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Credible Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: The Moral Imperatives

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Abstract: For >2 decades, there has been a new wind of democratic change sweeping across Africa where multiparty political systems were being installed all over the continent to replace the fallen authoritarian and dictatorial regimes. Today, democracy sits on the horn of a dilemma in several parts of Africa including Nigeria. As at now, the inadequacies of democracy and its practice as a political ideology in Nigeria are being illustrated by the tactics and tantrums of Nigerian political leaders and faulty political process. Free and fair election is still a mirage in Nigeria. This study focuses on the meaning and content of democracy and highlights the problems and assesses the prospects of consolidating democracy in Nigeria under the prevailing national and international socio-economic and political conditions. The study examines the interface between credible elections and democratic consolidation and how electoral fraud has become a threat to the survival, growth and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Finally, the study discusses the moral imperative of democratic consolidation in Nigeria and the argument, it advances is that without this imperative, instability will pose as a feature of Nigerian democracy.

Key words: Democracy, consolidation, election, development, moral, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The concept of democracy was based on the maxim contained in the American declaration of independence from British rule that all men are created equal and that they are endowed with certain inalienable rights by their creator. According to this laudable concept, government exists to secure these rights and governments must derive their powers from the consent of the governed. What that translates into is that the votes of the electorate must count for the electoral system to be credible. For democracy to be meaningful, it must have positive impact on the people. Since in democracy, the government derives its legitimacy from the people, the founding fathers of American democracy decided that political campaigns and regular elections were the perfect ways to determine the will of the people. To truly determine the will of the people, elections must be free, open and transparent and without coercion or corruption. It must not be elections where the will of the people is kidnapped or bought by the highest bidder. The free will of the people must be determined and obeyed if you would have a true democracy.

In Nigeria today, there is danger in the democracy as the will of the people is always manipulated and pushed aside in the quest for power and selfish interest. This is evidenced in proven cases of vote buying, election rigging, ballot box snatching and other forms of electoral malpractices. The electoral process has been over-monetized to the extent that results announced after elections very often did not reflect the choice of the people. There is no doubt that the best way to restore the people's confidence in the electoral system and democracy is by creating and enabling environment for a free, fair and credible elections. But this enabling environment has eluded Nigeria since, the inception of its democratic structures. Democracy means nothing if the people do not vote or if their votes do not count.

The most significant challenge to democratic consolidation in Nigeria involves the development of effective strategies for strengthening institutions of state in such a manner that they will be able to withstand the shocks of the democratic process. This challenge is particularly important for institutions like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the judiciary.

The politicians on their part have not shown respect for democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The above view is corroborated by Duru (2002) when he asserted that what happens is that politicians, conscious of the value of the spoils of office, adopt various means to ensure that they capture power. They buy votes, rig elections and commit other infidelities designed to subvert the people's will to choose leaders capable of leading the state towards development and enduring democracy. This study will among other things as stated in the abstract address the moral question in relation to elections and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION: A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

The concept of democracy has received many definitions since, it was loosely defined by a one-time great American president, Abraham Lincoln as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Since then, a lot of literatures abound on the concept of democracy with varied definitions. Appadorai (2003) defines democracy as the system of government under which the people exercise the government power either directly or through representatives periodically elected by them. By this standard, a state could be termed democratic if it provides institutions for the expression and supremacy of the popular will on basic questions of social direction and policy. According to Bayles, democracy is the equality of opportunity to participate in making group decisions and equality of obligations to participate in carrying them out once they are made until they are revised. To Bryce (1921), democracy denotes that form of government in which the ruling power of the state is largely vested in the members of the community as a whole. Ranney (1975) sees democracy as a form of government organized in accordance with the principles of popular sovereignty, political equality, popular consultation and majority rule.

Democracy is something more than a set of political procedures. To be worthy of its name, democracy should produce substantive outcomes that advance the health and well-being of the people. Decision makers are to govern for the benefit of the majority, not for the advantages of the privileged few.

