote accountability and civil control over military, which are the basic requirement of the democratic system.

### **The Role of Higher Education**

It should be very clear by now that higher education is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Some experts are with the view that it is better strategy for a county to invest in, and encourage primary and secondary education rather than higher education. One of such experts is professor D. S. M. Koroma. In buttressing his point he gave the example of Japan and Soviet Union. He says:

The typical picture of expansion of education in the case of Japan (since about (1890) and in the soviet union (since 1917) reveals a policy of first attaining universal primary education (in Japan about 1912, and in the defunct Soviet union about 1930) a more generous attitude was taken towards secondary education, while higher education was still kept tightly under control. It was only when secondary education had become almost

universal in these two countries ..... was higher education allowed to (Koroma, 2006: page 39).

What this means is that it makes more sense to invest in early schooling, even if that will mean neglecting colleges and universities. However, this suggestion is unacceptable, if one considers the historical and socio-economic difference of Nigeria and that of Soviet Union and Japan, Nigeria had experienced colonialism and is still under the yoke of Neocolonialism. In this country where the western variants of free markets and democracy are prescribed, there is the need to equally spend what it takes to established and maintain the Colleges and universities. For investing on higher education have the following advantages over primary and secondary schools:

- (1) People with higher education earn more money on the average than those who stop at primary or secondary schools.
- (2) People with higher education can reason, communicate, plan, organize their lives and manage their finances better (Fantom, 2004).
- (3) Self-esteem and confidence are higher among the college and universities graduates than those of primary or secondary.
- (4) Society stands to gain much from the research conducted by the colleges and universities.
- (5) Democratic values of fairness, transparency, consultation, tolerance, free flowing discussion, debate and vote are learned in the higher institutions.
- (6) Colleges and universities attract students from different part of the country or world, thereby providing avenue where differences can be understood and respected.
- (7) Students who learn at the colleges and universities are taught how to search for the truth, work with the truth, think independently, and exercise their rights.

These add up to a good case why it is essential for Nigeria to increase provision and support for her tertiary institutions. It is against this background that one can see the current private people participation in the establishment of colleges and universities as laudable.

### **Recommendations**

Doubtless, the sustenance of democracy is extricably intertwined with higher level of education. However, for the higher institutions to properly promote democratic values, the following recommendations are made:

- 1) Increase attention should be given to tertiary institutions by proper funding, since it constitute a touch-stone in human resources development and in building and sustaining democratic ideals.
- 2) All citizens must be given equal opportunity and be encouraged to attend higher institution of learning. Thus, all forms of discriminatory practices or policies like quota system which deny some citizens getting admission into colleges and universities should be abolished.
- 3) Presently, the pressure to expand the existing higher institutions is intense because of the enormous gap between the popular thirst for higher education and the facilities available to satisfy it. Many more young people want to attend tertiary institutions than the system has space to absorb. It is in the light of this that one can see the current liberalization of the higher education

as praiseworthy. Nevertheless, there is need for proper supervision of these private institutions for standard and quality.

- 4) The curriculum of all courses in the higher institutions should be configured to promote and sustain democratic values and customs. As it is now, our tertiary institutions are substantially informed by international examples. This is wrong. Educational institution must not be seen in isolation from surrounding society. It needs to seek out and take in the advice of local and national communities, join hands with the private sector and foster democratic and entrepreneurial spirit, so that graduates will imbibe democratic norms and temper market by not only seeking for job but create jobs.
- 5) It is impractical for a tertiary institution to excel in every discipline and department; as such every institution should consider carefully where its comparative advantages lie and where additional investment will do the most good. Hence, all education related are taught in the universities should be transferred to Colleges of Education. In the same vain colleges of education should be adequately equipped with both the human and material resources to handle teacher education programmes at the degree level.
- 6) General studies courses should be reformed in such a way that democratic values will be vigorously taught.

### **Conclusion**

This paper addresses the relevance of higher education in sustaining democracy in contemporary Nigeria. The colleges and universities remain crucial not only to the country's economic growth but to the promotion of democratic values. This is the more reason why more Nigerians must be given opportunity to attend. In fact, right now, the pressure to continue expending the tertiary institution is intense. It is therefore, suggested that more tertiary institutions be established both by the government and private individuals. But the expansion must be planned, prepared for and financed so that quality will not be compromise for quantity.

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