Democratization and Development in Nigeria: The Fourth Republic in Perspective

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Abstract

Nigeria’s present democratization, which culminated in the country’s Fourth Republic on May 29, 1999, started amidst great hope and expectations. Since then, the nature of the democratic project has been the subject of debate in various circles. This paper is a contribution to the debate on democratization and development in Nigeria. It examines the nexus among the 'embattled duo,' using a contextual analysis of the Nigerian experience under the fourth republic. It argues that whereas democratization, defined as the process of transition to a stable/consolidated democracy, could be a harbinger of development. The paper notes that the present state of democratization in Nigeria gives cause for concern, as it tends towards the direction of disempowerment. While democratization has been on course Nigeria, it has not taken a firm root, because it has so far been pursued and predicated on alien institutions. Given this scenario, the paper suggests that there is an urgent need for a reversal of the trend, if democratization must be genuinely nurtured and sustained in Nigeria. The paper concludes that addressing the problem of democratization and development must involve all the stakeholders. This is a major step towards stabilizing and entrenching democracy in Nigeria.

Introduction

Democracy is a vital instrument that propels political proficiency, economic development and social stability of any nation state. Democracy in Nigeria has been a mere political desideratum hanging on a limping utopia (Adewusi, 2011). A true democracy is a sine qua non for the development of all sectors of any country’s economy. As observed by Nwanolue and Ojukwu (2012), the general success of any practicing democracy is deeply incumbent upon three major challenges. First, the challenge of legislative efficiency, in which the activities of the national assembly ought to reflect and reform positively the socio-economic and political lacuna that has evaded the country for some reasonable length of while. Second, is the challenge of the executive and management of the nation’s economy. Lastly, the willingness of the legislative powers that be, to grant much reverenced policy of inclusiveness to the hoi polloi to participate vibrantly in the daily governance of the country (Mamudu & Hassan, 2011).

Regrettably, the practice of the so-called democracy in the 21st Century Nigeria is intrinsically characterized by political instability, social acabre, cultural balderdash and economic quagmire, resulting in unemployment of all forms, leading to abject hunger and indescribable poverty. The attendant implication of this misnomer are practical existence of all manner of crimes such as
kidnapping, armed robbery, prostitution, sexual slavery, pen-robbery, and electioneering bickering and hooliganism (Nwanolue and Ojukwu, 2012).

Stemming from the foregoing, the principal objective of this paper is to assess the state of democratization vis-à-vis development in Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual ambivalence, as well as confusions, that hover around democratization and development could be attributed to the fact that, all seems to be, though in varying degrees, multidimensional and value loaded (Omotola, 2007).

The issue of democratization has been the most topical in recent times as regards Nigeria’s development. Democratization simply connotes the process of installing a democratic system of administration. This, of course, involves an enhancement of the social condition necessary for the facilitation of a democratization process, characterized by a robust political atmosphere which ultimately engenders socio-economic and socio-cultural development of society. A democratic system of government is that political system in which everybody has equal opportunity to participate in the political process in whatever capacity that is deemed fit. A government, in this regard, derives its authority from the people who, in essence, choose those in government. An important feature of this system is the supremacy of the national or common interest, which must supersede personal interest (Ibagere and Omoera, 2010).

Gunther et al. (1995) contend that the democratization process has three phases: the fall of the authoritarian regime, consolidation, and enduring democracy. Obviously, the foregoing opinion and similar others do not specify a time frame for the actualization of the three highlighted phases. It, therefore, means that the peculiarities in each system would play a profound role in the process of actualization. In the case of Nigeria, the slow pace of the process raises doubt in the minds of the generality of the people who, for instance, are confounded as to why such basic aspects of democracy as elections and legislative duties still lack significant purposiveness, twelve years after the Fourth Republic commenced.

