

DEMOCRACY AS A SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to critically analyze democracy as a system of governance and the influence that affects its application in Nigeria. In order to achieve this, a qualitative research method was employed. In this research, a philosophical and descriptive approach was adopted in analyzing the data gathered through secondary source. The objectives of the work are discussed in the following headings: the meaning and nature of democracy, scope and principles of democracy, the doubts and fears regarding democracy, democratic requirements for Nigeria system, and challenges of democracy in Nigeria system, and the researcher recommended the ways for handling the challenges of democratic governance.

Key words: Democracy, governance, politics, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Man by nature seeks to rule over his fellows. He lives in a social web that is hierarchically structured. The act of humans governing or ruling their fellows has being in existence from origin. The system of governance may be monarchy, oligarchy, military, or democratic system. All these forms of governance have its peculiar challenges. However, in considering human rights, dignity, worth, freedom and responsibility, democracy stands out among other forms of governance, though the human instinct for sensory satisfaction and unguided quest for power have often frustrated the principles and practice of the democracy in its ideal form.

The framers of democracy faced many democratic issues. Democracy is complex, but balanced system that needs thought citizens, limits on power, rule of law, and human and civil rights. This implies that, not every country that calls itself a democracy is one, and not every country is capable of becoming one (Roskin et al, 2010). Moreover, Nigeria is young in democratic system of governance when compared with British, America or France. This, of course is not to console or excuse Nigerians from embracing the ideal principle and practice of democracy, on this light prompted the study: 'Philosophical analysis of democracy and the Nigeria system governance'.

THE MEANING AND NATURE OF DEMOCRACY

The word 'democracy' originated from two Greek words '*demos*' meaning 'the people', and '*kratein*' means to 'rule'. Thus, democracy originally mean rule of or by the people. However, this simple and soft translation of democracy obscures the fact that rule means rule by some over others. As Plato and Aristotle, for example, used the term, the *demos* were not the whole people. Rather they thought that the 'people' include at least two groups: the *demos* and the *aristoi*. *Demos* mean the many. *Aristoi* mean the best. *Demos* came to mean the many who are not best; that is, the great majority of men who are poor, perhaps uneducated and thus unfit to rule well (Martin, 1998).

According to Abraham Lincoln conceived democracy as ‘government of the people, by the people, and for the people’ (Ishaya & Jirapye, 2023, p. 50). However, the democratic system of Nigeria propels Omoregbe (2007, p. 3) to avert that ‘democracy is not really a government for the people; rather, it is a government for the rich and powerful who fund the parties and control them’. Coming from another angle Hall sees ‘democracy as that form of political organization in which public opinion has control’ (Ishaya & Jirapye, 2023, p. 51). For Franklyn Roosevelt ‘democracy was not a mere matter of universal suffrage and unhampered expression of the popular will. It must be a positive and constructive force in the daily lives of the people and provide not merely for political but economic needs also’. The conviction is that, if men were forced to choose between liberty and bread, they would choose bread (Ishaya & Jirapye, 2023, p. 51).

According to Seymour M. Lipset’s democracy in a complete society may be defined as a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible parts of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004, p. 526). Moreover, Schumpeter argues that democracy is a method by which decision-making is transferred to individuals who have gained power in a competitive struggle for the votes of the citizens (Ishaya & Jirapye, 2023, p. 52). Encyclopedia Americana International defined democracy as a form of government in which the major decisions of government- or the direction of policy behind these decisions- rest directly or indirectly on the freely given consent of a majority of the adults governed.

Democracy has many characteristics. Dictators misuse the word to convince subjects that they live in a just system. The Soviet Union used to claim it was the best democracy, and mainland China calls itself the “people’s Republic”. Democracy does not always equal to freedom. Elections, even free and fair ones, can produce regimes that ride roughshod over rights and freedoms, what is called illiberal democracy. Nevertheless, democracy is a complex and carefully balanced system that needs thoughtful citizens, limits on power, rule of law, and human and civil rights. Not every country that calls itself democracy is one, and not every country is capable of becoming one.

