



DEMOCRACY AND PROGRESSION OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Democracy is perhaps, the singular most important design of mankind particularly as it overwhelmingly reflects the ideals of liberty, freewill and egalitarianism. Since attaining independence, Nigeria has experienced a greater period of military rule than democratic governance; as a result, every facet of the Nigerian society has over the years reflected this reality of militarization. The industrial relations system in Nigeria is not ‘immune’ to the effects of the nation’s “bitter” democratization process. As such, the industrial relations system in Nigeria since the colonial era has evolved alongside, Nigeria’s painstakingly difficult democratization process. This paper examines the synergy between democratization and industrial relations in Nigeria, raising pertinent issues. The paper throws its weight behind the principle that democratic rule provides a healthier environment for a blossoming industrial relations system, particularly, since government till date remains the single largest employer of labour. The paper advocates the internalization of core democratic values, structures and processes as one sure way of ensuring a vibrant industrial relations system in Nigeria

Keywords: *Democracy, Democratization, Industrial Relations, Nigeria, System*

Introduction

Etymologically, the word democracy can be traced to the root Greek words “demos” meaning “people” and “kratein” meaning “to rule”. Today, the concept simply means a political system in which the people of a country rule through any form of government they choose to establish. According to Pious (2009), the democracies of the city-states of classical Greece and Rome were direct democracies, in which citizens with a right of political participation could speak and vote in assemblies that resembled New England town meetings.

Blaug & John (2001) hold that the Roman stoic philosophy, which defined the human race as part of a divine principle, and the Jewish and Christian religions which emphasized the rights of the underprivileged and the equality of all before God contributed to the development of modern democratic theory.



In its modern sense, democracy came into use during the course of the nineteenth century to describe the system of representative government in which representatives are chosen by free competitive election and in which citizens are entitled to vote. This ideal was instituted through the U.S in the 1870's and then 1890's, in Britain in the 1860's and then spread to other European Countries in later years and to the developing region of the world including Africa in the second half of the twentieth century (Yusuf, 2005).

Another form, in which democracy has been conceptualized, is in terms of social democracy, industrial democracy and people's democracy. According to Yusuf (2005), social democracy is a political ideology which advocates social, economic and social policies to be implemented within a society which has democratic political institutions and practices. In this sense, social democracy is parasitic upon political democracy.

Industrial democracy is a term developed by Sydney & Beatrice Webb (1897) cited in Yusuf (2005) which imply a form of workers control within industrial plants. That is the taking over of managerial decision by workers. People's democracy applies to the form existing in the defunct communist bloc of Soviet Union, the concept was used to describe the form of political system in the communist state which involves the control of government by the proletariat (Yusuf, 2005). The latter type of democracy falls under the Marxist model which seems to extend equality of all citizens from the political to the social and economic spheres of life (Anifowose & Enemu, 1999).

According to Alumona (2010), the term democratization, attracted attention in political science literature in the 1990's when the democracy movement was sweeping across the world. This movement brought about changes in the governmental systems in countries in eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and Africa, where before the movement, these countries were characterized with one-party, military and communist rule.

Nwabueze (1993), conceives democratization as not just concerned with the form of government known as democracy nor being synonymous with multi-partyism, but as a "process of experimentation" during which certain basic conditions have to be put in place. According to Nwabueze (1993), the process of democratization must specifically involve the following twelve things found in table 1:

Table 1: Process of Democratization Guidelines

1	Multi-partyism under a democratic constitution have the force of a supreme, overriding, law;
2	A complete change of guards and the exclusion of certain other categories of persons from participation in democratic politics and government;
3	A genuine and meaningful popular participation in politics and government;
4	A virile civil society;
5	A democratic society;
6	A free society;
7	A just society;
8	Equal treatment of all citizens by the state;
9	The rule of law;
10	An ordered stable society;
11	A society infused with the spirit of liberty, democracy and justice; and;
12	An independent, self-reliant, prosperous market economy.

Source: *Nwabueze (1993)*

In fact, radical minds like Engels conceded that democracies were the “highest form of the state”(Haralambos & Holborn 2004). It is in this light, that this paper x-rays the relationship between democracy and progression of the Nigerian industrial relations system.

Objectives

This paper specifically aims to achieve the following;

1. To review the development of a peculiar industrial relations system in Nigeria
2. To examine the interface between democratization of the larger social system and the industrial relations system in Nigeria

Democracy and Industrial Relations

From the earliest known times, man has always been involved in one form of work or the other. Early sociologists, including Marx, Weber among wrote extensively on the importance of



work. Thus, the subject of work and the relations among those engaged in it are as old as human civilization (Kaufman, 2004). With the industrial revolution propelling the expansion of capitalism, it was not long before the traditional form of work relations receded.

