



### CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

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#### **Abstract**

*The political history of Nigeria has been a tortuous one. Years after Nigeria's independence in 1960, politicians have failed to learn from lessons of history. Pointedly, political institutions are weak and to that extent lack the capacity to enhance democratic development. In order to close the lacuna, civil society groups have participated in the drive towards democratic growth and stability. However, such roles are minimal and limited largely because of the character and nature of the Nigerian state. The paper analyses the forces that stultified democratic growth and it also delineates the import of civil society groups in enhancing democratic consolidation.*

**Keywords:** Civil society, democracy, democratic consolidation

#### **Introduction**

To begin with, Civil Society is an old concept in European social and political thought. The contribution of Locke, Hegel, de Tocqueville, and Gramsci were not in doubt. Civil Society became particularly important for understanding novel forms of social and political engagements in Africa where the post-colonial state was in retreat or on the verge of collapse after failing to deliver on the post-independence dreams of the founding fathers' and their citizens of rapid economic transformation (Jusu-Sheriff, 2006). The Nigerian state, a post-colonial state several democratic attempts had yielded little dividends in terms of economic prosperity and democratic stability. The post immediate independence democratic experiment has had to battle with centrifugal forces of disintegration which culminated in the collapse of the first republic. Ordinarily, one has the genuine reason to believe that political elite ought to join forces to create congenial and vibrant political space for competitive politics. Disappointedly, the items competition for power which was lacking in decency, terminated the democratic project. However, decades after independence, with its attendant experience of different constitutions, and party systems, the political space is largely inundated with varying degrees of anti-democratic forces. In the past attempts to return the country to the path of democratic governance, particularly between 1993 and 1999, civil society organisations such as Campaign for Democracy (CD), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR),

and a host of others had worked in tandem with the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) to confront the then military authorities. Workers, students, market women and other interest groups were mobilised through strikes, demonstrations, rallies etc to put an end to military dictatorship.

Since the return of democratic governance in 1999, there is that anxiety over the fate of the new found democracy. This is because the perversion of governance by the military and their civilian collaborators and apologists has remained an albatross to the Nigeria's democratic experiment. Indeed, military authoritarianism has had profound impact on the political gangsterism, abuse of rights, election rigging, vote buying, arbitrary arrest of oppositions, arm twisting of civil society groups etc. can be said to be the norm. In truth, while some of the civil society groups are lubricating the engine of democracy in terms of confronting the enemies of competitive politics and checking the excesses of political leaders, a few are debilitating it. It is apt to note that the pervasive and deadly contestation for power by the political class and the failure of political institutions to engender democratic development poses serious challenge to the civil society organisations and to that extent the consolidation of democracy.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the forces stultifying democratic stability and to that extent the place of civil society groups in bringing about the desired change. To achieve this, the study is organised into five parts. Part one discusses conceptual interpretation of civil society and democratic consolidation. Part two delineates the nature of the Nigerian state and its effect on democratic stability, while the third aspect of the study interrogates the role of civil society in Nigeria's democratic process. Part four examines the challenges that are confronting civil society groups towards engendering democratic consolidation. The final part is the concluding remarks. We note that the problematic raises a fundamental question of what civil society is.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

The conceptual clarification of civil society is necessary to enable us understand the problematic. According to Diamond (1995:9-10) civil society is; the realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self generating, self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by the legal order or set of shared rules. It involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions and ideas, exchange ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable.

Uniting a group of people towards achieving a common goal represents a major hall mark of an association. Such association albeit outside the state realm play complimentary role to the democratic process. In all political systems, a considerable sphere of citizen activities falls outside the authority of the state. This is the realm of civil society (Johnson, 2001:33).

Hall (1995) further notes that civil society is an opposite of despotism, a space in which social groups could exist and move something which exemplified and would ensure softer, more tolerable conditions of existence. In his own perspective, it is a society in relation with the state in so far as it is in confrontation with the state, or more precisely, as the process by which society seeks to breach and counteract the simultaneous totalisation unleashed by the state (Bayart). It is obvious that civil society groups serve as checks against the excesses of government and its agencies. The excesses may cover a wide range of areas, such as human rights violation, abuse of constitutional provisions etc. Civil society groups are professional associations (lawyers, teachers, doctors), trade unions, students, women's groups, religious bodies and other voluntary association groups.

**Democratic Consolidation:** It should be clearly noted that the notion of democratic consolidation is not tantamount to enthronement of democracy. Consolidation of democracy is the process by which democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate and so habitually practised and

observed that it is very unlikely to break down (Oche, 2004:18). For democracy to consolidate there must be genuine desire by political leaders to introduce policies that are capable of improving the socio-economic wellbeing of the majority of the people. Key political, institutional and economic actors must necessarily utilize state resources to achieve the goals of democracy while public office holders must conduct the affairs of the state by following the laid down rules.

Democratic consolidation is about regime maintenance and regarding the key political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation and adherence to democratic rules of the game (Ogundiya, and Baba, 2007:254). It can therefore be argued that democracy consolidation is not just for democracy to take firm root but building formidable walls against its truncation by anti-democratic forces.