Basically, democratization connotes a process of movement from authoritarianism to a stable democracy. Democratization is the process of establishing, strengthening, or extending the principles, mechanism, and institutions that define a democratic regime (Osaghae, 1999). In his elaboration on this definition, Osaghae opines that two points could be inferred. One, that democratization is relative, incremental and phased. Two, that democratization is variegated in nature, calling for caution not to analyze it as a blanket process. It was Osaghae (1995), who equates democratization with transition to democracy, he explains it as a political process because it basically has to do with the transformation of the state and the political society. Golden, (2010), therefore conceptualizes democracy to incorporate the exploitative and alliterative tendencies often demonstrated by the capitalists against the downtrodden. According to him, democracy, empirically speaking could mean a socio-economic and political formation that grants the hoi polloi the irreducible instrument of determining and participating
effectively in the day-to-day smooth governance of their country. That is, the general transformative and re-structuring powers of that state are vested in the hands of the electorates.

Yahaya (2007) sees democratization as 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.

In his own view Potter (2000:368) conceptualised democratization thus:

\[ \text{a political movement from less accountable to more accountable government, from less competitive (or non-existent) elections to fuller and fairer predicted civil and political rights, from weak (or non-existent) autonomous associations to more numerous associations in civil society.} \]

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. He 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.

Onyeoziri (1989) argued that democratization needed to be situated within the following poles:

1) The domain of individual and group rights and freedoms;
2) The domain of popular and equal participation in collective decision;
3) The dimensions of accountability of government to mass publics and constituent minorities; and
4) The dimension of the application of the principles of equal citizenship in all spheres of life - social, economic and political.

He further opined that a system that recognizes more of these rights has democratized more than one that recognizes only few of these rights (Onyeoziri, 1989).

Democratization is more appropriately viewed as the institutionalization of democratic principles as part of everyday culture in a society. It finds expression in the channeling of behavioral patterns towards democratic ideals. It permeates all facets of community life from religion through the economy, marriage family to politics. These institutions legitimize the activities of those who exercise authority. If these institutions are absent militarism might be misconstrued for democratization (Ifeanacho and Nwagwu, 2009).
Be that as it may, it should be noted that democratization has generally been seen as the solution to Nigeria's multifaceted problems. This is what Ottaway (1995) called the 'democratic solution', which he considers as "certainly the most desirable and probably the only viable one in the long run". The validity of this claim only remains to be supported by empirical realities across the continent. May be a little more time is needed before a comprehensive assessment could be undertaken. Yet, a preliminary evaluation is desirable (Omotola, 2007).

From the above explanations, it is important to state 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.

Development on the other hand, is a problematic concept. It has been one of the most ambiguous terms in social sciences discourse and it continues to generate debate among various scholars.

In general terms, however, development has been viewed from political, economic and social dimensions. Sen (1990) offered illuminating thoughts on the concept of development. For him, development connotes 'capacity expansion'. As capacity expansion, development requires adequate empowerment of the state and the society such that they can adequately distil their complimentary responsibilities. It requires an enhanced state capacity as well as institutional and governmental stability. It is only within such framework that individual members of the society can find fulfillment in terms of the basic necessities of life. As freedom, development demands great latitude of autonomy for the political community and its constituent parts; as well as for the individual members of such communities.

Todaro (1989) conceptualizes development as a multidimensional process involving major changes in social structures, popular attitudes, and national institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality and the eradication of absolute poverty. Rodney (1972) sees beyond the individual or people’s perception of development and conceived development whether economic, political or social to imply both increase in output and changes in the technical and institutional arrangement by which it is produced. In other words and more importantly, development is a multi-dimensional concept and in spite of the various conceptions, development is basically about the process of changes which lies around the spheres of societal life.

Within the context of this paper, the term ‘development’ is a conscious acceleration of economic, political, social, educational and technological growth of Nigeria through effecting, consistent, progressive and enduring policies of the government. It is conceived in this paper that such effective policies of government that are capable of effective progressive development in all spheres of our national life must curiously evolve from a truly democratic political system in which adequate value is placed on protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is also believed in this paper that the overall development of
Nigeria cannot be realized in an environment which is characterized by lack of respect for democratic process and fundamental rights of citizens.