Onyeonoru (2005), held that the over throw of the feudal system meant a change from work relations based on the Lord and Serf to another that was hinged on wage labour which entails, work relations between an employer and employee. This new type of work relationship that has continued to dominate modern society presupposes the existence of a contractual relationship hitherto unknown in the world of work between an employer and employee.

According to Fajana (2006), industrial relations deals with everything that affects the relationship between workers and employers perhaps from the time the employee joins the work organization until he leaves his job. Fajana (2006) holds that in every industrial and industrializing country there are three main industrial relations actors or parties. The first is employers (and managers), the second labour (and trade unions) and the third is the state and its various agencies. According to Yusuf (2005) the interactions between these three actors are the concern of industrial relations.

Dunlop (1958) conceived the system of industrial relations as comprised of actors summarized thus;

- ❖ A hierarchy of managers and their representatives or representatives of organizations;
- ❖ A hierarchy of workers (non-managers) and their spokesmen i.e. workers, organizations and representatives;
- ❖ Specialized government agencies that may include specialized private agencies created by the first two factors,

Industrial relations is therefore, the regulation of employment relations in any employment situation by the employer (management or their organizations) and the third party, private or/and government acting as an umpire or a controller, the purpose of which is joint decision making for establishing job rules and job values and for the co-ordination of manpower resources for the attainment of the organizational objectives of the enterprise and the trade union as well as the state (Yusuf, 2005).

Put differently, the set of interrelationship between the actors describe what industrial relations is all about, so long as the object of interaction is anything in the interest of the parties. The interaction may involve only two of the actors or may involve their collectivity (if any). All these are industrial relations matters so long as the issues center on labour matters (Fajana,



2006). However, it must be understood that industrial relations vary across plant, enterprise, industry, regional and national boundaries (Yusuf, 2005).

The Systems Explanatory Model for Industrial Relations

The term “system” according to Otobo (2000), had begun to find its way into industrial relations literature by the early 1950’s, two good examples being Allan Flanders and Hugh Clegg’s “The System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain”(1954) and Summer H. Slichter’s (1955) article titled “The American System of Industrial Relations” (cited in Otobo, 2000).

Dunlop (1958), the famous American labour economist, drew heavily from the works of American sociologists Talcott Parsons and Nello J. Smelser. Before developing his explanatory model for industrial relations, he started by asking several questions among which was, the bold question – Are there characteristics common to all industrial relations systems? Below, is a summary of the general propositions as developed by Dunlop;

- An industrial-relations system is to be viewed as an analytical sub-system of an industrial society.
- An industrial-relations system is not a subsidiary part of an economic system but is rather a separate and distinctive sub-system of the society.
- Just as there are relationships and boundary lines between a society and an economy, so also are there between a society and an industrial relations system.
- Neither an economic system nor an industrial relations system is designed simply to describe in factual terms, the real world of time and space.

Dunlop then described the structure of an industrial relations system thus:

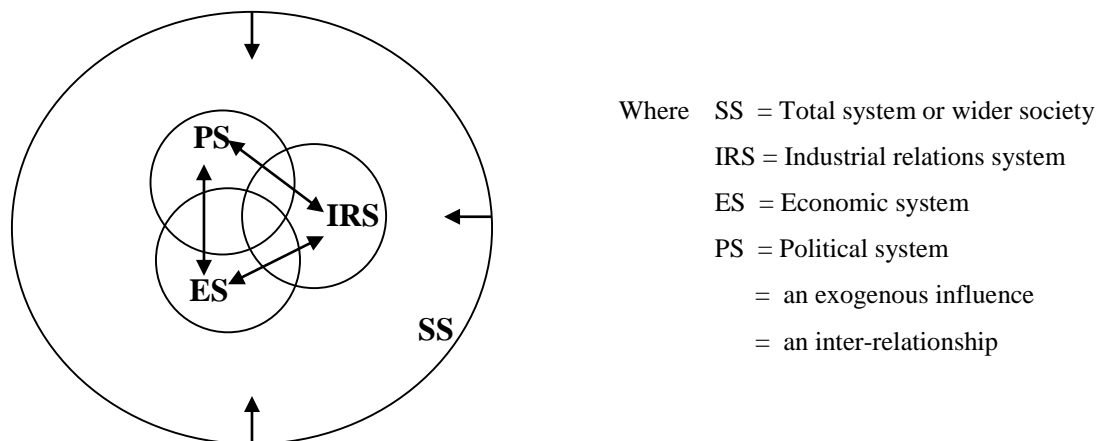
An industrial relations system at any one time in its development is regarded as comprised of certain actors, certain contexts and ideology which bind the industrial relations system together and a body of rules created to govern actors at the work place and work community (Dunlop, 1958)

Yusuf (2005), stresses that industrial relations may vary according to external factors (labour force, technology etc.) which determine for instance its structure. Variation may result from the method adopted by the system. For instance, an industrial relations system based on collective bargaining would be different from that based on overriding state action or one which is based on tripartite decision making in which the three parties participate as equal partners.

