

THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the Fourth Republic on May 29 1999, Nigeria had continued to struggle with the delivery of democratic governance and democracy dividend – social welfare, justice, equity, and equal access to resources and power. Often times, it seem as if the transition from military to civilian rule has been simply cosmetic due to the not too impressive scorecard of civil governance thus prompting scholars to aver that Nigeria is yet to attain the status of a democracy. After a decade of the current epoch, there is the need to identify concrete challenges to democratic governance in Nigeria with a view to contextualizing the core factors that continues to obfuscate democratic governance. While not attempting to approximate all likely denigrating factors; this paper adopts the UNDP's standard characteristics of democratic governance in measuring the Nigerian scenario. It illuminates the critical governance challenges facing Nigeria and recommended accountability and ethical principles for democracy to blossom.

Keywords: Democracy, Good Governance, Corruption, Human Rights, Electoral Reform.

Introduction

May 29, 1999 marked a watershed in Nigeria's political annals. It was the dawn of the fourth Republic, a return to democratic rule after several years under the yoke of military misrule which was marked by much suffering, infrastructure decay, and institutionalized corruption. The hope of the common man for a just and an egalitarian society became rekindled with the institution of a democratic government. Nigerians greeted the return to democratic rule with widespread jubilation and optimism as they looked forward to a new era of stability, peace, and prosperity. However, twelve (12) years after, Nigerians are still anxious to see and enjoy “democracy dividends” – social welfare, justice, equity, and equal access to resources and power.

A reflection on the above calls to question certain issues that stands as challenge(s) to democratic governance in Nigeria. These issues remain critical governance problems: Leadership challenges, corruption, lack of transparency, constitutional and electoral reforms, rising civil strife, poverty, unemployment, godfatherism, lack of human security and human rights. While recognizing the importance of these aforementioned problems, in this write-up, we focus on only five of the most immediate and perennial pitfalls – Leadership challenges, Corruption, Human rights, Civil strife and Electoral reforms.

The context

Governance refers broadly to the exercise of power through a country's economic, social, and political institutions in which institutions represent the organizational rules and routines, formal laws, and informal norms that together shape the incentives of public policy-makers, overseers, and providers of public services (UNDP, 2007). Governance in Nigeria dates back to the colonial period'. However, good governance is a much recent and novel idea of democratic governance that found expression in the detailed provisions of the 1979 Constitution that contained the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy. Good governance became the reducible criteria for assessment of government under the 1999 Constitution, due to the negative effect of military rule, the activities of civil society and the pressures of international financial institutions such as the World Bank, IMF and UNDP (Nwabueze,2005). Good governance is, among other things, participatory, transparent and accountable, effective and equitable, and it promotes the rule of law. It ensures that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable are heard in decision-making over the allocation of development resources.

In its report, Governance for Sustainable Human Development, the UNDP acknowledges the following as core characteristics of democratic governance:

- 1) Participation
- 2) Rule of Law
- 3) Transparency
- 4) Responsiveness
- 5) Consensus Orientation
- 6) Equity
- 7) Effectiveness and Efficiency
- 8) Accountability
- 9) Strategic Vision (UNDP, 2007).

The above highlighted characteristics of good democratic governance were glaringly deficient in governance during the military interregnum, thus making good governance as an element of constitutional government to be in its infancy in Nigeria. Good democratic governance can therefore be acknowledged as the term that symbolizes the paradigm shift of the role of governments.

The critical governance problems

1. Leadership Challenges

Nigeria's fundamental approach to leadership is troubling. In Nigeria, the primary goal of assuming leadership position is self-enrichment. Whereas Nigerian Leaders have the power to educate, inspire, and provide the people with the resources to advocate for the causes they believe in, but like bad parents, they have failed in their responsibilities to lead by good examples. In *The Problem with Nigeria*, Chinua Achebe concludes that Nigeria's problem is bad leadership and evidence on the ground has consistently shown that he is correct. Some people however seem to disagree that leadership is not Nigeria's problem. Certainly it is leaders and not the poor rural dwellers that are responsible for Nigeria's underdevelopment. In every country, it is the responsibility of the leadership to protect the political, social, and economic interests of the citizens.

Leading a country involves making policies and finding solutions to problems, ensuring stability of the polity, and guiding the society to prosperity. But a large number of the political leaders of Nigeria lack the vision, the passion, and the character to effectively govern the state and deal with the crumbling economy. They do not have a clear understanding of their responsibilities, as some of them are insensitive to the people's sufferings. Nigerians are tired of complaining to those who are leading without listening to them. As Bell and Smith (2002) opined "leaders can point to many reasons why they aren't good listeners, but none of these reasons excuses them from the obligation...to listen." Leaders who listen are, however, known to respond well to criticism and crisis, build more loyalty, and increase the morale of the followers. Listening is a way of showing that a leader cares about others.

