

THE POLITICS OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN NIGERIA: ARE THE PEOPLE INVOLVED?

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian state returned to civilian governance (erroneously called democratic governance) on May 29, 1999. Since then, the nature of the democratic project has been the subject of debate in various circles. This is because of the numerous ethno-religious and socio-economic and political crisis that has been a regular feature of the State. This paper interrogates the political context, processes, contradictions, and challenges inherent in the politics of democratization. The paper points to the absence of popular political participation in the political process as the greatest problem of democratization in Nigeria. Finally, the paper suggests the exclusion of a certain group of people from politics in order to allow the ordinary people take their rightful place in the political process.

Keywords: Political Participation; Democratization; Democracy; Political Process.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Nigerian State returned to democratic governance in 1999, during the era of what Samuel Huntington (1991) called the third wave of democratization, the nature of the democratic project has been the subject of an intense debate in various circles (Nwankwo, 2003; Saliu, 2004; Durotoye, 2006; Alumona, 2007; Nwabueze, 2007a; Nwabueze, 2007b; Amucheazi & Ibeanu, 2008). Admittedly, the rising concern about the Nigerian democratic project cannot be explained outside the numerous ethno-religious, socio-economic, and political crises that have been the bane of the nation since it returned to democratic governance on May 29, 1999. This state of affairs importantly raised some serious concerns about the politics of democratization in Nigeria, where the politics of godfatherism appears to be taking over the power of the people to participate in decision making. This has thrown up great challenges for the process of democratization. The key question now is: is Nigeria actually democratizing or weathering the storm of democratization?

Against this background, this paper interrogates the political context, processes, contradictions, and challenges inherent in the politics of democratization, underscoring why Nigeria is not yet on the part of democratization.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Our interest, at this point, is to investigate existing salient views on two critical concepts: democracy and democratization. Democracy and democratization are two strongly related and mutually reinforcing concepts. This is because you cannot talk of democracy without democratization. While democracy is the state of existence or being, democratization is a process that brings democracy into being and also allows it to take the strong hold of the society. There is no universally accepted definition of democracy. Scholars and statesmen have conceptualized it from different perspectives and emphasised different aspects of the concept (Jega & Wakili, 2005). This is as a result of the fact that the term has gone through several transformations and modifications. It is also a result of that we speak of different models

of democracy today. For instance, there is the direct or participatory model, in which citizens are involved, as in ancient Athens, the liberal or representative model, which views democracy as a system of rule-embracing elected officials who represent the interests and views of citizens within the framework of rule of law, and, finally, the Marxist model, which seeks to extend equality of all citizens from the political to the social and economic spheres of life. The Marxist model is also sometimes referred to as social or people’s democracy (Anifowose & Enemuo, 1999)

However, according to Jega & Wakili (2005), democracy, in its classical formulation, means broad based and active participation of all those defined as citizens in the conduct of their public affairs in the polis. This was possible in the relatively small ancient Greek and Roman city states. With the transformations that have affected democracy, modern formulations of democracy place greater emphasis on personal liberty, popular sovereignty, and representative government, with entrenched checks and balances to reduce or eliminate arbitrariness and abuses of power (Jega & Wakili 2005). What we can deduce from the above is that democracy allows for a broad participation of the people in choosing their leaders – who now, on their behalf, direct the affairs of the people.

The term, democratization, attracted attention in political science literature in the 1990’s when the democracy movement was sweeping across the world. This movement brought about changes in the governmental systems in countries in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Africa, where before the movement these countries were characterized with one-party, military and communist rule.

Nwabueze (1993) conceives democratization as not just concerned with the form of government known as democracy nor being synonymous with multi-partyism, but as a process of experimentation during which certain basic conditions have to be put in place. According to Nwabueze (1993), the process of democratization must specifically involve the following twelve things found in Table 1.

Table 1: Process of Democratization Guidelines

1	Multi-partyism, under a democratic constitution, having the force of a supreme, overriding, law;
2	A complete change of guards and the exclusion of certain other categories of persons from participation in democratic politics and government;
3	A genuine and meaningful popular participation in politics and government;
4	A virile civil society;
5	A democratic society;
6	A free society;
7	A just society;
8	Equal treatment of all citizens by the state;
9	The rule of law;
10	An ordered, stable society;
11	A society infused with the spirit of liberty, democracy, and justice; and
12	An independent, self-reliant, prosperous market economy

Nwabueze (1993) also makes many salient points about democratization. First, is that the listing of things required by democratization does not carry the implication of preconditions or prerequisites without which democratization cannot, and must not, be embarked upon and that they can be created or developed in the process of experimentation. Second is that the infusing of the spirit of liberty, democracy, justice, the rule of law, and the order among the people remains the most crucial to democratization, particularly in Africa.

In line with the above thinking, Yahaya (2007) writes that democratization

Is both a procedural and institutional aspect of liberalizing a previously authoritarian political environment. It would consist of opening up a previously closed authoritarian political system and deepening and expanding of values thought to be necessary for the entrenchment and sustenance of democracy. In essence, it is about the construction of a system that allows for the bulk of the populace to participate in the decision making process that has direct bearings upon their lives.

