

ISSN: 2315-7844

Website: www.arabianjbm.com/RPAM_index.php

Publisher: Department of Public Administration Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria and Zainab Arabian Research Society for Multidisciplinary Issues Dubai, UAE

AN OVERVIEW OF DEMOCRATIC RULE AND DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS IN NIGERIA: 1999 – 2013

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Abstract

The democratization process in Nigeria is about the institutionalization of democracy for the attainment of political and economic development of the nation. The current experience originates in May 1999 under Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, who was elected President under the flat form of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). This study focuses on the problems of transforming an authoritarian political system into a democratic system, particularly in the fourteen years of civilian administration. The objective of the study is to among other things, identify and explain the problems and prospects of democratization in Nigeria and suggest correct measures to be taken for positive results. Identified in this work is that lack of respect to the rule of law by elected officials, constitute a major problem for demoralization. Other specific problems include corruption of public officials, election rigging, lack of accountability and lack of security of life and property. The study suggests policy options that would reduce suspicion and fears among Nigerians and restore people's confidence in government. These includes among others proper application of law in all matters of governance, proper implementation of budgets and free and fair election as well as provision of adequate security.

Key words: Democracy, Governance, Democratization Process, Nigeria

Introduction

What should be the best form of government has engaged the attention of men since time immemorial. The discovery of democracy as a form of government that guarantees liberty, freedom and equality, was seen as an achievement by man. Thus the current agitations for changes by African countries could be regarded as a quest for democratic rule.

At the onset of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria in May 1999, the people were full of expectations that the new democratic project will not only facilitate national integration, and economic development, but also political stability after several years of military rule that was characterized by political controversies. “The high expectations were borne out of several factors the most important being the fact that, Obasanjo was credited as the Head of State who implemented the policies initiated by late Murtala Muhammad (between 1976-1979), that altered the structural, economic, political and social foundations on the country” (Dunmoye 2003). It was therefore reasoned that he knew and understood the complex terrain of Nigerian political system. Thus Nigerians were awaiting eagerly the much-shouted dividends of democracy. According to Dunmoye, “the high expectations soon evaporated into gloomy smoke of despair” (Ibid).

Conceptual Clarification

Two key concepts will have to be explained in clear terms here.

1. Democratic Rule

Democratic rule here refers to representative and participatory governance which, according to Claire M.C. Quillan, quoted in (Abubakar, A. 2003) “is responsive and responsible exercise of power over matters of public concern (Vanguard News June 20). Democratic Governance she emphasized, must not only embrace ethics in order to maintain legitimacy but it is also a concept which comprises institutions and processes that determine how authority is exercised, how decisions are made and how citizens have their say. It is the principle of direct say for direct benefits for all citizens.

Eline Ostrum, quoted in (Mahmud T. 2002), maintains that: “democratic governance covers all sections of our societies in that it is the regularized way of ordering human societies”. Viable government is judged by its outcome. It celebrates itself in terms of happiness it brings to the people within its defined polity. It refers to a viable government. A viable government must manifest itself in the improved welfare of the people within its jurisdiction. It must provide the people with security and address their fears. It must also give them hope, realizable hope for their aspiration and assist them to achieve these aspirations. “A viable government must be able to assist the people and provide the appropriate and conducive environment to attain the highest of their ambitions“(New Nigerian May 30).

Mahmud Tukur (2005), describe a democratic system as “that which allows the people to choose and change their governments at prescribed regular intervals by means, which are free of coercion, cheating, corruption and undue interference”. It ensures electoral processes which are, and are seen to be equitable, fair, transparent, credible and devoid of manipulations (Leadership June 5).

