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Western Democracy and the Dilemma of Nation Building in Africa, the Nigerian Experience (1999-2007)

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Abstract:

Nigeria witnessed a transition from military to civilian rule in 1999 with a practice of western democracy modeled after that of America. Although Nigeria shares a lot in common with America, its constitution is nothing but a military decreed document that is yet to be reviewed after two tenures of democratic rule. The model chosen has its own fundamental principles and characteristics that serve as a guide. Glances at the Obasanjo's administration in the first and second term indicate that Nigeria is just evolving and that most of these principles are still being abused. The dilemma of building a nation such as Nigeria is a major issue considering the historical antecedents of different ethnic groups in the country. Having experienced a long military rule with a transformed military man under the democratic regime is a major food for thought. The pluralist idea of what democracy means provides a kind of explanation for the ongoing political scenario in Nigeria. The idea of representative government has since been overlooked and has created a form of political apathy in the nation. Although the government is striving to consolidate on the country's "unity in diversity" Nigeria still remains a piece of a whole, which is being kept together by force. Individual interest is now the main thing as against the interest of the majority. Power has long ceased to belong to the electorate. The democracy practiced in Nigeria during the period under review is tending towards dictatorship.

Keywords: Democracy, ethnic groups, political apathy, dictatorship

1. Introduction

Democracy is that honourable value first coined by the ancient Greeks as "citizen rule". It means a form of government under which the power to alter the structure of government and laws lie ultimately with the citizenry. Abraham Lincoln's famous phrase that democracy is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, popularized the concept. For most African countries who were once colonized, it has not really been an easy task to move to that state where majority of the people could hold sway over the issues that affect their life, owing to the fact that these ones had experienced a long term of military rule. The Nigerian experience has not really been different because the transition to democracy that started in 1999 was just like a continuation of the long extended military rule. The present president was a retired military general with a military background, a former military head of state of the federal republic of Nigeria.

Although, Nigeria has chosen to adopt the American model of democracy instead of the British parliamentary form of democracy and as well shares lots of characteristics with America in terms of large, complex, and heterogeneous nature, it should be noted that "what works for America may not work for Nigeria". The idea of western democracy can be described literally as the way democracy is being practiced in the west.

The whole rationale of a democracy consists in using all objective ways to determine the true mind and preference of the majority over and against what an individual in leadership position or privileged minority may consider as ultimately good for the entire people. The question to be asked at this juncture is how has the practice of western democracy helped nation building in Nigeria? In an attempt to answer this fundamental question, some of the colonial legacies in Nigeria will be unraveled. The problem of uniting different ethnic groups with distinctive political structures together is the dilemma of nation building in Nigeria.

2. Definition of Terms

- i. Democracy: It means a form of government under which the power to alter the structure of government and laws lie ultimately with the citizenry. For Abraham Lincoln, “democracy is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people”. It is a government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system.
- ii. According to Seymour, M. Lipsets as quoted in Haralambose 2005, “Democracy in a complete society may be defined as a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders of political office”.
- iii. Western democracy is defined as a procedural system involving open political competition with multiparty and any political right guaranteed by law and accountability operating through an electoral relationship. It also refer to the model of democracy that derives its power from the people, works of course from bottom up, and embodies all those qualities that are defined as worth striving for.
- iv. Nation building: Refers to the process of structuring a nation using the power of the state. It aims at the unification of the people within the state. Nation building involves fostering social harmony and economic growth through the use of propaganda and major infrastructure development.
- v. Primaries: These are elections that take place within a political party in which the flag bearer emerges.
- vi. Political participation: This is a voluntary involvement in political activities by citizens of a nation.
- vii. Political apathy: This is non-involvement in political activities by citizens of a nation.
- viii. Constitution: This is a legal document that guides the affairs of a nation. It is a mutable document that evolves constantly and grows with the people and their needs.
- ix. Political violence: This is a kind of violence that has its origin in politics (politically motivated crisis).
- x. Political assassination: This is a kind of killing that is politically related.
- xi. Free and fair election: The organization of the election or voting process devoid of intimidation and restrictions.

