

Democracy in Nigeria: Practice, Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to attempt a critical appraisal of the pace, practise, pattern, priorities, problems and prospects of Nigerian democracy. While it remains true that Nigeria is governed by democratically elected leaders at the federal and state levels, Nigeria is yet to institutionalise democracy after a century of existence as a political entity. The paper discusses some of the impediments to the institutionalisation of democracy in Nigeria after more than half a century of political independence. Some of these are the country's colonial background interspersed by vagaries engendered by deep-rooted ethnicity; complacent and spendthrift leadership; incessant intervention of the military in the democratic process; electoral fraud; wide spread poverty and high illiteracy level. The paper argues that the pivot around which most of the factors listed above revolve is corruption which has virtually become a way of life in Nigeria. The paper however contends that the above notwithstanding, the prospect of a politically stable and democratically viable nation is marked by people's eagerness to participate in the electoral process; the relative stability and sustenance of multi-party system and the general realisation in the country that the only acceptable and popular route to the acquisition of political power is the ballot box. The paper obtains its data from primary and secondary source materials and employs the historical method of data analysis - simple descriptive collation and analysis of historical data.

I. Introduction

Democracy and Nigeria are like Siamese twins; though conjoined, they are uncomfortable and under intense pressure that could result in all forms of hurt, even death. Although, democracy may not be strange to an overwhelming percentage of Nigerians; what may be strange to them is the brand of democracy that invests, first and foremost, in human and material resources for the purposes of political stability, economic viability, scientific advancement, technological breakthrough, educational development and life-enhancing social services. Given the general optimism that Nigeria was going to be the bastion of democracy in Africa following her independence from Britain in 1960, one should normally expect that by now democracy should be deeply rooted and institutionalised in the country. Ironically and unfortunately, Nigeria, as far as the practise and delivery of dividends of liberal democracy is concerned, is yet a cripple that can barely stand let alone walk or run.

This paper asserts that Nigerian democracy has three outstanding features. First, it is spendthrift. Nigerian democracy is a brand of democracy that spends so much to accomplish so little (where and when it achieves anything at all). Second, it invests in the comfort of officials rather than in human and material resources. In fact, the welfare of the common man occupies the bottom rung on the ladder of the priorities of the anchors of Nigerian democracy. Third, Nigerian democracy is plagued by hydra-headed and pathological corruption that ensures that the impact of any seeming good policy is either extremely negligible or almost exactly nil. The paper however concludes that while the balance sheet of democracy in Nigeria may be less than satisfactory; all hope is not lost as the desire for the practice of true democracy amongst Nigerians remains unassailably high.

II. Conceptual Discourse

Democracy, either as a concept or a system of rule, has become excessively ambiguous in contemporary political analysis. Indeed, there is probably no concept that has been so subjected to varying definitions, antagonistic interpretations and contradictory practises as the concept of democracy. This is not surprising given the fact that democracy has become more and more widely praised and embraced thereby making it more and more difficult to pin down. Politicians from the extreme left to the extreme right always insist that the form of politics¹ or rule they support is the one that is democratic in character. Even military regimes, which, according to Robert Mundt et. al.

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