

Party Politics and Democracy: The Role of Civil Societies and Struggle for Democratization in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria returned to democracy since May, 1999 following long years of authoritarian rule by the military that had been in power for almost thirty years, and while considerable progress has been made in the area of personal freedoms and liberties, flashpoints of ethnic, communal religious and resource conflicts persist across most of the country. This is exacerbated by the seeming failure of government to address key issues affecting economic performances such as poverty alleviation, access to education, employment, resource distribution, infrastructure development and political power contests. The struggle by civil society associations in the 1990s were as much a protest against economic mismanagement as they were a clear rejection of tyranny and dictatorship. Civil societies are regarded as the conscience of any nation. Its concept refers to all those autonomous groups of associations occupying the domain of the family and the public realm of the state. The prefix “civil” denotes that such associations usually exist outside the military. Africa’s civil societies have been portrayed as the prime movers in the democratization process, especially in the 1990s. Democratic struggles are a part of the struggle for survival. It is to a large extent about people turning away from the state and assuming greater control over their future within the context of a state that is fast disintegrating under self-inflicted fiscal crisis and weakened national institution. However, with the establishment of democratic government in Africa, it seems the high expectations about the capacity of these civil society associations to promote governance reform, and foster democratic heights have been exaggerated even as one is not doubtful of their strengths in influencing governments’ policies. The central argument of the study is to linking the democratic struggles as a part of the struggle for survival and the establishment of civil society associations to promote governance reform, and foster democratic heights in influencing governments’ policies.

Keywords: Political power, democratic government, civil societies, struggles for survival, trust, tolerance, corruption.

Introduction

The desperation for political power and by extension for unrestrained access to economic resources has also deepened the corruption, instability, underdevelopment and insecurity situation in the country. The primacy of political power as a springboard to economic resources and higher level of social status has led to the militarization of society in Nigeria. This signifies violence in the struggles of social forces as against peaceful political competition and conduct. Ake (1989: 57-58), has clearly explained the nature of politics that generates conflicts in African societies such as Nigeria thus:

The militarization of society is the outcome of the over valuing of political power in Africa and intense struggle to obtain and keep it. This transformed politics into warfare. In this competition every form of force is mobilized and deployed; the winners have the prospect of near absolute power and the losers not only forgo power but face a real prospect of losing and even life.

The above merely amplify the character of a post-colonial state such as Nigeria. The premium on power is exceptionally high and the system lacks the institutional arrangement to moderate political competition and to mediate between classes thereby creating a fertile ground for corruption, instability, underdevelopment and insecurity in society. The current democratic governance in Nigeria has continued to witness repeated abuses of state power that has manifested in different forms and guises. No doubt, the political elites still see politics or state power as an avenue for primitive accumulation of wealth. This conclusion which has been reached by scholars like Anifowose (1982), Ake (1989), Joseph (1987), Ikpe (2000), etc is still the order of the day today. According to Tell magazine October 17, 2005, many public office holders in Nigeria especially state governors, ministers (past and present), members of the National Assembly, etc, are stupendously wealthy. This basically explains why corruption has remained endemic in the country. When public officers who are supposed to be the vanguard in the fight against corruption now elevates the ignoble practice to statecraft, democracy, good governance, peace and security cannot but be at risk. Corruption no doubt undermines and or hampers the governance process and indeed development.

Democracy: Conceptual Discourse

Democracy has become the most fashionable form of governance in the world. In all societies of the world today, the issue is not which political system is appropriate but rather when will society become democratized or fully democratic. The democratization project is therefore, regarded as the age of civilization that every society should strive to attain rather than a political option among many others (Owolabi, 2001). Democracy has thus been recognized as the only moral and legitimate way through which a society can be administered. Thus, theoretically, scholars and international financial institutions like the World Bank have established an inextricable connection between democracy and good governance. Democracy, adequately understood, is a theory that sets some basic principles according to which a good governance, whatever its form, must be run (Oluwole, 2003). Such principles include those of justice, equity, freedom, liberty, accountability, openness and transparency in government. Indeed, effective democratic forms of governance rely on public participation, accountability and transparency. In most countries today, it is these principles that are used as criteria for distinguishing between good and bad governments.

