

CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

It is quite intriguing that fifty-two years after Nigeria attained her nominal independence from her colonial masters and twelve years into her democratic dispensation following a protracted and most challenging struggle against a rapacious military hegemony, the dividends of good governance have largely eluded the majority who wallow in abject poverty in the midst of abundant resources. Thus, the current democratic experiment appears to be fraught with similar imperfections that plagued the past democratic attempts thereby making transformation a myth rather than reality in Nigeria. The dire need to institutionalize the culture of good governance in Nigeria so as to improve the quality of life of the Nigerian people informs the position of this study. Hence, civil society has been adopted as a veritable tool for achieving good governance. This paper, therefore, attempts to carry out a thorough exposition of civil society organization vis- a- vis its transformatory role as an arbiter to redeem the Nigeria society from imminent total collapse as the country is yet to arrive at the ultimate destination of democracy as the government of the people, duly elected by the people, in the service of the people.

Keywords: *Civil Society, democracy and good governance.*

INTRODUCTION

Civil society has tended to surface in political circumstances that offer new opportunities for the freedom of the individual. Even before the tensions of the bi-polar world between the West and the East, some political scientist like Theobald, Kessinger pointed to the fact that the all important concept of nation-states was beginning to loose meaning and rapidly becoming nebulous. The totalitarian government of various nations had prefixes like “democratic republics of...” Cuba, Northern Korea, defunct Soviet Union, Checkoslovakia, Yugoslavia and others had prefixes that made the notion of states very problematic for both macro and micro analysis (Balogun, 1989).

Political scientists and commentators from the West show that despite the scientific and technological advances of the nation-states of the East, an essential segment of the nation-state was being destroyed, vilified, trampled upon and frightened by the appurtenance of totalitarian governments. The coinage of the concept of civil society did the magic (Ekeh, 2002). The civil society which ideally should be receiving and enjoying the benefits of good governance became the most oppressed, least developed and the last to benefit from the progress of "nation-states". In the West, however, it was different, essentially because it is the civil society that attests to or

certifies progress within the construct of their respective governments (Ekeh, 2002). As observed by Akinlade and Ibitoye (2004), the study of civil society became a major pre-occupation of students of politics in the 1950's and 1960's. This was as a result of response to the burgeoning number and activities of these groups and a reflection of a shift from the study of the formal constitutional and institutional aspects of politics towards emphasis on political power. At one time, attacked as subversive of democratic processes, civil society later became widely regarded as the essence of the system of democratic pluralism where it was argued that they stood as a buffer between the citizens and the overbearing state (Akindele, 2003).

Furthermore, political theorists such as Bentley and Truman argued that civil society organizations are the fundamental building blocks of the political processes and that political institutions could be seen as being driven by civil society. They were not regarded as a threat to democratic processes because individuals were considered to be free to form groups and as a group was formed on one side of a political issue, another could arise which would redress the balance (Akinlade and Ibitoye, 2004). Indeed, it is the voluntary and symbiotic relationship between the civil society and the ruling elite that guarantees progress and ensures that dividends get spread. The absence of such political symbiosis would ultimately lead to major contradictions and disintegration as witnessed in the Eastern block, since 1989 (Newswatch, 2009).

The position expressed above simply summarizes the Western liberal democracies strand where civil society organizations have now been accepted as an engine of growth by their constructive and objective criticisms, debates and unalloyed interest in the policy programme of a nation. Thus, they are accommodated, tolerated and considered in terms of views before major policy decisions are reached. However, it is not an exaggeration to say that civil society organizations are weak and ineffective in Africa, Nigeria inclusive. The reason for this is not far-fetched, this is because democracy has a weak base in Africa generally. For example, Nigeria spent almost thirty years under military rule before democracy was eventually enthroned on the 29th May, 1999. Hence, the existing relationship between the state and civil society in Nigeria is still that of confrontation rather than accommodation, of competition rather than partnership. The media, for example, are largely perceived as an enemy rather than a socially responsive watchdog even under the present political dispensation.