Due to the fact that power belongs to the people, no political leader in the advanced democracies would function effectively without the support of the people. Thus they constantly have their ears on the ground for information (signs of shift in public opinion) that often guides them in policy formulations and implementations. The world's leading democracies are what they are today because their leaders are innovative and always searching for solutions to their social, political and economic problems. But that is not the case with Nigeria; evidence of bad leadership is all over the landscape as the leaders have not gone beyond a promise for change. They are only good at drumming the country's problems without finding their solutions. The institutions and infrastructure that are the bedrock of the economy are allowed to rot away leading to weak economy, rising unemployment and inflation, poverty and crime.

The major challenge of democratic governance in Nigeria lies in the process for electing public officers into leadership positions. The President and Vice President at the federal level; the Governor and Deputy Governor at the State level; and the Chairman and Councillors at the Local Government level; and all the members of the legislative Houses- National Assembly, Senate and House of Representatives) at the Federal level, State Houses of Assembly, and legislative Councils of the Local Governments – are all by elections. However, the electoral process and political party system are all corruption ridden and not sufficiently participatory (Azinge, 2004).

The elections are not only flawed but warped, the political parties are dominated by godfathers, money bags and ex-military leaders, and their party primaries (if ever conducted) are mostly selective, non-participatory and undemocratic, thus resulting in the corruption of the leadership, loyalty to god-fathers and patrons, and indifference to the electorate and citizens in their style of governance. The issues of legitimacy and representative nature of the leadership in the country, is reflected in their lack of accountability to the constitution, the political party and the electorate. Thus the root of corruption can be traced to the problem of leadership, thereby necessitating the call for the reform of the electoral and Party systems.

2. Corruption

The greater democratic challenge facing Nigeria is 'corruption,' Corruption has, among others been defined as an act of "requesting, offering, giving or accepting directly or indirectly a bribe or any other undue advantage or the prospect thereof, which distorts the proper performance of any duty or behavior required of the recipient of the bribe, the undue advantage of the prospect thereof" (Kofele-Kale 2006). In line with the above, Olu-Adeyemi (2004) argued that 'in Nigeria, an understanding of what constitutes corruption transcends officialdom and discussing corruption broadly as a perversion or a change from good to bad will not be inappropriate'. Also, 'citizens thrill at the non-enforcement of the rules that define the institutional basis of social, political and economic exchange, as corruption has become the dominant social norm and reflections on the first four decades of political independence no doubt indicate that citizens themselves are instrumental to the national decay, however, they are receptive to corrupt friendly regimes, thus, celebrating the potent force of mal-governance and underdevelopment' (Olu-Adeyemi, 2004).

Unfortunately, after years of independence, Nigerians still harbor the mentality that public money belongs to no one and that any person who has access to it should convert it into his or her personal use. Corruption permeates every sector of the Nigerian society, "from millions of scam e-mail messages sent each year by people claiming to be Nigerian officials seeking help with transferring large sums of money out of the country, to the police officers who routinely set up roadblocks, sometimes every few hundred yards, to extract bribes of 20 naira, about 15 cents, from drivers" (Polgreen 2005). However, the most disturbing and damaging form of corruption is made manifest in the succession of kleptocratic governments, which has produced extremely wealthy generals and political leaders.

Similarly, Electoral corruption is prevalent. This is a situation that includes the purchase of votes with money, promises of office or special favors, coercion, intimidation, and interference with freedom of election, sale of votes, killing and maiming of people in the name of election, and a situation where losers' end up as the winners in elections, and votes turn up in areas where votes were not cast. Apart from the above, Nigeria manifests the prevalence of prebendalism (client patronage) and all of these have undermined democratic governance in the country.

3. Human Rights

Prior the return to civilian rule in May 1999, the human rights situation in Nigeria was very poor. The esteemed Nobel laureate, Prof. Wole Soyinka once remarked that "I smell the sperm of tyranny before the rape of the nation", (CDHR, 2001) in a bid to describe the excruciating human rights situation in Nigeria during the dark days of military rule. At present, the situation has improved but the drawbacks and ineptitude of the long military interregnum still affects the human rights situation. This is because democracy has only succeeded in revealing the rot of human rights situation.

At present, fundamental rights of citizens still come under attack despite the advent of democracy. For instance, the protection and enjoyment of the right to life and respect for human dignity is hampered by the non-availability of the necessary socio-economic infrastructures that can guarantee the realization and fulfilment of such rights. According to the CDHR report on Human Rights (ibid), "the traditional means by which the Nigerian rights to life and respect for human dignity were abused are: death penalty, extra-judicial killings including assassinations; arbitrary arrests and detention; disappearances; avoidable disaster and the poor administration of our prison system." Apart from the above," a new dimension has emerged and this have to do with the individuals and groups who were dissatisfied with the ineptitude of the state functionaries and the brazen killings and maiming of Nigerians by unconventional security organizations who hijacked the duty of maintaining laws and order from the Nigerian police and assumed the business of protecting lives and properties in various parts of Nigeria."

