

THE IMPERATIVE OF DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA THROUGH CREDIBLE ELECTIONS

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Abstract

Since the fall of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes in West Africa, the sub-region has witnessed democratic change with the installation of multi-party political systems in almost all the countries. Today, democracy sits on the horn of a dilemma in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria. The tactics and tantrums of political actors in Nigeria and the shortcomings of the political process has showcased the inadequacies of democracy and its practice as a political ideology in Nigeria. Free and fair election which is one of the features of true democracy has eluded Nigeria since the advent of her nascent democratic dispensation. For democracy to thrive and consolidate in any political system, periodic elections should be free and fair, such that it will not be impossible to replace an incompetent and unpopular government from power. The weakness of the electoral umpire in Nigeria as shown in the series of controversies, litigations and court decisions on election matters that trail successive elections, and the behavior of the political class has cast doubt on sustainable democratic consolidation in Nigeria. This paper looks at the meaning and content of democracy, and highlights the challenges and prospects of democratic consolidation in Nigeria under the prevailing socio-economic and security challenges. The paper examines the link between democratic consolidation and credible elections, and how the growth and sustenance of democratic consolidation is threatened by electoral fraud and visionless leaders. Finally, the paper discusses the imperative of good governance, and the argument it advances is that without this imperative, socio-economic and political instability will pose as a feature of Nigerian democracy.

Keywords: Democracy, Election, Consolidate, Sustenance, Security.

Introduction

In any democratic system, the votes of the electorate must count for the electoral system to be credible. Periodic elections in democratic systems are the perfect ways to determine the will of the people, and such elections must be free, fair, transparent and credible. It must not be elections where the people's will is kidnapped or bought by the highest bidder. The control of government by citizens of the state through free, fair and credible elections has always been the central pillar of democracy globally. Credible elections provide the most desired mechanism for the orderly transfer of political power in response to the will of the electorate. A one-time United States Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, George Moose, once noted that "without regular, credible elections, individual officials are not ultimately accountable to the people". Crossroads (1996) cited in Akinsanya (2008: 41) also noted that "only a democratic government, established by the consent of the governed in accordance with their shared values, has the moral authority to act as the legitimate agent of the people". Elections are the litmus test of any democratic system. According to Gambo (2006: 88):

Election is one of the most critical engagements that characterize any liberal and competitive political system. It is an important

exercise in the sense that if carefully, freely and fairly undertaken, it produces outcome that is almost mutually agreeable to all competing social groups which are politically active within a given polity.

Gambo went further to assert that any political leadership which emerges from free and fair electoral process enjoys consistent and considerable support of the citizenry and is scarcely questioned in terms of legitimacy (Gambo, 2006). Elections do not only serve the purpose of peacefully changing government, it also enhances and confers legitimacy on the government (Ojo, 2006). Elections are an instrumentality through which people choose their leaders and keep them accountable.

The best mechanism for democratic consolidation in any democratic system is the creation of enabling environment for free and credible elections. Nigeria is yet to create this enabling environment for the consolidation of her democracy which started in 1999 after many years of military dictatorship. The most significant challenge to democratic consolidation in Nigeria involves the development of effective strategies for strengthening institutions of the state in such a manner that they will be able to withstand the shocks of the democratic process. This challenge is particularly important for institutions like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the judiciary. On their part, the political actors in Nigeria have always engaged in acts that do not and cannot promote or enhance democratic consolidation, as they buy votes, rig elections and commit other infidelities designed to subvert the will of the people to choose leaders capable of leading the state towards development of enduring democracy.

This paper therefore, examines some of the factors that constitute obstacles to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Even though Nigeria has had uninterrupted democratic process since 1999, her democracy is in great danger as a result of these challenges that will be discussed in this paper.

Democratic Consolidation through Credible Elections

Scholars and writers have come up with different definitions to describe the concept “democratic consolidation”. According to Linz (1985), democracy is consolidated when “none of the major political actors, parties or organized interests, forces or institutions consider that there is any alternative to the democratic process to gain power and no political institutions or groups has a claim to veto the action of democratically elected decision makers.”

The building of a consolidated democracy involves an affirmation and strengthening of certain institutions, such as the electoral system, vibrant political parties, judicial independence and respect for human rights and rule of law. Real democratic consolidation requires a demonstrable relationship between political accountability and quality governance. In Diamond’s (1999) conceptualization, democratic consolidation is “the process of achieving broad and deep legitimation such that all significant political actors believe that popular rule is better for the society than any other realistic alternative they can imagine”. (Diamond, 1999 cited in Kwasau 2013: 182). Some scholars view it as regime maintenance which regards key political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation and adherence to the democratic rules of the game. Democratic consolidation can only manifest under enhanced economic

development, advanced and developed political culture, stable party system and improved and independent electoral process.