The above clarification centers on democracy as the most acceptable system of rule the world over. Certain basic conditions are considered as necessary for democracy to thrive. These are, a functioning economy, a large body of reasonable educated, gainfully employed population, a patriotic middle class, a reasonable and responsible power elite and a transparent and

competent political leadership {Ibid}. Nigeria and indeed most African countries are yet to muster these requirements. Without these basics, it is not possible for democratic institutions, including the political parties, associations and media to thrive. Mahmud further argued that: “democracy is the most perfect form of government that must always be accompanied by free election, universal free suffrage, individual liberty and periodic short terms of office, in any political system that claims to be practicing or evolving democracy”(Ibid). Though illusion and subjectivity surrounds democracy, indices may be identified as approximating aspects of democracy, though the aspects themselves are in turn subjective in nature. Liberty, freedom, equality, delegation, representation, control, limitation of government are very essential. Also central to democracy is the existence of political parties and associations and institutions of electoral process.

ii. Democratization Process

Democratization in this article refers to the process of moving authoritarian system to democratic political system. In Africa, democratization evolves out of the process by which the military and authoritarian regime, gradually disengage from governance in order to make way for a popularly elected civilian government by means of a transition program (Esew, 2003).

Broadly, speaking democratization process is a means of achieving the supposed desired ends, that is, good government or human happiness. The definition and interpretation of these ideals into reality has also led to the problem of institutionalizing democracy. Democratization is an exercise in putting conception into reality. In the light of this, democratization as an all-encompassing process must be seen in essence and substance, as how an autochthonous and ethnocentric process of societal values, ethics, norms and nuances are organized. Muftwang (2003) and Esew (2003:17), concurred that, democratization connotes political liberalization of the avenues of decision – making. When applied to the politics of Africa, Diamond et al (1999) put it thus: “the concept of (democratic) transition is a specific generic references to the cycle to democratizing authoritarian or one party rule and of re-democratization that has characterized the politics of many countries (in Africa) since the 1960s”..... “Sometimes it is set in motion by military intervention to prevent the nation from deterioration into chaos or anarchy”.

The Democratization Process in Nigeria (1999-2013)

The current democratization process in Nigeria reflects the quest for the institutionalization of democracy. The desires for economic and political reforms remain inseparable as deduced from recent experiences in the (Former Soviet Union and Eastern Germany) and historical experiences of developed economies.

The process in the country originates during the period of military rule. Nigeria’s first attempt at democratization (democratic transition) in the post – Independence period was initiated by the Murtala/Obasanjo Administration in 1975 after the overthrow of General Yakubu Gowon (Oyediran, et al (2005); Esew, (2003); and Abdullahi, (2013).

The second Republic lasted for a period of four years (1979-1983), because the civilian administration of President Shehu Shagari was bedeviled by serious economic crisis and the crisis of political legitimacy which followed the disputed 1983 general elections. These crises led to the collapse of the Shagari government in December 1983.

The regime of General Muhammad Buhari (1983-1985) had no plan for transition to civil rule.

There was also an attempt at democratic transition between 1985-1993 under President Ibrahim Babangida, but it was ill-fated with the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential Election, Esew (2001); Esew, (2003); Etannibi (2004) and Abdullahi (2013).

The next in the series was the one by General Sani Abacha (1993-1998) which was also inconclusive with his sudden demise on June 8, 1998.

The second successful democratic transition which ushered in the 4th Republic in Nigeria (1998-1999) was by General Abdulsalami Abubakar. General Abubakar took over government after the sudden death of General Sani Abacha on June 8, 1998. His main agenda on assumption of office was the transfer of power to a civilian democratically elected government. To this end, he realized a transition program (Oyediran et al, 2005).

In accordance with the program, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was set up to register political parties and organizes elections. Three political parties were then registered namely, the Alliance for Democracy (AD); the All Peoples Party (APP) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Elections were conducted in to the various levels of government. The Fourth Republic took off on 29th May 1999 under Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. On assumption to office, President Obasanjo state that:

“One of the immediate acts of this administration will be to implement, quickly and decisively measures that would restore confidence in governance. These measures will help to create the auspicious atmosphere necessary for the reforms and the difficult decisions and the hard work required to put the country back on the path of development and growth” (Presidential Inaugural speech, New Nigerian May 29, 1999).

The agenda was hinged on over-hauling the economy and achieving macro-economic stability through Due process mechanism, war on corruption, privatization, fiscal and budgetary reforms, debt management and the political reform program. The above appeared to be laudable policies but when it comes to implementation, the action of the government appeared to be controversial. Most of the economic policies (from the time of Obasanjo up to the current period) have not yielded positive results for Nigerians and are in fact shrouded in mystery and official corruption.

