



Democracy and the Economic Development of Nigeria: Contentions and Reflections

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Abstract: The development of any country is hinged on the pattern and dynamics of its governance. Nigeria has practiced democratic process of governance over a long period of time, since 1999. The dividend of this democratic process, in terms of economic development, was the preoccupation of this paper. The paper concludes that the tenet of democracy at every level of governance in the Nigerian context has been greatly encroached which is due largely to factors including: party politics, ethnicity, bad leadership, religious bigotry and corruption. These are born out of lack of political will by some individuals in leadership position. Therefore, if an enabling ground that is conducive enough to foster human rights, liberty and liberation is not created, the needed gains of democratic processes will remain an illusion. The paper recommends the need for the country to come to terms with regional inclinations and use it for its advantage, through policies that acknowledge the interest of all the regions and harmonize it to the development of the country at large. But this can only be possible if individual self-aggrandizement is overcome by politicians and their supporters, so that democracy is pursued through the establishment and observance of the rule of law, with complete separation of power and independence of all the three arms of government.

Keywords: Democracy, Economic development, politics, leadership, development, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between democracy and economic development has been in debate for quite a long while. Whereas some researchers (Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 2005; Evans and Ferguson, 2013; Aminu, Gbenga and Bolaji, 2014) emphasize the positive impact of democracy on economic development, others have argued on the reverse, that it is actually economic development that has impact on democracy. Still, they are those who argued that there exists no relationship whatsoever

between the two. Whichever is the case, an understanding of the concept of democracy as well as a deeper insight into the of economic development is essentials to establishing the correlation between the two variables. This paper is intended to pin-point the dividends that is supposed to accompany any ideal democratic processes and governance.

It is necessary to point out that Nigeria's independence in 1960 heralded the practice of

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democratic regimes. And this has raised several unanswered puzzles on what constitutes a democratic setting and practice. Sa'ad (2012) tried to unravel this puzzle by blaming the problem that has hindered democratic regimes in Nigeria on regional inclinations resulting from the regional governments first used by the colonial masters before amalgamation. Therefore, while considering the impact of democracy on the economic development of Nigeria, it is pertinent to look at the socio-political structure of the country and assess its possible limitations to the full impact of democratic dividends to the country.

This paper is therefore interested in x-raying and rethinking the impact of democracy on the economic development of Nigeria, taking cognizance of the socio-political structure of the country. The rest of the paper is divided into sections to cover some theoretical understanding of democracy and economic development, a rethink of democratic regimes in Nigeria (1960 till date), and democratic dividends and economic realities of Nigeria's development. These sections are aimed at positioning the papers' perspective to advance some actionable policy implications and draw conclusions as well.

Some theoretical understanding: Democracy and Economic Development

An understanding of the concepts of democracy and economic development is necessary for underscoring any possible relationship between the two variables. Democracy as a concept has been described, defined and explained by various authors, although a consensus on what should be its universally accepted definition has not been reached (Dahl, 1956; Ardo, 2000). Therefore, understanding and operationalizing the concept will align the proper perspective and position of this paper.

Thomas (2015) looking at democracy as a form of government, traced its Greek origin to be inspired by the Greek myth of *Demos* – meaning people, and *Kratos* – meaning power. He therefore sees early democratic tradition to involve a privileged participation where the people's common good is decided by the majority. With the perspective of democracy as a form of government, Huntington (1991) looked at the modern usage of the concept and defined it in relation to sources of authority of government, purpose of governance and the processes of instituting the government. This crystalizes the gains that citizens expect in the process of governance.

From the liberal perspective, Wolterstorff and Cuneo (2012) see democracy as entailing commitment to the equal rights of the citizens,

which must be exercised within a constitutional framework that defines the freedom and limits of the government, so that the legal system can protect the citizens from any infringement on their rights. Democracy connotes governance that is selfless. This means that efforts to administer democratic processes (governance and the rule of law) should be directed at the governed and ruled. However, this goes within the ambits of certain institutional frameworks with a defined and clear-cut mechanism and backings for its enforcement. Considering the foregoing definitions, it becomes obvious that the meaning of democracy is embedded in governance and the rule of law. Agreeing with Jega (2002) assertions, it is pertinent to say that, if there could be any agreement to the definition of democracy, it would be that it is not personal rule and is different from authoritarian rule.