The Nexus Of Democratization And Development

The interface between democratization and development has long engaged the sustained interest of scholars and researchers across the globe. However, much as it has generated enormous interest, no universal evidence seems to be shared that one is more important than the other. The debate on the relationship between democracy and development has equally been on the front burner of scholarly discourse over the years. The debate therefore remains one of the hotly debated issues, today as yesterday; and may continue to be (Omotola, 2006). No wonder, Feng (2001) noted that, “Democracy and Development remains one of the most important topics – perhaps even the single most important in the field of international and comparative political economy for years to come”.

These debates were aptly summarized by Olufemi (2000) thus, one school of thought argued that democracy was unrealizable And unsustainable without a requisite dose of economic development.

Democratization and development share certain basic virtues such as popular participation, capacity expansion as well as freedom (Mazrui, 2002). Democratization is an independent variable that explains the level of economic development of any society. As observed by Osaghae (1995), it is important to emphasize the point that while democratization may engender development, much of it depends to some extent on the context within which the analysis is carried out. Moreover, the impact of democratization on development could be a reflection of its time-spell as well as the depth of the democratization process itself. It could also be a spectral, especially in the short run, giving the fact that development is a multidimensional concept. Development in a given aspect, say for example at the political level, may in the long run induce development in other aspects. That being the case, caution must be exercised in making generalized statements about their relationship. This explains why a contextual analysis would be of high utility having been reputed for its ability to account for differences in the same phenomenon in different systems.

The idea of popular participation as noted by Adedeji (1997) is crucial to both democratization and development. In its comprehensive usage, popular participation is the empowerment of the people to involve themselves in the regulating structures and in designing policies and program that serve the interest of all, and contribute optimally to the development process. This prompted Zack-Williams (2001) to conclude that “no democracy, no development”. According to him, an essential weapon of democracy that makes it a requisite for economic development is that democracy empowers the general population to control decision-making. As such, the governed are presumed to have all it takes to hold governments accountable by insisting on transparency, openness and other measures of control. The absence of these virtues is considered as very inimical to the pursuit of economic development. Democracy
according to this school has been found to facilitate economic development with little or no political or social exaction from the people.

Issues In Democratization And Development In Nigeria

Nigeria's march to constitutional civilian rule has so far been a tortuous adventure, characterized by moments of hope raised and hope dashed. The democratization processes that ushered in the fledging fourth republic were particularly daunting. It could be said to have effectively begun with the setting up of the Political Bureau in 1986 by the General Babangida regime. Reputed as the most ambitious, imaginative, complex and expensive transition in the world; it however ended in fiasco with the tragic and arrogant annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election (Omotola, 2007).

The sudden dealt of General Abacha on June 8, 1998 however paved the way for the emergence of General Abdulsalami Abubakar as the Head of State. The basic concern of the regime would appear to be a successful transition to a democratically elected government within the shortest possible time. The emergence of a democratic Nigeria in May 1999, ended 16 years of consecutive military rule. This fourth republic was anchored on the 1999 Constitution, whose features are not substantially different from the 1979 Constitution. Obasanjo, a former general, took over the leadership of a country as a president that faced many problems, including a dysfunctional bureaucracy, collapsed infrastructure, and a military that wanted a reward for returning quietly to the barracks (Nwalonue and Ojukwu, 2012).

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.

In Nigeria, democracy has been restored for over a decades ago, which so much hopes and expectations by the people. For instance, it is assumed that with democracy, people would be free to choose their leaders and representatives and hold them accountable for the overall objective of fast tracking development and improving the general living conditions of the masses. This expectation is not misplaced considering that Nigeria has abundant human and natural resources. However, the reality on ground has shown that this expectation is yet to be realized (Okafor, 2011).