Political Issues

The experience of the Nigerian politics over the period of fourteen years of civilian administration, 1999 - 2013 is characterized by lack of accountability, coercion, naked violence, greed, brazen manipulation and wider scheming. Lack of respect to rule of law is a major setback to civilian governments particularly Obasanjo period. We can recall the series of political crisis which besets this country soon after the inauguration of his administration – Shagamu mayhem, the Lagos, Kaduna, Plateau, Port Harcourt. Anambra, Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba and Bauchi disturbances among others. In all these crises, the government was unable to bring even one person to book. Police will conduct investigations and with all the intelligence outfits at the disposal of the government, it could not do anything. That attitude of the government encouraged Nigerians to take the law into their hands. They simply retaliate, because the government has failed in the discharge of its responsibility. This has raised again the issue about the national question. The metamorphosis of all these was the emergence of ethnic militias all over the country like the Odua Peoples Congress (OPC), the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC), the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Bakassi Boys, the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), etc. Increasing friction among

Nigerians along regional lines lead to the emergence of tribal and regional groups like Afenifere, Ohaneize-Ndigbo, Arewa Consultative Forum, and Niger Delta Youths movement etc.

(i) Executive –Legislature Relations

The relationship between the legislature and the Executive during the period under review was not so cordial. There had been some accusations between the presidency and the members of the National Assembly for recklessness and corruption. Some of the issues at conflict between the legislature and executive between 1999-2006 includes – the scrapping of the PTF by the Executive; Furniture allowance for members of the National Assembly; interference by the executive in the affairs of the National Assembly; credibility over the finance of the legislature; amendment of the electoral Act 2000; the aborted repealing of the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) Act 2000, and the Third Term Agenda (Dunmoye, 2003). All these put the relation between the Executive and legislature at deteriorating point, jeopardizing the interest of Nigerians. This culminated into the removal of three senate Presidents namely Evans Enwerem, Dr. Chuba Okadigbo and Adolpos Wabara and the first speaker of the House of Representatives Alhaji Salisu Buhari. These were followed by the impeachment Saga against the president by the National Assembly under speaker Ghali Umar Na’abba. The Assembly accused the president among other things for using the consolidated revenue fund without appropriations and spending money in excess of appropriations. The uneasy relations continued and by August 2002, the House of Representatives gave the president the ultimatum to resign or be impeached. A list of 36 impeachable offences against the president was drawn up. The senate later joined in the threat of impeachment. This development heated up the political system and threatened the nascent democratic experiment. The impeachment saga was averted through the intervention of some well meaning Nigerians including former leaders and traditional rulers. All these happened before the general election of 2003 (Ibid).

From 2003 to 2007, the second term of Obansajo’s government, Nigeria drifted into a pariah state with increased violence particularly in the Niger Delta region. Under late President Yar’Adua, the relationship between the Executive and Legislature improved significantly because of the President’s resolve to implement wide range political and economic reforms. The magnanimous decision of Yar’Adua to grant Amnesty to the militants in Niger Delta restores peace in the area and help in revamping the economy. But things began to change when the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan came to office in 2010. Some of the contentious issues in the relation between the two arms of government include budgetary allocation and allegations of corruption. The award of zero allocation to the Securities and Exchange Commission by the National Assembly in the 2013 budget was a case in point (Sadiq & Abdullahi, 2013). Again for the first time in the history of this country the President delegated his finance minister to present the 2014 budget to the National Assembly on his behalf.