What all these point to is the fact that democratization is a process that takes place over a period of time and that in the process of democratization, the state and the general populace are the major actors who must show commitment to the whole process of trying to allow democracy to take a strong hold of the entire society. While countries that are transitioning are challenged to democratize, it is necessary to say that attaining democratization is not impossible, as western democracies have ably demonstrated.

It is from the above conceptual premise that we proceed to evaluate the politics of democratization in Nigeria. But the point has to be made that we are not going to evaluate the Nigerian experience strictly on the conceptual background provided above.

THE POLITICS OF DEMOCRATIZATION: THE MISSING LINK

As already pointed out, Nigeria returned to civilian governance (erroneously called democratic governance) on May 29, 1999. This was amid pomp and pageantry, especially by the Military, who had been in power for many years. But what can we say of the politics of democratization in Nigeria where democracy appears to be serving every purpose including the undemocratic ones? This fundamental question, which is the subject of this paper, forms the crux of our discussion in this section. The question also opens a plethora of issues. But our analysis here will be anchored on one fundamental question: if democracy is fundamentally about the people and democratization about the process of trying to make democracy have a strong hold of the society, is there a genuine and meaningful popular participation in Nigerian politics and government?

The right to participate in politics is an essential element of democratic governance because it provides the people the voluntary activities through which they can share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy (McClosky, 1972). From this standpoint, it becomes imperative that in the process of democratization, there should be genuine efforts to allow the people the right to participate in politics. The interplay of power and forces in Nigeria's effort to democratize raises some further questions about popular political participation. They include:

1. Are Nigerian elections, which are supposed to be the process of choosing leaders, free and fair?

2. How are people organized in the different political parties or is nature of party politics conducive for democratization?
3. Are the supposed elected leaders accountable to be the people?
4. Is political power, which ordinarily belongs to the people, institutionalized or personalised?

These disturbing questions leave much to be desired about political participation in Nigeria. After the hurried transitional election that took place in 1999, Nigerians have had two general elections in the process of democratization. Although elsewhere we have observed that there are methodological problems associated in declaring an election free and fair (Alumona, 2007), it is also widely accepted that if elections must sustain the development of democracy, then such elections must be seen to be free and fair. In terms of aiding the process of democratization, the 2003 and 2007 general elections left much to be desired.

The events of these elections are still fresh in our memory. In each case, the entire electoral process, starting from the passage of the electoral law, which should serve as a guide, through the registration of voters, to the conduct of the elections itself were all geared towards denying the people the right to participate in politics. In the 2001 elections, there was the controversy of how President Obasanjo smuggled certain provisions into the electoral act. During the registration of voters for the election, after a long delay, there was scarcity of registration materials in areas where the government perceived that the ruling party has no grassroots support. During the election itself, there were reported cases of massive rigging. In some areas, candidates that never stood for elections, owing to some intra party crisis, were later announced as winners. In a certain senatorial district in the southwest, a man in detention, because of an alleged murder offense, won a senatorial seat even without personally campaigning for a single day. In places like Anambra State, people were able to win elections just because they had a powerful godfather. As Chief Chris Uba later revealed, he alone influenced the election of all the contestants on the PDP platform in the state (Nwanegbo, 2005).

The case of the 2007 elections is not different from that of the 2003 elections. Although the elections marked a fundamental turning point in Nigeria's political history, because it affected the struggle for power shift from the south to the north, it was also a monumental desecration of the whole idea of a democratic election. Before President Obasanjo even declared it a do-or-die affair for his party, the period leading to the election had shown signs of what manifested later in the proper conduct of the election. Many of the party primaries were conducted in non-transparent processes. There were serious allegations of an institutionalized process of exclusion of participants, especially within the ruling party. The political environment was characterized by events that were geared toward derailing the democratic process. The failed third term agenda of President Obasanjo and the assassination of prominent aspirants for top political posts were among the outstanding aspect of these events. The report of the European Union Election Observation Mission (EUEOM), consisting of 150 observers deployed to all the 36 states of the federation (Except Delta, Bayelsa, and Rivers) and the federal capital territory, Abuja, captured the enormity of what happened during the election. According to the report, the 2007 state and federal elections were far below the basic international and regional standards for democratic elections. The wide contestations that have continued to trail the results of the elections speak a lot about what happened during the elections.

In all these, the role of state institutions cannot be ignored. The Independent National Electoral Commission and other security agents, like the police and army, did not live up to expectations. They were all tools in the hands of the ruling

party in preventing the majority of Nigerians from participating in the electoral process (see the EUEOM report on the Elections)

How are People organized in the different Political Parties?

Participation in political parties is another area where the process of democratization has also been eroded in Nigeria. While political parties should be the foundation and building block of the process of democratization, the nature and character of the dominant political parties in Nigeria threatens the whole process. Intra and inter-party electoral competition has been characterized with intense violence, acrimony, and warfare (Adejumobi & Kehinde, 2007). We have witnessed a few powerful individuals buying up the political space in the different political parties all in the name of godfatherism.

