

The Crisis of Democracy in Nigeria: An Examination of Two Determining Factors

Temidayo David OLADIPO, Ph.D¹

Abstract

When one reflects about Nigeria's democracy one cannot but wonder what is responsible for the inability of democracy to translate into development for the people. Why is democracy in Nigeria encountering so many troubles- insurgencies, corruption, ethnic rivalry, political assassination, among others? How come rather than solving so many social ills, it seems to be aggravating them? These are the major questions that provoked the reflections poured into this paper. Two factors are identified as being responsible for the inability of democracy to engender the promotion of the common good in Nigeria. The first is colonialism. The second is the nature of politics in Nigeria. The colonial contribution, it is argued, is that it shaped Nigeria into a country where, ultimately, politics is devoid of morality. It also made the Nigerian populace to perceive the government of the country as being alien in nature, and one that should be cheated. The nature of politics, as it is, is indicted as not creating an enabling environment for democracy to thrive. In the final analysis, what needs to be done, we conclude, is the re-examination of the principles informing governance and the relationship of the citizens with the state in order to provide a better footing for democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democracy, development, colonialism, politics.

Introduction

Democracy is government of the people, by the people, for the people, yet this mode of governance is hardly the same in any two countries. One of the many factors shaping it is the history of the country in question. Another is the nature of the people, which differ from one place to another, and which is shaped by a people's belief system and orientation. Political ideologies, political culture as well as political actors also shape the nature of democracy in a polity. This paper is, however, on the examination of two factors that are responsible for shaping the nature of democracy in Nigeria. The factors identified, in this paper, are colonialism and the nature of politics in Nigeria. Although there are others, these two are considered as being very crucial because they have, to a great extent, been instrumental in bestowing on democracy in Nigeria its present form and pathologies.

Our contention, in the papers, is that there is need to re-evaluate the colonial legacies inherited by the country in order to do away with negative orientations towards the Nigerian state. There is also the argument that the nature of politics in Nigeria, which is underpinned by the need for material acquisition and greed will keep hindering democracy from engendering development until such attitude that sees the state as a means to an end is done away with. Examining these two factors is aimed at drawing attention to what is fundamentally wrong with democracy in Nigeria. The need for this is due to the realisation that Nigeria's quest for good governance and development cannot be achieved if that which is basically wrong with democracy is not properly diagnosed. It is only proper diagnosis that can result in finding lasting solutions that will ensure that democracy delivers development to Nigerians, who, as it stands, are disappointed that their expectation that democracy will enhance good governance, which will, in turn, lead to development has not been realised.

¹ Department of General Studies, Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, PMB 5454, Nigeria.

They are also disappointed that democracy has not been able to heal the country of its many ills, which include: extreme poverty, unfulfilled elementary needs, widespread hunger, a high rate of death, preventable diseases, illiteracy, lack of access to portable water, poor sanitation, violation of political freedom and basic liberties, bad governance, and various forms of violent conflicts (Sogolo 2013:16).

Colonialism and Its Effect on Nigeria's Democracy

The discourse about Nigeria's democracy should appropriately start with colonialism. This is because there would have been no Nigeria as a state if colonialists had not merged together erstwhile independent communities and named it Nigeria. It is the colonialists that gave birth to Nigeria, formed its institutions, set its bureaucracies in place, decided the rules with which Nigeria is to be administered and determined the mode of governance with which the country is to be governed. Eventually, when the British granted Nigeria independence, Britain bequeathed to Nigeria, not just structures, but a mental orientation about the state.

Indeed, as Ekeh (1975:93) says it is to colonialism that we must look for any valid conceptualisation of the unique nature of African politics. Osaghae (2006:234) reiterates this position. To him, the character and pathologies of contemporary African politics takes root from, and has been shaped by, colonialism. One major influence of colonialism is that the nature of the state introduced to Africa essentially differs from the type of state the West had. Although the state in Africa was patterned after that of the West in that they parade similar institutions or bureaucracies, yet, "many postcolonial African countries function quite differently from conventional understanding of what a formal Western state is and should do" (Taylor 2005:2).