The term democracy indicates both a set of ideals and a political system, a feature it shares with the terms communism and socialism. Democracy is harder to pin down, however, than either “socialism” or “communism”. For democracy has never become identified with a specific doctrinal source, it is rather a by-product of the entire development of Western civilization. Democracy is difficult to define, not every political system claims to be a socialist system, but even communist systems claim to be democracies (International encyclopedia of social science 1972). The transition to democracy is delicate and happens best slowly and gradually, as it did in Britain with a series of Reform Acts during the 19th century. Typically, during the first decades of democracy, only the better-off can participate, a pattern called ‘whig democracy’.

Modern democracy is representative or indirect democracy. The people govern through representatives periodically elected by them. The ordinary citizen’s part in government is limited. Periodically he may vote to choose a member of parliament from his constituency. If he has the necessary qualification, he has the right to stand as a candidate for election and to apply for executive and judicial posts; but in practice only a very small, proportion of citizens

can ever hope to be elected to the legislature, or chosen for executive or judicial office (Appadorai, 2004, p. 187).

SCOPE AND PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY

1. Democratic legitimacy: Democracy is to begin with a principle of legitimacy. From the democratic view point nobody denies that power is legitimate only when it is derived from the authority of the people and based upon their consent. However, for democracy as a legitimizing principle lends itself to two diverging interpretation; (1) that the consent of people can be a mere presumption, an untested assumption; or (2) that there is no democratic consent unless it is verified through ad-hoc procedures. And these opposing views are related to an even more fundamental disagreement over the very meaning of the term 'people'. The 'people' can be understood as a singular term or as a plural, that is, as a singular entity or as 'everybody'. And, clearly, it is only the latter notion that calls for a legitimacy ascertained by means of reliable procedures, for 'the people' conceived as an entity, or as an organic whole, easily combines with a legitimacy assumed on the sole basis of acclamations and plebiscitary approbations.

2. The normative focus: The normative view democracy is encapsulated in the popular definition of democracy as the 'rule of the people'. We may say that the 'ought' of democracy amounts to the etymology of the term. Taking off from this, there are, three different normative approaches: oppositional, realistic, and perfectionist (or utopian). Used as oppositional concept, democracy indicates what ought not to be; realistic normativism points to what could be; while utopian normativism presents the image of the perfect society that must be. Moreover, since the normative attitude is basically future-oriented, it is easily converted into "futurism" in the sense that "democracy" becomes a long-range projection unrelated to current deeds. The use of undemocratic means to achieve democratic ends finds its justification precisely in this attitude.

3. The descriptive focus: As Dahl (1956) puts it, in actuality democracies are "poliarchies". And the standard definition that describes democracy as a system based on competitive parties, in which the governing majority respects the rights of minorities.

4. The typological focus: Democracy is also one type of political system among others, and from this view point the problem becomes to define the properties that distinguish it from nondemocratic politics. Hence, attempt is often made to qualify democracy with ought rather than to the 'is'. Democracy literally means 'power of the people'. According to Appadorai (2004, p. 187) democracy is that form of government in which the ruling power of a state is legally vested not in a particular class or classes but in the members of a community as a whole. This is known as direct democracy. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century thinkers accepted the ancient Greeks criticism of direct democracy as mob rule. It is difficult to carry out because of the size factor. John Seldon as quoted by Roskin et al. (2010, p. 97) that "the room will not hold all".

A nation government that submitted each decision to millions of voters would be too unwieldy to function. However, representative democracy evolved as the only workable system. Democracy today is, in Lipset & Joson's (2004) words, "a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office." Constitutional means that the government is limited and can wield its authority only in specific ways.

THE DOUBTS AND FEARS REGARDING DEMOCRACY

In Nigeria, like in any other country, the long term viability of democratic governance has been in doubt since the advent of democratic regime. It is on this ground, the question of democratic fundamental nature rests. Moreover, democracy works on the principle of the constitution. The constitution may be democratic or undemocratic. For example, if the constitution is undemocratic and one believes in democracy, then the most important practical task is to alter the constitution or get round it somehow (Martin, 1998).