Election is a democratic process that gives the citizens of a state the opportunity to choose their representatives. Givwin and Norton (1992) see election as the formal process of selecting people for public offices. They further posit that election is a veritable means by which a democratic society may organize itself and make specific formal decisions. The beauty of election is the opportunity to choose among contestants and programmes. It also promotes accountability. Election in any liberal democracy is anchored on the principle of consent franchise and representation. "Election not only serves to provide the voter the opportunity to exercise his choices or preferences on political leadership, but also provides the basis on which elected political leaders assume legitimacy of their positions" (Elekwa, 2008: 6).

To Olu, "election is a means of determining the will of the people regarding their choice of political leaders and regime types. In essence, both the process and the outcome of the election should reflect the consent and aspirations of the people as organized electorate (Olu, 20003: 18). What this means is that, apart from being a routine periodic exercise, in all democratic systems, election must be competitive, transparent, free and fair, as well as credible in order to live up to its democratic essence and merit.

In liberal democratic systems, elections are seen as a viable mechanism for consummating representative government. "Apart from facilitating leadership succession, it promotes accountability, citizens' participation and give voice and power to the people. It is an expression of the people's will (Alfa et al., 2012: 151).

An essential function of elections in liberal democracies is the right given to citizens to exercise their franchise and elect people into power. Any government which is a product of free and fair electoral process, enjoys immeasurable support from the electorate and such a government is scarcely questioned in terms of legitimacy. This informs Gamgo's (2006: 88) submission that "election is one of the most critical civic engagements that characterize any liberal and competitive political systems". Ojo (2000) believes that it is only when elections are judged to be free and fair in any society that such society can be said to be democratic. He posits that elections do not only serve the purpose of peaceful change of government, they also confer political legitimacy on the government. Schumpeter's idea of meaningful democracy is when citizens in any political system are given the opportunity to decide who rules them through credible elections (Schumpeter, 1962).

Elections are therefore regarded as the hallmark of democracy. This means that there is an inextricable link between sound electoral process and true democracy. A sound democratic setting is one in which the citizens of the state are given the maximum opportunity to participate in the electoral process. This opportunity defines an ideal competitive democratic electoral process which somehow exists under suspicious circumstances in Nigeria. When political institutions are occupied by people with stolen mandates, there will be a dent on the image and integrity of such institutions and the entire political process.

The socio-economic challenges Nigeria is facing has compelled the average Nigerian voter to sell his votes during elections. This is a consequence of crippling poverty which pervades the Nigerian state. This is why Omenka and Apam (2006) stressed on the need to tackle the high rate of poverty in the country. According to the duo, unemployment and abject poverty are at their peak in Nigeria today. The average electorate has hardly seen any dividend of democracy.

Poverty and selfish interest of Nigeria's political actors have paved way for electoral malpractice which is an obstruction to democratic consolidation in the country. This questions the legitimacy of these political actors and the institutions that produce them, as little attention is given to the development and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Ebegbulem (2011) believes that the average Nigeria is disenchanted about the entire political process. He sees no reason to participate in the electoral process that hardly fulfills his basic expectations of freedom to choose his leaders because election results are always manipulated. "From the first republic to the present, multiparty elections have been held under undemocratic circumstances, resulting in election outcomes that have led to the non-consolidation of democracy. This crisis in electoralism is demonstrated by the citizens' lack of confidence in the institutions of governance." (Ebegbulem, 2011: 248).

Determinants of Democratic Consolidation

The existence of the democratic state, a democratic society and the presence of neighbouring democratic states are essential for democratic consolidation. The democratic state is the bedrock of democracy as it offers the institutional structure that enables democracy to flourish. Such a state must be based on certain principles and rules that are essential for a worthwhile democracy. These include, the existence of several political parties representing divergent interests, freedom of the press and of information, and the independence of the judiciary. Other determinants are the organisation of free, fair and regular elections, the alternation of power, separation of powers, etc.

Although the above are necessary for a viable democratic foundation, democracy can only be successfully consolidated by democratic values which are realizable within the framework of a democratic society. These values which are endless include the recognition and safeguarding of universal nature of human rights, primacy of civil as against primordial interests and institutionalization of political power. There must also be the presence of neighbouring democratic states which will serve as an insurance against hostility from undemocratic forces on those states. This is based on the assumption that political pluralism may be easily consolidated when it extends to other neighbouring states.