The West got it wrong because "the prime motive for the establishment of colonies was economic" (Cammack, Pool, and Tordoff 1993:16); and in order to realise their economic goals, the colonialists employed means that are immoral in achieving the ends they sought. The consequence, in Nigeria's case is that the newly introduced colonial state had an overbearing control on not just the political realm, but also on the social, religious, and economic spheres. Hence, "whilst in the West, the realm of politics is relatively well-defined and self-contained, both concretely and analytically separate from those, for instance, of the economy or society, such is emphatically not the case in Africa" (Chabal and Daloz 1999: xvii). The kind of politics the colonialists introduced to Africa was quite different from the kind obtained in their home countries. Largely, the type of politics the colonialists practised back home was responsive to the needs of their people and geared towards improving the lot of their citizens. But the type they introduced to Africa was exploitative and directed towards expropriating the human and natural wealth of the African continent. Politics in the colonial era was aimed, strictly, at the maximisation of returns from the colonised states for the advantage of the colonisers.

The result of this kind of administrative policy, in Nigeria, is that the state was not administered by those ruling with the view of benefiting the people being ruled. The people merely got the crumbs from the master's table. The institutions that were set up existed for the sole purpose of obtaining compliance from the people. The rulers were omnipotent, unquestionable beings, whose wills were laws. The people were not the nucleus from which power derived. They were mere objects over which power was lorded. Eventually, when the colonialists handed over the reins of governance to indigenous rulers, apart from the change of guards nothing fundamentally changed about the principles with which Nigeria was administered. The way the colonialists administered Nigeria rubbed off on indigenous politicians. These politicians adopted the philosophy underpinning the ruthless style of administration of colonialists without questioning. As Ekeh (1975:96) puts it, this class accepted "the principles implicit in colonialism but it rejects the foreign personnel that ruled Africa."

The politicians that took over the reins of governance in Nigeria were more concerned with being in charge of the state of affairs of the country. They gave little attention to evaluating the ideologies, policies, values and institutions with which Nigeria was hitherto governed in order to determine how adequate they are for post-colonial statehood. Business was carried on with the nature of the inherited colonial state without adequate thought about the consequences of the characteristics of the colonial state in a post-colonial era. This made the protégé of the colonialists, as noted by Chabal and Daloz (1999: xviii), to resort to the political instrumentalisation of disorder, that is, "the process by which political actors in Africa seek to maximise their returns on the state of confusion, uncertainty, and sometimes even chaos," just as the colonialists did. Explaining how colonialism has shaped the crop of leaders Nigerians got after independence, Ibrahim (1986:40) argues that: the present Nigerian ruling class is the product of a sham transition from colonial rule to 'independence.'

It is a class whose historic mission was to participate in the rapid exploitation of the resources and labour of the people as junior partners to the imperialist bourgeoisie. As it was a class whose initial capital was nil or very minimal, it had to depend on its control of the state machinery to engage in rapacious primitive accumulation to transform itself into a bourgeoisie.

As control of state power became the decisive element in accumulation (rather than the appropriation of the surplus value of workers) the competition for its control became characterised by fraud, lawlessness, chicanery and all sorts of autocratic practices. The principle of colonialism with which the ruling class that emerged in Nigeria continued governance, as inherited from the colonisers, is predominantly responsible for not only the generation but also the sustenance of what Ekeh (1975) calls the two publics - one, the primordial public and, the other, the civic public- and this is further responsible for some political problems.