In this regard, democracy not only prescribes how political power should be acquired but also what to do with it or how it should be expressed. Therefore, democracy specifies who constitutes the legitimate government and wields the authority inherent in the state (the elected representatives), how they acquire authority (free and fair elections, choice between parties) and how they are to exercise it (in broad harmony with public good) (Parekh, 1993). This makes democracy amenable to moral and ethical justifications. Hence, good governance forms the philosophical foundation upon which democracy and democratic theories are built. In his confession before the United Nations in October, 1991 Thomas Pickering, the United States Ambassador, declared, "The bottom line of good governance is democracy itself" (Skinner, 1970). Many scholars who shared this view have associated the tragedy of development in Africa, Nigeria inclusive, to the absence of democratic rule and or prolonged military hegemony (Ake, 1996).

It is worrisome however, that almost two decades after the "third wave" of democracy has blown across the continent of Africa, democratization has not produced the expected result. Rather than engender development and good governance, it has led to anarchy, civil wars, genocide and general political instabilities as have been seen in Kenya, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Rwanda, Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria. In Nigeria for instance, political assassinations, abject poverty, ethno-religious conflicts, acute youth unemployment and general economic and political decay have been the major dividends of democracy since 1999 when the country returned to democracy. It is clear that the form of democracy as it is practiced in Africa today is an imposed one. Most African states are forced to democratize in order to be able to access foreign loans and aid. Therefore, the third wave was not a natural wave.

Democracy is adopted to suit the desire of the foreign donors and advanced capitalist democracies. The problem here is that liberal democracy does not evolve, as it was in the west, with the African societies. The argument here is that there is a serious need to "domesticate" western liberal democracies in order to enhance its benefits in Africa. Toyo (1994); Nwigwe (2003) sees Nigeria as a non-democratic state. This assertion is still plausible today. The reason for Toyo and Nwigwe's conclusion is not far-fetched. In terms of outcome, Nigerians have not significantly reaped the dividends of democracy.

Secondly, Nigeria's democracy has been violent ridden characterized with Wanton destruction of lives and properties (Ogundiya and Baba, 2005). More importantly, the peoples' vote seems not to count in determining who governs as elections are rigged or its outcome determined before the poll. Therefore, procedurally, democracy in Nigeria is lamed and in terms of its conceptual outcome has failed to meet the expectations of the people. Furthermore, Nigeria's democracy (if it could be so described) has tended to promote inequality rather than equality.

Toyo (1994) comment is also instructive; there can be no genuine democracy in a country where citizens are grossly unequal in wealth and the poor who are invariably the majority, are dependent on the wealthy. Due to the fact that wealth is power, where such a cleavage and dependency exist, political power is inevitably in the hands of the wealthy. In this scenario, democracy ceases to be democracy in reality; in effect it is a plutocracy. Bolaji (2004) citing Aristotle said civil society is a "public ethical community of free and equal citizens under a legally defined system of rules". Alexis de Tocqueville writing on democracy in the 19th Century North America emphasized the importance of civil society associations. He pointed out that civil societies help the creation and maintenance of democracy. However, Encarnacion (2000) has challenged the notion that civil society could serve as the engine of the democratic transformation of formerly authoritarian and totalitarian societies. He strongly contested the notion that civil society is a requirement of a vibrant democracy. He was of the opinion that the Tocquevillian interpretation of civil society was clearly American in character and it would be out of place to apply it to most democratizing nations. Tocquevillian applied its concept without contemplating its compatibility with the socio-economic context of most of the developing countries.

Civil Societies

They are regarded as the conscience of a nation. Its concept refers to all those autonomous groups of associations occupying the domain of the family and the public realm of the state. It is important both for the building of democracy and for resolving conflicts, because such values as trust and tolerance are important for the building of democracy. Former (US) president, Bill Clinton in his 1994 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, pointed out that civil society can provide people with the economic opportunities to build their own countries, not to flee their borders and he further explained that civil society has helped great nations to build democracies where everyone is more secure, more prosperous and very successful. Diamond (1994) sees civil society as the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, largely self-supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order or set of rules. It is distant from society in general in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to exchange challenges. The power seekers have dominated the political space. Why have organizations that fought so gallantly against the military ceased to be important under democratic rule? To what extent has the experience of the military rule structured their internal processes and the strategies they employ? What are the characteristics of these civil society organizations and do they relate to the state? Are the weaknesses of civil society to be located in the relationship between disengagement and democratization? Answer to these questions will give proper focus in doing justice to the paper.