From the above understanding of democracy, it follows that if democracy has anything to do with economic development, it would be the 'development' that affects the citizens of the economy that is being developed. Therefore, the concept of economic development needs to be understood under the perspective of impactful governance and availability of opportunities for economic actualization. This concept has been misconstrued with other concepts, especially the concept of development and that of economic growth.

Development, according to Willis (2005) can be equated with progress and modernity. Martinussen (1997) used different variables to measure development. Such variables include economic growth, modernisation, increased welfare and human development, dialectical transformation, elimination of dependency and capacity building. To Peet and Hartwick (1999), development is seen as using the productive resources of the society to improve the living conditions of the poorest people. This shows that the development high points of any society are embedded in its governance framework. Thus, failure to deliver these the need expectations that is associated with governance, underscores particularly development of the economy of such nation.

The economic definition of development as put forward by Todaro and Smith (2011) reflects the point of convergence between the concepts of development, economic growth and economic development, which does not imply they are same thing more than they have common denominator (GDP). Todaro and Smith (2011) see development as achieving sustained rates of growth of per capita income which will enable a nation expand its output faster than the rate of her population growth.

Therefore, development generally cuts across various spheres of progress which include social, political, technological and economic spheres, etc. This discourse, however, is interested in the economic aspect of development which has severally been misconstrued with economic growth.

Economic growth and development are two inseparable words on the one hand, whereas the growth aspect of development refers to the rate of increase in an economy's real output, that is, the expansion of national output (Nellis and Parker, 2004; Samuelson, 2005), economic development, on the other hand, is when there is sustainable quantitative and qualitative improvement in all or almost all the sectors of an economy (Chukwu, 2009). Economic development is also a continuous process of positive change and improvement in material well being of the overall citizens in a sustainable way so that today's consumption will not affect the future (Lawal and Oluwatoyin, 2011; Idris, 2013).

Consequently, if democracy is understood to be a form of government that gives the people voice in the process of instituting government and governance, it follows that it is a form of government that seeks for the good and welfare of the people via economic development. This position seems to challenge some theoretical foundations especially the assertions of the standard modernization hypothesis exemplified by Lipset in 1959 which argues that economic development predisposes a country to a greater likelihood of democracy because increased wealth reduces inequality and status distinction, leading to an increase in the size of the middle class. This argument creates dilemmas that seek to find out if a country has to be economically developed before they could experience democracy? If that is the case, what form of government would they practice to attain economic development? The authoritarian government which is a direct opposite of democracy, and most other forms of governance would not give the people a voice in the political process. How then will their welfare be assured and their rights protected? This led to the argument by Przeworski (2000), that the modernization theory has little or no explanatory power. The factors of production can only grow under dictatorship, but there could be more efficient use of resources in a democratic government.

On the contrary, modernization theorists and other researchers have argued in favour of democracy first, before economic development. Their argument is that democracy is not an outcome of economic development but a necessity for economic development. Scholars in this school of

thought compared democratic governance and low income countries with their authoritarian counterparts and concluded that democratic countries perform better than their authoritarian counterparts, measuring with life expectancy, literacy, access to clean drinking water, agricultural productivity and infant mortality (Chalker, 1999; Acemoglu *et al*, 2005; Siegle, Weinstein, and Halperin, 2005).

The Nigerian situation where both democratic and authoritarian governments have been experienced raises concern for Leftwich (1996) to argue that, development should not be a factor of system of government or regime type. Whether democratic or autocratic, what matters to Leftwich is the type of state and the politics that generate and sustains the state. Applying this argument to Nigerian democracy and economic development, it is obvious that controversies exist among scholars and commentators with regards to which regime favours development for Nigeria – military or civilian. In as much as the civilian/democratic regimes in Nigeria can boast of many giant strides to economic development in the country, there are mixed-feelings on the achievements that the military regime has demonstrated over the years. To fully grasp the true picture of democracy and economic development in the Nigerian context, it is necessary to take a rethink on Nigeria's democratic regimes since 1960s.

Rethinking Democratic Regimes in Nigeria: Since 1960s

For a better understanding of the democratic events from the 1960s, one can not overlook the precedents of the period. Talking about democracy in Nigeria, many will think of the 1960 independence, the first republic and its aftermath; and that line of thought will not be out of place for the political entity called Nigeria. But for the spatial entity which is made up of diverse cultural nations; it could be argued as a fallacy. Before the advent of the colonialism, the diverse entities that existed politically, independent of one another practiced democracy though in different forms (Aderibigbe, 1965; Hunwick, 1965; Akinbobola, 2000; Sa'ad, 2012; Udensi & Udensi, 2020).

