

CHALLENGES OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SUSTAINING DEMOCRACY IN NASARAWA STATE NIGERIA

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Abstract

Although the present democratic dispensation kick-off with the inauguration of President Olusegun Obasanjo and Governor Abdullahi Adamu in May, 1999; the emerging issue is how to make the young democracy responsive, responsible and accountable to the people or, on the reverse, to reduce unemployment, poverty and illiteracy which are necessary in sustaining it. This task is on every Nigerian (Nasarawas inclusive), however, the youths being leaders of tomorrow have greater role to play. This paper examines the role Nasarawa youths can play in sustaining the young democracy. It's realised that illiteracy, unemployment, poverty and lack of genuine youth organisations and leaders are some of the challenges working against the ability of youths to participate or play this role effectively. The authors recommend that for the youths to effectively participate and contribute to the sustainability of democracy in Nasarawa State, they must strive hard to meet the challenges of illiteracy, indiscipline, corruption, unemployment and poverty, individually and collectively, through realistic youth organisations.

Introduction

Since the returned to democracy in May, 1999 after almost three decades of military rule and over two decades of economic crisis, Nigeria is faced with the complex challenges of sustaining the nascent democracy. The infant democracy has refused to develop to childhood let alone maturity. In short, the learning process of Nigerian democratization is quite retrogressive. This is because, the emerging democracy does not in any way reduce unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, corruption, or conversely, create responsive, responsible and accountable government.

Thus, the emerging issues in Nigerian democracy today, are understood not only as an end to military rule but also as the establishment of responsive, responsible, and credible political institutions which will promote a government that is accountable, transparent, responsible, prevent corruption, respect human rights and rule of law and ensure popular sovereignty (Jega,2007:287).

In this respect therefore, the Nigerian youths being one of the most important segments of the Nigerian population has enormous role to play.

This paper therefore, explores the roles and challenges ahead of Nasarawa youths in sustaining democracy in the state and the country at large. In looking at the issue, the paper starts with an introduction, follows by definition of concepts and analysis of the issue in Nigerian context, impeding challenges to the roles of youths in democratic sustainability in Nasarawa state and concludes with some recommendations.

Clarification of Concepts and Issues

Youths: This as a concept refers to a group of people aged 18-35 years (N.Y.P. 2006). It is that vibrant and energetic social group that is severally used in shaping the future of a society. In many literatures, youths are regarded as leaders of tomorrow.

Unlike Nigeria, some countries perceived youths as people within 18-40 years age limit. Meanwhile, irrespective of the age bracket, certain characteristics manifest themselves in the youths. These include; physical changes, biological changes, intellectual changes, emotional changes, increasing independence and sex interest (Obikeze, 2006:269).

The concept of Democracy, on the other hand, must be viewed far beyond mere elections, albeit imperfectly conducted-where muscle and money power is a dominant factor.

First, the word democracy is derived from two Greek words "demo" meaning people and "cracy" which means rule or government. Thus, democracy literarily means rule or government of the

people (Oddih and Emeka, 2006:36). Abraham Lincoln's often quoted definition of democracy as "government of the people, by the people and for the people" has remained the most popular of all definitions despite serious attempt by scholars to offer better, practical and comprehensive definition. Lincoln's definition had actually explained the situation in ancient Greek-City state, where it was possible for the entire adult individuals to gather in a market square to take decisions and implement them. This is regarded as direct democracy.

The modern democracy is therefore, an indirect one better known as representative democracy. It is a form of government where people participate indirectly by electing those who will represent them or act on their behalf and be responsible and accountable to them in all their public dealings. Democracy is to ensure the greatest happiness for the greatest number by guaranteeing good and responsible governance. Nigerian democracy even after ten years of practice has not only failed to meet these expectations but has refused to meet the simple conditions for ideal democracy. These conditions as observed by Diamond et al (1988) in Nnoli (1994:4-5), involve;

- a. Meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organised groups;
- b. Highly inclusive level of political participation; and
- c. A high level of civic and political liberties.

Nigerian experience of democratic process has been basically weak and shaky. The political atmosphere has been liberalised, in contrast to what was obtained under military rule, but evidence abound about executive over-zealousness, if not lawlessness, and general intolerance of due process and rule of law.

The aspiration of Nigerians is thus to attain Substantive Democracy, perceived as actual, real and genuine popular empowerment of the people, such that they become active and committed participant in the management of their daily affairs, and in the development of their societies. This is a process in which there is truly responsive and responsible governance, aiming at the satisfaction of the basic needs and aspirations of the citizens (Jega, 2007:284).

This is a serious challenge in the light of the current state of the Nigerian economy. Nigerian people have been assaulted, battered, impoverished and made illiterates and lost focus due to corruption, senseless and reckless socio-economic and educational policies of successive military administrations.