3. Pluralist View of Democracy

Pluralism is a theory that claims to explain the nature and distribution of power I western democratic societies. They believe that through elected representatives, different groups and socio economic backgrounds are represented in the government. For the Nigerian scenario this view provides a viable explanation for the forms of government practiced at the local, state and federal level of the country.

Pluralists believe that political parties give the public opportunities to influence and shape government programs and party ideologies and principles. So political parties are veritable vehicles to acquire and utilize political power. To achieve this, political parties need to secure the support of various interests groups in the society.

Also classical pluralists believe that “all sections and all shades of political opinions are represented and reflected in a wide variety of groups in western democracies” (Haralambose, 2005:548). They regard the exercise of power through the state to be legitimate rather coercive, since it is held to be based on the acceptance and cooperation of the population. Many political scientists believe that the concept of democracy is an ideal condition which can be continuously approached in many ways. For example, Dag Ancker and Robert A.Dahl both believe that a community is democratic when the acts of its government correspond to that rational wishes of the people and each citizen has equal opportunity of expressing preference concerning the final outcome. In a genuine democracy, the majority owns the power of decision-making and no one individual or few, no matter how privileged or well placed could decide for the rest. Power and authority come from the people and the people have the right to withdraw same when necessary.

4. Characteristics of Western Democracy

According to Toshi Knell (2001), characteristics of western democracy include the following:

1. Freedom (this includes freedom of expression of information). In Nigeria, the freedom of association is controlled through police permit. Also the president does not tolerate contrary views.
2. Free and fair elections: This has been a major obstacle in Nigeria democracy. The ruling party uses its incumbent power to rig elections. The case of Anambara stste where Chris Uba a prominent People’s Democratic Party (PDP) chieftain owned up to rigging elction in the state in favour of Chris Ngige before president Obasanjo.
3. A clear balance of power with the legislative arm making laws and the public service implimenting them. The presidency has an overbearing influence on the legislature and civil servants. It is after the failure of the third term ambition of president Obasanjo that we noticed a balance of power.
4. Subordination of the military to the democratically elected government.
5. Accountability: In Nigeria due to electoral fraud and imposition, the leaders are alienated from the people. So it becomes difficult to make leaders account for their actions or inactions by the people. Except where the states through its agencies like Economic and financial crimes commission (EFCC) compel few leaders to account to the government.
6. Honesty and lack of corruption: In spite of the efforts of president Obasanjo’s administration to fight it, corruption stillpersists at various strata of government.
7. Transparency: This was one of the greatest problems of public administration in Nigeria, until the introduction of the office of due process and budget monitoring in Nigeria headed by Dr Ngozi Ezekwesili.

8. An independent judiciary: The judiciary is very important in any democracy. It does not only interpret the law, it regulates the conduct of political leaders as in the case of the impeachment of former governor of Oyo state Chief Ladoja. Where the wrongful impeachment was nullified by the judiciary.
9. Respect for human rights and playing the game straight, with respect for the rule of law democracy strives. Adesanya(2003) was of the opinion that when democracy is not allowed enough room to operate on its own terms, it turns in to dictatorship.

5. Dilemma of Nation Building in Nigeria

The emergence of democracy in Nigeria on May 1999 ended sixteen years of consecutive military rule. President Olusegun Obasanjo inherited a country suffering from economic stagnation and the deterioration of most democratic institutions. The leader of the Afenifere group, late chief Abraham Adesanya in his paper title "Threat to democracy in Nigeria" said that "the new president took over a country that faced many problems including a dysfunctional bureaucracy, collapsed infrastructure and a military that wanted a reward for returning quietly to the barracks".