In addition, the refusal or failure of the African Political elite to tropicalise 'democracy' and thereby engage local structure, wisdom and energy in the running of governments partly explains the distance between civil societies and African rulerships. The only exception is in Botswana where democracy is working because of the basic initial resolve to tropicalise democracy and utilize all uncorrupted local structures of communalism and age-grade system into effective partnerships with democracy. Today, the success of Botswana is the most jealously guarded secret and, without doubts the richest country in Africa, using GDP and per capital indices, as yardsticks (Balogun, 1989). This is a proof that democracy and civil societies benefit tremendously

from all atavistic sentiments, feelings and energies, wherever found. However, as in many African countries and in the developing world in general, civil society is growing. The struggle against military dictator has given rise to a large, complex and advocacy oriented civil society in the country. In different ways, organs of civil society as well as the vibrant media have constituted a loud and effective anti-military, pro-democracy voice in the country. The new challenge for civil society is to adjust to the changed political climate. As there is no better time than now in our contemporary political history that we must invest our quality time to ponder on the ways and manners by which we can collectively make democracy work in Nigeria, given the universally acceptable truism that there is no better alternative to democratic government.

The term "Civil Society" is very broad and without borders. It is, therefore, suggested that it would be improper to talk of the civil society without giving a contextual meaning to the term. The civil society is the bedrock of any civilized country. It is called civil because it is predominantly for both enlightened and the not so enlightened members of the society who are commonly united by a common bond and aspiration which presupposes the existence of the rule of law, good governance, demand for representative government and protection of the rights of the people, among others. Thomson (2007) defined civil society as the organizations that arise out of voluntary association within the society, found between the extended family and the state. Examples, of these include professional organizations, labour unions, trade associations, women's groups, church assemblies, businesses, special interest campaigns, community groups, right down to sports and social clubs. In this respect, any group organizes beyond the family but not part of the state apparatus, can be said to be part of civil society.

Political activity within civil society is diverse. Groups representing numerous different interests, naturally enough are not united in their demand. Politics within the civil society is competitive, just as it is "high politics" of the state. These different interests also influence how civic associations relate to the state. Some groups will co-operate with the government while others will voice their opposition. In any case, each groups will attempt to influence state decision making with varying results. If however, a large gap exists between interests of civil society and the state with the state unresponsive to civil society demands, this may lead to citizens actually challenging the authority of the state.

To put succinctly, civil society are formal organizations of people with common interest for the purpose of influencing government to the advantage of the general public. It is not an integral part of any constitution, except that their formation may be accommodated under one of the fundamental rights of individual, that is, right to association. In fact, democratic principles allow it. Even though, there is coincidence of interests among its members, it is different from political parties because it is smaller in organization and scope. Its functions are also different. Democracy is a household word which has adherents and critics. The practice of democracy is believed to have started with the Greeks specifically in Athens of the 5th century B.C, when

every adult male citizen were the ones eligible to participate in the decision making process of the city-states (Ekeh, 1992). However, women and slaves were outside this franchise group (Omodia and Erunke, 2000). In modern times, every nation wants to be democratic or at least to be seen to be democratic. In this sense, democracy can be understood as an ideology, a concept or a theory. It is an ideology that details the best possible form of social organization. Based on the foregoing, democracy can be referred to as an ideal. Thus, to be democratic is to have faith in people, to believe that people have inalienable rights to the notion that all people are equal in some fundamental and essential ways.

As cited in Akinlade and Ibitoye (2004), in the words of Sartori (1965), democracy is a political system in which the influence of the majority is assured by elective and competitive minorities to whom it is entrusted. Abraham Lincoln (1863) says that democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Modern theorists have seen it as the majority rule with minority interest. One important reason why democracy is very controversial and difficult to define is that, it has become very fashionable to difficult types of government that lay claim to being democratic. However, a useful way of clarifying the concept of democracy is to realise that it is used to refer both to a system of government, and to a set of principles:

- (1) As a system of government, it implies rule by the people through their elected representatives. It can also take the form of either direct or indirect democracy.
- (2) As a set of principles, it pre-supposes the idea that political power originates from the people and that government is therefore legal or legitimate only when it is based on the consent of the people.

