ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF PRACTICING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

By

Paul T. Haaga (PhD)
Department of Philosophy,VeritasUniversity, Abuja
Mobile: +23408067666445, 08054979939
paulohaaga@gmail.com

Abstract

Many people believe that democracy which is the "rule of the majority" is an indispensable form of government. This explains why democracy has become the most fashionable form of governance in the world. In most societies of the world today, the issue is not which political system is appropriate but rather when will the society become democratized or fully democratic. A strong and effective democratic process should be able to establish a functioning administrative structure, and address the issue of how leaders are chosen and how they should act for the interest of the people they are representing. This paper points out some major methodological problems by addressing the case of egalitarianism in the Nigerian democratic structure. It also illustrates the nexus between freedom and democracy. The paper suggests participatory democracy, enhanced by the use of information and communication technology as a way to meaningful development in Africa.
Keywords: Governance, Nigeria, Participatory, Democracy

Introduction

The practice of democracy in Africa presents the immediate problem of defining democracy as a concept, and then deciding if Western definitions even holds-water in Africa. The fact is that democratic social organization is the best culture for ensuring the fullest development and expression of each person's unique talents and life purposes; genuine democracy involves far more than periodic voting for politicians it requires intelligent, active participation in the formation of values that regulate the living of men people together. On this note, Dewey (1974) insists that all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them.

Participatory democracy through active citizen participation enhances the quality of decisions, policies and laws thus contributing to the amelioration of the quality of life of citizens. People must be able to contribute to how they are governed; they must be able to ask questions and intervene in the procedure. The crucial questions regarding democracy in Africa are: is Africa underdeveloped because it is primarily undemocratic? Or is Africa undemocratic because it is

primarily underdeveloped? Which is cause and which is effect? In responding to these questions, this paper examines the tenants of democracy in Nigeria; it outlines the challenges of the democracy practiced in Nigeria and finally suggests participatory democracy which involves change, reorientation, personal responsibility and active participation as the way to meaningful development in Africa.

On the Conceptand Values ofDemocracy: A comment from Plato

Democracy is etymologically derived from two Greek words, *Demos* meaning 'people' and *kratein* meaning 'to rule'. It means rule of the people. Abraham Lincoln classically defined it as "government of the people, by the people and for the people". Strictly speaking, government by all the people should mean unanimous decisions in the welfare of the people (Sabine and Thorson, 1973). But this of course, is impossible in political matters. Lincoln's addition of "government for the people", in Rousseau's *Theory of the General will*, means the decisive view, which invariably must be that of the majority and should seek to serve the interest of all, even though it does not have the agreement of all (Raphael, 1976).Aristotle defines democracy as "the rule of many for the good of the poor" as opposed to oligarchy, which asserts "the rule of the few for the good of the wealthy". Aristotle makes this contrast to indicate the intrinsic character of the two polities: whereas in oligarchy, the rulers are few because there are only few people who are wealthy, in democracy there are many because liberty is enjoyed by all alike (Aristotle, 1981: III, v. 7). Democracy means "a system of government where people organize and realize their wishes through the instrument of the law they have made for themselves" (Njoku, 2002). The assumed relationship between participatory democratically elected leaders and the citizens is based on reciprocity. As such the people make the laws themselves and the binding force of this law can only be realized when the people participate actually in the making of these laws, rather than in just delegating people to do this on their behalf.   It   is   not   the questions of how many political parties exist or partake in government but most essentially how they, together with other public institutions function and how are the basic democratic values demonstrated?   These values (of democracy include) freedom, equality, justice, self-responsibility, accountability, openness and transparency in government; and these values distinguish democracy from other political ideas and forms of government. Plato describes the ends of democracy as freedom, equality and variety(Horowitz, 2003). But he criticizes democracy precisely because these loading features namely, freedom, equality,

justice, self-responsibility, openness and transparency are not always obtainable. Freedom in the sense of "doing what you like" is attractive but it cannot last, and it is further less desirable than doing the right thing. Plato further opines that, equality is wrong because it goes against nature; men are unequal in their capacities and should be given different functions in accordance with their different capacities (Plato, 1987).