The primordial public became “a public entity which one works to preserve and benefit, while the civic public is the one “from which one seeks to gain, if possible in order to benefit the *moral* primordial public” (Ekeh 1975:100). Achebe (1960:30) succinctly captures the point of Ekeh regarding the development of the two publics in Nigeria when he says that, “in Nigeria the government was ‘they.’ It had nothing to do with you or me. It was an alien institution and people’s business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble.” This theory, according to Osaghae (2006:241), “is particularly powerful in explaining the salience of ethnicity and corruption as political instruments, the fractured character of citizenship that produces bad citizens rather than good citizens, and the problems of national cohesion.”

With the two publics in place in Nigeria, government continued to be perceived as an alien body, an imposition which is merely tolerated and one which deserves no political obligation. This made it difficult “to get the citizen to be patriotic, work hard and be faithful to public service, pay taxes, and oblige the state with other duties. The transfer of these pathologies was made easier by the fact that the African bourgeois class did not antagonise the precepts of the colonial state but only its alien personnel which it eventually replaced” (Osaghae 2006:237). Another implication is that people who ventured into politics ended up seeing governance as a means to an end and sadly not the end of promoting the common good but a means to the end of benefitting oneself and one’s cronies. Public wealth, which would have gone into the improvement of infrastructure and the betterment of human lives, ended up in private coffers. Whereas in the West, only one public- the civic public- exists, which is informed by morality, Nigeria and other African countries have two publics.

The inability of colonialism to engender the promotion of the welfare and development needs of the people became an alienating influence which promoted ethnic, communal, and hometown development associations that eventually secured the loyalty of the people at the detriment of patriotism to the Nigerian state. The development of these two publics is at the heart of the bane of Nigeria’s politics, corruption. This is so because the contending demands of belonging to two publics and the need for recognition and acceptance in the primordial public makes an average member who finds himself in the civic public to embezzle public wealth in order to benefit the primordial public and thereby consolidate his/her position in it. Ultimately, therefore, the colonial experience led to a situation in which there was separation of morality from politics.

Unfortunately, although politics should be guided by ethical considerations and the application of set of appropriate rules, this was not the case in Nigeria. This essentially can be traced to the pattern with which the colonialists, and the post-independence leaders of the Nigerian state, administered Nigeria, a pattern which was devoid of morality. In the end, Nigeria inherited a crisis- the separation of politics from morality. However, Appadorai (1975:9-10) has rightly underscored the importance of morality in politics, when he held that: ...the question for politics is to discover not what government prescribes, but what they ought to prescribe, the connection between ethics and politics is clear, for on every political issue the question may be raised whether it is right or wrong...what is morally wrong can never be politically right....Politics is conditioned by ethics. The separation of morality from politics has taken its toll on democratic governance in Nigeria with flagrant disregard for the principles and values on which democracy is founded.

Suffice it to point out at this juncture that for any polity to qualify as a democracy, it must be one in which the founding charters, norms, and principles of governance of the state have been established by the people; one in which the leaders have been chosen by the people, and in which there exists peaceful, free and fair means of changing such leaders when it becomes necessary.

In such a policy, there must also exist such rights as freedom of speech, of assembly, and of worship; equality before the law; respect for and guarantee of human dignity and fundamental human rights of the people; tolerance of other people's faith and beliefs, of the opposition, and of ethnic differences; accountability of leaders to the people; justice; and an appropriate set of institutions that can guarantee separation of powers among the different arms of government. Such a system must also respect the opinions and rights of the minority. These rights must be guaranteed by law against "the tyranny of the majority." However, what the separation of morality from politics does to these principles of democratic governance is that it creates a lacuna which can be exploited for truncating these principles with impunity. Of a truth democracy involves having in place "institutions, values and [more importantly] patterns of behaviour conducive to respect for human rights, acknowledgement of the rule of law, enhanced transparency and accountability" (Gordon 1997:156). Governance in a democracy where there is gross disregard for morality will be done without respect for the institutions and values underlining democratic governance.