Even in some ethnic entities where kingship was practiced and the kings seen to have some kind of absolute power, there were still checks and balances. For instance, the excesses of the Alaafin (King) of Oyo in the Yoruba political system was still checked by the head of the Oyomesi – the Basorun. In the North, the Emirs though feared and revered, still have their decisions subject to the scrutiny and agreement of the emirate council, the Igbos practiced what could be seen as absolute democracy

through the village council where the opinion of every member is well listened to (Aderibigbe, 1965; Hunwick, 1965). Similar processes were obtained in other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria before the advent of the colonial masters. But for easy administration and the reduction in cost of administration, the colonial masters justified the amalgamation of these entities through the Northern and Southern protectorate in 1914. This marriage of hitherto different political nations was without an agreement, and consequently the present clamour and suit for divorce.

Nevertheless, before the amalgamation, the colonial government administered through the three regions – North, East and West. These regions developed inclinations to the protection of their regional interest through the election of representatives at the national government in the Lagos colony, and this was the beginning of ethnic politics in Nigeria. Therefore, the forced marriage through the amalgamation could be seen as the bringing of three divergent interests together to pursue one goal; and as the saying goes, “two cannot walk together, except they agree”. This has led Nigeria into the democracy of regional interest and this is the kind of democracy that has hitherto been practiced in Nigeria since the 1960s.

This regional democracy practiced from the outset, seemed good for the country because it opened the doors of economic exploration in these regions. Each region wanted to take care of their economic development, so they opened up for both local and foreign investors (Saad', 2012). The North specialized in groundnut, cotton, tin and columbite, the West were known for cocoa, timber, palm produce, cocoa and rubber, while the Eastern region was into coal, palm produce and local fabrications. These areas of specialization by the different regions led to the diversification and specialization of the Nigeria import and export earnings (John, 1986).

Nevertheless, this kind of competition though with some economic benefits, could not be seen as healthy as it was in rivalry as could be seen in the disagreement that followed the 1963 elections and population census respectively. Because every region protected their interest, party formation was regionalized as well, and this led to a situation where no party could secure simple majority in the Nigeria House of Representatives. This led into the alliance between the NPC of the North and the NCNC of the East, with the Action Group (AG) of the western region standing alone against the alliance that formed the national government.

This alliance and opposition gave room for expression of the rivalry that has existed but in the

cold form. The arrest and trial of Action Group (AG) prominent leaders was its manifestation, which culminated into the 1966 military coup that led to the end of the first civilian government in Nigeria. It is still in the regional interests that the Premiers of the North and the West were killed leading into a counter coup in July 1966, master minded by the Northern military officers. The escalation of this coup and counter coup led into the Nigeria Civil War as a result of the Eastern region seeking cessation from Nigeria (Niven, 1970; Post and Michael, 1973). The effects of the Civil War that lasted between 1967 and 1970 have lingered till the present day democracy in Nigeria.

Immediately after the Civil War, Nigeria experienced different civilian/democratic regimes that have not fared any better than give voice to the regional and ethnic inclinations expressed by diverse means that inhibit development in Nigeria. It was military regime all through from 1966 when the First Republic ended till 1979 when the Second Republic started with the election of Alhaji Shehu Shagari whose regime lasted between 1979 -1983. The Shagari led government abandoned the British parliamentary system and adopted the American presidential system of government. But that was not to last as he was overthrown again to end the second republic. The military activities that prolonged till the fourth republic and the yearnings for return to democracy heightened the expectations on democracy.

In 1999, Nigeria returned to democracy with new hopes and expectations, such that people felt and yearned for changes in the economy and the standard of living. However, these hopes and expectations have been dashed as Nigerians face different levels of frustration and disillusionment due to government failure in delivering the expected dividends of democracy. Nevertheless, the problem of democracy in Nigeria cannot be solved by only the reformation of elections and government institutions. There is the need to go back to the root, from the amalgamation and down to the independence, because the problem of democracy in Nigeria has become the problem of individual orientation that has been formed over years of witnessing the regional rivalry.

Democratic Dividends and the Economic Realities of Nigeria Development

Omotola (2007) sees dividends of democracy as the benefit and positive gestures brought about by the new environment of democracy in a state. Democratic dividends are better expressed in the rule of law which has the tendency to instigate equality and fair platform for development. In contrast to decrees in military

government, the rule of law is unique as it allows the supremacy of the law, fundamental human rights and equality before the law. For democracy to yield its expected dividends and also be realistically impactful on Nigeria's development, the rule of law must be upheld and actionably practiced.