For democratic sustainability in the nation and Nasarawa State in particular, Nigeria (Nasarawa, inclusive) must rise above the aforementioned challenges. It is a task on every citizen of Nasarawa State and Nigeria, in general. The youths, as approved by the Nigerian youth policy, are people within the age bracket of 18- 35 years. They constitute the engine room of growth in the society, the most vibrant and productive segment of the societal development.

Given this background, their roles in sustaining democracy in Nasarawa State is quite imperative. Again, being constantly refers to as "leaders of tomorrow", the youths must contribute immensely to the sustainability of the nascent democracy because sustainable democracy is necessarily the cornerstone for the foundation of tomorrow. However, this contribution should be a positive one. It is a sad truth to say that Nigeria's (including Nasarawa's) political landscape regarding the role of the youths is that of negative story. This is because of the ways and manners they are negatively being used and dumped by the politicians. The contention is that democracy in the past has not yielded any fruitful result to the youths in Nasarawa State; instead the youths are made to serve the interest of political class in the name of thugs (Abubakar, 2009:6).

Certainly, the roles of youths in Nasarawa State democratic development should go beyond mere voting at elections to genuine and concrete political participation. By this idea, therefore, Nasarawa youths should be involved in the choosing (freely) of those to govern them; contribute their quarter in decision making and implementation; and freely express their opinions (i.e. assess, commend or criticise) on government policies. Political participation is differently explained as the active involvement of citizens in matters of political interest which include formation and implementation of public policies, voting, contesting for political office, campaigning for a political party, contributing to community projects, lobbying for government projects, organising demonstrations and expressing grievances even through violence (Oddih and Emeka, 2006:39, and Guaba, 2003:445).

Therefore, there are two dominant ways that youths can participate or contribute to the political advancement of their society. It can be through rational or acceptable means such as

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voting, contesting and expressing group opinion; or it can take unconventional (non-rational) means such as violent demonstration. The way and manner which people choose to participate in politics is the function of the nature and orientation of the political system. However, for democratic sustainability in Nasarawa State (and Nigeria), the rational/conventional means is the most preferred which the youths should choose. Unfortunately, certain challenges impede the ability of the youths to effectively participate or contribute to the democratisation process of Nasarawa State.

Challenges to the Participation of Youths in Democratic Sustainability in Nasarawa State

The youths in Nasarawa State have some impediments/challenges working against their efforts to entrench and sustain genuine democracy in the state and Nigeria at large. These among others, are:

A. Illiteracy: this implies inability to read and write by an individual. It is a state of absolute lack of education. Though mostly refers to lack of formal education, the concept denotes inability to read and write or to obtain western and/or other form of education e.g. Arabic/Qur'anic education.

Education, on the other hand, embodied the entire process through which members of the society acquire necessary norms, values and skills which conform to societal standard or which make them fit to the society. In modern society like contemporary Nigeria, education is systematic and organised; characterised by the existence of organised structures and personnel, as well as, accorded criteria for grading of status or certificates in a school system (Umar, 1993).

Against this backdrop, the bulk of Nasarawa youths is illiterate. UNDP Human Development Report (1996 and 2004) observed that, "apart from the fact that the chunk of Nigerians (Nasarawas, inclusive) is grossly illiterate, the number of youths dropping out of school and graduate lacking skills has been on the increase". This has been a major setback to the ability of the youths to support and sustain genuine democratic processes. A considerable number of them are brainwashed and indoctrinated by the politicians to see their role in the democratic growth as thugs or political gangsters, popularly known as, 'Yanbanga' and 'Yankuge'. Their illiteracy status is been exploited by desperate politicians at the detriment of the youths and the young state. Worse still, the senseless and reckless educational policies, at all levels of governments, have prevented most youths, access to meaningful and sound education.

B. Unemployment and Poverty: unemployment indicates the situation where an individual or group of individuals is/are unable to be gainfully employed as a means of daily survival. It is a state of joblessness where some societal members lack sources of income which is necessary for their social, economic and political integration into the society (Adeleku, 2008, cited in Umar, 2009:102).

Lack of employment, which in most cases is attributed to lack of education, normally breeds poverty amongst the youths. UNDP (2001) avers that, "the number of youths who are out of work and out of school either as graduates or drop-out ---- are increasingly worrisome." Perhaps, there is link between unemployment and poverty and the roles youths are playing in the democratisation process in Nasarawa State. This means that joblessness and poverty pose a serious threat to the survival of the youths and their ability to play their expected roles in sustaining the nascent democracy in the state.

Invariably, this has compelled them to engage in any dirty and unhealthy kind of work, the common of which is political gangster. Banga and Kuge has remained the most common and gainful jobs for illiterate and semi-illiterate youths in the State since the advent of this democratic dispensation in 1999. Youngsters are in the payroll of all local government councils and development area councils as compensation for the role (i.e. thuggery) they played during 2002 local government election and 2003 general election, and the role they were expected to play in the subsequent election after 2003. In most cases the politicians supply these youths with arms to carry out this devilish role effectively.

