

# Democracy and National Development in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects

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## Abstract

Democracy plays a very important and crucial role in promoting good governance and national development. The common feature is its emphasis on improving the socio-economic welfare of the people and this is synonymous with the idea of national development. Without doubt, most countries and continents of the world have had traumatic, exasperating and ugly experiences in organizing themselves democratically. Almost every nation, rightly or wrongly, freely or compulsively, wants to be seen as democratic even though the political system bears no semblance of a democracy. Against all odds, all over today's world, there are serious clamors and yearnings for democratization and these seem to make democracy very fashionable. In light of the above therefore, this paper critically examines the challenges and prospects of democracy and national development in Nigeria. It argues that the ubiquity of electoral malpractices in Nigeria and corruption are the two major challenges to the materialization of democracy as an instrument of national development in Nigeria. In addition, the paper states that the independence of INEC, practical enforcement of anti-corruption laws and enthronement of internal democracy in political parties will enhance the prospects of democracy and national development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Democracy, National Development, Nigeria, Prospects.

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between democracy and national development is widely appreciated. This is because democracy plays a very important and crucial role in promoting good governance and fostering national development. The common feature of democratic governance is its emphasis on improving the socio-economic welfare of the people and this is synonymous with the idea of national development. Thus, the individual and his quality of life must be the centre of conception of national development (Amucheazi, 1980). As history may have it, democratic practice is undoubtedly as old as humanity and the civil society itself. It is traceable to the ancient Greek society (i.e. the city-state of Athens). However, circumstances and controversies over the decades have seriously preoccupied scholars with the very concept of democracy given its consensus definition, perception and application.

The etymology of the term "democracy" was derived from two Greek words, which literally mean "Demos" (people) and "Kratian" (Rule). In other words, it means a government administered and composed by the people collectively. This essentially presupposes and establishes that governments derived their existence from the will of the generality of the people. Thus, Richard R. Fagen (1986), cited in Nekabari Nna (2002:43) has listed the following as the basic characteristics of a democratic form of government:

1. There is effective participation of individuals and groups in the decisions that most affect their lives.
2. There is a system of accountability whereby the behavior of leaders and officials can be monitored, judged and if necessary changed by those who are subject to their authority.
3. There is political equality (in the sense of equal opportunity to participate in the political processes etc).

Democracy is perhaps the most cherished form of government. This is as a result of the rising degree of countries in the world today claiming to be democratic and the number of the populace who yearn for it. As a matter of fact, almost every form of government in the world today claims to be democratic even when critics believe that such claim is not valid. However, even though there appears to be a universal passion for democracy as against other forms of government; these appear to be no universal standard for its application. Thus, while it is an ideal system of government which all societies strive to attain, its application remains specific to the cultural context in which it is applied.

Without doubt whatsoever, most countries and continents of the world have had traumatic, exasperating and ugly experiences in organizing themselves democratically. Almost every nation, rightly or wrongly, freely or compulsively, wants to be seen as democratic even though the political system bears no semblance of a democracy. Against all odds, all over today's world, there are serious clamours and yearnings for

democratization and these seem to make democracy very fashionable. It is therefore against this background that this paper is proposed to critically examine the challenges and prospects of democracy and national development in Nigeria.

## **2. Conceptual Clarifications**

### **2.1. Democracy**

It is an indisputable fact that democracy is a form of government various scholars of thought have attempted to define democracy. The purpose remains for promoting good governance and national development. Thus, Dahl (1982:11) defines democracy as “a system of elected representative government operated under the rule of law, where the most significant groups in the population participate in the political process and have access to effective representation in the practice of making governmental decisions, that is, of allocation of scarce resources”. Democracy may also be described as a system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representatives periodically elected by themselves (Appadorai, 1975).

Democracy which means “rule by the people” is a form of government which lays emphasis on active participation by the citizenry and on popular sovereignty. Political Participation is one of the defining qualities of democracy and is thus considered the bonafide right of citizen in any democracy (Price, 1975:36; Ikpe, 2000:15). It is deducible from the foregoing that in virtually all democratic countries of the world, the rulers rule with the people’s mandate. The implication remains that in order for the people’s rule to be effective, the people must participate in the government of their countries. Political participation therefore can be described as “those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly arrived at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take” (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978:1). To Giddens (1996) democracy is a political system that allows the citizens to participate in political decision making, or to elect representatives to government bodies. Ntalaja (2005) views democracy as a universal form of rule with specific manifestations in time and space.