This is what Nigeria has witnessed in its democracy; and the reason why democratic governance has been unable to bring about development in the country. Unah (2009:53) is right then, when he held that a wrong value system will result in a wrong pattern of behaviour. The adoption of a wrong pattern of behaviour by persons or groups will in turn result in the negative unfolding of events around them. In other words, the adoption of a wrong social conduct by persons and groups will result in negative development. Colonialism shaped Nigeria's political terrain in yet another way. Although, Nigerian politicians took over the reins of government at independence, the power to govern was never firmly in their hands as the economy was decisively in the hands of foreign bourgeois. Agbese explains that (1990:302): although independence placed the state under the control of the dominant class, the Nigerian economy was controlled and dominated by British firms.

The control and domination of the economy by a foreign bourgeoisie placed the local bourgeoisie in a precarious position. It acquired political power without the corresponding economic wealth. The implication of this is that the locus of power plays outside the shores of the Nigerian state. Events in the Nigerian political terrain were hence quite often influenced and manipulated from outside. Moreover, with the control of the economy by foreign investors, a huge proportion of the resources from the Nigerian economy, that would have been instrumental in developing the country, made its way into foreign coffers. Capital flight has, however, been made worse as a result of the acts of corrupt politicians who are fond of stacking away stolen wealth in foreign accounts.

The Nature of Nigeria's Politics and Democracy in Nigeria

Partially, as a result of the impact of colonialism and, to some extent, due to the non-readiness on the part of post-colonial political leaders to bring about lasting changes in the principles of governance, Diamond's observation that "something is fundamentally wrong with politics in Nigeria" (Diamond 1984:915) remains true till date. Regarding what is wrong with politics, Diamond's position is that making the state the centre for the accumulation of wealth and acquisition of resources is what is principally wrong with politics in Nigeria. This, essentially, for him, is responsible for the desperate struggle to capture and retain state power since "access to the state constitutes the chief instrument for the accumulation of capital by the dominant class" (Agbese 1990:302). As a result, Ake (1989:1162-1163) observes that, "we are intoxicated with politics. The premium on political power is so high that we are prone to take the most extreme measures in order to win and maintain political power, our energy tends to be channelled into the struggle for power to the detriment of economically productive effort..." Ake (1996:7) further posits that: much of what is uniquely negative about politics in Africa arises from the character of the state, particularly its lack of autonomy, the immensity of its power, its proneness to abuse and the lack of immunity against it.

The character of the state rules out a politics of moderation and mandates a politics of lawlessness and extremism for the simple reason that the nature of the state makes the capture of the state power irresistibly attractive. Other than how the nature of the state affected the kind of politics obtained in Nigeria, Tar and Zack-Williams (2007) have identified four pervasive trends in Nigeria's politics. The first is the *politicisation of sectarian differences*. Politicians often resort to this as a means of gaining and perpetuating themselves in power. In doing this, "primordial ties such as ethnicity, religion and region of birth are mobilised by one faction of the bourgeoisie against other factions" (Agbese 1990:302). The second feature is *the militarisation of the state and political culture*.

This is as a result of many years of military rule that the country witnessed. Coupled with this is the fact that most Nigerians who ventured into politics were ex-military men with the “barrack culture” and rulers with little or no regard for the democratic culture. *The privatisation of violence* is the third feature of Nigerian politics identified by Tar and Zack-Williams. This is evident in the establishment of private and party militias by politicians as means of protecting their loots from state plundering. They, at the same time, employ the barrels of the gun to intimidate rival politicians and members of the public. There is also violence visited on the state by ethnic militias. Little wonder that “democracy in the societies of the bottom billion has increased political violence instead of reducing it” (Collier 2010:11).