Civil Society and Democratization

Civil society for the purpose of this paper is hereby divided into two broad groups. The first comprises pro-democracy civil associations such as human rights organizations and political reform movements. The second consist of students' movement, labour unions and various professional associations. They work for the common good of the entire society. Civil society associations in third world countries have been widely used as the most effective means of controlling flagrant abuses of state power, holding rulers accountable to their citizens and establishing the foundation for durable democratic government (Chazen, 1996:282). According to Bolaji (2004), the most treasured of all human attribute is life. The next most treasured attribute is freedom. Under what circumstances would men have given up these two attributes? The first circumstance would be involuntary through conquest by an external force. It is precisely to avoid the first circumstance that men voluntary enter into an arrangement that would guarantee collective life and freedom even at the expense of individual life and freedom. The struggle by the civil society to take over control of governance from the military and its apologists can also be traced to the first military coup of January 15, 1966 that overthrew the elected civilian government. A succession of military government ruled the country with a short break of four years (1979-1983). After the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) there were agitations by civil society associations for the return to democratic rule.

The civil populace could not predict the then Head of State, Yakubu Gowon, as he shifted the dates of proposed election and disengagement of the military. Most Nigerians believed that the perceived insincerity on the part of Yakubu Gowon and the persistent agitation by the civil society associations led to the coup in 1975 that overthrew the government of Yakubu Gowon. The Murtala-Obasanjo regime successfully handed over to a democratically elected government under the leadership of AlhajiShehu Shagari. The regime of AlhajiShehu Shagari was aborted by General Buhari and Co., the rule of Buhari was seen as an unprecedented period of anti-politician rhetoric and high level of intimidation of past politicians and the civil society. A lot of draconian laws were introduced aimed at destroying the members of the political class, irrespective of where they came from. Some politicians were tried and jailed over political cum economic actions they took during the short period of civil rule, 1979 – 1983. Under the regime of General Buhari, the civil society suffered untold hardship and deprivations. Labour unions and professional associations who dare criticize the regime had their members harassed, intimidated and detained under very draconian decrees. Though the decrees helped to a greater extent in curbing corruption and embezzlement, especially in high places, it however brought with it so much pain and human right abuses. This diminished the effort of the unrelenting civil society to return the country to civil rule. The government of Buhari went ahead to proscribe several civil society organizations, mostly labour unions and professional associations. Even the press was not spared, Decree 4 (Public Officers Protection against False Accusation decree, 1984) empowered the government to jail journalists for publishing articles which in the opinion of the government were considered to be false.

Babangida overthrew the government of Buhari in a palace coup. General Babangida was well known for his deceptive style of leadership. His regime started with the pretence that it respected human rights, those labour unions and professional associations that were banned by his predecessor were quickly unbanned, all in a bid to win public acceptance and to make his regime popular among majority of the civil populace. However, this political “romance” did not last for long as the monster in the president soon reared its ugly head. The regime became very authoritarian; the members of civil society associations were constantly harassed by key players in the regime. Some journalists were bombed, a notable case was the use of parcel bomb in the assassination of top class journalists (Dele Giwa) and he was a co-founder of new swatch magazine. Others were either clamped in detention or disappeared under very mysterious circumstances. During the era of General Babangida, public demonstrations, strikes, proliferation of civil right groups and prodemocracy protests became the order of the day; all these were to fight against, the excesses of the government. Civil society becomes more aggressive and restless when there is misgovernance and military rule, this was the case during the latter days of General Babangida’s regime.

A very clear instance in which the civil society rose to its billing as an engine in the democratization process and a strong opposition to the action or perceived inaction of government was the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election. An election in which civil society was actively and enthusiastically involved. The civil society fully participated in the June 12, 1993 elections by channeling its energies and preferences through a two-party system created by the regime. The election was widely believed to be free, fair and credible. The government of the day under Ibrahim Babangida approved the use of domestic monitors and international observers, human rights organizations and NGOs representing the larger civil society. Some civil society associations were given enough freedom to collate results along with electoral officers. They all came to a consensus that the election was virtually free from electoral malpractices, the freest and most acceptable election ever conducted in this country, and as a result it should not have been annulled.