Democracy goes beyond political participation. It also includes the satisfaction of the basic demands of the people. The capacity of a democratic state to meet those demands depends on the availability of resources.

Impediments to Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

In Nigeria, democratic consolidation has been a problematic endeavor over the years because elections have always been bereft of democratic ideals. According to Ibeanu (2007: 3):

The electoral process as currently constituted in Nigeria is psychologically alienating from the vast majority of the people who are largely outsiders and are only periodically inserted in the process when they cast votes. At the same time, this alienation is underscored by the fact that even when these vote casters have completed the ritual of voting, the outcome bears little semblance to what they chose in their ballots.

Election rigging has dealt a huge blow to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Elections conducted by the country's electoral body (INEC) since 1999 when Nigeria embraced democratic rule after many years of military dictatorship have not met with the expectations of Nigerians due to various forms of electoral manipulations. These have made elections in the country far from being free, fair and credible. Election rigging has not only marred democratic consolidation in Nigeria, but has also disenfranchised many Nigerians. It has promoted the imposition of unqualified and corrupt individuals on Nigerians who have no regard and respect for the principle of democracy.

This lack of respect for adult suffrage and human rights violation has been a major obstacle to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Even though Essis (1994) observed that there is no perfect democracy, she however highlighted three "constants of democracy", which are (i) universal adult suffrage which sets the basis for the legitimacy of power and allows, through free and fair elections for political alternation without which there can be no real democracy; (ii) the legal state which protects the citizens by guaranteeing individual freedom, defines the necessary equilibrium between the different authorities in the state; (iii) the respect for human rights which constitutes a guarantee against all despotic powers. It is evident today in the Nigerian democratic process that adult suffrage is not important, as the electorate's votes do not count in deciding election outcomes. Violation of human rights is still part of the country's political process.

Lack of adequate security in Nigeria is one of the major obstacles to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. This informs Dauda and Avidime's submission that the security situation in Nigeria is a major challenge to the consolidation of democracy. They note that "the tense security situation in all parts of the country makes nonsense of whatever efforts have been made to justify the sustenance of our democratic experiment since the environment is unconducive for foreign investments and endangered by bad governance and political instability". (Dauda and Avidime, 2007: 18). According to the duo, the problem of youth unemployment cannot be divorced from the current security challenges in Nigeria which poses a threat to national security.

Ethnicism is another obstacle to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The problem of ethnicism in Nigeria's political process cannot be divorced from socio-political instability in the country. Frequent ethnic induced turbulences in Nigeria and the clamour for the presidency by the various ethnic nationalities in the country indicate that the Nigerian society is still balkanized by tribal sentiments (Victor, 2002). The various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria encourage and promote ethnic interest, thereby making the creation of a common identity problematic. This poses a threat to democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Poverty also makes the consolidation of democracy a herculean task in Nigeria. Poverty is a consequence of unemployment which is part of the Nigerian society. Any society that is characterized by poverty cannot develop, and such a society is always unstable. Poverty and unemployment have posed serious hindrance to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. It is estimated that over eighty percent of Nigerians are poor, and this level of poverty accounts for part of the security challenges in Nigeria today, because the unemployed and poor youths carry arms against the state and its citizens. As a result of poverty, many Nigerians are easily brainwashed during elections, as they become victims of various forms of inducements and gratification. This is a barrier to Nigeria's quest for democratic consolidation.

Corruption is another major impediment to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. The Nigerian state is synonymous with corruption. Events in Nigeria since the country's democratic experiment in 1999 have shown that corruption is a clog in the wheel of Nigeria's democratic project. It has devastated and eroded the fundamental values and principles of democracy in Nigeria. Kwasau (2013: 186) observes that:

Corruption has reached a high crescendo such that an average Nigerian now possibly associates democracy with it. The consequences of political corruption are potently manifest cyclical crisis of legitimacy, fragile party structure, institutional decay, chronic economic problem and unemployment, and above all general democratic volatility.

Godfatherism in Nigerian politics which negates all tenets of democracy also poses a threat to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Godfatherism prevents the selection of competent and qualified candidates for elective position. The so-called Godfathers achieve their goals with money and where this method proves unsuccessful, they unleash violence both as deterrence and punishment. Elections can never be free and fair, and governance cannot be accountable and transparent under the politics of Godfatherism. In Nigeria, since the enthronement of democracy in 1999, the politics of Godfatherism has created doubts about the legitimacy of the electoral process and those produced by the same electoral process. Godfatherism is one of the biggest dangers to democratic consolidation as it promotes the exclusion and denial of legitimate entitlements of the electorate.