The president enhanced the credibility and acceptability of his government by releasing many persons held without charge by late Abacha junta. He equally set up a panel to investigate human rights violations and moved to recover millions of dollars in funds secreted in overseas accounts.

Most civil society leaders and Nigerians witnessed marked improvements in human rights and freedom of the press, however, conflict persist between the executive and legislative branch over appropriations and other proposed legislations. There were also cases of conflict between the state governors and the federal government over resource allocation.

The first tenure of president Obasanjo's administration was greeted by various communal violence in Kaduna, Jos, Benue, Taraba, and Nasarawa states. Most of these crises were created by the introduction of criminal Sharia code in some of the northern states and the indigene/settlers disputes. The national security commission was formed to address communal violence

The question that is to be asked is: how then can a nation be built? Given the complex nature of Nigeria state how possible is it for the unification of people from various ethnic groups? Although nation building involves fostering social harmony and economic growth through the use of propaganda and major infrastructure development has not really been successful in the Nigerian case.

In Africa, nation building entails all efforts by the newly-independent nations to mould what had been colonial territories, carved up by colonial powers without regard to ethnicity or boundaries, in to viable and coherent national entities (Adesanya, 2002).

Nation building includes the creation of national flags, national anthems, national days, national stadium, national airline, in addition to the deliberately molding of different groups in to a nation especially since colonialism had used divide and rule tactics to maintain its domination.

In Nigeria, nation building has been a very difficult task due to the existence of many ethnic groups that made it up. Most of these groups threatened to secede from the country. Examples include the case of Biafra and more recently the agitations of Niger Delta. Various policies were made to foster unity among these ethnic groups. We have the federal character commission, quota system, National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), derivation formula or resource allocation, and even the rotational presidency.

In spite of all these, the country still needs a visionary leadership that will impact meaningfully on the lives and future of the masses without compromising the unity of the nation in the process. One of the major ingredients of democracy apart from rule of law is free and fair elections.

Political parties facilitate free and fair elections when it presents party flag bearers who are credible and emerge through Democratic Party primaries. This is not the case in Nigeria, where most political parties lack any ideology/principles and members are only interested in acquiring power without any clear vision on how that power should be used for the benefit of the citizens.

Politics in Nigeria has been described as either dirty or do-or-die affair. Politicians are so desperate to acquire power that they change parties at will just to achieve their selfish ambition. For example Governor Tinubu changed from AAlliance for Democracy to Action Congress, Vice President Atiku Abubakar changed from People's Democratic Party to Action Congress and later back to People's Democratic Party. This "mad rush" for power has polluted the political environment with people of questionable character dictating the direction of political process in certain quotas. This issue of imposition of candidates and god-fatherism in Nigerian politics has risen to an embarrassing level. This has equally increased political violence and other electoral malpractices in the country.

A lot of Nigerians are no longer interested in the entire electoral process. They have suddenly withdrawn from being a part of the whole electoral process. This general apathy prompted the use of threat and persuasion by the government to make people participate even in voters registration exercise. For example, in Oyo state there was a common radio jingle that warns workers against losing their salaries if they do not have voter's registration slip and as such encourage them to register. Also several public holidays have been given both at the state and federal level to encourage people to register.

The Nigerian constitution is a part and parcel of the problem of nation building. As it is a military dictated decree. This constitution would have been amended if not for the third term ambition of the Obasanjo government.

The practice of democracy in Nigeria is yet to measure up to the standard of the American model that is being emulated. There is no absolute freedom for mass media; this is due to among other things, relations of ownership, the possibility of using paid adverts, the dependence of certain mass media on advertising income, the integration of many editors and journalists into power structure and availability of secretarial assistance. The issue of free and fair election is still a far cry as Adesanya described president Obasanjo as perhaps the only democratic leader in the contemporary World running a democracy of fraudulent elections, non-consultation and dialogue. According to Dare Babarinsa, (2005), "...because Obasanjo has been unable to gather around himself loyal disciples, terrible

things have happened under his watch: Odi massacres, the assassination of Bola Ige his attorney general, the assault on democracy and constitution in Anambara state”.

