

The Challenges of Democratic Governance in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This review sets out to examine the challenges of democratic governance in Nigeria. Specifically, the work focuses on some inescapable facts, such as concept of governance and politics, democratic governance, corruption as well as erosion of federalism by Nigerian leaders. The study observes that a government that does not recognize that it holds power in trust for the people is one of the challenges of Nigerian democratic governance. In addition, the work highlights the importance of willed, handful of well meaning totally committed and uncompromised people, to turn the tide and bring about the much needed change to a true democracy in Nigerian governance. Sequel to the findings of this work, it is recommended that, consistent audit should be carried out in Nigerian democratic governance, the properties of genuine federalism be enhanced, elected officials must possess and demonstrate excellent leadership qualities and credentials for the offices they occupy.

Keywords: *Democracy, Power, Governance, Federalism*

INTRODUCTION

Democratic governance is not about who signs the budget or how many cars constitute the convoy of government official. It is leadership that is centred on the people and does not lose them. It is governance by the people. It is governance of the people by the people and for the people (Lincoln 1863). This cannot be over emphasized enough, democracy is about the people. The recurrent phrase “the people” should serve as a mnemonic for the elected officials; a consistent reminder of why they occupy the office entrusted to them. When “people” are the core ingredient in a democratic system of government, it means the people, the masses, the folks, the community and proletariat; the common people, through whom the privileged occupiers of offices derive their power.

Power belongs to the people, and “democratic governance” recognizes that it holds power in trust for the people. Its legitimacy is derived from the authority invested in it by the people. It therefore listens to the people, not out of a sense of benevolence, but because it has no choice. It has to carry the people along all the time to retain its legitimacy, but all these of course, are near ideals or ideal situation in Nigerian democratic governance. In Nigeria democratic setting, the central question that is pertinent to ask is, can Nigerians ever truly attain citizenship of their own country beyond the ceremonial process of their country passport? To be a citizen is a guarantee of equal rights, responsibilities and privileges. It is automatic conveyance of all forms of freedoms be it social, educational, political, economical,

technological, religious and much more. It means, citizens are treated with dignity and respect that they deserve as human beings, and sacred rights enshrined in the constitution to protect the citizens at all times. These factors: rights, privileges, equality, responsibility and participation are consequent of democratic governance. That is why the process of democracy is integral to the citizen existence as a people. It is an ideal worth striving for. Democratic governance has the potential to guarantee the citizens the rights and privileges the citizens desire as a people. Therefore, no matter the level of difficulties Nigeria experience in the process of democratic practice-and God knows Nigeria has been through a lot-democratic governance is still a best option for a difficult and complicated country like Nigeria to explore. This review therefore takes a look at the challenges of democratic governance in Nigeria.

The issue of governance has gained universal currency as nations and international institutions seek appropriate mechanism to enhance the role of government, by making it more transparent, accountable, responsive and responsible to the constituencies; and juxtapose government with the functions of politics (Natufe, 2006). Natufe (2006) opines that, there is a temptation to use governance and government interchangeably. Government is derived from the Greek word *Kerbyman*, which means to steer. Generally, government is defined as a collective body of elected and appointed institutions, empowered to legislate and adjudicate for the good of society, while governance is conceptualize as, the processes and systems by which a government manages the resources of a society to address socio-economic and political challenges in the polity. Thus, a government is elected or appointed to provide good and efficient governance. According to Daniel (2005), governance embodies “the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised for the common good”. A good governance system is defined by its relationship to some key prerequisites including:

Accountability: In a democracy, elected and appointed government officials from the president down to the office messenger in a local government council, must be accountable for their actions and policies. They must provide answers for their activities to the general public. It is imperative that, the population demands this from all government officials at all levels of the political system. One way of doing this, is for members of each electoral constituency to construct a performance measurement framework, compelling respective government officials to provide answers for their activities and policies, citizens must demand regular meetings with their respective elected officials at the constituency level.

Transparency: This is the easy and unrestricted access of government information by the people. The general public must have access to information on government policies and programmes. It is vital, the ministries and bureaucrats ensure the unedited dissemination of such information as demanded by the general public, excluding

information pertaining to a nation's security. The enactment of such Act will compel government to adhere to the tenets of transparency in their decision making process as well as limiting the chances of government officials engaging in corrupt practices.