(ii) Tenure Elongation Saga

In an attempt to perpetuate himself in power President Olusegun Obasanjo secretly initiated the political reform agenda that was set to add more time (third term) to elected officers including the president and governors. The third term agenda had again set the legislature and the executive at each other’s throat. As the president was bent to continue in office beyond the 2007 date prescribe by the constitution, he quickly organized a constitutional and political conference in 2005 and nominated about one third of its members single handedly. The confab was charged to revise the 1999 constitution and suggest possible changes to be considered by the National Assembly. It was alleged that the president’s representatives have sneaked into the Conference copies of a revised version of the 1999 Constitution proposing for a third term or a six year

single tenure for elected public officials. Even though the President denied involvement in the issue, it became obvious that a hidden agenda was on course. The third term agenda was magnanimously rejected by the senate and the House Representative on Tuesday 25th May 2006. Although the third term agenda by former President Obasanjo was unanimously rejected by the National Assembly, the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan has advocated a six years single tenure for the President and state Governors. The move was not supported by majority of the Nigerian people. Yet many are apprehensive that the ongoing National Conference may be used to channel the idea of a single tenure under the Conference's political reform proposal to be submitted to the people in a referendum.

(iii) The General Elections: 2003; 2007; and 2011.

A general look at the civilian rule reveals that election in Nigerian democracy is up to this time not yet a game of the electorate; it is a game of the government, and the federal government. Power resides with government and not the people. The Federal Government in collaboration with other agencies like INEC and the Police determine who wins, where and how. In fact the Leadership described the 2003 General election as the worst in the country and called it "the 419 election"(Leadership June 5, 2005).

Election rigging is notorious fact both in its incidence and in the form it takes and now to constitutes the most serious problem confronting democracy in Nigeria. By its very nature, election rigging, particularly of the massive kind alleged to have been perpetrated during the April 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections, is subversion of the constitution and of the democratic form of government. It is a robbery of the right of the people to participate in their own government, or in Wole Soyinka's more telling metaphor "the stealing, the thief of their voices" (Vanguard June 20, 2003). It is therefore the greatest offence that can be committed against the constitution and people of Nigeria.

In the light of the above, it would be difficult to expect a sustainable democratic agenda of governance to emerge from a deeply fraudulent electoral process like the one we have witnessed in 2003, 2007 and 2011. A corrupt process will invariably impact negatively on performance. And where there is a wishful attempt to corrupt the process through acts of coercion and fraud or an equally damaging situation of gross administrative incompetence, or both, it is wishful thinking, at best to expect a sustainable democratic agenda to emerge.

Socio-Economic Issues

The supposed beneficiaries of democratization are typically peasant farmers who have no good food, no good road, no good education, and no good health. Paradoxically, the democratization process in Nigeria has focused on the political elite who unfortunately are busy subverting democracy in various ways. We never learn, we try to pursue democracy against our culture and social experience and turn it into an exercise in alienation. Democratization like development has to take us as we are and not as we ought to be.

On assumption of office the Obasanjo administration had embarked upon different government programs to jump-start the economy in the manner that is pro-poor and poverty reducing-hence the establishment of National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP), under a reform package called NEEDS. The result and sincerity of this claim is still contestable. Sadiq and Abdullahi (2013), observed that, fourteen years after the inception of NAPEP the level of poverty in the country is still very high and crimes and social vices are still prevalent. Looking at the other economic reform programs one may question the good intention of the PDP government. For instance, is the privatization Policy not a program for the Nigerian financial

elite? Why are the majority of contracts awarded since the inception of the PDP administration not implemented in spite of the Due1 Process. Look at the poor handing of the Electricity project under Obasanjo, which forced the National Assembly to institute a probe which indicted many PDP stalwarts including late Chief Bola Ige and Senator Iyabo Obasanjo among others. Yet the government did not take any action on that.

The PDP'S anti-corruption crusade is believed to be targeted at those that fell out of government favor and has tenaciously ignored request to investigate alleged scams within the presidency. The fiscal reforms are guided by the World Bank and IMF, which are concerned about their interest first. Thus leading to devaluation of the naira and failure to repair the refineries. The privatization project is believed to be a portal for official thieving. The former head of the project and minister of the FCT under Obasanjo, Nasir El-Rufa'i, was in 2005 indicated by the Senate for corrupt dealing while handling the pet program and suggested that he should be banned from holding public office for forty years (Leadership June 5, 2005). Serious cases of scandals were recorded under the present administration of Goodluck Jonathan, like the Halliburton scandal, the fuel subsidy fund scandal, the Police Pension Fund scam, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) misappropriation of funds case.