The re-registration exercise of the ruling the People's Democratic Party (PDP) shortly before the 2007 elections is a case in point. During the exercise, party cards were not made available to party members believed not to be loyal to the President Obasanjo's third term agenda. Such people were not allowed to partake in party congresses from the ward to the national level and hence were precluded from the election of party officials. The new party officials that were elected in such circumstances have operated like mini-gods, using the instrument of suspension and expulsion to deal with their opponents as they deemed fit (Durotoye, 2006).

The political parties have been hijacked by a few cabals at the expense of the principle of freedom of participation. Although the members of these cabals come from diverse background, the dominant occupational group is made up of retired military officers, policemen, and para-military agencies (Omotola, 2007).

We have also witnessed party primary elections that have generated a lot of controversy, owing to the non-transparent manner in which they were conducted.

Are the supposed elected leaders accountable to the people?

In a democracy, the leaders must be accountable to the people who elected them into office. The Nigerian experience, since 1999, still leaves much to be expected. The actions and pronouncements of the government have been far from seeking the consent of the people in taking decisions that affects them. The arrogant display of power and authority by our elected leaders and their appointed allies is alarming. We have seen elected representatives who operate constituency offices that are not functional, yet they claim huge amounts of public funds as constituency allowance. How they interact with their constituency and get to know their views on key national issues still remains to be a question yet to be answered.

Another issue to buttress our point is the way public policies are made and implemented. Although in developed democracies it is difficult to determine the level of influence of public opinion on public policy, it is known that the public makes input in the policy process either directly or indirectly through the platform of the party. Since 1999, we can argue that there has been complete disrespect for public opinion in the formulation and implementation of public policy.

During the Obasanjo's administration, the controversy, generated by deregulating the downstream oil sector, readily comes to mind. The administration hurriedly increased the prices of petroleum products without proper and wider consultation. And when the masses protested in places, like Lagos and Abuja, not only were the police used to repress them, but the president arrogantly threatened, in a national broadcast on 8th Oct 2003, to deal with labour leaders who he alleged were instigating problems in the country.

Is political power, which ordinarily belongs to the people, institutionalized or personalized?

The answer to this question is an affirmative. Power in Nigeria has become highly personalized and this is threatening the democratic process. Through the platform of the different parties, we have seen the emergence of some powerful individuals, known as godfathers, who now arrogates to themselves the power to decide for the people. In doing this, they have denied the people their right of participation. In broad daylight, with the assistance of state institutions, like the police, army, and INEC, they have turned their different states into their personal estates.

In Anambra, the war between Chris Uba and the former governor, Chris Ngige, cannot be easily forgotten. The former governor was kidnapped by agents of the state on the instructions of the godfather, who had the support of the authorities at the federal level. Today, this godfather is still walking the street a freeman. In Oyo state, Lamidi Adedibu held the state hostage because of his disagreement with the governor, Rasheed Ladoja, over what should be given to him monthly from the state treasury. In Kwara, a particular godfather was able to get his son and daughter elected into public offices. The story remains the same across all the states.

The role of these godfathers in the elections is so profound that it needs serious attention. While its implications for Nigeria's nascent democracy needs no further discussion here, since they have been well documented in the literature (Olawale 2005; Ayoade, 2006; Omotola, 2007), it is useful to point out that there is an urgent need to institutionalize democratic structures and institutions in order to checkmate the problem.

CONCLUSION

Using a major attribute of democratization, which is popular participation, we have tried to evaluate the politics of democratization in Nigeria since 1999. We observed that the interplay of power and forces points to the fact that the Nigeria's democratization process is facing serious challenges. The most serious of these challenges is the personalization of power, which has denied the people the right to participate. This problem, among other things, has affected the conduct of political parties, the policy formulation process, and political accountability.

Whichever way one decides to look at the issue, we argue that it captures Jackson and Roseberg's conceptualization of personal rule in Africa where:

persons take precedence over rules; the office holder is not effectively bound by his office and is able to change his authority and powers to suit his own personal or political needs. In such a system of personal rule, the rulers and other leaders take precedence over the formal rules of the political game, the rules do not effectively regulate political behavior, and we, therefore, cannot predict or anticipate conduct from the knowledge of the rules. To put this in old-fashioned comparative government terms, the state is a government of men and not of laws.

In light of these issues, it becomes clearly evident that the people under such as prevailing environment cannot assist the process of democratization because, using the words of Ake (1993), such a democratic system is 'not emancipatory for it offers rights that cannot be exercised, voting that never amounts to choosing, freedom that is patently spurious, and political equality that disguises highly unequal power relations'

We, therefore, recommend that one particular condition of democratization, as enunciated by Nwabueze (1993), should be brought into force in Nigeria. That condition is namely 'a complete change of guards and the exclusion of certain other categories of persons from participation in democratic politics and government'. This recommendation is based on the fact that the absence of popular participation in the democratization process has been caused by a group of individuals consisting mainly of retired military officers, police men, para-military agencies, and government contractors. This group constitutes what is known today as political godfathers. We find this group trying, at all levels, to buy up the political space where the people are supposed to participate in the decision making process.

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