Democracy and Good Governance: the Africa Experience

African democracy originated in "chiefless societies", and democracy reached its highest development where the people actually governed themselves without chiefs, where self-government was a way of life, and "law and order" were taken for granted. The lineage ties and responsibilities and the age-grade or age-set system were the earliest institutions through the African constitution functioned, and out of which its democracy was born (Wiliams, 1987). After a while, democracy in Africa became an experimental process in a new generation of countries. Truly democratic participation is self-motivated and self-determined; it is not coerced. Currently In Africa, democracy implies a commitment to the self-motivated assertion of some few individuals with egoistic interests in political affairs.There is a massive a campaign for one particular system of government, commonly known as democracy, which is presented by many as the only valid system of government for all peoples in all places and circumstances.   In Africa, different forms of government were tried out by different peoples at different stages of their history. Before colonial rule was imposed on the nations of Africa, it was impossible to invent a common name for the different forms of government that existed among its various peoples (Onah, 2004). Also, it is pertinent to note that in the recent past, Africa witnessed political liberations from authoritarian regimes to democratic systems. The liberation has mostly culminated into multiparty democracies. Multi-party politics has been perceived and pursued as end itself rather than as means to the fundamental goals of human satisfaction, happiness and dignity. To buttress this point, Chidam'modzi opines that "it has also been apparent that democracy has been construed as merely multipartiyism" (2004).

Notwithstanding, people may disagree about the best means of achieving good governance, but they quite agree that good governance is absolutely imperative for social and economic progress (Oburota, 2003).What is governance and what makes governance good or bad? This is perhaps a philosophical question which may attract endless and multifarious answers. Fundamentally,

the question of good and bad is ethical/moral. According to Madhav (2007) good governance has much to do with the ethical grounding of governance and must be evaluated with reference to specific norms and objectives as may be laid down.

In most societies of the world today, the issue is not which political system is appropriate but rather when will the society become democratized or fully democratic. The democratization project is therefore regarded as the age of advancement that every society should strive to attain (Owolabi, 2001). Democracy has thus been recognized as the only moral and legitimate way through which a society can be administered (Oluwole, 2004). Indeed, effective democratic forms of governance rely on public participation, accountability and transparency. In this regard, democracy not only prescribes how political power should be acquired but also what to do with it or how it should be exercised. Therefore, democracy specifies who constitutes the legitimate government and wields the authority inherent in the state, how they acquire authority and how they are to exercise it (Parekh, 1993). This makes democracy amenable to moral and ethical justifications or judgments. Hence, good governance forms the philosophical foundation upon which democracy and democratic theories are built.

But then one wonders if Nigeria is practicing a conventional democratic system of government or a democratic system of government peculiar to Nigeria alone? In regard to this, Nwigwe (2004) observes that it would constitute a very difficult problem for political theorist to determine the classification of Nigeria's type of governments. It is not a monarchy, even though there are so many monarchs in the policy making positions. It is definitely not an aristocracy, because by its very definition, aristocracy means government by the best. It is of course not democracy because at least in its modern understanding, democracy is government of the people by the people and for the people. What then is it? The fact is, Nigerians has not significantly reaped the dividends of democracy, because the strength of democracy lies in its concept of all-inclusiveness which is registered in the phrase: government for the majority. Let us see the misconception of democracy in Africa.

Nigeria and the Question of Democracy

The history of Nigeria's democracy is a history of duplicity and fraud. Largely supervised by a cabal within the military, our so called 'transition to democracy' was actually transitions to feudalism and Autocracy more often than not leading to the ends. These transitions were not tailored to lead the nation into democracy because the architects were often concerned more with their personal,

class or regional interests rather than those of the nation (Kukah, 2009). The saddest aspect of Nigeria's democracy has been the absence of a coherent programme of transition dedicated to ending authoritarianism and immunity, leading to genuine democracy. 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).

In an ideal democratic system, the people are supposed to be the ones through their elected representatives,to make decisions that would be binding on all. It is rather unfortunate that the so-called democracy practiced in Nigeria is pluralistic dictatorships in which selfish and unscrupulous tyrant ride on their subjects in order to defend their personal interests. Little wonder Onah (2004) redefined the Nigerian democracy as government of the people, by the parties, for the powerful; or as exploitation of the people, by the powerful, through the parties. With some of these imbedded features in the Nigerian democracy, one will conclude thatNigerian politicians see democracy in instrumental terms and are not committed to democracy as an end and concur with those who are of the opinion that "only a tiny handful of people make decisions that shape the lives of all of us despite the elaborate rituals of parties, elections and interest group actively, we have little direct influence over these decisions" (Dye and Zeigler, 2000).

The task of combining democracy and development in Nigeria seems harder especially with the era of globalization, and the abuses of human and civil rights; equality and freedom are major pillars of democracy but how pragmatic is this in the Nigerian democracy, a system where most office holders or politicians have immunity from prosecution while in office. Commenting on freedom, Baah, (2000) states, "the focus on individual as a free being is western and really difficult to apply to African", collective rights take precedence over social and economic rights, which in turn precede over civil and political rights. Freedom of expression of the press is fundamental to democracy, but even with the bill passed on the 'freedomofinformation'; to what extent can we say the press is free? This is only an illusion which is dubious and deceptive. What we have today is a politicized press and it is hijacked by the so-called powerful or influential people in the society. How can there be a meaningful development in such a deceptive democratic system? It is on this regard, that this piece adopts a revolutionary dimension by proposing participatory democracy as a way to meaningful development to Africa. Revolution in this sense means, change which takes place within a short period geared towards restructuring of power

or organizational structures and it is more obtainable in a democratic system of government where the operative systems are stagnant and redundant.

The relevance of Information in Participatory Democracy

The ideological orientation of the move to participatory democracy consists in the   dropping of egotism and the picking of altruism. Participating in a democracy by voting is one part of a larger freedom that allows the citizens of a community, and our nation, to make change. A free press is one part of a larger freedom because it gives citizens the right to be informed, this not just altruism but also a culture of information, for the inflow and outflow of information is one of the fundamental values of participatory democracy (Brown, 2011). This freedom of information is so fundamental to participatory democracy, because in order to make fruitful and useful contribution to policy formulation in Africa, individuals must be informed. And the limitation of vital information about policy and governance to just a small share of those in governance, restricts democracy to representation rather than participation. As such, the flow of information is vital for there to be participation. The freedom of information despite the information bill past in Nigeria, still is in doubt. This quest for information informs his question that, how can we build an era where information will be more important than money? The fact here is that free flows of information enhances and have great influence on any democratic system (Theobald, 2004).   Also, it is this quest for genuine communication rather than domination that informs Habermas' (1997) discourse in his *The Theory of communicative Action,* where he makes the case that, the life world has been colonized by system and that media is what makes this process possible. It does this because of its ability to help individual's co-ordinate their actions on large scale whole pursuing individual interest at an instrumental level towards the world. That media stride interaction is an alternative to communicative understanding, thus the emphasis should be on expression rather than attempts to impress intellectual pride and linguistic pedantry. The point we are driving at here is that one ideological backdrop for participatory democracy is the fact of co-ordinate communication of all based on information from all and for all.

Technology has a role to play, in this regard and this takes off from Theobald's projection that our new capacity to gather, store and reproduce information signals a motion to information. But it is obvious that this capacity has been used wrongly, as such instead of technology helping to liberate man, it has only helped in dominating man. Since a new model for man is required for this level of democratic re-orientation, we are making a case for a new model of

technology that will also be vital at this point. Technology here is at the service of man not man at the service of technology. Regarding technology, Jungk (1997) writes, "this revitalization of democracy could be assisted by electronic communications techniques, which can bring distant objects close and unite partners in discussion however for apart they may be". Technically, this can be described as the role of cyber space technology on participatory democracy.

The best example in this regard is what president Barrack Obama did sometime in the "High Tech town Hall" in United State. Therewere avenues created via the web where the president himself was available in person to entertain questions from the public with regard to policy issues. For those without direct access to the venue because of space, could use the internet. It was also far reaching because the internet is also at every corner of the United State. But in the case of Nigeria where the internet services are restricted to some places, we could use the television or radio station, by so doing; we shall see the use of cyberspace technology for more involvement of the people in policy making, and for clarification of some policy formulations.

On the possibilities of practicing Participatory Democracy in Africa (Nigeria)

The fundamental goals of participatory democracy are: (a) making the leaders accountable and answerable for their actions and policies; (b) making the citizens effective participants in choosing their leaders and regulating their actions; (c) making the society as open, and the economy as transparent as possible; and (d) making the social order just and equitable to the greatest number possible. To this, we observe that given the right conditions and factors, participatory democracy provides a solid foundation for good governance which is essential for nation building (Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, 2012).