Democracy as it is practiced in Nigeria embraces the definition of democracy by Plato a 5th century BC. Athenian great philosopher and political thinker. According to Plato, democracy is the gently art of gathering votes from the poor and campaign funds from the rich by promising to protect each from the other. In reality, democracy is fundamentally defined by freedom from hunger, the right to education and health. There is no doubt that democracy has no meaning in the absence of the rule of law and its survival depends on the independence of the judiciary and the legislature. It comes with a great deal of freedom and liberty. The supremacy of the law is the hallmark of any democratic government. The law is the ultimate sovereign and not any person or group of persons. Democracy simply signifies that the ultimate authority belongs to the people. A democratic state is characterized by recognition of equality of rights, political privilege, social and legal equality and a democratic ruler rules by the consent of the citizens. He rules in the general interest of the citizens and not in the interest of a single class or individual.

Within the thematic view of democratic consolidation and the necessity of the electoral process, Akinsanya asserts that a consolidated democracy is measured by the extent to which a country has regular free and fair elections, genuine contestation over selection. He stated that democratic consolidation requires stability. To him, a high degree of stability brings about accountability, transparency, responsiveness and competitiveness.

To Michael Bratton, democratic consolidation involves the widespread acceptance of rules to guarantee political participation and political competition. According to him, elections remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic governments but as a necessary requisite for broader democratic consolidation. The regularity, openness and acceptability of elections signal whether basic constitutional, behavioural and attitudinal foundations are being laid for sustainable rule. Corroborating Bratton's assertion, David Posner averred that the consolidation of democracy involves the institutionalization of rules that fully guarantee political participation and political competition.

To him, elections which empower ordinary citizens to choose candidates of their interests, guarantee democratic consolidation as argued by Schumpeter (1962) that elections are the defining institutions of democracy.

CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY THROUGH CREDIBLE ELECTIONS

Gambo, writing on the topic Godfatherism and Electoral Politics in Nigeria averred that election is one of the most critical civic engagements that characterize any liberal and competitive political system. It is an important exercise in the sense that if carefully, freely and fairly undertaken, it produces outcome that is almost mutually agreeable to all competing social groups which are politically active within a given policy. Any political leadership which emerges from a free and fair electoral process enjoys consistent and considerable support of the citizenry and is scarcely questioned in terms of legitimacy.

In his own submission, Ojo clearly states that in an electoral democracy which is the aspiration of Nigerians, a free and fair election is indeed a since qua non. According to him, no polity can be judged to be democratic if elections are not free and fair. Elections do not only serve the purpose of peaceful change of government, they also confer political legitimacy on the government.

Democratic rule is inconceivable without elections. The essential function served by elections under liberal democracy is to get people elected into power. Elections are part and parcel of the Schumpetarian definition of

procedural democracy. According to Schumpeter (1962), democracy is only meaningful when people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men and women who are to rule them. From Schumpeter's placement of democracy and elections, elections can be regarded as the hallmark of democracy which provide the citizens the opportunity of choice as to who should govern them. There is inextricable link between sound electoral process and true democracy. This is why Duru (2002) maintained that without commitment to the rule of the game by the political class, the whole idea of democracy becomes a fiction or at best mere idealism.

Extant literature on elections refer to a democratic setting as one where all citizens are entitled to vote, i.e., maximum political participation of the citizens and competition among political parties and a host of civil and political liberties. These norms and expectations define an ideal competitive democratic electoral process which somehow exists in Nigeria under suspicious circumstances. It is unfortunate that political institutions in Nigeria are currently inhabited by many politicians with stolen mandates. This has affected the image and respect for such national institutions which are supposed to direct the course of democracy. The situation will ultimately have a devastating impact on the legitimacy of such institutions.

Although, the just concluded 2011 general elections have been described by observers (both local and international) as the best election conducted in the history of Nigeria's electoral process, the 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections were characterized by electoral malpractices which portends danger to democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

An average voter in Nigeria is interested in immediate pecuniary or material rewards and will easily trade off his votes when appropriately induced. This can be explained by the crippling poverty facing the people in the absence of government's provision of the basic amenities required for decent living as well as their justified distrust of the political leaders. Lending credence to the above observation, Omenka and Apam (2006) stressed on the need to tackle the high rate of poverty in Nigeria. They believe that unemployment and abject poverty are at their peak in Nigeria today. The average electorate has hardly seen any dividend of democracy. They maintain that there is need to strengthen the economic and socio-political capacity of citizens.