It is hardly surprising that the various attempts at democratization have failed abysmally. The reason for the continued failure is not far to seek. One basic problem has remained unsolved right from the drafting of the first constitution in 1922. This is the problem of integration (Onoriose 2006). This problem appears to have bifurcated and continues to multiply in different trajectories with the effect that the plethora of problems associated with disunity continues to manifest as insurmountable impediments to a true democracy.

In his analysis of the inability of democracy in Nigeria to bring about expected level of development Agagu (2004) stated that: The failure of democracy to engender development is
therefore inextricably tied up to the nature of the Nigerian state whose origin and initial goal was not to pay any serious attention to the problems of the subjects but to exploit one people and their resources to serve the goal of the metropolis. In other words, it had never been inclusive *ab initio*. This was later reinforced by the nature of political elites that emerged and whose goal was self-serving at the detriment of the masses and even the state. The elites did not see any reason to change the focus of the state, since the dictative nature of the state, as it were, at independence was also appropriate for them to serve their own purpose. The type of democracy operating in Nigeria inhibits or hinders developmental efforts. No wonder, Ake (1996) remarked that; We have pursued development with a confusion of purposes and interest and with policies full of ambiguities and contradictions. It is not that we could not find suitable notions of development or ways to apply them to our experience.

What appears as damaging evidence for Nigeria’s democracy is the failure of democracy to meet the materials aspirations of the Nigerian people alongside evidence of tension in the polity among the different levels and branches of government as well as the various constituent elements of the Nigerian federation. Of these concerns, the most critical is the popular expectation that democracy would overcome poverty, deprivation and want, and above all create democratic citizens.

Good governance has for many years remained elusive in Nigeria’s political terrains because of the fact that this worthy aspect of culture, tradition and norms, political vestiges has been abandoned. Rather, despotic and corrupt leaders mostly in uniform, have always found their ways into the polity as leaders (Joseph, 1987).

Corruption is quite widespread and consists of various forms and this is why each successive administration in Nigeria has always been accused of corruption. Till today, it is pertinent to note that some state governors have been accused of corrupt practices including the immediate past Senate President, Adolphus Wabara, with some members of the National Assembly in league with the former minister for Education, Prof. Fabian Osuji. So also, the erstwhile Inspector General of Police, Tafa Balogun was convicted on charges of graft. All these serve as barriers to our growth as a nation because private interests have taken over public interest. Thus corruption has eroded efficiency and professionalism of patriotic services to the Nigerian federation (Odeh, 2010). Corruption is no doubt an endemic problem that has thoroughly affected the development of the Nigerian economy. This in turn has clearly enhanced poverty, unemployment, prostitution, armed robbery, and many social ills that endanger the lives of millions of Nigerians by exposing them to a high level of insecurity within the polity.

Cognizant of the damaging effects of corruption on Nigeria, the administration of President Obasanjo, upon assuming power in 1999, established the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offenses Commission (ICPC is its official acronym) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The administration charged these commissions with investigating and prosecuting various criminal activities and officials involved in corrupt practices. Initially these commissions prosecuted a few low-level officials, leading to near
universal condemnation of their efforts. In the recent past, however, the ICPC and EFCC have scored some notable successes. The EFCC has facilitated the arrest and prosecution of many fraudsters. It has also prosecuted officials involved in corrupt enrichment, including a former inspector general of police. Further, the president of the Senate was forced from office under the pressure of accusations that he took bribes from the education minister to pass an inflated budget. The government has also formed a partnership with Microsoft to crack down on the notorious email fraud (Polgreen 2005). In spite of these efforts, Transparency International, an independent global watch on corruption, continues to rank Nigeria among the five most corrupt nations in the world.