In this regard, democracy has become the yardstick of political civility, the measure of collective tolerance in both domestic and external relations; a tool of modernization and transformation formed along the Western capitalist model and an assurance to global investors that inter-state investments can be sufficiently protected by competent judiciary of the democracy. By and large, at a public lecture organized by the Newswatch magazine in 2009, the eminent Political Scientist, Elaigwu identified FIVE major points which he described as the minimum characteristics of democracy; firstly, is authority which emanates from the people. Secondly, a democratic polity must be based on the rule of law. Thirdly, a democratic polity must be legitimate.

Fourthly, there must be element of choice because people must have the right to effect changes in the leadership or the government of their country. Lastly, there must be accountability and leaders must be held responsible for their actions as representatives of the people who are trusted with power to achieve particular ends (Newswatch, 2009). The implication of this is that any nation that cannot meet these requirements cannot lay claim to democracy. Contemporary thinking about good governance has inevitably helped to re-focus attention on the significance of government, even though; they are now expected to do things differently from the past (Akindele, 2003). Good governance, a "catch -all" phrase which has been popularized by the Bretton Wood Industries is used to describe the inter-play of best

practices in the governance of a nation. “This in turn requires system of accountability, adequate and reliable information and efficiency in resource management and the delivery of public services”. This is a vivid observation about the interlocking relationship between the end and means of governance. It provides the back drop to the very critical role of administrative constitutions in the promotion of good governance (Okafor and Eloagu, 2002). Good governance, therefore, characterizes issues of performance in the management of the country's political, economic and social resources in order to enhance human progress, social well-being and sustainable development and to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of development programmes. According to Okafor and Eloagu (2002), good governance is an open system with inputs and outputs from its internal and external environment. Changes in the world's economic, political and social systems have brought unprecedented demands for good governance in both developed and developing countries. This, therefore, suggests that good governance is the pivot around which other factors of development revolves, particularly as development is no longer measured solely by per capital income. Other indices of human development include equity in the development of the citizenry (both men and women), co-operation among identifiable groups, security and sustainability, particularly for the younger generation.

Good governance ensures that political, social and economic choices and decisions are made on the basis of broad consensus in the society through elected representatives (Akindele, 2003). Good governance should among other things, be participatory, transparent, equitable and accountable. It should enhance high-level institutional effectiveness and economic growth. The rule of law must prevail and complement by a politically stable environment for the formulation and implementation of government policies. Good governance also ensures co-operation between the political class and the administrative class for the delivery of high quality services needed for sustainable development and growth. Good governance presumes the primacy of laws and due process, the independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, the separation of powers as between the executive and the legislative and political accountability (Ikotun 2010). Good governance by promoting the values of political participation of the citizens, transparency, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency which are fundamental features of democracy must necessarily be equated with democratic government. In view of this, Balogun (1989) outlines the following factors as critical for the birth and sustenance of good governance in Africa:

- Open and dynamic policy making
- Need for managerial adaptability
- Public service restructuring
- New service ethics
- Self-reliant private sectors
- Political will
- A people oriented leadership, and
- A developed human capital

DETERMINANTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY EFFECTIVENESS

Eckstein as cited in Akinlade and Ibitoye (2004), was able to classify the factors determining the effectiveness of civil society in any political system under the following heading:

Group Characteristics: Certain characteristics of groups are likely to determine decisively their effectiveness under almost any pattern of policies or structure of government. These characteristics are physical resources, size, organizational cohesiveness and political skills. Physical resources mean wealth. First and foremost: wealth for 'buying' the goodwill of influential people, wealth with which to advertise and circularize. Other resources include the possession of journals or newspapers especially by the popular groups. The politically effective size of a groups and its ability to make its quantitative weight felt is very important too. This is partly as a result of other resources it commands.

Governmental Structure: The effectiveness of civil society is also determined to some extent by the governmental structure. There is, for example, a great difference between systems in which power is concentrated and those in which it is decentralized. For example, in American government, groups can ordinarily get what they want at any rate if they want something important by obtaining favourable decisions from a large number of bodies; the legislative committees and executive officers. Such advantage or freedom of association, discussion and lobbying do not exist in the totalitarian states and the diversity of interest is lacking in more primitive societies.

There is also a relationship between the effectiveness of civil society and the character of the administrative structure upon which they act. A close 'clientele relationship' between a group and the administrative departments always tends to give the important advantages over others if only by obtaining for it a prominent spokesman within the structure of government. Civil society in their every aspect is a function of three variables: the pattern of policy, the structure of decision - making and the attitudes, broadly speaking, the political socialization and culture of the society concerned. Each affects the form, the intensity, the scope and the effectiveness of civil society.