### **The Nigerian State and Democratic Stability**

Understanding the nature of the Nigerian state is compelling in order to establish the effect of civil society on democracy in the country. Nigeria is a post-colonial state battling with anti-democratic forces. Scholars generally agreed that the colonial state was important to the colonising power only to the extent that it served as a bridge for the metropolis' economic interest. The colonialist adopted divisive mechanisms to enable them achieve their goals. During colonial times, the British policy of "divide and rule", exemplified in the differential treatment of regional elites, the amplification of pre-colonial differences, the heightening of inter-ethnic tension, sowed the seeds of inter-regional and inter-ethnic suspicion (Babawale, 2007:16). In a fundamental sense therefore, colonialism provided the structural basis for conflict generating politics.

It must therefore be noted that competitive politics in Nigeria has increasingly become deadly, vicious and threatening. Politics and political competition is a do or die matter, a zero sum game, a warfare, where principles and rules were set aside and all forms of illegalities and corruption became common place (Ikelegbe, 1995:209). Just like many other African countries, the political elites perceived and still perceive the pursuit of power as the dominant theme of politics. It is seen as a serious game that must be thoroughly fought, clearly won and to that extent enjoy all the good things of life. This is so because the political economy is skewed towards a centralised state which monopolises resources. In this perspective,

Ake (1996:7) clearly avers that: The struggle for power was so absorbing that everything else, including development, was marginalised. Those who were out of power constantly worried about their exposure to every kind of assault by a state that was hardly subject to any constitution or institutional restraints. Since what mattered in this type of politics was the calculus of force, the out of power elites strove constantly to put together a credible force to challenge those in power, or, at any rate, to limit their own vulnerability to harassment and abuse political power was everything; it was not the access to wealth but also the means to security and the only guarantor of general wellbeing.

Undoubtedly, the attitude of the political elites and the conduct of their collaborators clearly manifest negativism in terms of democratic development. Put differently, Nigeria's current democratic experiment despite its relative stability has not transformed or changed the perception of the ruling class about power and democracy. Consequently there is the dire need for the activation of civil society groups for Nigeria's democracy to thrive and consolidate.

Furthermore, interruptions in the political process due to prolonged military rule and the politics of do-or-die of the political class among others had debilitating implications on political institutions. Inter and intra party wranglings and executive recklessness still manifest in the political space. Similarly, the judiciary that is vested with the constitutional responsibility of providing the much needed checks on the executive is marred with corruption. Where you have

bold and courageous judges, they are tamed in terms of premature retirement or in some cases, they are frustrated out of office. The suspension of former judge of the appeal court is a case in point.

It is interesting to note that political institutions such as political parties, the legislative arm of government and what have you, albeit, often show some modicum of devotion and commitment in terms of rising to the dictates of the circumstance, but the fact remains that personal, sectional and other primordial interests often becloud their sense of judgements and actions. All these have implications for democratic stability.

Civil society organisations often engage in activities such as dialogues, debates and other public debate to educate and enlighten the people. In the short years of their existence however, they have created awareness on issues which they consider prejudicial to the growth of democratic norms in general or that could abort Nigeria's transition to civil rule programme in particular (Akinola, 1994:113).

### **Civil Society Groups in Nigeria: The Challenges**

Many years after the return to democratic governance the political space still manifests symptoms of authoritarianism. This has had grave consequences on civil society organisations as catalysts to engendering democratic consolidation. The antics of politicians in terms of manipulation of the electoral process and other anti-democratic moves often times stultify democratic consolidation. This is done by the intimidation of the people, the dumping of money in their laps, the absence of choice in electoral programmes, and the glaring commitment of the leaders to the rigging of elections against the will of the people. Thus the people are forced into political superstition or else into indifference and opportunism. In this state they are easily manipulated along ethnic lines (Nnoli, 1989: 208-209). Expectedly, and in Nigeria, the absence of well organised civil society organisations can be said to be largely due to the intrusion of ethnic bent into almost everything. Poverty of idea, corruption, lack of transparency in governance and floundering economy among others are some of the problems haunting most African states, including Nigeria. In an attempt to extricate the nation-state from the economic quagmire confronting it, several economic reform policies had been introduced by successive administration. For instance, the Babangida's administration introduced the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP). Aside from this, other policy measures to revamp the economy as Babawale (2007:40) puts it include:

*Huge currency devaluations, most of it bordering on the destructive trade liberalisation, price and interest rate deregulation, elimination of administrative controls, privatisation and, or commercialisation of public enterprises, abolition of commodity marketing boards, removal of subsidies and introduction of cost-recovery measures, drastic reduction in public expenditure levels and export promotion incentives, are some of the policy reforms which African governments have been encouraged to implement under the close supervision of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.*