However, many other modern political scientists depreciate the significance of the constitution as an influence upon behaviour. They believe that, despite the undemocratic constitution, the political system gradually became democratized. The political process is thus treated as radically distinct form, in conflict with constitutional form. According to this view, for example, the extra-constitutional development of mass political parties and presidential popular leadership short-circuited the resistance to democracy of the 18th century. On this view, history has to repeat itself every day. The constitution is seen as still the archaic undemocratic document of 1787 (in America). Thus, the political short circuiting must occur daily to permit the modern democratic system to function (Martin, 1998).

Socrates challenged the idea of democracy. What he asked was the peoples' claim to rule? Governing or ruling, he argued, was an art like the art of navigation. Yet in peril at sea, it made no sense to take a poll of all the passengers. The sensible thing, he suggested, was to seek and follow expert guidance in such matters. Why then in government, should power be given to the inexpert many instead of the expert few? The question is acute. Indeed the history of the democratic idea can be seen as a series of responses to the Socratic challenge. Moreover, the framers of democracy did not need ancient writers to teach them the dangers. Thus, it is easy to find quotations vividly demonstrating their fears regarding democracy. For example, in the 1787 convention, Martin (1998) asserts that Elbridge Gerry warned that "the evils we experience flow from the excess of democracy" and Edmund Randolph complained of "the turbulence and follies of democracy" May 31.

What distinguishes the framers from the predecessors was that they agreed on democracy's weakness and dangerous tendencies, but they did not reject democracy. They knew that whether they like it or not they had to conform to the "popular genius" of country institutions. They accepted democracy and sought to guide against its "turbulence and follies". James Madison stated their view perfectly: They wanted to eliminate or lessen "the inconveniences of democracy", but in a manner "consistent with the democratic form of government". Hence, the framers wanted to "make *democratie* safe for the world" (Martin, 1998).

DEMOCRATIC REQUIREMENTS FOR NIGERIA SYSTEM

There are three basic democratic requirements for Nigeria to adhere judiciously, if democratic system of governance must survive.

1. Democratic tradition: It is obvious from our experience of democracy, that many Africa countries, if not all, including Nigeria of course lack democratic traditions. Perhaps, democracy is still young in Africa and there are no close advanced democratic countries near Africa. Consequently, due to the lack of democratic traditions, some Africa countries that has democratically elected leaders were overthrown by military system of governance; for instance in Mali, Burkina Faso among others. Therefore, the lack of democratic tradition paves the path to dictatorship governance. Democratic tradition helps in preserving democracy (Edward,

1939, p. 241). Democracy system is dynamic but attainable. Eventually, Nigeria can turn democratic, but it is a matter of time, for democracy develops in the process of time. However, the qualities for building a democratic tradition are enshrined in the constitution. Nevertheless, democratic tradition in current Nigeria system of governance would remain a mirage if the provisions of the constitution do not reflect in our customs, beliefs or ways of doing something with respect to humanity, no matter the diversity of ethnicity, religion or regional affiliations.

2. Embracing the tradition of Pluralism: The Nigeria democratic systems need to embrace or re-embrace the tradition of pluralism in her socio-political context; if a just democratic atmosphere must be achieved. Imo (2000, p. 3) describes “pluralism” as the result of social transformation which gives rise to people of different beliefs, values, and customs being brought together by the forces of history in social relationship. Nigeria is a pluralistic society. There is hardly any State within Nigeria you will not find people of diverse tongues, beliefs or regions living together. Hence, democracy cannot function without due considerations necessary for balancing the compromise between people of diverse classes. When electing candidates for public positions, merits should be considered against class, ethnicity or religious sentiments. Then, democratic tradition can flourish in the spirit of pluralism.

3. Openness to Religious/Philosophical evolutionary ideas: When democratic tradition is establish and practice in the spirit of pluralism, then, evolutionary ideas would no longer be attached to psychological disenchantment or as sources of threat. For instance, the word “restructuring” used in the 2015 and 2023 presidential political campaigns had a parallel means to people of Southern and Northern regions in Nigeria. Religious or philosophical ideas that positively shape political landscape should not be subject for democratic battle. For just democracy have no room for fight, democracy doesn’t fight. Democracy is process of electing the competent and rightful candidate to pilot the affairs for the benefit of the society.