Participation: This is a very important element of governance. It is imperative that citizens participate at all levels of their government's decision making process. Their participation should not end at merely casting their votes on Election Day. They must insist and ensure that, their votes are counted. For effective participation in public policy, it is essential for citizens to organize themselves into credible interest groups (professional associations, academic unions, student unions, non-governmental organisations and so many others) that constantly review government policies, articulate the positions of the general public, and engage elected officials in public debate regarding the rationale and impact of their policies and programmes on the population.

Predictability: A democratic policy is governed by laws and regulations anchored on the constitution of the country. Therefore, the application of these laws must be fair, consistent and thus predictable within the boundaries of the constitution. Any arbitrary application of laws and regulations would vitiate the constitution and inhibit good governance. A critical element of this is the recognition of the principle of jurisdictional responsibilities; especially in a federal polity like Nigeria.

The above elements presuppose an educated, politically conscious, enlightened and actively proactive population. Where the population is ill-equipped to engage in any of the above elements, it is certainly that, the rudiments of good governance will readily be compromised by the government of the day. This situation buttresses the view that, the society gets the government it deserves. Daniel, Aart and Masino (2006) identify six dimensions of good governance which reflect some elements of the above categories. These are:

Voice and accountability: the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and free media.

Political stability and absence of violence: perceptions of the likelihood that, the government will be destabilized or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means, including political violence and terrorism.

Government effectiveness: the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, the credibility of government's commitment to such policies.

Regulatory quality: the ability of government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that permits and promotes private sector development.

Rule of law: the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of the society, and in particular, the quality of contract enforcement, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence.

Control of corruption: the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as ‘capture’ of the state by elites and private interest.

Politics: In a political system, particularly in a multi-party democratic system such as Nigeria, political parties are established to articulate contending interests of the population, members of a political party meet to elect their officials. Citizens cast their votes on the Election Day to elect their representatives in parliament; members of parliament (National Assembly etc) debate their contending views on national development, and seek a compromised resolution. An elected government formulates policies and enacts laws that determine how the nation’s policies and programmes are to be administered. Citizens involved in the above processes are engaged in politics.

In the words of Harold (1936), politics is a process engaged by elected officials to determine, “who gets what, when, where and how”? This formulation subsequently influences the widely held notion of politics in a contest for power in the distribution of resources in the polity. Based on the foregoing, politics is therefore, a process of resolving societal conflicts that arise when determining who gets what, when and how. On the other hand, Easton (1965) perceives politics as an ideological struggle for power in the acquisition and distribution of resources. Zedong (1965), offers an interesting definition, when he declares that, politics is war without bloodshed, while war is politics with bloodshed. Unfortunately, in contemporary society politics is war with bloodshed.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOVERNANCE AND POLITICS

The process of policy formulation in a mature democratic environment is where the above identified elements of governance are at play. By a mature democratic environment, it means one where citizens are actively engaged in the political process, and where elected officials are responsive to the elements of governance. Policy formulation in such an environment elicits the active participation of various citizens, groups and professional organisations at every stage of policy debate (politics) in the country’s parliament, effective policy formulation requires a solid policy making environment (governance), as noted by world bank (2000), “policy reforms are less likely to succeed when public institutions and governance are weak” the process and quality of policy formulation and implementation (politics), are critical elements in determining the level of engagement of the population and measuring the quality of governance of society. The environment for policy formulation must be democratic, and it is imperative that, the process must be transparent. The degree of citizen’s

participation in this process is determined by the level of their education and political consciousness, as well as on the access to political elites and effective communication. Therefore, it can be inferred that proper acquisition and use of power in politics enhances good governance.

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

The late music Maestro and activist Fela, criticizes Nigeria Democracy in his 1986 album, by saying, teacher don't teach me nonsense; when he sang that democracy is a crazy and underachieving experience in Nigeria. Fela inverted the two syllables in the word 'democracy' and came up with 'crazy demonstration' of craze to typify the absurdity pervading the Nigerian society (Bakare, 2013). Democracy, as a framework in which we try to organize our society Fela claims, is ruining things for us rather than repairing them. What we are experiencing in Nigeria body of polity is not democracy. Democratic governance has to have a deeper and more prudent meaning than the mindlessness that is reigning in Nigerian society. A system of government in which as Fela puts it, "rich man dey mess, poor man dey cry" cannot be said to democratic governance, because it weighs down on the very people who chose them and the same people it promise to protect.