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the challenges of democratization in Nigeria better than the problem of ethno-nationalism. The issue of ethnic cleavages, manifested in the high incidence of ethno-nationalism, has loomed quite large in the affairs of successive Nigerian governments. A major problem arising from the ethnic and religious diversity of Nigeria is that it makes democratic compromise difficult. The different groups clamor for scarce resources and for control of the government. This leads to what Daniel Chirot (1977) refers to as "democratic paralysis".

As Nigeria works out representational democracy, there have been conflicts between the Executive and Legislative branches over major appropriations and other proposed legislation. A sign of federalism has been the growing visibility of state governors and the inherent friction between Abuja and the various state capitals over resource allocation. The perennial disagreements between the executive and legislative branches of government over appropriation laws is explained in terms of inherited tradition of executive dominance despite the inherent pre-eminence of the legislature in the constitutional allocation of responsibilities. Lack of capacity, knowledge and information of budget issues which is even more acute with sub-national legislatures makes executive dominance more real. However, faced with pressures from their constituents and “concerned with their re-election chances, federal and state legislators may become vocal and uncompromising advocates of the inclusion of funds not provided for in the draft budgets for projects in their constituencies, although they risk the prospects, in so doing, of the president or governor, based on their power of patronage and control over the party machinery, to ensure that they are not renominated by the party for their opposition to executive branch bills”. In addition, the overbearing role of the executive linked to situation of extreme centralization of power and resources has remained a key challenge in Nigeria’s democracy; it is at the root of the growing culture of impunity and lack of respect for the rule of law.

Among the various groups in Nigeria, the presence of hostility is rampant and this has constantly created instability in the polity as a result of nepotism (Nnoli, 1995). Merit and efficiency are scarified on the altar of ethnic chauvinism". Hence conflict between groups seems to be the order of the day in the polity rather than the development of a cooperative spirit. The competitive nature among Nigerian ethnic groups has till date made census figures questionable because right from the first population census crisis of 1954 to that of 1962 the Southern ethnic groups have repeatedly challenged the return of high figures for the North.
Ethnicity is therefore a plague that is prevailing over democratic consolidation in Nigeria as there were calls by the Christian and other socio-cultural groupings in the polity threatening to boycott the census if ethnicity and religion were omitted from the list of questions. This is as a result of the fact that census figures have been a backbone for the hegemonic disposition of a particular group in the Nigerian federation over the rest, so in the contest for the control of stale power and resources, ethnic sentiments have always been employed by both minority and majority ethnic groups in the pursuit of national resources. The increased ethnic tension that this has brought, has affected economic development as the climate is considered not investment friendly (Odeh, 2010).

Furthermore, Nigeria is today battling with modern day autocracy that retains some "democratic norms." The system substitutes "democratic" system with "totalitarian rule" in "every sphere of human interest and activity. The increasing pattern of centralization and political control by the executive. And this contradicts the principles of democracy that emphasizes freedom of opinion and decentralization of the political system. The Nigerian politics that is characterized by intimidation, oppression, and subordination is in most part a product of the general culture. Political democratization involves certain values, which includes freedom of association, citizen participation in decision-making and non-arbitrary rule, tolerance of opposing views, respect for law and order, free and fair elections, leadership transparency, etc. However, since 1999 Nigeria has been witnessing an increasing build-up of authoritarian structures and institutions. The control units, particularly the Police, EFCC, ICPC, SSS, INEC, etc, are authoritarian and thus out of control. Consequently, human rights abuses have worsened in the society over the years, and mostly the common people are feeling the pinch.

Democratization may be in vogue in Africa, but democracy is not yet a reality in Nigeria. One possible explanation is the weakness of civil society. If civil society is strengthened to perform its democratic roles, civil society can exert pressure on the state and promote democratic development and consolidation. The creation of a vibrant civil society therefore is critical for the effective performance of democracy and must be linked inextricably to the social, cultural, and historical institutions of a society. Nigeria’s greatest weaknesses lie in the civic, cultural, and moral realm where government solutions are often deficient and unworkable (Imade, 2009). If Nigeria has to reduce the role of the government, it will have to find ways to strengthen other sectors that are public but not governmental—that are civil society.