While Abraham Lincoln, a former American President, in his address of 19<sup>th</sup> November, 1863, describes democracy as “government of the people, by the people and for the people”. This underscores the need that democracy is both representative and participatory hence its emphasis is actually on the general welfare of the people. Suffice it to say that all democratic governments do not only derive their root from the consent of the people but are designed to protect the interest of the people. Beyond that is that policies of government are products of the collective decisions of the people. In other words, the mass of the people are directly or indirectly involved in taking decisions on issues that affect their lives. Above all, considering Abraham Lincoln’s definition of democracy which appears to be the most popular and elementary one, it is however correct to say that democracy justifies the social contract which exists between the citizens and their elected representatives.

### **2.2. National Development**

The issue of national development cannot be over-emphasized. It is a recurring decimal in understanding the history of development strategies and growth models as it concerns an individual country’s history. Hence, commentators on the postulation of western social scientists have emphasized in different forms that development must be conceived in the context of a particular social system. Amucheazi (1980) maintains that the individual and his quality of life must be the centre of conception of national development. This is in view of the fact that development is all about the people. And so, development should be man-oriented and not institution-oriented.

National development is essentially the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nations. It is also the ability of a country or countries to improve the social welfare on the by providing basic infrastructure such as roads, schools, hospitals, recreational facilities, etc. Consequently, a country could be considered to be developed to the extent at which every sector of its economy, or national life reflects steady, yet progressive growth. The development process, of course, must be seen in its broadest context if it is to meet the expectation for a more elevated standard of living. Besides, the overall concept and goal of national development is to fulfill the following broad national objectives:

- a. Rapid growth of the incomes of the population in general.
- b. Poverty alteration/reduction; rapid growth of the incomes of the poor.
- c. Satisfaction of basic social and economic needs.
- d. Sustainment of a democratic and fully participatory society.

Finally, the most all-encompassing goal of national development is the progressive realization of the abilities and talents of each individual for his/her own satisfaction and enhancement of the good of the community and the nation ([www.guyana.org](http://www.guyana.org); accessed 03/04/2014).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Democracy and national development are inseparable and interwoven. Without man and his society, democracy becomes meaningless as well as national development. The political economy approach is therefore considered as the most appropriate methodological framework in our analysis of this paper. It is derived from Karl Marx's theory of social production. In essence, the political economy approach studies the society in its entirety but through the existing relations within it, and especially within the umbrella of social production. Production becomes very important and crucial both in understanding of the development of the society and the analysis of the dynamics within it.

Here, our concern is basically on how the mode of production determines the behavior and character of man and his society. Given Marx's dialectical materialism, this emphasizes on the primacy of "mater", especially economic conditions to social existence. In other words, its emphasis is on the primacy of material condition of life. This is known as economic determinism. The emphases of political economy approach are tripartite in nature. That is, the primacy of material conditions, the dynamic character of reality and the relatedness of different elements of society (Ake, 1981). And this is in further analysis that it is only in production that man feels happy, refreshes and recreates himself. Therefore, the political economy approach considers both the political life and the economic life of societies thereby exposing the people's perception and role in governance as to bring about development and their well-being.

In the final analysis, the relevance of the political economy approach is based on its ability to justify how democracy as a system of government has engendered and facilitated national development by improving the living standard of the people as a result of economic and political stability.

### **4. Democracy and National Development in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects**

The current Nigerian democratic rule is a product of two futile attempts by different military heads of state, namely General Ibrahim Babangida and Late General Sanni Abacha to transit to civilian rule. Therefore, General Abdulsalam Abubakar planned the transition, which brought into power the current democratic rule. The Abubakar political transition programme between June 1998 and May 1999 is however regarded as the shortest in Nigeria's political history lasting barely one year.