A government where the rich and the politically powerful trample on the right of the poor is not a system that should claim it practices democratic governance. Bakare (2013), consequently points out that, it is more than 26 years since Fela released the album; Nigeria has transited from military rule to 14 years of unbroken civil rule, a fact that Nigeria leaders are very proud of. According to Bakare, what goes on at present in Nigeria does not qualify to be called democracy in the true sense of the word. Democratic governance in Nigeria is deflective, wasteful and too self possessive, it forgets that the people exist and makes itself the centre of all issues. The Nigeria sort of democratic governance turns the very concept of democracy on its head and reduces all conversation to the political actors. This is reflected in the day to day activities of Nigerian government, ranging from official lying to blatant corruption and victimization. Instead of democracy, what has been perfected in Nigeria as at today is Kleptocracy; which is the combination of military bravado in milking Nigeria, and civilian pretense for the same objected. This result is increasing underdevelopment of Nigeria in colours of shame and perpetual embarrassment. Here are a few illustrations of false democratic governance in Nigeria.

- a) The federal government clampdown on the new People Democratic Party. E.g. An event centre, a park owned by Senator Aisha Al Hassan, a staunch member of the faction of the ruling Party (PDP) located in Maitama, Abuja, has been marked for demolition simply because she has chosen to break out of the original PDP, as a citizen of democratic governance, she has a right to belong to any party of her choice and own property in any part of Nigeria, this right has been violated.

- b) Also tasting the might of the government was a former governor of Gombe State, Senator Danjuma Goje, whose security details were withdrawn, also the former governor of Kwara State, Dr. Bukola Saraki who is a member of the faction of the party led by Alhaji Kawu Baraje, security details have been withdrawn, Saraki is also being investigated by the special fraud unit over the bond he took while in office on behalf of his state. More so, the police in Bayelsa State have declared the chairman of the faction of new PDP in the state Chief Richard Kpodo and the secretary Sivi Godswill wanted, apart from them, other members of the new PDP in the state are wanted for allegedly belonging to a political party aside from the governance party, the original PDP (Wednesday, Punch 16th October 2013). What is happening is against the dictates of chapter 4 sections 40 sections of the 1999 constitution, which allows freedom of association and liberty to freely associate. The national publicity secretary new PDP chief Eze Chukuemeka Eze describes the situation as alarming; he said democracy in Nigeria had yet to take root in the country. Eze said “what Nigeria has is a combination of military and democracy which is Militocracy. Another example is; when the Lagos State government deported 76 destitute persons and dumped them on the upper Iwaka Bridge, Onitsha on July 24, 2013. Their fundamental rights as provided for in section 34, 35, 36, 37, 40, 41 and 42 of the 1999 constitution as amended was violated. This is unlawful gross violation of their constitutional rights as Nigerian citizens, and are entitled to reside in any part of the country, if Nigeria is said to practice democratic governance. Democracy in Nigeria is gradually under threat, there are no longer rights to association, and this is not good for the development of democracy in Nigeria. This is like era of impunity. These are, but a few examples of a system of governance that is far from democratic governance.

SOME MAJOR CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

Corruption: The issue of corruption is a major hindrance in ensuring good governance in any given society. Corruption is a social phenomenon. In Nigeria’s case, heads of governments and legislators connivance with their colleagues and members of the private sector engage in corruption and looting of public treasuries. The impact of corruption on the population is immediate, visible and more devastating as socio-economic infrastructure completely breakdown, driving the poor into extreme poverty and obliterating the middle class society. Criticizing the failure of governance in Nigeria, Abati (2006) laments the poor state of Nigerian roads thus: “The state of Nigerian roads is the state of Nigeria and a reflection of governance in the country”. Every sphere of national life is like the roads: pot-hole ridden, abandoned to the vagaries of nature, the hospitals are ill-equipped, and the system in disarray.

Since 1999, contracts have been awarded by government at all levels for the repairs, rehabilitation and construction of roads there have been stories told of how this has provided great opportunities for corrupt contractors, public officials and consultants who are more concerned in self-enrichment. Abati's analysis succinctly encapsulates corruption as failure of politics and poor governance in Nigerian. The secretary general of the Arewa Consultative Forum, Col. Hamid Ibrahim Ali (rtd), in rendering his assessment on the quality of the State governors in the Forth Republic, declares that, "ninety percent of them are corrupt, absolutely corrupt" while Nigeria boast a legion of millionaires and billionaires, there are no corresponding industrial plants to justify the rise of the club of the riches. It is pertinent to note that, while oil has intensified the rate of corruption in Nigeria, the polity has become less democratic and ridden with poverty.