THE ROLES OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The impact of almost thirty (30) years of a military regime can be seen at all levels of Nigeria's social, economic and political life. Nigerians aptly describe its impact as the "militarization of the Nigerian psyche". The violence and insecurity which is widespread in the country is to large extent the result of the development of a military culture. Physical confrontation, the preserve of the military and police forces is extensively resorted to by citizens as a consequence of the structural violence brought about by the military. Demilitarizing Nigeria social life, among other things, is therefore, a prerequisite for the democratic development of the country, hence, the civil society organizations vehemently refused to be cowed despite the fact that legion of them were arrested, detained, incarcerated and even assassinated. In the face of state brutality

and injustice that were prizes for standing up for the truth during this era, members of the civil society remained committed to their goals and aspirations and unshaken in their resolve to emancipate the people from the shackles of oppression. In fact, the era was full of chaos, anarchy and confusion.

The events of this period were vividly captured by Kunle Amuwo, a Political Scientist, in his paper titled "General Babangida, Civil society and the Military in Nigeria". According to him, the military era did not only witness an unprecedented flourishing of pro-democracy and human groups, several civil organizations stepped up opposition to the regime when it mattered most. The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and many unsuccessful transition programmes provoked this healthy development (Ikotun, 2010). The demise of General Abacha on the 7th June, 1998, however, ushered in a fresh political ambience and by the time General Abdulsalam took over upon the exist of General Abacha, he handed over to a democratically elected president on the 29th May, 1999. It became evident that the military had been chased back to the barracks. Ever since then, the civil society organizations had been at the forefront of change-seeking and the official opposition to the government.

If there is any area where efficiency and effectiveness is noticed, it is the civil society. This has manifested in such areas as good governance, electoral reform, human rights, police brutality, rule of law, undemocratic practices, economy and the protection of wealth. As a matter of fact, without the civil society organizations, Nigeria would have reverted to a pariah state. However, with the enthronement of democracy in 1999, one cannot claim that all is well with Nigerians as the majority does not have access to the dividends of democracy. The reason is that Nigeria is seriously overwhelmed with leadership and a lot of social, economic and political issues that the organizations cannot afford to keep quiet. Thus, Akindele (2003) submitted that today civil society faces greater challenges and more onerous responsibility in the promotion, consolidation and democratization of democracy and make it sustainable than it did in the struggle to enthrone it.

Nevertheless, an historical prospective suggests that the contributions of civil society to public affairs have been tremendous and central. Though, their material interests and ultimate aims may vary, their activities are extensive and their influence are far reaching. They range from national campaigns that seek urgent solutions to social, economic and political problems, to countless local groups locked in battle with bureaucracy. Civil society does also reach into every area of social, economic and political life and their contributions are most important and essential to the smooth running of government. Furthermore, in order to bridge the gap between the government and the people, the organized civil society has developed the habit of analyzing government policies and denouncing those which are likely to harm the people. The civil society also plays an important role in the promotion and sustenance of democratic culture. This is done by way of educating, sensitizing and managing conflicts arising from societal forces and clash of interests.

The original methods employed by the civil society organizations are typically reflected in some form of workshop or what is called the "joint problem-solving" models which is rather done in collaboration with other transformative school of thought in conflict resolution field. By extension, the expansion of civil society's 'toolbox' for conflict resolution in the Nigerian nation state also involves the use of skills acquisition and trainings as well as the adoption of traditional approaches such as the use of village elders or hybrid model of Nigerian and western techniques. Basically, civil society organizations as a way of consolidating democracy in Nigeria do adopts the following principles for effective accomplishment of goals; organizing training workshops, seminars, conferences; among others to different cadres of individual and/or groups in fundamental conflict areas as well as providing broader education through the media (Omodia and Erunke, 2007).