Gambo sees the activities of Godfathers as inimical to the tenets of democracy. According to him, under the politics of Godfatherism, "there is total absence of culture of accountability, and this negates one of the critical attributes of democracy which is a responsible and accountable government. Good governance predicted on rule of law, due process, accountability and transparency in the management of public space is precariously compromised" (Gambo, 2006: 99). Ayoade (2006:87) also notes that:

Godfatherism has created more problems than enough. It has created doubts about the legitimacy of the electoral process and the elected. It therefore creates an environment that delinks people from the state. The opposition tends to refuse to obey what conscience forbids. They therefore react by becoming apathetic or, at the other extreme, violent. Those that remain apathetic do so only because they do not hold strong political views, while those

who turn violent cannot accommodate the blatant disregard of rules.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts the Liberal Theory of Democracy as its analytical framework. The liberal theory of democracy is prevalent among capitalist states. The proponents of liberal democratic theory were Jeremy Bentham and James Mills, the father of John Stuart Mills. Democracy was promoted in America and Europe when capitalism emerged as the dominant economic ideology. It was supported by the philosophical writings of scholars such as John Locke, John Stuart Mills, Baron de Montesquieu and other liberal writers. The basic features of the liberal democratic theory are”

- i) Capitalism is an economic ideology;
- ii) Free, fair and periodic elections based on universal franchise;
- iii) Emphasis on civil liberties or individual rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, press and religion;
- iv) Competitive party system as opposed to one-party system;
- v) Pressure groups;
- vi) Rule of law;
- vii) Separation of powers and checks and balances;
- viii) Abhorrence of revolutionary approach to change government (Kwasau, 2013).

The central idea of the liberal theory of democracy is how to promote political systems that encourage universal suffrage where adult citizens are given the opportunity to vote and be voted for regardless of race, gender or religion.

The relevance of this theory in this work is that it will help in examining analytically the challenges of democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The theory exposes and explains the expectation of any political system, Nigeria inclusive, as it puts more emphasis on the conduct of credible elections which is one of the attributes of democratic consolidation. Although other theories such as the Liberal Marxist Theory, Classical Theory of Democracy, Political Economy Theory and Group Theory have been used to analyse democracy, none is sufficient to examine democratic consolidation better than the liberal theory in this work.

Conclusion

Since democracy has the capacity of ensuring political stability and socio-economic development, it was embraced by Nigerians in 1999 with high hopes and enthusiasm. These hopes and enthusiasm were short-lived as the country’s political landscape was turned into a battleground for the promotion of ethnic, religious and elitist agenda. Nigeria is today characterized and marred by political instability.

In all true democratic states, elections constitute the soul of the democratic process. It is very unfortunate that in Nigeria’s democratic process, the people’s votes do not count as election results are decided by few money bags whose vote buying, rigging and financial inducement have made a caricature of democracy. The consolidation of democracy can be guaranteed in Nigeria through free and fair election of credible leaders who are ready and willing to act as the people’s servant and not the other way round.

When the conduct of elections is credible, it gives the government which is the product of such elections legitimacy garnered by the consent of the citizens. This improves the capacity of the state and its rulers to function properly through legitimate authority under the rule of law, and improve the levels of human development through effective governance. Legitimate governments which enjoy the support of the citizens are put in place through credible elections.

Since neither the rights of the Nigerian people are adequately protected nor are their wishes carried out by the government, the aggrieved citizens, especially the youths, carry arms against the state and other innocent citizens in the state through insurgency and terrorism. Given the security challenges in Nigeria arising from the activities of the insurgents and other terrorist organisations in the country, democratic consolidation may be far from reality. The current economic crisis in Nigeria has to be urgently addressed. Apart from addressing Nigeria's economic problems very urgently, it is equally imperative to emphasise the need for good governance and the empowerment of the civil society for sustained development and democratic consolidation.

Since it is only robust democratic institutions that can guarantee peace in any electoral process, to achieve democratic consolidation in Nigeria, the government must provide an unbiased conducive political environment for all political parties and their contestants during elections. This is very necessary, considering the observation of Ebegbulem (2011:248) that:

From the first republic to the present, multi-party elections have been held under undemocratic circumstances resulting in election outcomes that have led to the non-consolidation of democracy. This crisis of electoralism is demonstrated by the citizens' lack of confidence in the institutions of governance.

What therefore negates democratic consolidation in Nigeria is the failure of political actors to abide by the norms of democratic governance, and also the failure of the democratic process to produce leaders through free, fair and credible elections.

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