

## Successive Failure of Democracy in Nigeria: The Way Out

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### **Abstract**

*The research is an assessment of representative democracy as an administrative system in Nigeria, by highlighting the failure of the state. It looks at some components of direct democracy. Therefore, the paper focuses on direct democracy, using secondary sources of data. In conclusion, the research offers direct democracy as a solution to the failure of the Nigerian administrative system especially as it affects participation, developmental programmes and institutionalized corruption.*

**Keywords:** *Democracy, participation, national development, direct democracy, Nigeria, corruption.*

### **1. Introduction**

Democracy is a global system which every nation tries to achieve. The whole world is in a trance for democracy, with Africa not being any different. "Democracy has gathered momentum across the globe as a result of its immense advantages and by implication because of the negative consequences of bad governance" Bello-Imam (2004, p. 1). Nigeria is not an exception, because no state can operate in isolation and thus the need for the country to democratize becomes paramount. Our history reveals an epileptic attempts at democracy with tragic consequences. However, Nigeria since May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1999 been practicing democracy with little or no dividend of democracy. Nigeria's rough history shows failure of government policies (development programmes), corruption, apathy and non-participation of citizens among other things towards government and government programmes, largely due to the attitude or failure of leadership.

We the people were looking forward to a smooth history in the making with the achievement of what seemed like a true democracy. However, unfortunately as Ojo (2005) puts it, "the democracy in the African context serves the interest of only the ruling class".

Democracy is not a restricted concept or form of government that must be practiced only in one prescribed format. The truth is the world has more systems of democracy than recognized democratic countries. Despite this, there exist certain features and strata of democratic systems that might be differentiated from one another.

Any form of democracy tries in its own way to ascertain the will of the people and to bring public affairs into line with it. Theoretically, this can be achieved by direct participation of all citizens (direct democracy) or by a body of elected representatives (representative democracy). Within the group of representative democracies, the focus may be on a strong president (presidential democracy) or on a strong parliament (parliamentary democracy). As already mentioned, the question is not whether there exist some forms of direct participation or of representation but rather on how much importance they are given in a certain

system.

## 2. Nigeria- Presidential Democracy

The president is head of state and leader of the government.

President elected by the people, nominates the ministers (members of government).

Parliament- Elected for a fixed legislative period. Government members need not be members of parliament.

Strong position of the president (veto).

Laws- Are debated and passed by parliament; lobbyists do not have a formal right to be heard, but exercise some influence on members of parliament in reality; the president may block a law by veto; as the president is elected as a personality (not only as a party leader) by the people (not by the parliament).

A strong president may act immediately but there is risk that he rushes to conclusions he may hardly be willing to withdraw from even if they prove to be unwise from a later point of view.

The separation of powers though it might seem very clear in theory does not automatically provide checks that are more effective and balances between parliament and government than in a direct democracy.

## 3. Application of Direct democracy

Specifically, this paper examines four separate applications of direct democracy.

- Referendums;
- Citizens' initiatives;
- Agenda initiatives; and
- Recall.

The terminology used to describe the various instrument of direct democracy can vary between different jurisdiction, and different terms have sometimes been used to describe what are essentially the same institutions and processes. Referendums conducted by the government, for example, have sometimes been called plebiscites – a term that remains in used today in some jurisdiction. Citizens' initiatives – the term used in this research – are sometimes also known as popular referendums or citizen initiated referendums, depending on the context in which the procedures are used. The meaning of some of the terms used to describe the different institutions and processes of direct democracy has changed over time, and it is subject to linguistic variations.

Referendums are procedures that give the electorate a direct vote on a specific political, constitutional or legislative issue. Referendums take place when a governing body or similar authority decides to call for a vote on a particular issue, or when such a vote is required by law under the terms of a constitution or other binding legal arrangement. In some cases, procedures also exist which allow citizens or a minority in a legislature to demand a referendum on an issue. The result of a referendum may be largely binding, as determined by the law or constitution under which it is called, or it may be used by the authorities for advisory purposes only.

Citizens' initiatives allow the electorate to vote on a political, constitutional or legislative measure proposed by a number of citizens and not by a government, legislature, or other political authority. To bring an issue to a vote, the proponents of the measure must gather enough signatures in support of it as the law under which the initiative is brought forward requires. citizens' initiatives may deal with new proposals, existing laws or constitutional measures, depending on the provisions of the law under which such a vote take place.

Agenda initiatives are procedures by which citizens can organise to place a particular issue on the agenda of a parliament or legislative assembly. As with citizens' initiatives, a minimum number of signatures is generally specified by law in order for the initiative to be brought forward to the legislature. Unlike the

procedure followed for citizens' initiatives, no popular vote take place when agenda initiative is brought forward.

Recall procedures allow the electorate to vote on whether to end the term of office of an elected official if enough signatures in support of a recall vote are collected. Although the process of recall is often similar to that of citizens' initiatives, recall deals only with the question of removal of a person from public office, and the outcome is therefore always binding.

#### **4. National Development Plans in Nigeria**

We have had series of development plans in Nigeria. Nigeria is permanently hunted by the spectre of development. Its barely fifty years since independence and Nigeria is still rolling by the day in search of development. The myth of growth development is so entrenched that the country's passes for the history of development strategies and growth models from colonial times up to date. No term has been in constant flux as development. This seems the only country where virtually all notions and models of development have been experimented (Aremu, 2003).