The civil populace broke into several interest groups, all in an attempt to correct the injustice done to the political process and the body polity. The civil society associations at the vanguard of this struggle include National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), Odua People Congress (OPC), Campaign for Democracy (CD), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) among others. The human rights groups succeeded in raising public awareness of human right abuses. They were instrumental in securing the release of some detainees. The prolonged crises emanating from the annulment of the election can also be traced to the character of the Nigerian military; they have tested political power and were not bothered about the consequences of denying Nigerians their democratic rights (Omoruyi, 1999). Moreover, it is worthy of note that in the period since 1985, changes were made in previously announced time table for political transition.

Parties were formed by the civil populace, candidates were nominated for various elective positions, but the government of General Babangida went ahead to ban the nominated authorities led to the traumatization of the civil society as well as the evolving political society comprising the party and electoral system.

Civil Societies and June 12 Struggle

During the June 12 struggle, the military used every oppressive method at its disposal to suppress the opposition who represented the larger civil society. Notable Nigerian including Anthony Enahoro the elder statesman reputed to have moved the motion for the independence of Nigeria in 1953, Boloji Akinyemi, former external Affairs minister, Bola Tinubu, a senator in the aborted third republic, Cornelious Adebayo, a former governor of Kwara State and so many others had to devise various ways and means to escape from the country into exile for personal safety (Kunle, 1999). NADECO was seen by the government as the main arrowhead in the struggle to reclaim the June 12 mandate.

The leaders of NADECO were constantly under the searchlight of the military, they were harassed and chased all over the country, some had their homes burgled, and in some cases explosives were used to completely destroy buildings belonging to NADECO chieftains. All these were done to completely stifle the opposition, which in this case represented the civil society. Some NADECO home based leaders (e.g. Alfred Rewane) died as a result of the democratic struggle by the civil society. General Ibrahim Babangida had the opportunity of being great (having conducted a free, fair and widely accepted election) but he chose to ignore that opportunity and instead plunged the country he swore to defend into deep crises, anarchy, chaos, the end of which even Babangida as a leader could not predict. Babangida should have made a positive difference and change in the life of this nation maybe that should have been the turning point that we all have been expecting. He deliberately ignored wise counsel from notable Nigerians, intellectuals, elites and elder statesmen. The civil society associations spearheaded the mass protest and civil disobedience that hounded General Babangida out of office.

Civil Societies (Post-Babangida Era)

Protest, strikes, public demonstration, widespread discontent and a proliferation of civil rights and pro-democracy groups that characterized the last days of the Babangida era continued into the undemocratic Interim National Government (ING) left behind by Babangida. A few members of some civil society associations who initially fought for an end to the military and an installation of a popularly elected government were given ministerial, board or other forms of appointments, and they were convinced to join the cabinet of Sani Abacha that overthrew the ING. Like in every military regime, Abacha was no exception; he used his position to intimidate the civil societies. Under the Abacha self-succession bid, political parties were founded and financed by government, candidates for elections were banned without any reasonable explanation by government, human right abuses became the order of the day, top military officers influenced the election of candidates for elective positions, the existing five political parties which were severally referred to as the five leprous fingers of the government finally nominated General Sani Abacha as the sole presidential candidate, this was against the spirit of the constitution and electoral laws. As pro-democracy movement press for democratic reforms, authoritarian regions work to weaken such movement by undermining the cohesion and ability to mobilize the people against the state.

Abacha built a wide network of spies and secret agents to undermine the human right groups and pro-democracy associations. The penetration of the groups by state intelligence agents coupled with massive repression and assassinations led to the birth of guerilla types of organizations in which leaders of such organizations became extra cautious, secretive and adopted a guerilla type approach in combating the high handedness, misgovernance and self-succession bid common with third world leaders. The death of Sani Abacha put a final stop to his self-succession bid, most Nigerians were relieved and civil society spared the unending trauma of Sani Abacha's regime. Though the regime of Addusalam Abubakar freed all political detainees, thus expanding the space for future democratic activities, the military and their apologists dictated the tone and form of the programme that eventually led to the installation of the government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999. The military thus has a way of determining the outcome of elections and political activities, which may not necessarily agree with the expectations of the pro-democracy and other civil society associations.