Historically speaking, religious ideas has not only obstructed the advancement of democracy, but have altered the principles of democratic governance and peace in Nigeria. For Nigeria is religious by nature, and carries it into the parliaments. It is not all religious ideas that can result to democratic backwardness. However, within the framework of modern society, any idea that cannot endure and survive sound logical processing, should be discarded. Therefore, objective ideas should be evolutionary ideas workable in the socio-political context of a particular country.

CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA SYSTEM

1. Illiteracy and Poverty: Democracy can actually come too soon in the political life of a nation. Stable democracy has historically taken root in countries with large educated middle classes. As Barrington Moore observed in 1996, “No bourgeoisie, no democracy”. People in poor countries care more about survival than democracy. In a 2004 UN Survey of Latin America, a majority said they preferred a dictator who puts food on the table to an elected leader who does not. Middle classes bring with them moderation, tolerance, and the realization that not everything can be fixed at once (Roskin et al, 2010). Without that, elections can undermine democracy.

However, the large number of uneducated and poor masses outnumbers the better-off. Eventually, when the broad masses of citizens suddenly get the vote, the system can break down. Newly enfranchised and unsophisticated voters often fall for the extravagant promises of demagogues, who offer simple solutions to get the votes of the gullible. They vow to “share the wealth” or advocate aggressive nationalism or religious fundamentalism. Attempting democracy too soon can lead to rule by demagogues (Roskin et al, 2010).

2. **Potentiality of Demagogues:** Apart from the large number of illiterates in society, another concern is the potential for demagogues to exploit the democratic system. The charismatic leaders have the power to manipulate the populace by appealing to their desires and prejudices rather through rational argument, leading to decisions that were not in the best interest of the community (World history encyclopedia, 2024).

3. **Tyranny of the majority:** The tyranny of the majority is a situation in which a group of people are treated unfairly because their situation is different from the situation of most of the people in a democratic country (Meriamwebster, 2025). It also implies to a situation in majority rule where preferences and interests of the majority dominate the political landscape, potentially sidelining or repressing minority groups and using majority rule to take non-democratic actions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2025). A tyranny of the majority can ensue when democracy is distorted either by an excess of centralization or when the people abandon a wider perspective to rule upon numbers, not upon rightness or excellence.

Tyranny of the majority is when the will of a majority population group exclusively prevails in a system of governance it results in the potential for tyranny over minority groups (www.masterclass.com, 2022). In social choice, a tyranny of the majority scenario can be formally known as a situation where the candidate or decision preferred by a majority is greatly inferior to the socially optimal candidate or decision according to some measure of excellence such as total utilitarianism. To reduce the risk of majority tyranny, modern democracies frequently have counter majoritarian institutions that restrict the ability of majorities to repress minorities and stymie political competition (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2025).

4. **War or social crisis:** Petrie as quoted by Appadorai (2004, p. 240) that the outbreak and the continuance of war or social crisis, and the suffering which followed, helped to shake men's faith in democratic principles. Men had thought that democracy and peace were synonymous, but the events of August 1914 (World War II), Russian and Ukraine war, and even the pockets of social crisis within Nigeria destroy this illusion. Again, the war left legacy of misery and depression in nearly every country. Men looked for a better and happier world after the war; the world that did result was not only not better, but worse. It was freely contended that parliaments were bankrupt and that democratic civilization had outlived its usefulness.

5. **The weakness of democratic governance:** The faith in democratic principles was undermined by the inability of democracy to solve adequately the problems which it had to face. The deficiencies, weaknesses and of course great mistakes of democratic leaders, played a specially role in the downfall of European democracies. There were excuses, of the party system, its mistakes and exaggerations; the slowness and inefficiency of democratic methods of work and leadership, during times of crises and at moments when quick actions and quick decisions were nessecery; the partiality, corruption and incapacity of bureaucracy, subjugated very often to the exaggerated party spirit; the deficiencies, mediocrity and mistakes of the democratic leaders (Edward, 1939, p. 61).