The civilian administration has not done much in terms of revamping the educational sector. Year in year out, the crisis of the educational sector has deepened with teachers going on strike in many states of the federation. Very little effort is seen in terms of real investment in education except in few states. The 25% budgetary allocation to education earmarked for the developing countries was yet to be implemented in the country. Consequently, the existing universities, both federal and state, are underfunded and the staff are demoralized. The Academic Staff Union of Universities, ASUU has just ended a prolonged strike action which lasted for six months, while their counterpart in the Polytechnics, ASUP is yet to end its eight months industrial action.

Evaluating the PDP government in May 2001 Chief Olu Falaye asserts that "if the government performances in dealing with political crisis is poor, its achievement in the economic domain is nothing short of a disaster" (Vanguard May, 2001). In addition the government has constantly since 1999, increased the prices of petroleum products which in turn affects the prices of goods and services. The insensitivity of the PDP government culminated into total withdrawal of fuel subsidy in January 2012. This ugly development generated crisis in the country as the Labor Union demanded for the immediate reversal of the decision. The protests turned into violence with scores killed and many injured across the country. The government later reversed its earlier decision to meet the demands of the labor. Senator Saidu Dan Sadau maintained that; "not much has been achieved by the PDP administration giving the high hopes raised by Obasanjo's inaugural address in 1999 couple with the expectations of Nigerians at that time. Things have been very rough for the Nigerian farmer, very rough for the Nigerian manufacturer, and very rough for the Nigerian businessman. Increasing prices of goods have created untold hardship to the common man" (New Nigerian, May 30, 2003).

During the 51st Independence Anniversary Lecture in Abuja, President Goodluck Jonathan admitted that, the system has collapsed because it encourages the culture of corruption, patronage and indiscipline. But he did not say specifically what steps he was taking to improve the situation (Daily Trust September, 2011)

The Dividends of Democracy

It has been pointed out by Muftwang (2003), that Democracy is founded on “full bellies and peaceful minds”. The maintenance of multiparty democracy also relies on government looking after the economic and social welfare of citizens. If the ruling party does not cater for its citizenry it could be voted out of power. Accountable governments have to meet the demands of health care, education, social provisioning and transportation – all the basic needs expected by the people. For example in Western Europe, multi-party democracy developed alongside the construction of the welfare state. But in Nigeria Fourteen years of uninterrupted civilian rule has failed to deliver the supposed dividends of democracy. Today the yearnings of the people is reflected in the clamor for the dividends of democracy which is not forthcoming, despite government’s claim for its realization.

The ruling PDP has during its 14th anniversary celebration in September, 2012 expressed its satisfaction at the roles it has played in turning around the economy and society in Nigeria.

Olisa Metuh, the PDP’s National publicity Secretary stated that, “after fourteen years of the formation of the PDP and thirteen years in leadership of our dear nation, we are happy to express our deep satisfaction at the roles we have so far played in the course of Nigerian’s development” (Daily Trust September 28, 2012).

But in a swift reaction, the main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) reminded Nigerians of the cases of corruption, insecurity and inconsistent policies that the country has had to grapple with under the ‘leaking’ umbrella of the PDP. According to APC’s acting National Publicity Secretary Lai Mohammed, “are Nigerians celebrating that the PDP has turned Nigeria into a borderless land of unending misery, ethnic warfare, insecurity and torture?” (Ibid)

As mentioned above people oriented programs like the National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP) and the current SURE-P have not really impacted on the people. Similarly, the structural aspect of our democracy from federal to state and local levels is expensive such that at the end of Obasanjo two terms in office in 2007, 99% of all government revenues were devoted to recurrent expenditure, and only 8% was available for capital expenditure (Abdullahi, 2013). Today as Jonathan rounds up his first term in office, the situation has worsened. This means that jobs are not being created on the side of expenditure profile of government. Many state governments have now resorted to borrowing to pay for the up keep of our elected officials, while workers are not being paid salary regularly. All these indicate that only an improved economy can guarantee democracy.

Nigeria is now ranked third on World Poverty Index. This has been revealed by the World Bank President Mr. Jim Yong King. He stated that “Nigeria is one of the top five countries that has the largest number of poor (Vanguard News April 11, 2014).