However, a commendation should be given to the president on the area of transparency. This is because efforts were made for the publicity of budget allocations in the media and the establishment of the due process office.

6. Assessment of Nigeria's Democratic Experience (1999-2007)

Analysts have described Nigerian democracy as young and fragile in view of the numerous military rules the country has experienced. An important issue which will be called an oversight from the perspective of the political elite particularly those in the north was how a retired general in the Nigerian army such as Obasanjo will be fair in a democratic structure. Bobson Gbinije in his article “Imperative of issue-based politics” described Nigerians democracy as “vestigial and embryonic in its metamorphosis which needs to ascend the consolidatory path to adulthood, the electoral institutions, politicians, political parties, the electorates and individual aspirants by ensuring that their aspirations and ideal are issues driven.

The president's military background has effect not only on the nation but also on his party. He removed three party chairmen, denied elected (PDP) party's governorship candidates from contesting election, and asserts his authority on the party. This intra-party power play generated a lot of blood among some of the founding members and even led to the formation of other parties. In spite of the fact that People's Democratic Party (PDP) is the ruling party with majority seats in the national assembly; it still could not generate a common voice or support in many issues.

During the first tenure (1999-2003), the national assembly was acting as a mere appendage or rubber stamp of the executive. They did not provide a strong check on the executive. In fact the national assembly was struggling to regain their credibility after the “furniture allowance” saga, which gave them bad image in the eyes of the masses. The judiciary also performed below average in the first tenure of this regime. There has been several delays in hearing several suits particular to electoral disputes.

Electoral malpractice has also been a part of this system. For example, during the 2003 election, the police apprehended a popular Yoruba musician Wasiu Ayinde because he was found with ballot boxes during the election in Lagos state. In Oyo state, there was a case of five registration machine found in the house of Alhaji Adedibu (a PDP political godfather). Also the Nigerian Tribune of December 25 reported a case of sales of voter's card in Sokoto state by Democratic People's party (DPP).

Several political assassinations have occurred and many have lost their lives within this few years of democracy. The likes of Bola Ige (the former attorney general of the federation), Daramola of Ekiti state, Funsho Williams of Lagos state and honourable Olagbaju of Osun state House of Assembly. The PDP has contributed to the state of insecurity and instability as its leadership deliberately promoted conflict even with its ranks. In the south eastern states there exist a battle for supremacy between Abuja based politicians and the home based politicians over control of political structure at the state level.

Impeachment has become a regular part of the political news in this new dispensation. About five governors were impeached within the space of two years, first was governor Alamesighia of Bayelsa state, Ladoja of Oyo state, Ayo Fayose of Ekiti state, Dariye of Plateau state and Peter Obi of Anambara state. Also, at the National Assembly, two Senate presidents were equally impeached. They were Senator Evan Enwerem and Senator Okadigbo.

Political godfatherism and high scale corruption by elected officials played out during the period under review. In an attempt to reduce corruption and other economic crime, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) was formed by the Federal government. However, it was observed that the government of President Obasanjo used EFCC to hunt down perceived political enemies or opponents like Atiku Abubakar his vice president and Tinubu governor of Lagos State.