Though civil associations work hard in trying to bring about democratic reforms, they do not necessarily hold the initiative during negotiations. They tend to be engulfed in the same credibility problems facing the state.

Civil society organizations can be more effective and purposeful in the democratization process only when they form structures that correspond to the state's institutions and can therefore respond better to their challenges, hence only the labour movement has been able to remain relevant in the current democratic era. It still remains the only truly national organizations in civil society in active engagement with the highly centralized federal government; this is good for the democratic process. According to the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), the country is drifting towards a one party state. It does not end at that, since the one party state is under the rule of one man. It is proper to say that there is no democracy in the way the internal affairs of the ruling party are conducted. If we look at the National Assembly, since the current president got to power, he has succeeded in having a full grip on the national Assembly. The National Assembly is required by law to serve as a check on the president, but this is not the case. Agitation for good governance by the civil society is on the rise, all in a bid to check the military fashion of leadership of the current president. The president has no respect for the principle of separation of powers. Democracy as we know is founded on the basis of separation of power (Titus Mann: Vanguard, September 2, 2005:44). The present government came into being in 1999. It has demonstrated nothing but contempt for pro-democracy groups calling for the convocation of a Sovereign national Conference.

The Sovereign National Conference entails the rights of the people to meet in a kind of universal conference, which is not necessarily guided, although it has to have guidelines. The aim of the (SNC) would be to dialogue and discuss the terms and conditions of their relationship (Nicholas Ohwo; Daily Sun, March 16, 2005). However, two years into the second term of the current president, he saw the wisdom in convening a national conference. The manner in which the delegates were selected was undemocratic. When the conference started they had documents to work on, they received memoranda from government, private individuals, and from civil society groups. During the course of the conference, some documents in for of a draft constitution containing among other things provisions for a six year term for the president was circulated. Though the conference in its plenary session rejected it, at the end of the conference the document (draft constitution) became part of the reports of the conference that the president presented to the National Assembly. This is the document that the national Assembly is being lobbied to consider.

The move by the president to either extend the duration of his second term in office or to seek for a fresh four-years third term will not go down well with the civil society, and will completely pitch the pro-democracy organizations against the president. Pro-National Conference formed during the fourth republic is also calling for a Sovereign National Conference; they are determined to convene such a conference. Former president Obasanjo made overtures to the members of Pro-National Conference, but it is clear that the problem of state restructuring and other burning issues which is his view are no-go areas are top on the agenda of the pro-democracy groups. The plan by the government to encourage civil associations to form a civil societies commission would not be in the best interest of the civil societies and the populace in general. This would make their activities to be closely monitored and the government can employ divide and rule to break the ranks of the members. It is worthy of note that the influx of referred military officers, military money bags into the politics of the fourth republic will militarise the polity, this will lead to a clash of interest between the civilians and the retired military men. Meanwhile, it is not an overstatement to contend that the return of the country to electoral democracy in 1999 has not made significant impact on the economic and social well-being of the people.

Conclusion

The role of civil society should go beyond fighting for the individual rights of the citizens, because democracy is not about right alone. Their activities should include ensuring participation, interest representation and contestation. Thus, the role and performance of civil society must properly be situated in the context of state relation. Most of the civil society associations are elitist in character; as a result they are far from the communities or people the claim to represent. They are some civil society associations whose presence is felt at the grassroots, but are not very relevant at the national level, this tend to have negative implications on the effort of civil society associations. The democratic challenges for civil society associations under a brutal dictator like Sani Abacha differ from those under an elected government because of their peculiarities. Therefore, the approach, methods and strategies of civil societies in combating misgovernance under the military dictator should differ significantly from those under a democratically elected government. In view of the new challenges under a democratic government, a process of renewal in which the structure and operation of the organization have to be redefined. The task of redefining the organization structure and operation is not an easy one; the amount of transformation process will go a long way in influencing their relevance and effectiveness in an enduring and lasting democracy.

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