Since Nigeria returned to democracy in May 1999, after almost three decades of military rule, and almost two decades of economic crises, the country still faces the complex challenges of national reconciliation, national construction, national integration and economic reform and democratic consolidation. Even after holding the post-transition general elections in 2003, Nigeria continues to grapple with these challenges and the citizens are still grapple to see and enjoy the dividends of democracy. Such as social welfare, security, justice, equity and equal access to state resources as well as state power.

However, it is the contention of this paper that the greatest challenges of democracy and national development in Nigeria are the twin issues of electoral malpractices and corruption. There are other challenges but these remain very fundamental. Electoral malpractices refer to the unlawful and dishonest acts in the conduct of elections. It ranges from snatching of ballot boxes, falsification of election results, imposition of candidates by political parties, victimization and inducement of electorates, arson, kidnapping and assassination of political opponents, unlawful disqualification of aspirants and candidates by both political parties and electoral commission etc. These offences when translated constitute electoral malpractices under the law. Ake (1978) observes that political completion is characterized by violence and such violence is used to get access to the state and to use political power for their own class and private accumulation since state powers appear or assume significance as a means for creating and economically dominant class. All of these constitutes serious impediment to a healthy democratic practice hence good governance will be lacking at the expense of national development.

In fact, the absence of good governance also militates against national development. Since democratic governance in an ideal sense is expected to ensure the observance of democratic principles for the purposes of good governance which includes the rule of law, transparency, accountability, participation and responsiveness to the needs of the poor, marginalized and underrepresented group. As such, where there is no good governance, proper democratic rule and national development will as a matter of fact become a mirage. This is due to bad

leadership in Nigeria. Most of Nigerian leaders have no sense of commitment to national development especially because of electoral malpractices and corruption in the system. Perhaps, this obviously explains Chinua Achebe's position that the basic problem in Nigeria is the issue of national leadership. He concluded the problem of leadership thus:

*the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example, which are the hallmarks of true leadership". (Achebe, 1983).*

Mimiko (1998) argues that the decolonization allowed the crop of leaders that aligned with colonial power to take over Nigeria. This gave rise to the sustenance of a neo-colonial economy even after political independence. Nigerian leaders on assumption of power quickly turned up the repressive machinery of the colonial state rather than dismantling it. Apparently, they have no vision of development to accompany the efficient instrument of repression from their colonial heritage. Their paramount interest was the access to power and privileges and not development.

The astronomical rate of corruption and indiscipline is another remarkable impediment to democracy and national development. Corruption is generally the bane of Nigeria's development. It is because the Nigerian state is corrupt, managed by corrupt leaders who have made the state an instrument of private capital accumulation, instead of using it to project the interest of the citizens. A very good plan supervised by a thoroughly corrupt state can hardly do a thorough good job (Mimiko 1998). Corruption is antithetical to democracy and national development. Both democracy and national development cannot co-exist where corruption is specifically present hence, both suffer greatly. The wealthiest people in Nigeria are generally people who have acquired wealth through state power by political corruption, by access to state contracts, agency rates or concessions such as import licenses – which does not usually involve them in direct productive activity (Alapiki, 2004: 56).

Most of their wealth is acquired through fraudulent manipulation of their relationship with the state, thus, they resort to any unimaginable strategy to capture power and maintain the status quo. Their desperate, lawless and at times destructive mannerism discourages others from participating in the political system (Gilbert, 2003:55). For instance, we are meant to understand that the economically privileged group dominates the political landscape. And so, they contest elections and sponsor their loyalists to win elections at all cost without recourse to constitutional provisions and democratic norms. Hence, electoral malpractices and other corrupt practices affect the prospects of Nigeria's democracy and national development because of the inordinate ambitions on the part of desperate politicians.

Eme Ekekwe (1998) and Claude Ake (2001) and perhaps a reasonable number of scholars believe that democracy in Africa within the context of liberal democracy in contemporary Africa shows a crisis of legitimacy. This is largely due to the challenges confronting Nigeria's democracy especially those of electoral malpractices and corruption. To this end, government in Nigeria and indeed other developing countries has tended to be pre-occupied with powers and its material prerequisites (Ekekwe, 1980:104).