The exchange of letters between former President Obasanjo and President Jonathan in December, 2013 has exposed the vanity of the ruling party. The former President and President Jonathan cancelled each other over allegations of corruption, insecurity and misuse or abuse of power and the attempt to divide the country along ethnic lines.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most obvious of the democratic spirit in Nigeria is the total failure to adhere to rules and regulations of government. All the federal budgets from 1999 to 2013 were misapplied and, partly misappropriated. This malfeasance formed the basic rationale for the original impeachment process initiated by the House of Representatives in August, 2002 against former president

Obasanjo. Instances of violation of rules and regulations are legion but perhaps the outstanding example was the attempt by the presidency to alter the 2002 Electoral Law after it has been passed and signed.

Nor is the situation better with regards to separation of powers. At the federal level the presidency's gross interference in the leadership and working of the National Assembly resulting in countless stand offs and the removal of three presidents of the senate and two speakers of the House of Representatives, is matched only by the National Assembly members' dedication to involve themselves in executive functions, especially where contracts or spending money are concerned.

Judicial independence is only an imaginary. The batch of woeful judgments arising from the 2003 rigged elections has destroyed whatever sympathy the judiciary has with the public. The only exception was after the 2007 general elections under President Yar'Adua who vowed not to interfere with the Judiciary. The historic Judgments leading to cancellation of five governorship elections and several legislative seats were recorded during that time. However, the way the Judiciary handled election petitions in 2011, has dashed the hopes of the less privileged.

The PDP government was so callous and contemptible of public opinion that in spite of the massive protests by Nigerians against the constant and regular increases in the prices of petroleum products went ahead adamantly.

In 2012, the President sent shocking news to Nigerians during the New Year anniversary in which fuel subsidy was removed. The effect was massive protests which led to loss of lives before the decision was reversed.

While democracy encompasses a process with countless number of tenets in a given continuum, it may not be out of place for PDP's government to claim being democratic government even if the given polity only satisfies one or two or more of these democratic tenets. But our politicians must know that, there is no amount of constitutional innovation that would guarantee sustainable democracy without first laying the groundwork that is receptive to such innovations. What we are witnessing today is the increasing tendency towards tyranny and one party rule. At the moment none of the existing political parties, not even the PDP functions as a party geared to acting democratically much less of ensuring the growth of democratic conduct of public affairs. The recent merger of the opposition parties to form the All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2013, and the mass exodus of politicians from the ruling PDP to the new APC including five state governors and thirty seven federal legislators in 2014 is a land mark in the political history of Nigeria. However this should not be over exaggerated.

Recommendations

It is obvious from this analytical review that the most decisive issue in Nigeria today is the myths, and prospects of democracy. Democracy is not only desirable, it is necessary. Though it will not solve all our problems, none of our fundamental problems can be solve without it, as it provides institutions for expression and the popular will of the people is taken.

There is an enormous task ahead of the Government, the most serious being the increasing wave of insecurity; poverty and unemployment; decaying infrastructures; corruption; and national integration. The legislature, the executive and the judiciary must perform their functions within constitutional provisions based on the need to protect the nascent democracy and national unity (Dunmoye, 2003). The following suggestions will be appropriate in order to improve democratic rule and contain the acrimony in our polity.

Insecurity in the country must be contain, especially the type that is raging in the North eastern part.

- I. The judiciary should be regarded as the final arbiter between the Legislature and Executive in case of constitutional disputes. And the two arms must respect the decisions of courts especially the executives.
- II. There is need for increased party discipline and that elected officials should submit themselves to it and be conversant with the manifestoes of their respective parties.
- III. To the citizenry, it must be understood that mass political protest is the engine of democracy and the hall-mark of a people's capacity for it is attested by the fact that it was mass political protest which brought about democratization in Africa and many other parts of the world in the period 1990-onward. A nation lacking the capacity for such peaceful, non-violent protest in defense of its participatory right is not ripe for democratic government.
- IV. Public officials must be committed to accountability, prudence and transparency in government.

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