Fourth, there is *the personalisation of state apparatus by those in power*. This they often do for personal gains and in order to enforce legitimacy. The nature of Nigeria as a rentier state also makes the state susceptible to violence. As a rentier state, Nigeria is made susceptible to crisis in the bourgeois’ attempt to control oil resources. Dependence on oil has at least two other implications apart from this. One, it has hindered the diversification of the economy. Second, it made the ruling class pay less attention to other sources of funding government. Not much attention is paid to taxation, for instance, or even to development of the agricultural sector among other sectors that can increase Nigeria’s revenue. The implication of this is that the people are less obliged or concerned in questioning and fighting corruption. The money being embezzled is often seen as “oil money” and not “our money.” Accountability, an important concept in democracy, is thus demeaned.

The nature of political parties in Nigeria also poses some challenges to democratic governance in the country. First, as Ebijuwa (2007:183) rightly notes, there is the problem of the control of the political parties by wealthy politicians who finance and run the parties as their personal properties. These politicians dictate who takes what in the parties and expect victorious candidates to be subservient to their whims and caprices in planning and executing policies that affect the state. In addition, most of the parties that have formed in Nigeria’s political history have formed along ethnic lines, thereby making political parties nothing more than instruments of ethnic expressions. These parties have also played upon ethnic jealousies, such that they precipitate their victories on discrediting other parties as being parties of the “other,” as such these parties rather than being instruments of cohesiveness have become instruments of division in the country.

Moreover, political parties in Nigeria are basically guided with the principle of “seek ye first the political kingdom,” making politics in Nigeria to degenerate into an unrelenting struggle for the capturing of state power first while laudable programmes of transformation are pushed to secondary positions. As such, when a particular political party eventually captures power, it takes time before it gets its acts together in carrying out transformative programmes. Sometimes, a whole tenure is wasted without any meaningful achievement. A free and fair election is an important precondition for democracy. It is important as an instrument of accountability and as an instrument of conferring legitimacy.

As an instrument of accountability, Collier (2010:18) explains that, “in a democracy a government has no choice but to try to deliver what ordinary citizens want. If it is seen to perform sufficiently well, then it gets re-elected; if it is judged to be inferior to alternatives, then it losses. Either way, government strives to perform because it is accountable to voters.” Since government knows that if it does not perform well it will not be re-elected and since government hopes to get re-elected during elections they often strive to carry out laudable development projects that will convince the people that it deserves another chance. Election, therefore, serves as a way of holding those in government accountable for their actions while they are in power.

Elections also serve as an instrument of conferring legitimacy. This is because people often give support to what they are convinced that they have helped create and build rather than what is forced on them. Resorting to election is done in an attempt to secure the consent of the led in deciding who the leader should be in dealing with issues that affect their lives. However, in Nigeria, because elections are radically flawed, election neither serves as an instrument of demanding accountability nor as an instrument of conferring legitimacy. In the absence of a free and fair election that confers legitimacy, the government of the day often had to rely on pre-emptive repression to stay in power instead of the expressed consent of the people. This is the point Uroh (2007:47-48) makes when he argues that:...when we affirm that a political institution is legitimate, we imply simultaneously that it has the *right* to exercise political power, and by extension, that its directives ought to be complied with by the citizens. The reverse is the case when we perceive a political institution as illegitimate. When this happens compliance to state directives by the citizens becomes a matter of prudence; that is they obey out of fear of the consequences of doing otherwise.

The institutions of the state from that moment become sustainable mainly by “fear, intimidation and violence.” But force can only secure compliance; it neither legitimates power nor confers the *right* to be obeyed on those wielding it. Also, because the electioneering process is muddled up in a lot of shady deals, honest people do not even venture to contest since they know they will not emerge as winners. In fact, they most likely will not scale through most of the huddles placed before them by political godfathers.