Extra-judicial killings have also increased in the land against one of the twin pillars of natural justice, which requires that a person must be heard before any punitive measure can be taken against him. The Nigerian police and the numerous ethnic militia groups in Nigeria took unenviable lead in the killings and brutalities that took place across Nigeria and the truth in most case is that the rights of Nigerians (many of them mere suspects) were violated. Police and military task force brutality have also increased and the rights of innocent Nigerians are trampled upon whether in their homes, highways, offices or public places. Although the military has gone back to the barracks for well over ten years, the human right situation has not really improved. It still presents the recurrent anomalies of extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrest and detention without trial, torture and degrading treatment, which are perpetually perpetrated on a daily basis.

4. Civil Strife

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with a diverse cultural heritage. The country has a population of about 140 million with not less than 250 ethnic groups. After several years of military dictatorship, Nigeria found herself again in the mainstream of civil governance. While this development was seen by some people as an avenue to explore dividends and goodies of democracy, others saw it as an opportunity to express grievances. This had re-affirmed the poser that over the past several decades, Nigerians have sought to build a stable multiethnic nation. However, nation building has been complicated by Nigeria's tremendous diversities, thus, making the management of diversities to be more central than ever as a problem in Nigeria's political process. The interactions within the State have led to the formation of innumerable structures of sub-nationalism and recurrent skirmishes which have greatly increased since the return to civil rule in 1999.

Since the re-emergence of democracy in May 1999, not less than one hundred politically, ethnically and religiously motivated conflicts have occurred in Nigeria. The democratic opening presented by Nigeria's successful transition to civil rule in May 1999 unleashed a host of hitherto repressed or dormant political forces. Unfortunately, it has become increasingly difficult to differentiate between genuine demands by these forces on the state and outright criminality and mayhem. Post-transition Nigeria is experiencing the rise of conflicts borne out of various agitations by a plethora of movements purportedly representing, and seeking to protect, their ethnic, political or religious interests in a country which appears incapable of providing the basic welfare needs of its citizens. Different reasons and circumstances leads to these conflicts and violence in Nigeria. Some of the reasons are 'the weak character of the Nigerian State and the inability of its equally weak institutions to engender order and security' (Ayodele, 2004); 'poverty, military intervention in politics, citizen's apathy to the State, elitist greed and manipulation' (Olu-Adeyemi, 2008) and 'Land, space and resource availability, Jurisdictional disputes between Monarchs, disregard for cultural symbols and pollution of cultural practices' (Adeniji, 2003).

5. Electoral Reforms

In the contemporary world of today, elections have become the most acceptable means of changing leadership in any given political system. At all times, it is the conduct of a free and fair electoral process that justifies a Representative government to be referred to as democracy because the authority of government is derived solely from the consent of the governed. However, history has shown that it is usually difficult to hold elections that are completely free and fair. Even the United States (US) election that led to the victory of President Bush was alleged to be marred with irregularities in the State of Florida. In Africa, studies on elections have revealed that transiting from one regime to another is often the problem. For instance, the recent elections in Kenya were reported to be seriously flawed and impacted by irregularities in vote tabulation and reporting of results. In Nigeria, the 1999 and especially the 2003 and 2007 general elections were reported to be marred by irregularities by foreign and local observers. In fact, most of the results of the elections (the 2007) have been reversed by the Judiciary while many are still pending.

The integrity of the electoral system is a major issue facing democratic governance in Nigeria. It is known from past history that turbulent elections have been a source of political crisis in Nigeria and controversies surrounding elections have serious potential to undermine the legitimacy and stability of democracy. There could be the most serious consequences for democratic development if political leaders are unable to reach consensus on rules of political conduct, and if the Nigerian public therefore becomes alienated from the electoral process. Even President Umar Musa Yar'Adua acknowledged the fact that Nigerian electoral system needs reform. It was on the basis of the above that Yar'Adua made the issue of electoral reforms an integral part of his seven point agenda, although unfolding events has continued to question his sincerity in this regard.

Thus, Electoral reform remains a pressing challenge for democratic governance in Nigeria's developing democracy.

Concluding remarks

For democratic governance to thrive in Nigeria, the people must be vigilant and demand accountability from the leaders. It has been proven that 'the strength of a democracy is only as great as the will of the people to uphold it.' For all these to be possible the citizens must be politically educated and mature. This would enable the future leaders to make ethical decisions and for the people to begin to make political office holders accountable while within and outside office.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, "politics without ethical principles" is among the "social sins of humankind." Nigeria has the potential (human and material resources) to translate to a great democracy if the politicians (and the people) can change their mind-sets and learn to play ethical politics that adds good value to the system. This entails a paradigm shift in the manner in which Nigeria is governed. As Albert Einstein has noted, "the specific problems we face today cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." The political leaders should do more and talk less.

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