The main roles also include the management of flow of influence between the government and the governed in a wide variety of contemporary political system. The fact that civil societies participates in political competition of a given system and seek to obtain and maintain power does not distinguish them from other social structures. The dividing line between civil society and other social structures is often drawn by pointing to a difference in functions. Groups are expected to convey to the political apparatus the total claims of supposedly homogenous clientele while parties are to select aggregate and thereby transform the raw demands of the electorate into reality. They try to bring about desirable changes by influencing the government to the group and the larger society in general. It is also their responsibilities to ensure that government pursues equitable distribution of wealth and that no segment of the society is marginalized. Furthermore, the major task of civil society in many political systems has been to function as agents of innovation.

However, in modern service, where public authorities, possibly in conjunction with political parties, have become an important source of innovation, civil society are more likely to defend the status-quo. The struggle over values which groups engage in and the claims they lay to scarce resources, either prevents or promotes change. They may destroy an existing consensus as well as prepare for a new one. Their part in providing a balance between stability and change within a government system remains important and cannot be underrated in any given political community. Civil society as a veritable tool for democratic sustainability do not only articulate the demands of their potentials, they also play important role in the dissemination of information on government policies to both their members and members of the public through their various activities such as press conference/release, seminars, conferences, symposia, among others.

In addition, they often make it known to the government the views and feelings of the people on a particular issue or policy and may offer useful suggestions and pieces of advice to the government in the various government committees which include members of civil society. In other words, they usually champion the cause of the underprivileged people in the society who are not in a position to influence

government's policy. They have always been in the forefront to ensure that governance or government policies have human face. Besides, they are in the vanguard to make government responsible and accountable to the electorates who elected them. The last but not the least, they act as watchdog over public policy and administration, especially in between elections during which voters are completely powerless. They can champion the interest of the majority groups and help to check injustice and unconstitutional measures taken by the government and sometimes forced the government to conform to democratic norms. However, weak leadership, poor funding, indiscipline, administrative structures, among other things, have sometime made them ineffective as they ought to be.

THE NEED TO REFORM THE CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society has received a lot of attention in Nigeria since democratization process began some years ago. Its development, among other things, has helped to sustain the current democratic process. However, it is not an exaggeration to say that the civil society in Nigeria is not as powerful as they ought to be. The reason for this is not far fetched, this is mainly because democracy has a weak base in Africa generally, Nigeria inclusive. At this period of political experiment being carried out in Nigeria, there is need to reform the civil society as a possible method of reformulating Nigeria's democratic needs.

Firstly, the government under the present democratic system must conform with democratic values/tenets. Secondly, there is need for the individual to be conscious of his/her rights as clearly spelt out in chapter four of 1999 constitution. In addition to this, the individual must wake up for his/her duties/responsibilities within the society (FGN, 1999). Thirdly, there is also apathy on the part of some section of the civil society, some form of complacency. What can be done under these circumstances is periodic seminars/workshops or conferences, since civil society is a thing of the mind. Such seminars/workshops or conferences can develop individual's mind positively towards a virile and strong society. Fourthly, there is also the need for educational programmes both in television and radio and the distribution of handbills to the entire populace in order to enlighten them. Finally, the civil society can also be reformed by creating a conducive political climate devoid of tensions occasionally caused or created by the unguided utterances and/or actions of the politicians (Ekeh, 1992)

CONCLUDING REMARK

This study carried out a thorough exposition of civil society organizations vis-a-vis its transformatory role as an arbiter to redeem the Nigeria society from imminent total collapse as the country is yet to arrive at the ultimate destination of democracy through which the majority can benefit from the dividends of democracy. The researcher is also of the opinion that the fight for the enthronement of true democratic rule which lay emphasis on good governance, rule of law, human rights, equality, transparency, among others is still going on, that is, yet to be won. This is because the civil society is confronted with some problems such as poor funding, weak leadership,

hostile environment, indiscipline, etc. The civil society organizations need to be re-invigorated from their present position in order to install an enduring democracy capable of producing a fruitful result. In view of this, it would take a lot of political education and consciousness, human rights awareness, non-aparthy to politics and high level of literacy. The press also needs their freedom to provide a wealth of news and alternative perspectives for without a free, robust and inquisitive press and civil groups to press for institutional reforms, good governance and democratic ideas may be a mirage in Nigeria. On the last note, the government should tolerate an alternative point of view. It is in such situation that civil society can nurture and sustain democracy in Nigeria.

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