Two years after independence, the first national development plan policy was formulated between 1962 and 1968 with the objectives of development opportunities in health, education and employment and improving access to these opportunities, etc. The plan failed Ogwumike (1995). Collapse of the first republic and the commencement of civil war also disrupted the plan. After the civil war in 1970, the second national development plan 1970 to 1974 was launched, the plan priorities were in agriculture, industry, transport, manpower, defence, electricity, communication and water supply and provision of social services (Ogwumike, 1995). The third plan, covering the period of 1975 to 1980 was considered more ambitious than the second plan. Emphasis was placed on rural development and efforts to revamp agricultural sector. The fourth plan 1981 to 1985 recognized the role of social services, health services, etc. The plan was aimed at bringing about improvement in the living conditions of the people. The specific objectives were: an increased in the real income of the average citizen, more even distribution of income among individuals and socio-economic groups, increased dependence on the country's material and human resources, a reduction in the level of unemployment and underemployment Ogwumike (1995).

During these periods, Nigeria's enormous oil wealth was not invested to build a viable industrial base for the country and for launching an agrarian revolution to liquidate mass poverty. For instance, the green revolution programme that replaced operation feed the nation failed to generate enough food for the masses. In recent past, various strategies for development have also been tried with little or no result; structural adjustment programme (SAP), Vision 2010, national economic empowerment and development strategy (NEEDS), Creation of development centres, seven point agenda, vision 2020, etc.

#### **5. Discussion of major findings**

In spite of series of development strategies, put in place by successive governments, all attempts to generate meaningful development proved futile in Nigeria.

Based on this, one is now confronted with these puzzles: were those previous development plans or strategies bad in their context, or wrongly projected? If nothing is wrong with the plans, then why is it still difficult to generate meaningful development in spite of huge resources at our disposal? Some factors have combined to halt the nation's development.

There are in most cases, no executive capacity responsible for the formulation and implementation of the plan. What we usually see are officials entrusted to such a position but without any meaningful executive authority.

Some of the previous development plans failed because there was little or no consultation of the public (citizens). Planning is supposed to involve even the peasants in the villages. Even the local government

officials who are close to the people were not consulted. Planning is not an edifice where technocrats alone operate (Mimiko, 1998).

Lack of good governance also militates against national development. Where there is no good governance, development becomes a mirage. This is because of bad leadership in the country. Most of our leaders have no sense of commitment to development. Mbaya (2009) captures the situation this way: "The recent disgrace and exposure of corruption and unethical activities among political leaders and the covert conspiracies of governments betraying their own people in Nigeria is evidence that there is lack of servant-leaders..."

Embezzlement and other selfish deviant behaviours of the so-called leaders, could be better comprehended when viewed as "latent" and "manifest" functions as forwarded by Parsons (1960).

Mimiko (1998) presents the situation this way:

*The decolonization allowed the crop of leaders that aligned with colonial power to take over Nigeria. This ensured the sustenance of a neo-colonial economy even after political independence. These leaders on assumption of power quickly turned up the repressive machinery of the colonial state rather than dismantling it. Significantly, they have no vision of development to accompany the efficient instrument of repression they inherited. All they were interested in was access to power and privileges and not development.*

Another finding is, even though people like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)- a social contract theorist, who advocated a standing government for society if man is to avoid a "state of nature" where life is "solitary", "brutish", "nasty", "poor", and "short". It is now clear that without good leadership man could go back to the stage of the "state of nature", as we are witnessing in Nigeria where the state is deteriorating daily. People are increasingly displaying features of a society in a state of anarchy.

## 6. Conclusion

It is apparent that the assessment of the administrative system of Switzerland surely has lessons for Nigeria. Through direct democracy and its discussed characteristics. A state where the citizens have a say in the formation and programmes of their government.

In Nigeria the leaders are not altruistic and have a vision of self aggrandizement that run counter to the aspirations of the people. While Nigerians are languishing in poverty, their rulers are revelling in obscene affluence. This paper has carefully discussed various attempts at national development in Nigeria. So what is the way forward?

## 7. Recommendation

The thing to note here is there is nothing wrong with the administrative system- democracy; federalism, presidential system of government, practiced in Nigeria. The problem is our "rough history" and the inability of our leaders to change to a "smooth history". But there are lessons to be learnt from the adoption of direct democracy. The Nigerian constitution provides for limited direct democracy this needs to be amended to give greater participation to the citizens through referendums, citizens' initiatives, agenda initiatives, and recall. This has the advantage of not only ensuring that leaders do their jobs but also to do away with bad elected office holders in government.

Nigeria is a multicultural state the option of direct democracy would not only increase participation but would also help establish a more stable (politically, administratively, socially, etc.) nation-state (a state made up of nations). Where leaders are held accountable for their actions/inactions.

Direct democracy would also help not only in state building but also in terms of nation building (loyalty and commitment of both leaders and their people).

It is also recommended that Nigeria adopt the Switzerland part-time job format which direct democracy can ensure. According to Beedham (2002) direct democracy in Switzerland "could turn out to be a model for everybody's 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy". In Switzerland, members of the parliament are not full-time legislatures, meaning they have individual jobs like any other ordinary citizen. In fact, apart from a few positions mostly trainers the armed forces in Switzerland are virtually non-existent. This could be adopted for the national assembly and when circumstances permit, the same could be adopted for the armed forces in Nigeria. This has at least two advantages: one, serious reduction in overhead costs in the public sector. Two, having representatives working like every other citizen allows the public to have better interaction with their elected officials and for the representatives to have a clearer understanding of their people as well as their needs.

The problem of latent functions can be checkmated by the principles of direct democracy; I therefore offer Nigeria and its people direct democracy as a key to administrative excellence and development.

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