There is no doubt that electoral malpractice which either stems as a result of poverty or as a result of selfish interest on the part of politicians and leaders of the country will obstruct the consolidation and sustenance of democracy in Nigeria because of the ultra-privatization of transition project by money bags. As a result of this, the legitimacy of people and political institutions that are duty bound to direct the course of democracy in the country will forever remain questionable as they give little attention to the development and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. As the explanation of all these, lie in the abject poverty of the people and the belief that the state is not just and fair enough to protect them when the need arises.

The average Nigerian voter often wonders why he or she should participate in the electoral process when elections hardly fulfill the people's basic expectations of freedom of choice as election results are always manipulated. From the 1st republic to the present, multi-party elections have been held under undemocratic circumstances resulting in election outcomes that have led to the non-consolidation of democracy. This crisis of electoralism is demonstrated by the citizen's lack of confidence in the institutions of governance.

OBSTACLES TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

One identifiable obstacle to the development and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria is that Nigerian politicians make bogus promises in order to win over the electorate, they do little or nothing to deliver the dividend of democracy to the people. Instead, what they have succeeded in doing is to fan the embers of hate and ethnic division, kill and maim one another, loot the treasury, rig elections, engage in corruption and suppress the rights of the less privileged. There is insincerity and insensitivity of the leaders to the needs of the ordinary citizens whom they have been elected to serve. Ebegbulem observed that democracy as it is practiced in Nigeria today has no agenda for the people. People's rights are not protected neither are their wishes carried out by the government. We see a democratic Nigeria where the purpose of the government is the good and welfare of the ruler and his party members instead of the ruled; we see a democratic Nigeria where the leaders are sacrificing the interest of the masses on the altar of individual and class interest. He went further to say that the Nigerian type of democracy has produced leaders who have blighted the lives of Nigerians who now wallow in poverty, illiteracy and hunger. Today, we have leaders in Nigeria who have criminally mismanaged the economic affairs and resources of the nation. Ebegbulem's observation is corroborated by Akinboye who posits that the current trend in the democratic agenda of the country seem to be more problematic as the political class surreptitiously collaborated with greedy and self serving politicians to

subvert political processes and at the same time, undermine values and norms. In their submission, Dauda and Avidime argued that the current security situation in the country is a major obstacle to the consolidation of democracy. According to them, the tense security situation in all parts of the country makes nonsense of whatever efforts has been made to justify the sustenance of the democratic experiment since the environment is unconducive for foreign investments and endangered by bad governance and political instability. They went further to assert that the problem of youth unemployment cannot be divorced from security problems in the country, although there has not been any reliable data on the country's unemployment profile but it is quite understandable that unemployment, especially among the educated youths is a major source of misery, increasing crime rate as well as embracing attacks on innocent people in the country.

Essis (1994) pointed out that there is no perfect democracy and therefore there cannot exist a universal democracy but she highlighted three constants of democracy. These are universal adult suffrage which sets the basis for the legitimacy of power and allows through free and fair elections for political alternation without which there can be no real democracy; the legal state which protects the citizens by guaranteeing individual freedom, defines the necessary equilibrium between the different authorities in the state; the respect for human rights which constitutes a guarantee against all despotic powers. But today in Nigeria, the adult suffrage is irrelevant as the people's votes do not matter and the violation of human rights is still rampant.

Godfatherism is another major obstacle to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The activities of Godfathers have demeaned the development and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Godfatherism negates all tenets of democracy. It blocks the democratic process by obstructing selection of good and qualified candidates for elective posts.

The so-called godfathers often rely heavily on money and force to achieve their goals. They share out money in order to establish a network and create political bonding. However if that fails to win support, they unleash violence both as deterrence and punishment. Under politics of godfatherism, elections cannot be free and fair nor can governance be transparent or people-friendly. Godfatherism has created doubts about the legitimacy of the electoral process and the elected. It creates an environment that delinks the Nigerian people from the government.

It is one of the biggest dangers to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Godfatherism as an ideology, promotes exclusion and denial of legitimate entitlements of the citizenry.

There is total absence of culture of accountability and this negates one of the critical attributes of democracy which is a responsible and accountable government. Good governance predicated on rule of law due process, accountability and transparency in the management of public space is precariously compromised.

DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION AND THE MORAL QUESTION

The moral foundation of the state is what determines its capability to meet its obligation to the citizens and citizen's ability to obey the laws of the state. This takes us to John Locke's social contract theory in which he argues that the government of the state has the contractual obligation to guarantee to every individual the rights enjoyed in the state of nature. In other words, government exists to provide security and defence and protect the rights of individuals. In turn, the individual obey their rights and fulfills its part of the contract.

If the state exists to pursue the interest of only a few as we have in Nigeria then it has no right to expect obedience. Osaghae (1994) made it clear that for there to be democratic consolidation, the state and its operators should be credible in the eyes of the people. Where such credibility is absent the political process is unlikely to be stable. This is what he describes as the moral imperative of the state. What this means is that good government is the major index for measuring stability. Ideally, only a government that performs well can be stable. In line with this, a bad government, adjudged to be so by the citizens themselves, sustains itself in power by means other than consent, usually brute force and support by foreign super powers (Osaghae, 1994). Under normal circumstances, such a government should not remain in power, once it has lost the support of the people. Such vote of no confidence by the people means that the mantle of governance should now shift to alternative party or people of the citizens' choice through free, fair and credible elections.

The moral question here in the consolidation of democracy is that democracy can only be consolidated if the people believe that the government has the moral right to be obeyed. Where the people perceive of the state as operating in an amoral milieu, they are not likely to accept that it has the capability to govern them properly. Drawing the moral imperative closer to Nigeria, we discover that Nigerian politicians, conscious of the value of the spoils of office, adopt various means to ensure that they capture power. They buy votes, rig elections and commit other infidelities designed to subvert the people's will to choose leaders capable of leading the state towards development and sustainable democracy. Without

commitment to the rules of the game by these politicians, the whole idea of democracy becomes fiction or at best mere idealism. These political leaders in their desperation to win elections at all costs, adopt unethical, undemocratic and in some cases crude methods to win elections. Their actions clearly show that their personal interests and greed override their commitment to serve. Their desire to win elections at all costs is a do or die affair (Apology to former president, Olusegun Obasanjo). This is a clear indication that they have hidden agenda in their quest to rule the country.

This is evidenced in the activities of the country's rulers and politicians during the 2003 and 2007 general elections. During these elections, it was observed by both local and international observers and election monitoring agencies that there were ineffective movement of election materials which gave room for massive rigging everywhere, the result sheets were simply passed round to the politicians who filled in whatever numbers they chose; the voters were not given the freedom for open secret balloting and there was rampant violence at election venues which had intimidating effect on the electorates.

The police were not left out in this show of shame as they lost their traditional role of being the friend of the people and rather became partisan to the detriment of the electorate. It was reported that they facilitated electoral irregularities. In many polling booths, they prevented the electorates from exercising their rights to vote as they were in the payroll of some dubious politicians. This moral decadence exhibited by the rulers and politicians towards the electoral process puts a question mark on democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

The essence of democracy is that people will have the final say in who governs them and that those who govern express and execute the common will of the people. In any credible democracy, elections constitute the soul of the democratic process. It is therefore, a sad commentary on Nigeria's democratic development that voters no longer matter in the country's democracy. The activities of godfathers vis-a-vis vote buying, rigging and financial inducement have made a caricature of democracy in Nigeria. Democratic consolidation can only be achieved in Nigeria when Nigerians freely and fairly elect their leaders such that those so elected owe their election to the people and not a cabal who stay in hidden places to write election results. That way, those so elected will be the people's servant and not the other way around. There must be a break from previous derailment of the democratic system of governance resulting from electoral malpractices which have been catalyst to the emergence of corrupt and inept political leaders. The Nigerian democratic system has no agenda for the poor and average Nigerians. People's rights are not adequately protected neither are their wishes carried out by the government. The solemn fact is that before the end of the quarter of this century, Nigerians will have experienced decades of political experiments, beginning with the formation of the first major political parties around 1950. These experiments, many inspired by the finest democratic ideals have resulted in a ravaged economy, a poorly functioning electoral system, a corrupt state and recurrent social upheavals. This has resulted in combined influences of apathy, apprehension and confusion which have kept Nigerians away from voting during elections. The major argument of this study is that those anti-democratic forces if not properly addressed, the expected democratic consolidation which in the final analysis is the major index of democratic success will elude Nigeria.

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