Meanwhile, the prospects of democracy and national development are quite enormous. Based on this, new development policies and strategies are currently in place as alternative strategies for national development by successive democratic governments such as the seven point agenda and the transformation agenda. These policies and vision are intended to improve the people's living standard in all sectors of the Nigerian economy. For example, the President Jonathan transformation agenda is designed to offer a complete change in the existing structure into something new. Its main target is categorically about the Nigerian economy. It aims at engendering economic growth and development in the welfare of the citizens. It then hopes to do this by a new approach in the management of the economy aimed at rectifying the lack of continuity, consistence and commitment to agreed policies that characterized past approaches.

The transformation agenda further stated that the objectives of enhancing economic growth and development are to be pursued by providing "a suitable environment for productive activities to flourish" and the provision of suitable environment will be by means of priority policies and programmes, involving the diversification of the economy away from oil by energizing such other sectors as manufacturing, agriculture, solid mineral and the service sector. However, this agenda has been adjudged as being responsible for some appreciable progress made

in notable areas of the Nigerian economy like agriculture, power, education, transformation, commerce and industry etc. Another prominent example is the recent increase in Nigeria's GDP as the largest economy in Africa thereby surpassing the South African economy. To buttress this fact, credence is given to the public explanation on the state of the nation's economy offered by Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Nigerian minister of finance and coordinating minister for the economy.

Politically speaking, the present democratic rule in Nigeria has also brought about the enhancement of women participation in politics and governance. Women hitherto have never had it so well. This is evident in the 35% affirmative action for women necessitated by the Jonathan administration. Hence, their capacity building is increased towards contributing meaningfully in nation building and national development. Again, in positioning Nigeria's democracy for national development, it is noteworthy that the rule of the game must be anchored on justice, fairness and equity. To achieve these virtues, the rule of law becomes highly imperative, the promotion and enjoyment of fundamental freedom becomes indispensable; and accountability, transparency and due process must be the guiding principles in the conduct of public affairs. It is therefore our position that no other form of government is capable of guaranteeing these virtues other than a democratic government because of its lofty prospects in the spirit of national development. For instance, 2014 National Conference initiated by the Jonathan administration is no doubt intended to address the numerous issues emanating from the challenges of democracy, governance and the Nigerian state crisis. Hence, the challenges of our national unity are very critical to our national progress. The realization of these goals for Nigeria's unity in a democratic arrangement constitutes national development.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Democracy cannot flourish without the presence of good governance with a view to bringing about the much – anticipated national development. It is in this view, having identified electoral malpractices and corruption as the two major challenges to the materialization of democracy as the instrument of national development in Nigeria, that we make the following recommendations:

1. There should be the independence of INEC in terms of the appointment and security of tenure of electoral commissioners as well as the guarantee of adequate and autonomous funding for the electoral commission.
2. Government should be more proactive in ensuring that the anti-corruption agencies are more effective and efficient and not mere appendage of the presidency for witch-hunting perceived political opponents.
3. There is the need for attitudinal change. Nigerians must as a matter of fact change their pessimistic attitude towards politics and governance.
4. There should be the independence of the judiciary in terms of the appointment and promotion of judges and other judicial officers for the effective discharge of their functions without fear or favour.
5. The civil society groups should be more vigilant and more proactive in challenging the obnoxious policies of government.
6. INEC should rise up to their constitutional responsibility of monitoring the activities of political parties so as to enthrone internal democracy in the political parties with strict adherence to their respective constitutions.
7. The National Orientation Agency and other relevant agencies of government should enlighten and discourage Nigerians from the idea or belief that “things cannot work in Nigeria or the Nigerian factor”.

From our discussion on democracy and national development in Nigeria, evidence abounds to show that there is a relationship between the two concepts. However, our submissions remains that in spite of all odds, democracy is still considered as a vehicle for genuine national development. No wonder, in the People's Republic published in 1968, the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, and the first leader of the opposition said: “the best form of government is democracy, and any government other than democracy is evil because of its utter disregard for the rights, welfare and happiness of the people”. Hence, it is fundamentally important to describe democracy as national development itself.

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