7. Challenges of Nation Building in Nigeria

- **ECONOMIC FAILURE:** In Nigeria, in spite of the billions in foreign reserves, the quality of life and cost of living of the average family is still very poor. The economic growth has no positive impact on the lives of the ordinary citizens and does not explain the rate of underdevelopment, job loss, unemployment, and unpaid pension and retirement benefits to retired workers. The attempt to diversify through Agriculture is hampered by lack of loans at cheap rates to local farmers. After seven years of democratic practice, the country still depends on crude oil as a major source of revenue. There have not been enough efforts to maintain the existing refineries talk less of building new ones.
- **GOVERNANCE:** Through Nigeria is under a democratic rule, the style of governance does not reflect democratic ethics. The democracy in Nigeria is just “nominal democracy” with little tolerance for the opposition and pressure groups. The power of the president still dominates all spheres of governance. The unitary command structure is still prevailing, with a very powerful president controlling the states and local government tiers. To save this nascent democracy, the leadership must show a lot of democratic culture by working with every sector including the opposition and others pressure groups by so doing most of the political tension and violence will reduce.
- **RULE OF LAW:** Most of the cardinal objectives of western democracy are anchored on rule of law. This simply means the supremacy of the constitution and equality before the law by all citizens. In Nigeria, the federal and state government select which court order to implement and which one to reject. This selective justice does not encourage an enduring democracy in the nation.
- **HUMAN RIGHT:** Democracy being government of the people protects the fundamental human right of the people. In Nigeria the police and other law enforcement agents treat suspects as culprits. The opposition is crushed by the use of the state power and media houses are still camped down carelessly by the present dispensation.

- **ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CRISES:** The freedom of expression offered by democracy has been abused sometimes in Nigeria by some religious and ethnic elements in the country to format trouble. The crisis is sometimes caused by politicians who are afraid of losing out in the power game in the country. Another aspect of these crises is the issue of indigene and settlers dichotomy in certain areas of the country. The constitution should be amended to correct this misunderstanding.
- **POLITICAL CRISES:** Political crises are sometimes used as a strategies plan to intimidate and harass opponents by some politicians/ parties just to acquire power until political positions/offices are seem as a means to serve the people the political crises may not be curbed easily even in a democratic rule.
- **EDUCATION:** This possess the power to influence and socialize the citizens to admire to democratic principles, and accept improved ways of life. The budgetary allocation to this all-important sector is still very low in Nigeria in spite of the reforms.
- **TRANSPARENCY/ ACCOUNTABILITY:** these qualities promote government's credibility and acceptability by the followers and even international communities. Transparency enables the citizens to monitor, access and accept government policies without much coercion. The amount spend on orientation of citizens will be reduced when the public is empowered through adequate information. So the monthly publication of federal allocations to states and local governments should be encouraged. Government and the followers must work together to monitor the utilization of the funds released.
- **FOLLOWERSHIP:** the followers should not distance themselves from the governance of the country. It is not enough just to vote and then ignore the elected leaders. The followers must discourage corruption by not making unnecessary rewards from the voted or elected leaders. The followers must take interest in developing democracy by encouraging good leadership and fighting crime and corruption by encouraging good values of honesty, patriotism and selfless services for the country to maximise her abundant resources to the benefit of all and in creating a united nation in the midst of divergent cultures.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

The solution to our problem is not military dictatorship, but ensuring that democracy truly works in Nigeria. Efforts must be made to promote democratic culture in Nigerian politics by allowing politicians to learn from their mistakes rather than consider military as an alternative.

The government in power must devote much resource to human capital development so as to harness the abundant resources available in the country. The fight against corruption should be sustained. What we need in the next tenure is a leader that will not violate the constitution, disobey court orders and infringe upon the fundamental human rights of the citizens particularly those who hold contrary views from that of the government. Democracy in Nigeria will be enhanced by the practice of true federalism and the visionary leadership that will consider the entire country as his/her constituency irrespective of his tribe or geo-political zone. Good governance, service to the people and adherence to the rule of law must be the focus of leaders at all levels in Nigeria. Democracy remains the means to an end in Nigeria's quest for a strong and united nation. Political Parties must be formed on the basics of common ideology and internal party democracy should be followed to elect party flag bearer. Both government and the political parties should embark on voter's education to eradicate voters' apathy. Elections must be seen to be free, fair and credible. It must be conducted in an atmosphere of peace devoid of any violence or threat of violence. Electrol offenders must be duly punished by the law enforcement agents.

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