Unfortunately however, genuine socio-economic and poverty alleviation policies that will

open-up employment opportunities are not pursued or given due attention by the Nasarawa State Government just in order to maintain the status quo; hence making the youths susceptible to the dangerous idea of political thuggery.

- C. Lack of Formidable and Genuine Youth Organisation and Leadership:** most youths do not form a vibrant youth organisation that can pursue youth development policies and support the bid to substantive and sustainable democracy in Nigeria and Nasarawa State, to be specific. Where there are so called youth organisations, they are spear headed by elders in the disguise of youth. Thus, this can be proven by the fact that most of the heads of youth organisations are persons aged above 40 or sometimes even 60 plus (Raman, 2007). This situation has been affecting the roles of youths in supporting and sustaining democracy in Nasarawa State. The present president of Nasarawa State Youth Council and his predecessor, Haliru Wakaso and Umar U. Shehu, respectively; present youth leader of Nasarawa State Peoples Democratic Party (P.D.P.), Alhaji Abdullahi Baba Sale to mention but a few, are all example of youth leaders above 40 years of age. Thus, they may not necessarily give youth development programmes much priority or effectively pioneer the crusade for youth positive participation and contribution in Nasarawa State democratisation process.

Conclusion

The cry for what can be called formal or substantive democracy in Nigeria is yet to be over even with the Country's one decade of democratic experiment. The political class of Nigeria (Nasarawa, inclusive) is still repeating the mistakes of the past, in some cases, in a blunter manner. This is a serious constraint to the collective need for stable, substantive and realistic democratic processes in the Country. The task of ensuring good and participatory governance which is a necessary ingredient for democratic sustainability is on every Nigerian. Perhaps, the kind of role Nigerians (including Nasarawas) can play differs.

However, youths being leaders of tomorrow have greater role to play either individually or as groups with vested interest. These roles cannot be effectively carried out until when the youths, collectively and individually rise above the aforementioned challenges. Once the challenges are overcome, the Nasarawa youths can effectively participate and contribute to the sustainability of the democratisation process which is now in full swing.

Recommendations

- i. **Sound and Qualitative Education:** in addressing these issues or challenges, it is important for Nasarawa Youths and all other stakeholders to first and foremost, fight illiteracy and spare no energy in the battle to rid the education sector of all the vestiges of authoritarianism, vandalism, senseless violence, anarchism, rackets and racketeers, cults and cultists e.t.c. The strategy should go beyond superficial campaign to include the creation of open, transparent and legitimate avenues for exercising right and expressing bottled up tension. They should ensure and support policies that will increase school enrolments and quality of learning in the state as well as those that will guarantee self-reliance and creativity.
- ii. **Genuine Employment and Poverty Alleviation Programmes:** the youths should be consulted for their input in the design and implementation of employment and poverty alleviation programmes such as the N.D.E. and NAPEP among others. This shall genuinely boast employment and reduce poverty facing the youths. Special fund should be set aside at all levels of government to take care of these programmes. Hence, this will prevent or decrease the undue manipulation of the youths for selfish political interest by overzealous politicians.
- iii. **Genuine/Realistic Youth Organisations:** the youths should form realistic youth organisations under their control and leadership. The leadership should be ready to pursue the interest of the youths at all times as well as assist in building solid and responsible

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democratic conduct and practices in the state. Similarly, the youths should strengthen and expand the historic links which have existed with other democratically inclined groups such as the Nigerian Labour Congress, National Association of Nigerian Students, Nigerian Bar Association and other Human Right Organisations for positive interventions in national politics and policies for effective advocacy and defence of popular causes and aspiration. Jega (2007:289) posits that, “they should assign priority to re-building all the political bridges that have been weakened or destroyed by the reckless transition politics of Babangida and Abacha regimes, and even build more bridges.

- iv. **Nationalism and Patriotism:** there is the need for the youths and their organisations to eschew parochialism, divisioness, and forge nationalist and pan-Nigerian alliance. They must strive hard to transcend the ethno-regional divides of the ruling class so as to be firm and united in fighting the course of democratic development.
- v. **Discipline and Transparency:** the youths must struggle to get the country rid of indiscipline and corruption. While they must fight all sorts of indiscipline and corruption within them squarely, they should assist in the anti-corruption crusade in the state and the nation as well. No stone should be left untouched in the desire to clean the state from indiscipline, corruption, misappropriation and greed. Nasarawa youths must learn to be transparent and accountable in all their official and non-official transactions in order to facilitate the redistribution of resources in the state; thus, helping the country and Nasarawa State to nurture and sustain democracy and good governance.

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