Perturbingly, the adjustment measures did not yield the desired results. The worsening economic situation aggravated the existing unemployment, mass retrenchment of workers, decline in the standard of living, increased widespread poverty and restiveness in the polity. Civil society groups had a fair share as many of them could not muster sufficient funds to carry out their activities. Relatedly, the inadequate funding of genuine groups engendered the rise of uncivil groups promoted by government to check mate the former. For instance, during the Abacha's military regime, several associations were formed, founded, funded and protected by his regime to impose

the will of their principal on the entire country. Series of rallies were organised, while the SanniAbacha rally was allowed and even sponsored by government in Abuja, a Lagos rally in opposition, organised by the United Action for Democracy, (UAD), an association of 26 pro-democracy groups, was disrupted by police (Akinboye, 1999:256-257). In the same perspective, the Association for Better Nigeria (ABN) led by Arthur Nzeribe ferociously campaigned for Gen. Babangida to remain in power in 1993. However, these were civil associations with no apparent civic or with clearly un-civic social projects, and it is hardly surprising that none of them has survived the demise of their benefactor regime (Obadare, 2004:147).

Another salient challenge confronting civil society organisations in Nigeria is the hostile political environment reinforced by lawlessness and intolerance of political leaders. The Nigerian state several decades after independence is still repressive and anti-democratic. The penetrating analysis of Ake (1996:6) assisted us as he poignantly remarks that:

*Much of what is uniquely negative about politics in Africa arises from the character of the state. particularly its lack of autonomy, the immensity of its power, its proneness to abuse and the lack of immunity against it. The character of the state rules out a politics of moderation and mandates a politics of lawlessness and extremism for the simple reason that the nature of the state makes the capture of state power irresistibly attractive.*

The hostility of the state is reinforced by the government clamp down on the leadership of the genuine civil society organisations. Neither enthronement of democracy nor consolidation of democracy can be guaranteed where civil society organisations are not only politically debilitated but strangled.

### **Contribution of Civil Society to the Democratic Process**

We must not forget that Nigeria's political institutions are largely weak and fragile. Politicians themselves are more interested in accumulation, aggrandizement and deadly struggle for power. It therefore behoves on civil society organisations to intervene to ensure quality governance and political stability. For instance, the Civil Liberty Organisations, (CLO), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), the Campaign for Democracy (CD), and the United Action for Democracy (UAD) among others had on several occasions mobilised the civil population in support of democratic enthronement. According to Diamond (1995:9-10), the following characteristics and benefits are identifiable in an organised civil society:

- i) an organised civil society serves as a check against the excesses of government, human rights violation, abuse of the rule of law monitoring of the application of constitutional provisions
- ii) increase the participation and the skills of all the various segments of society and instils a sense of tolerance, thrift, hard work, moderation, compromise among the various competing parties in the society.
- iii) it serves as an alternative to political parties and can offer a refuge for those who are shut out from their rights due to non- membership of given political parties.
- iv) it serves to enhance the bargaining power of interest groups and provides inclusive mechanisms for them.
- v) it has the role in mitigating the excesses of fundamentalists, extremists, and maximalists who tend to have a very narrow of life in the of either /or.
- vi) it can serve as recruiting ground for and the training of prospective members of the political or economic classes to enhance the quality of participants in government. in effect, it is a leadership recruitment field.

However, the civil society organisations have a very long way to go because the hostility of the political space constitutes a major obstacle. The Nigerian state is not only oppressive but also totalistic. To that extent weak civil society organisations can easily be suffocated and debilitated. From our analysis, it is obvious that civil society in Nigeria is weak. However, the contribution of students' union in terms of checking the excesses of government and protesting arbitrary rule cannot be ignored. It is trite to note that whatever the limitations of the National Association of Nigeria Student (NANS), the body had put successive governments on their toes particularly on issues of national importance. According to a member of the association;

The greatest achievement of NANS has been the ability of the Nigerian students to stop the bankrupt federal government from its misadventure of introducing exorbitant fees in our institutions to make education an expensive commodity that can be purchased only by the rich and privileged (Quoted in Kukah, 1999:151).

### **Concluding Remarks**

From the foregoing, it is clear that the existence of civil society organisations is to strengthen the political re-awakening in the country. Thus to ignore the import of these organisations is to create a gap that could not be abridged given the fragility and feebleness of political institutions in the nation state.

In truth, civil society groups in Nigeria are weak and confronted with the challenges of funding, managing the repression of government, managing the uncivil groups that are operating outside established rules and mobilizing stakeholders to understand their goals among others.

However, for democracy to thrive and to that extent consolidate, the civil society organisations must be well organised and be well prepared to hold public office holders accountable. 'Civil society should begin to demand of reformist politicians that they stay true to what they profess...' (Olutokun, 2014). Given the inadequacies of political, non-political institutions, and indeed the attitudes of politicians, civil society must by their activities, mobilize stakeholders and constitute formidable forces to check the arbitrariness of government and political office holders accountable. Of course there is a synergy between well organised and genuine civil society groups and consolidation of democracy. Therefore, any association created must aim at deepening democratic consciousness of the people and promote the aspiration of the generality of the citizens.

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