The implication is that the option available to voters is that of choosing between bad candidates, who when they emerge will not provide transformative leadership and at the end the polity suffers for it since no credible development programmes are envisioned by those who eventually find themselves in the seat of power. If, per chance, “honest” people venture into politics, in quite a number of cases they compromise or have to pay for their uprightness dearly by having their governance disrupted by certain disgruntled godfathers because the terms of the pre-election agreement they entered into with the candidate in question has been breached. This much is evident in the way Chris Ngige of Anambra state came into power in 2003 and, the troubles he had with his estranged godfather, Chris Uba. Another example is that of how Governor Adewolu Ladoja of Oyo State had his terms in office disrupted by his political godfather, Lamidi Adedibu in 2006.

Conclusion

In this essay, there has been an examination of two salient factors that have bequeathed to Nigeria’s democracy some of the troubles plaguing it. The first factor that was examined is colonialism. As Otite suggests the past defines social characteristics and identities (Otite 1983:6). The past is a major factor that produces the “present which will, in turn, develop into the future” (Otite 1983:7). Consequently, vestiges of colonial legacies in leadership styles, governance, and citizen’s orientation were identified. This was followed by the discussion of certain deficiencies in the nature of politics in Nigeria. There is no doubt that the anomalies identified under these two areas have come to pose some challenges to the ability of democracy to engender development in Nigeria. It therefore becomes pertinent to direct efforts to such dangers that threaten to smother life from Nigeria’s nascent democracy.

References

- Achebe, C. 1960. *No longer at ease*. Essex: Heinemann.
- Agbese, P.A. 1990. The political economy of militarisation in Nigeria. *Africa Spectrum* 25.3.
- Ake, C. 1981. *Presidential Address to the 1981 Conference of the Nigerian Political Science Association*. West Africa, May 26, 1981.
- Ake, C. 1996. *Is Africa Democratising?* Cass Monograph, No. 5. Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd.
- Appadorai, A. 1975. *The substance of politics*, 11th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cammack, P., D. Pool, and W. Tordoff. 1993. *Third world politics*, 2nd ed. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Chabal, P. and Daloz, J. 1999. *Africa works: disorder as political instrument*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Collier, P. 2010. *Wars, guns and votes: democracy in dangerous places*. London: Vintage Books.
- Collier, P. 2010. *Wars, guns and votes: democracy in dangerous places*.
- Diamond, L. 1984. Nigeria in search of democracy. *Foreign Affairs* 62.4.
- Ebijuwa, T. 2007. The moral foundation of political authority in Africa. *Philosophy and social change: discourse on values in Africa*. Ibadan: Hope Publications.
- Ekeh, P.P. 1975. Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: a theoretical statement. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17.1.
- Gordon, D.F. 1997. On Promoting democracy in Africa: the international dimension. *Democracy in Africa: the hard road ahead*. Ed.: Marina Ottaway. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Ibrahim, J. 1986. The political debate and the struggle for democracy in Nigeria. *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 37: *Oil Debts and Democracy in Nigeria*.
- Otite, O. 1983. *The presence of the past*. An Inaugural Lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan on 5 May, 1983.
- Osaghae, E.E. 2006. Colonialism and civil society in Africa: the perspective of Ekeh’s two publics. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and None profit Organisation* 17.3.

- Sogolo, G. 2013. Africa, socio-political order and Anyiam-Osigwe's idea of holistic development. *A holistic approach to human existence and development*. Eds. K.A. Olu-Owolabi and A.B. Ekanola. Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd.
- Tar, U.A. and A.B. Zack-Williams. 2007. Nigeria: Contested elections and an unstable democracy. *Review of African Political Economy* 34.113: *Imperial, Neo-Liberal Africa?*
- Taylor, I. 2005. *NEPAD: Towards Africa's development or another false start?* London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
- Unah, J. 2009. Values and development. *The development philosophy of Emmanuel Onyechere Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe, Volume 1: Personal values, personal awareness and self-mastery*. Eds.: Olusegun Oladipo and Adebola B. Ekanola. Ibadan. Hope Publications.
- Uroh, C. O. 2007. Mediating pluralities in Africa. *Philosophy and social change: discourse on values in Africa*. Ed.: Temisan Ebijuwa. Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd.