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Power, Property, Publicity and Democracy in Nigeria

BY

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ABSTRACT

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria's current democratic experiment is the longest. Between May 29 1999 till date, the nation has transited from one civilian government to another, not without hues and cries though. The 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections were fraught with fraud and violence.

The Nigerian political system and landscape defiles democracy in its true sense. This paper therefore, attempts to study the interplay of 'power', 'property' and 'publicity' in Nigerian democracy, with a view to understanding the Nigerian political landscape and proffering solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is gradually finding its foot in Nigeria. By May 29 2009, the country's fourth democratic experiment would have been 10 years. This is the longest in Nigeria's nationhood. The first republic which started at independence in October 1960 lasted only 6 years (1960-1966). The experiment did not only collapse, it did violently and laid the foundation for the first and only civil war in Nigeria in 1967. The second republic which started in October 1979 came to an abrupt end in December 1983 through a military take over led by Buhari and Idiagbon. General Badamosi Babangida who sized power from Buhari and Idiagbon in August 1985, annulled the election of June 12, 1993 which was considered the freest and the fairest in the nation's history and assumed to have been won by the late business mogul, M.K.O. Abiola. By that action, he did not only abort the third republic, he made 1993 and 1994, years that Nigerians will not forget in a hurry.

Now that we are in the tenth year of the fourth republic, some politicians, particularly those who belong to the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) are of the opinion that the country is advancing democratically, particularly, if and when compared with the past experiments. They are quick to point out, that we have not only transited from one civilian regime to another, we have also been able to put the Military in their barracks. This notwithstanding, some keen watchers have warned that it is not yet uhuru. They identified desperate and violent crave for, abuse and misuse of power, property and publicity as the major bane of democracy in Nigeria.

This paper therefore, attempts to study the interplay of power, property, and publicity in Nigerian democracy. The paper also aims at determining the type of democracy/government operating in Nigeria. Some of the questions this paper will aim at providing answers to are: How well or otherwise is power, property and publicity used in the governance of the nation? Is democracy practiced in Nigeria, if yes, what type or version of democracy is in use in the nation?

DEMOCRACY

Democracy literally means, the rule by the people. The term is derived from the Greek word dēmokratiā, which was coined from dēmos (people) and kratos (rule) in the middle of the 5th century BC to denote the political systems then existing in some Greek city-states, notably Athens.

Ayedun-Aluma (1996), explains that the dictionary definition of democracy entails two ideas: The first idea is that democracy is a form of government in which the people hold and exercise political power either directly or through their elected representatives. The second idea which follows from the first is that democracy is a social condition in which the people have and exercise equal political rights. The import of these ideas is that people have the liberty to effect their political preference without let or hindrance, and that the citizens have equal political rights- to vote and be voted for.

Unarguably, the most popular definition of democracy in this part of the globe is that which defines it as the —government of the people, by the people and for the people. Beyond the semantics, democracy can simply be defined as a —popular government. Democratic government can be established in a town or city, a country, a business corporation, a university or an international organization.

If a government of, or by the people—a popular government—is to be established, some fundamental questions must be confronted at the outset. For instance: What is the appropriate unit or association within which a democratic government should be established; a town, city or a country? Given an appropriate association—a city, for example—who among its members should enjoy full citizenship? Which persons, in other words, should constitute the *dēmos*? Is every member of the association entitled to participate in governing it? How small can the subset be before the association ceases to be a democracy and becomes something else, such as an aristocracy (government by the best, *aristos*) or an oligarchy (government by the few, *oligos*)?

Assuming there exist a proper association and proper *dēmos*, how are citizens to be governed? What political organizations or institutions will they need? When citizens are divided on an issue, as they often will be, whose views should prevail, and in what circumstances? Should a majority always prevail, or should minorities sometimes be empowered to block or overcome majority rule? If a majority is ordinarily to prevail, what is to constitute a proper majority; a majority of all citizens or a majority of voters?

Answers to these very germane questions must be clearly and unambiguously stated in the constitution of the association. This is why democracy is generally believed to thrive on the rule of law. In any association where there is no law or where the law is not sacred and respected by all, democracy is not likely to thrive.

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, both the theory and the practice of democracy have undergone profound changes. For thousands of years, the kind of association in which democracy was practiced, the tribe or the city-state, was small enough to be suitable for some form of democracy by assembly, or—direct democracy. Much later, beginning from the 18th century, as the typical association became the nation-state or country, direct democracy gave way to representative democracy. Also, until fairly recently, most democratic associations limited the right to participate in government to a minority of the adult population, indeed, sometimes to a very small minority. However, beginning from the 20th century, this right was extended to nearly all adults. (In Nigeria, citizens above eighteen years of age can vote and be voted for).

No association can maintain a democratic government for long time if a majority of the *dēmos* (people) or a majority of those in government believe that some other form of government is better. When the people start to ask: Why should—the people rule? Is

democracy really better than aristocracy, oligarchy or monarchy? Or reason that, perhaps, the best government would be led by a minority of the most highly qualified persons—an aristocracy of —philosopher-kings.¶ as Plato argues in the Republic, democracy is under threat.

Thus, a minimum condition for the continued existence of a democracy is that a substantial proportion of both the dēmos (people) and the leadership believe that popular government is better than any feasible alternative. Leaders must therefore identify and sustain those conditions that favour the continued existence of democracy and prevent those conditions that are harmful to it.

Power

Power has many dimensions; hence it can be defined from different perspective. It can be defined as the ability or act to produce effect. It can also be defined as the possession of control, authority, or influence over others; legal or official authority, capacity or right. Power could also be physical might, mental, moral or psychological influence, or political control. Some of its synonyms are; authority, jurisdiction, control, command and dominion. As close as these words may look, they definitely communicate different meanings.

__Power‘ implies the possession of ability to wield force, permissive authority, or substantial influence i.e. power to move people to action or mould people’s opinion. __Authority‘ implies the granting of power for specific purpose within a specific limit i.e. the power of attorney.

__Jurisdiction‘ applies to official power exercised within a prescribed limit i.e. the election tribunal having the jurisdiction to hear petitions arising from an election. __Control‘ stresses the power to direct and restrain i.e. the teacher. __Command‘ implies the power to make decisions and compel obedience i.e. Commander-In-Chief. __Dominion‘ stresses sovereign power or supreme authority i.e. man is given dominion over all creation.

Adefulu (1994) states that —power¶ and —authority¶ are two terms that have been and still been used to mean the same. However in an attempt to differentiate the terms, social theorist tend to describe authority in relationship with terms such as: —legitimacy¶ and —rightfulness¶. Barry (1981) suggest that to distinguish between —authority¶ and —power¶, we must regard authority as a philosophical concept whose function is to ask normative question about the right of a person to give orders or make pronouncements or decisions under an act or rule. He states further, that there seem to be a relationship between —power¶ and —coercion¶. Political power however, is the type of power held by an individual or a group in a society which

allows them to administer public resources, including labour and wealth. There are many ways to obtain possession of such power. However, the extent to which a person or group possesses such power is related to the amount of societal influence they can wield, formally or informally.

In political context, it is observed that some Presidents, Governors and other political and public office holders wield enormous power such that limits severely the private choices of individuals. Adefulu (1994) reasons that the powers of political and public office holders may be legitimate, in a sense; it could also be likened to that of a bank robber. This is so because; both can cause people to act in desired ways because they have coercion at their disposal.

Weber (1947) submits that authority suggest that obedience is secured by other means rather than threat, and its exercise, a product of rules. The exercise of power to secure obedience therefore, rest on the use of threat or force.

Because absolute power corrupts absolutely, there is the need to contain and balance legislative, executive and judicial power. A situation where so much power is permitted in an individual, group or an arm of government, freedom and protection against the abuse of such powers cannot be guaranteed. Separation of power must be in such grade, that any of the branches can operate without excessive limitations from the others; but interdependency between them must also be in such grade, that one single branch cannot rule out the other's decisions. This is the principle of separation of powers.

PROPERTY

Historically, property has been a persistent test of admittance into electorate. The gradual relinquishment of property ownership criteria marked the evolution of the franchise in Great Britain and the United States. Prior 1775, only landowners or members of certain guilds or profession can vote in the United States. However, between 1775-1783, poll tax was introduced and it expanded the suffrage. Although, there were public outcries against the poll tax as a prerequisite for voting, the system lingered until 1966 when the Supreme Court in the United State outlawed the poll tax in state and local elections.

In Nigeria, before and after independence, there had been, and there is still no legislation limiting admittance into electorate on the basis of property. The 1963, 1979 and 1999 constitutions, only limit admittance into electorate on the basis of age. To be voted for, the 1999 constitution stipulates certain educational/academic conditions that must be attained.

However, the different political parties in their written and unwritten rules and regulations have conditions that aspirants are expected to meet to qualify to contest for certain political offices.

The constitutional provision that stipulates that an aspirant must have been a resident in a particular area for at least two years for him or her to qualify to run for elective position in the area seem to have been translated to mean that the aspirant must have property/properties in the area. It is a common phenomenon, almost a fashion in the south-western part of Nigeria, that political office seekers hurriedly build house(s) in the area where they will be contesting for election. This, they probably assume will and should convince the electorate that they are sons and daughters of the soil. Examples of these abound, particularly among politicians who hitherto reside in cosmopolitan cities such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Kano etc or outside the country.

Many keen watchers of Nigeria's democracy have decried the obvious lacks of ideology; many of the citizenry have equally lost faith in its players. The player themselves don't promise much, the campaign period is basically a period to display wealth. Rather than give speeches that indicate that they understand the challenges ahead, and are capable of tackling them, they drive to campaign arenas in convoy of state of the art vehicles.

At the 2003 convention of a leading political party monitored on Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), it was more of a vehicle carnival than any other thing. Between 1979-1983, a particular model of Mercedes Benz was named by the people after the then president —Shagari model. This was because the model became a status symbol for those in power. Today, our politicians own and ride jeep of different makes while the citizens wallow in abject poverty.

In a true democracy, state managers at the different levels exercise authority (power) given to them by the electorate for a specific purpose within a specified limit. Hence, they are mindful of the fact that the position they hold, is held in trust for the collective benefit of the electorate and not for the selfish gains of a few. In Nigeria today, can we conveniently say that those who exercise authority today (politicians) got it through the electorate? Do they consider themselves accountable to the people? Are they serving the interest of the masses or their personal interest?

What we have in Nigeria today is far from democracy, it is simply a government of the privileged few for the benefit of a privileged few. Politics is by far a quicker means/route to prosperity than any other investment. It therefore seems reasonable in the Nigerian context that funds should be invested in politics rather than undergo the attendant headache of either engaging in legitimate business or working hard to acquire property.

Adeyeye in an interview with TELL Magazine regrets a situation where a political office holder in an extremely poor country like Nigeria, earns more than a neurosurgeon working in the United States. He accuses Nigerian politicians, himself inclusive of awarding themselves hefty salaries and allowances, aimless globetrotting and rapacious looting of the treasury. He defined the type of government we run in the country as —Corruptocracy government of the corrupt by the corrupt and for the corrupt (2008:18).

PUBLICITY

Microsoft Encarta (2009) defines publicity as activities that stimulate public interest: especially advertising and the dissemination of information, designed to increase public interest in, or awareness of something or somebody. A publicist therefore, is a liaison between an individual/organisation that employs or engages him/her and the media. The long term effectiveness of a publicist depends on his/her ability to satisfactorily represent his/her client while at the same time meeting the needs of the various media. To achieve this task professionally, the publicist must act as a catalyst that influences both parties with which he/she deals with without being unduly influenced by either.

In any serious democracy, the rule of law and a free press are probably the two key components. The Judiciary and the press are not only expected to be independent, they are also expected to be objective. One can therefore understand why the press is referred to as the fourth estate of the realm after the Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary.

With this enormous power, the media as the major medium of publicity does become a beautiful bride that must be court, befriended, married or bought. Publicity (attracting attention of the public to something or somebody) is serious business. In almost every human endeavour, there is that conscious effort at attracting attention. The cry of a new baby may as well be translated to mean ‘_Here I am/I have arrived’.

In addition to this, the media is also a powerful tool of socio/political mobilization. It has been and is still been used as an information and propaganda machine to sway public opinion

and sympathy towards or against issues or ideologies. The early Newspapers such as —Iwe-Irohinl (1859), —Anglo- Africanl (1863), Lagos Times (1880) and a host of others quickened the death of colonial rule in Nigeria. The likes of Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Ladoke Akintola among others used —Daily Newsll (1925), —West African Pilotll (1937), —Nigerian Tribunell (1959) and —Daily Sketchll (1964) to promote their political parties and ideologies.

Coker(1968) report that when the venom and fire coming from the pens of prolific writers/columnist such as Lateef Jakande (John West), Bisi Onabanjo (Ayekoto), Ayo Adebajo (Micky Mouse) and host of others became too much for the Prime Minister Tafa Balewa led federal government to bear, the idea of striking a balance in the flow of information to the people was muted. This gave birth to —The Morning Postll in 1961.

Democracy, more than any other form of government requires the goodwill of the people. Politician will need a lot of publicity to shore their image before the election. While in office, more publicity is needed to assure and reassure the people of their performance. Even when a contestant loses, publicity is yet needed to maintain relevance for future elections. This underscores why the media booms in a democracy. In the democratic dispensations, more media organisations are established and more funds accrue to them from advertising, publicity and other related activities.

Between 1995 till date, a number of Newspapers have been established: ThisDay (1995), The Sun and Daily Independent (2001), The Abuja Inquirer (2004), The Nation (2006), Encounter (2007) and Compass (2008). Similarly, a number of Television and Radio stations have also hit the Nigerian airwaves between 1999 and 2009. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) led federal government has strategically established many NTA and FRCN stations, such that each of the 36 States has almost two of these stations. As at 2008, the number of Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) stations had risen to 77 from 28 in 1999. This same period has equally witnessed an increase in the number of private Radio and Television stations in the country. For instance, The Silverbird Group has increased its Broadcast network to cover more states. Today, the group has 6 radio stations and 3 television stations. Daar Communications now broadcast to the world through its satellite broadband.

The increase in the number of Newspapers, Radio and Television stations, is an indication of their viability and relevance at least from the point of view of the proprietors. The personality of the proprietors of some of these media organisations equally underscores how important

the media (publicity) is to democracy in Nigeria. For instance, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu (immediate past Governor of Lagos State) is rumoured to be behind The Nation Newspaper and Continental Broadcasting Service, owners of Radio and TV Continental. The former Governor of Abia state, Kalu is believed to be the proprietor of The Sun Newspaper, while Nigerian Compass is linked to Otunba Gbenga Daniel (Governor of Ogun State).

Conclusion

But for the 1993 general election, elections in Nigeria have always been a-do-or-die-affairs. That of 2007 only got a presidential backing. There was so much pre-election violence across the nation and many unresolved political killings: Bola Ige, Daramola, Funsho Martins, Marshal Harry, just to mention a few were gruesomely murdered by yet to be identified gun men.

While political campaigns and elections in other part of the world centres on ideology and issues, in Nigeria, there seem to be a convergence of opinion among power brokers and seekers that power can only be attained through violence. This opinion tallies with Weber's premise, that all governments -- whether democratic or not -- rest ultimately on the threat of violence against the people. Arendt disagrees with Weber on the issue of violence. She points out that it is not violence but power that is the essence of government.

Violence can destroy the old power, she said, but it can never create the authority that legitimizes the new. Violence is therefore the poorest possible basis on which to build a government. "To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished but it is also paid by the victor. Hutcheon (1996)

This according to Hutcheon, is particularly dangerous because the means of destruction now determine the end, with the consequence that the end will be the destruction of all [legitimate] power and what is left is terror.

Eteng (1996:7) submits that _what obtains in Nigeria today, is essentially a relation of raw power. Power is everything, and those who wield coercive resources use it freely to promote their interest'. The resource of physical, material and psychological coercion becomes the personalised tools of particular dominant groups, especially the hegemonic factions of the ruling class. Today, the judiciary-the courts and special tribunals, the police, the army and to some extent the media are now personalised power instruments of oppression and violence deployed by state managers against those defined as opposition.

This situation is attributed to the absence of independent conflict regulating public mechanisms in the Nigerian state (such as an independent judiciary) This underscores why the struggle for political office has become a do-or-die affair and thus pursued by every means most vicious than fair. The defining characteristic of totalitarianism, according to Arendt, is the use of terror as the chief means of maintaining control. Terror within a totalitarian state or organization takes the form of dominating human beings from within. Not only must one avoid expressing dissenting thoughts; merely possessing such thought is the ultimate crime.

The —conquer all syndrome has engulfed the Nigerian political landscape such that once you get into power you must strive to conquer the party machinery, the executive, legislature and judiciary. The Police and the other Military and para-military organisations must all submit to you. As a matter of fact you must become the General Officer Commanding (GOC) all the forces both seen and unseen. It therefore seems wise that the politician should acquire power at all cost since it will guarantee property and publicity.

However, if Nigeria will qualify as a democratic nation, political positions/offices should not be seen as a means to wealth but as an opportunity to serve. The electoral system must be reformed such that the will and wish of the people are made to count, the electoral body must not only be independent, it must be seen to be independent. The law interpreting and enforcement organisations and institutions must rise up to the challenge without taking side. The —conquer all syndrome must stop, and the —rule of law must be sacred.

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