The Nigeria fourth republic is essentially the starting point of democracy in Nigeria, and therefore has in diverse ways witnessed several policy actions in various sectors and areas through programs and projects. Such programmes include the introduction of new salary scale; the deregulation of many sectors of the economy like the communication sector which introduced the Global System for Mobile (GSM) telecommunication; the Seven Point Agenda; the passage of the Press Freedom bill, establishment of new federal universities and a host of other programmes (Igba, 2012). Nevertheless, Omotola (2007) argued that the Nigerian economy is yet to show any sign of recovery, which he blames on the haphazard nature of implementation of democratic processes.

It is imperative to establish that the knot that ties democracy and the economic development of any country is strong, and the realization of the gains of democratic governance are possible only through the enforcement of what true democracy is. Nigeria as a nation has been involved in an undistorted line of democratic process since 1999 to date. With the perspective of what true democracy is, it is important to ask: why is the country yet to attain all the benefits and privileges that democracy comes with? The present nature of democracy practiced in Nigeria creates a nation that is devoid of national interest and ideology. Political mandate in the Nigerian context comes with regional, ethnic and religious interests, which has led to policies and programmes that are people oriented being influenced and hijacked to the detriment of the economic progress of the country. This has led to different political upheavals and security challenges that have held the developmental process of the country in captivity.

The economic realities of any nation is dependent on factors that are hinged on various indicators comprising of its industrial structure, unemployment ratio, income gap among citizen, rate of annual growth or increase in GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and GNP (Gross National Product) which are also development necessities that are sacrosanct in delivering an all-inclusive progress: socially, politically, economically etc. The Nigeria situation of circumstances that have hindered its democratic process are expressed in a myriad of factors including the structure of the Nigerian society, religious bigotry, ethnicity,

institutional decay marked by corruption and others. These factors outlined above bring to bear the challenges that Nigerian democracy is currently faced with, and this is tantamount to what has stunted the dividends of its democratic governance.

Policy Chances and Conclusion

The development of any country is hinged on the pattern and dynamics of its governance. Nigeria has practiced democratic process of governance over a long period of time, since 1999. The dividend of this democratic process, in terms of economic development, was the preoccupation of this paper. Bad leadership, ethnicity, religious bigotry and corruption were identified as the foot-soldiers that were impactful in hindering economic development in the various democratic administrations in Nigeria. Democratic governance is a *sine qua non* for both economic and societal development/advancement, however, this has also been hindered by lack of political will by political leaders to enforce or ensure compliance to the dictates and tenets of democratic governance. The style and structures of leadership where the governed were not considered at the center governance and decisions-making in policies and programmes have hindered democracy and economic development.

The paper further underscores the point that political freedom, human rights and liberty could create an enabling ground that can ensure checks and balances among the various arms of government. Thus, democracy ensures accountability and arrests those factors that hinder citizens from actively participating in their governance, and aligns them with a government that is accountable and responsible.

The paper concludes that the tenet of democracy at every level of governance in the Nigerian context has been greatly encroached which is due largely to factors including: party politics, ethnicity, religious bigotry and corruption. These are born out of lack of political will by some individuals in leadership position. Therefore, if an enabling ground that is conducive enough to foster human rights, liberty and liberation is not created, the needed gains of democratic processes will remain an illusion. Nigeria has all it takes for human and material resources to develop, but that can only happen when the canker that eats into the fabric of the national structure is killed. National integration and unity are possible, but that is only when the country is able to overcome the mirage of "unity in diversity" and come to understand the reality of the 'diversity in our unity'.

There is the need for the country to come to terms with regional inclinations and use it for its advantage. Let there be policies that acknowledge the interest of all the regions and harmonize it to the development of the country at large. But the above can only be possible if individual self-aggrandizement is overcome by politicians and their supporters, so that democracy is pursued through the establishment and observance of the rule of law, with complete separation of power and independence of all the three arms of government. Finally, having established that the relationship between democracy and economic development is such a strong affinity that is inseparable, as far as the rule of law remains unbroken, there is therefore the need to socially engineer a process that can create a feed-back strategy to provide the needed support for the anti-corruption fight of President Buhari's administration through the implementation of freedom of information bill and protection of human rights. This suggestion is intended to liberate and release Nigerians from fear and intimidation.

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