Poverty: All national and international indices have shown that, poverty has driven the average man to an early grave. Poverty in Nigeria continues to grow. Fifty years after independence, just a few Nigerians have unimaginable wealth that is parallel only by astonishing poverty of most citizens (Bakare, 2013). According to World Bank (2000), about sixty six percent of the Nigerian population now falls below the line of about a dollar a day compared to 43% some years ago.

Unemployment: Bakare (2013) in his position maintains that 53 years later, Nigeria is a nation with fear, the youth have no jobs and many are learning to employ themselves as robbers, kidnappers, terrorist, thugs and militants. In a place of hope and aspiration, one ruler after another inflicts on the youths despair and cynicism. Fifty three years later, Nigerians fear whether they will survive as one, whether they will survive to tell the tale, whether they will ever have water to drink or electricity to see their children smile, or jobs to engage themselves in, roads to get to them or safety from 'unknown' gunmen and indiscriminating security agencies. Underemployment is high in this dispensation of governance. The decades after independence, it is almost impossible to provide younger Nigerians with any aspiration they can grow and compete with the best of other nations. The challenges to democratic governance in Nigeria include all these among others.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria is experiencing a fundamental crisis in her democratic governance. Though the people of Nigeria share a collective identity as Nigerians, they are no means united in their prism of Nigeria. Their shared collective identity is merely a geographical descriptor of their location within a state in international system, and does not reflect any concerted stratagem to mould a Nigerian. Therefore, the citizens of Nigeria are more comfortable identifying themselves as Angas, Bini, Efik, Esan, Fulani, Hausa, Ibibio, Idoma, Igbo, Ijaw, Isoko, Itsekiri, Kalabari, Kanuri, Nupe,

Tiv, Urhobo, Yoruba etc. these purportedly, are the nations of Nigeria. They are hardly collaborative nations but intensely confrontational and hostile in their political discourse as a result of the failure of the Nigerian state to construct a viable strategy of national integration. However, it is important to note that, no democracy any where is perfect, democracy in its self is an ideal, but one worth striving for by the society that claims to be practicing it. There have been series of debates that questions the appropriateness and sustainability of democratic governance in Nigeria. These postulations do not always offer an alternative forms of government, Nigeria can explore if democracy refuses to work for Nigerians. And so, until there is a viable alternative, Nigerians have to stick with democracy and make it work for them.

Nigeria is a federal political system that defines the structure of the polity in a way that underlines the independence of the federating units' vis-a-vis. since the inception of Nigeria's fourth Republic in may 1999, elected officials have contributed to the erosion of federalism by their actions which have facilitated the entrenchment of unitary practices in a supposedly federal polity. The regular visits, either voluntarily or mandated by State governors to the presidency in Abuja for instructions, considerably weaken the premise of federalism. The federal government has assumed the status of national government akin to that of a unitary system, because the State governors have acquiesced to the erosion of the fundamental premises of federalism, they lack the audacity to challenge the president when it is clear that his policies negates those premises.

A bleak picture is the basic reality of the state of things in Nigerian democratic governance, but then the question is; where does Nigeria and Nigerians go from here? How do the people return to the centre of the discourse around the structure of democratic governance in Nigeria? In a quest to answer these questions and attain to democratic governance in Nigeria, the best, the brightest and the fittest among Nigerians should be involved in politics. To educate, enlighten, and empower the citizens on the need to ask questions and criticise their governments constructively. The greatest asset of a poorly run government is a disempowered and unconcerned citizenry. There should be consistent audit in the system of Nigerian democratic governance by the citizens; the citizens should ask how well the system is working out for them. A genuine federal system should be enhanced; the properties of federalism are prerequisite for good democratic governance.

The different tiers of government should be made totally independent and not subordinate to one another, and each level of government concentrating in its area of jurisdiction. Adherence to the fundamental premises of federalism is essential to establishing a solid conceptual base for good democratic government. Elected officials must possess and demonstrate excellent leadership qualities and credentials for the offices they occupy. The question of leadership qualities is crucial to the rudiments of good democratic governance. Nigerians should strive to meaningfully participate in issues that affect their lives, and refuse to always be treated as

afterthought instead. Nigeria citizens should effectively participate in the collective choices that define their membership as a nation. There should be electoral independence for both federal and state independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). As an independent entity in a federal system, federating units must possess exclusive jurisdiction over the institution that is responsible for conducting and supervising elections for political offices in their respective territories. The general public should agitate for the enactment of an access Act, which guarantees the unrestricted access of the public on government policies and programmes.

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