Concluding Remarks

Without any doubt, the faltering of democratization in Nigeria may be attributed to the fact that it is not enmeshed so much in the society as it failed in its entirely to pay attention to Nigerian realities and peculiarities. This point has been well stressed that development of democratic institutions can only be accomplished by Nigerian themselves, and only when the social foundations are at least somewhat conducive.
The principles of democracy are the same all over the world, but the component parts of each society are peculiar. As a result, the conditions that make democracy and legislative efficiency possible in one society may constitute a hindrance in another. The leaders and citizens must encourage and show respect for cultural differences while at the same time encouraging the diverse population to work for common goals (Nwalonue and Ojukwu, 2012).

While democratization has been on course, it has not taken a firm root, because it has so far been pursued and predicated on alien institutions. Given this scenario, the paper calls for an urgent need for a reversal of the trend, if democratization must be genuinely nurtured and sustained in Africa.

Caught up in this precarious and pathetic situation, there is an urgent need to redress the situation, if democratization must live up to its billings in Nigeria. It is necessary to reconcile the disjuncture between Nigerian peculiarities and the inherited institutional as well as socialization structures upon which Nigerian democratization experiment are anchored. As long as these structures remain the platform upon which Nigerian democratization drives and strategies are anchored, all developmental drives may appear like putting the cart before the horse and to that extent, turn out to be an exercise in futility. There is therefore the need for adaptability to make the democratization process amenable to Nigerian realities.

If democratization and development must be genuinely nurtured and sustained, there is an urgent need for a reversal of the trend, social mobilization in all its ramifications as a highly useful and pivotal option.

The prospects of thriving democratic process and practice in Nigeria are bleak as long as abject poverty, stark illiteracy, the value of conspicuous consumption, and disregard for party loyalty hold sway. Elimination of poverty through well articulated poverty alleviation program will go a long way in making the voters more self-reliant, independent minded and rational. There is a need for the development of a new approach that aims at the self-determination of individuals and communities, at the economic, social and political level. Such an approach should be based on the formation of new political, economic and social structure that secure citizens control over their own resources. Hence, there is the need to fashion out a new inclusive democracy which could determined collectively the basic need of the population and find ways to meet them.

The process of consolidating democracy in Nigeria must guarantee a synergy between the government and the governed. There is an urgent need to re-invent and reposition the wheel of democracy on our polity. The trend in the world is towards sustaining democracy. Our democratic agenda as observed by Kolawole (2004) must of necessity aim at evolving, guaranteeing and sustaining an enduring democracy. For democracy to have any meaning, government must be accountable to the people, not only for the resources they received and spend, but for the very policies they formulated and executed. In this respect, if there is so much faith in democracy, it is because of the ‘belief that democratic political processes will
make the state perform better, curb corruption, rationally allocate resources and secure for the individuals a dignified place within the civil society.

Developing a system spearheaded by civil society for measuring government performance from the local government level to the national level provides the best context for checking government’s corruption and abuse of power. If civil society is to help develop and consolidate democracy, “its mission cannot simply be to check, criticize, and resist the state. It must also complement and improve the state and enhance its democratic legitimacy and effectiveness.” Limiting state power via decentralization is key to successful governance. Over-centralization of power encourages tyranny. As the saying goes, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Decentralization of state power to the grass root level also brings the government closer to the people. In addition, it encourages experimentation and promotes unity without uniformity.

Central to the resolution of the challenges of democratization in Nigeria is the mobilization of the citizenry. The starting point would be the empowerment of the masses in terms of qualitative basic needs (food, shelter and clothing), education and secured access to health care. Its central focus must be to decolonize the mind of Nigerians, both the power elite and the ruled alike, while stressing the fact that development is more feasible when situated within the framework of the cultural milieu. The mass media, civil society organizations, and indeed all and sundry have a responsibility in this challenge.

References