Participatory democracy is a process emphasizing the broad participationof constituents in the direction and operation of political systems; it is a call for people's participation in actual governance rather than being relegated just to the point of voting. However, it tends to advocate more involved forms of citizen participation than traditional representative democracy. Participatory democracy strives to create opportunities for all members of a political group to make meaningful contributions to decision-making, and seeks to broaden the range of people who have access to such opportunities. It adopts elements of direct democracy and representative democracy and emphasizes the broad participation of constituents in the direction and operation of political systems. Though etymologically, democracy will mean participation, traditional representative democracies tend to limit

citizens' participation to voting, leaving actual governance to politicians (Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, 2012). In order to experience full participatory democracy in Nigeria, there must be participatory arrangements, which need to be open at their foundation to everyone affected by such decisions; the need for mutually agreed and openly negotiated rules to be upheld by everybody, and mechanisms for sanctioning deviants; an enabling environment for participatory institutions and groups to monitor implementation of government's decisions; and a general sharing of knowledge. What is most important is what eventually brings about good democratic practices that promote good governance to facilitate sustainable development in different settings (Babangida 2008).

In principle, democracy obviously requires both the existence of a civil society and respect for human rights. In reality, however, it is often seen merely in terms of the organization of elections. The degree of success of the system should be measured with reference to how far all the actors in society are actually involved; and this can be visible through the adoption of participatory democracy (Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, 2012). One quality which has always been lacking in Nigeria's political system in the past and present is people's participation in democracy. Even when democracy is in place, people are often pushed aside by the political forces at play. Power brokers do not often see the wisdom in involving the people in the crucial decisions taken to transform the society. The result of this negligence has been a massive failure of the system.

The basic idea of participatory democracy is that people need a new way to be involved in a broadened approach to local decision making. Participatory democracy has come to mean the right of citizens in a democracy to participate. It means the obligation of citizens to participate in the decisions made by their governmental representatives that impact the lives of all citizens (Brown, 2010). Surveys have shown that citizens no longer feel ownership of decisions which impact their lives. There is little or no trust between citizensand their elected officials in Nigeria. Every community is being overwhelmed with change which is transforming institutions. Too many people feel that they have to make sure that they get their fair share because of competition and lack of ethics. All of this leads to a society whose local communities no longer have a sense that the "common good" is possible. It is on this note that Jungk (1977) writes on this task that the quest for a man in this millennium, is, how the democracy of acclamation can be transformed into a democracy of participation. The people must wake up to reality and begin to ask their politicians questions such as, why do you want my vote? And he must treatthe easy answer of the politician with appropriate skepticism (Achebe, 1983).

Democracy as it were in Nigeria, only performs the duty of acclamation and needs to take up the role of participation. A great reversal of values will be pertinent and there will have to be a shift from isolation to openness, from conquest to expansion, from producing to experiencing, from forced achievement to free development, from hard to soft value system, from rigid to flexible way of life, from use to playful, from death –dealing to life giving. As such is this re-orientation of values for a more humanized democracy?We begin to see the truth of Yankelovich(2005) about the sudden up-surge of the right for self-expression.His general orientation is that: The spiritual and cultural development of the individual can only be accomplished within the solidarity of a community that has renounced egoistical surges such as careerism, the pursuit of profit, and consumer greed. It is through participatory democracy that a meaningful development can be attained on the ground were the people represented acknowledges and are aware of what is done on their behalf.

Conclusion

It is only through active participation in democracy that we can find a solid ground for meaningful and sustainable development in Nigeria, rather than mere representation. As it were, this piece advocate for political transparency, accountability and equity amongst Nigerian leaders, especially now where the maxim is "survival of the fittest". Participatory democracy brings to the fore the publicness of the public sphere, in this regard too Habermas (2007) even goes as far as stipulating guidelines for this form of discourse. Thus, in his essay "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a programme of philosophical justification", Habermas makes the case that the validity of moral norms cannot be justified in the mind of an isolated individual reflecting on the world. That this can only be ascertained inter subjectively. The proposal of participatory democracy also answers the question of the publicness of public opinion, for when avenues are created for public participation in opinion formation, and thenwe can truly talk about the public nature of public opinion. The basis for universality here is not just the logical structure of the positions nor their ontological composition or constitution, but the depth and the breadth of the participation is what matters.

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