WAYS FOR HANDLING THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

1 **Electing only the competent to power:** Man naturally drive for power in order to control his fellow. Thus, power and functionary positions are greatly in want by people. Perhaps, due to the privileges and recognition it incurs. However, not many understand the principle of power and its responsibility. Many are not even sophisticated enough to lead themselves let alone to govern others. Socrates used the analogy of a ship to drive home this point. He asked whether one would entrust the navigation of a ship to anyone or someone who is expert in seafaring (World history encyclopedia, 2024).

2 **Restricting pre-election debate on fundamental issues:** Aristotle thought that man was by nature a political animal. Humans alone possess speech, which enables them to debate issues. To be human, one must live in a community, in which one exercises the powers of one's speech, debating the collective choices that a community must take (The concise encyclopedia of democracy, 2000). The strategic organization of debate is part of pre-election activities especially in advanced countries. Moreover, democracy is still young in Nigeria, even though debates are sometimes organized, but there are times that candidates boycott the process. However, pre-election debate is crucial aspect, that exposes the degree of logicity of the aspirants, this is fundamental in handling complex challenges that the nation must face.

3 **Public and Systematic Scrutiny on candidate's manifesto:** All candidates no matter their class, ethnicity, religion, region or political affiliation must have their respective manifesto. The candidates must be responsible and ready to respond to the questions that may arise from their manifestos. In addition, all aspirants' expressions of interests and motive for a certain office must have working alignment with their manifestos. The general public equally has the right to the plans, motive or strategies each candidate employs in tackling the economic, social or political issues bedeviling the nation. Among other things, political debates expose each candidate's degree of criticality and mental soundness, necessary for national development. In fact, critical ideas are the driving power for national advancement and political stability.

4 **Background check of aspirants:** The background check of all aspirants of political offices is very paramount, as long as good governance is concerned. The role of checkmating all candidates for political functions can never be overemphasized, for democracy have the potency to give power to the unfit, for evil doers and fraudsters' wants power. Thus, Nigeria as a young democratic nation should develop her unique and objective machineries for cross-checking and examining every candidate that presents him or herself for any political position. All aspirants should undergo psychological therapeutic process, to ascertain if they have the mental capacity to govern or to lead. Nigeria is so complex that it is difficult or even impossible for mentally unstable person to lead. Secondly, all aspirants should undergo the procedures for moral check. They must pass the examination that consists of these questions: Do they have any criminal record? Are they convicts? Previous record of work? How do they relate to others? For the moral state a leader reflects in the way he or she leads.

5 **Examining the Educational status of aspirants:** Democratic system of governance needs train and skillful individuals so as to effectively diagnose and also treat the complex issues. These complex issues can only be properly handled by people with technological know-how. When issues overwhelm an individual, this may be an evident that such individual is not well prepared to face the issues. Moreover, Socrates believed that not everyone had the knowledge and wisdom necessary to make informed decisions. According to Socrates, voting is a skill that requires education and wisdom, and allowing uneducated individuals to vote could lead to poor governance and societal instability (World history encyclopedia, 2024).

Education has a political face. Among other things, the principle of education is to carefully prepare individuals as to be able to govern themselves and even others (dependence or subjects) in their respective society. Hence, the place of education in democratic governance is not negotiable. Credentials are testimonies that people have undergone such and such institutions of learning, in diverse categories. Credentials are the evidence that certifies that one has fully justifies the course of study, and he or she is educated in a particular specialization. As such, pre-election check on the academic background of aspirants is very crucial. Therefore, the educated or enlightened leaders are in the position to govern well than the illiterate ones.

CONCLUSION

Democracy is dynamic in nature, from its meaning to practice. Thus, any country that is not progressing intellectually, materially or socially can never fit into modern democracy and its civilization. Intellectual progress is the by-product of education. Democracy need to be practice with knowledge and wisdom. Educated people are mostly useful to themselves than to be used to violate the principles and practice of democracy. They are also in the position to distinguish the right from wrong. This is basic sustaining the principle of distributive justice and respecting human rights as engraved in the constitution of Nigeria.

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