The political environment which gives rise to the type of law governing the industrial relations system and the process of management pervading the situation is indeed a dominant factor as rightly observed by Dunlop (1958), where he says that “specialized government agencies as actors may have functions in some industrial relations system so broad and decisive to override the hierarchies of managers and workers on almost all matters”.

Blain & Gennard (1970), adopted Dunlop’s assertion that the industrial relations system is at the same logical place as the economic system rather than being a sub-part of it and this they expressed in the form of a diagram thus;

Figure 1: Analytical Model Showing the Relationship of the Industrial Relations System to the Social System.



Source: Blain & Gennard (1970)

Progression of the Industrial Relations System in Nigeria

The end of the First World War according to Yusuf (2005), created the initial conditions that gave the impetus for developing a labour policy. He points out that two events – the establishment of International Labour Organization (ILO) and the labour condition after the war, provided reasons for the adoption of a definite labour policy. This policy was meant to ensure efficient utilization of labour against the backdrop of international scrutiny of labour standards. Between the first and second world wars, the colonial administration introduced actions towards concrete labour policy in their colonies. This led to the granting of legal rights to unions in the colonies including Nigeria.

According Fajana (2006), the introduction of wage employment in the colonial public services, which became predominant during the laying of the railway track from Lagos to the



hinterland, heralded the growth of industrial relations in Nigeria. He identified the following factors as responsible for the evolution of industrial relations in Nigeria.

1. The growth of large organizations;
2. The activities of the state;
3. The role of the employers and their strategies in managing people at work;
4. The reactions of the workers and their organizations to the strategies and actions deployed by the state and employers; and
5. The counter – strategies of employers and workers and employers

The Interface between Democratization and Industrial Relations in Nigeria

Scholars in the field of industrial relations have pertinently acknowledged the state as the third force in the industrial relations system. As a distinct industrial class emerged in society, the state's role shifted to legal regulation of hours and conditions of work. Subsequently, as government assumed overall responsibility for the economy, the role of the state had expanded to include co-ordination of the activities of employers, employees, political parties etc. (Fajana, 2006). It goes without saying, that there is a connection between political environment and industrial relations. According to Yusuf (2005), the content of democracy has a way of shaping the industrial relations system of a society. Economically, democracy has been conceptualized as a system in which all aspects of economic activities production, organization and distribution are democratized (economic democracy).

Flanders (1972); Kerr (1973); Damachi (1983); cited in Yusuf (2005) have also demonstrated that an industrial relations system is healthier in a favourable political climate. For instance, in Britain, industrialization came at a time when the philosophy of *laissez-faire* was the underlying principle guiding all economic activities. As a result, this influenced industrial relations in the free enterprise system. Again, because of the long history of industrialization in Britain as well as other developed countries of the world, a large proportion of the citizenry constitutes the wage labour force. This factor becomes very relevant in the consideration of industrial relations practice especially in developing countries such as Nigeria when it is realized that in contrast to the situation described above, the political culture is devoid of a definite philosophy, while only a very minimal proportion of the total population constitutes the labour force.

Another important issue in the consideration of the interconnection between democracy and industrial relations practice is the involvement of the citizenry in the democratic process,



in agreement with Jega & Wakili (2005) who conceptualize democracy as allowing for a broad participation of the people in choosing their leaders – who now, on their behalf, direct the affairs of the people. In other words, the involvement of the greater majority of the people in the political process at the national level, make agitation and eventual realization of industrial democracy possible. According to Yusuf (2005) in the Nigerian case, because the country has largely experienced military rule (a cumulative of 28 years) there is a weak development of democratic culture in the country. Naturally, this factor has influenced the industrial relations practice in the country, which is undoubtedly, in line with the classical functionalist-sociology perspective on the inter-relatedness and interdependency of the various social institutions in society. Clearly, non-civilian (un-democratic) rule has had its consequences on the Nigerian industrial relations system (Fayoshin, 2007).

Nigerian Industrial Relations in the Years of Military Rule

The Nigerian political landscape has been characterized by a series of military interventions since 1966. Nigeria gained independence from her colonial leaders on 1st October 1960 and became a republic in 1963. However, by January 15, 1966 the country witnessed her first military coup, and the Nigerian populace had their first taste of the totalitarian nature of the military regime. From that point thereof, the nation's political environment would be characterized by suppression, repression and suspension of constitutional rule, arbitrariness and unilateralism.

According to Yusuf (2005), over the years, the first casualty of military coup is the trade union. As a prominent pressure group in the society, the trade union has always been at the receiving end of harsh military policies. As the largest employer of labour, government involvement in industrial relations in Nigeria is ubiquitous. Yusuf (2005) outlines the following manifestations of such military involvement.

- (i) **Restrictions and Outright Ban of Trade Union activities:** More than any other time, trade unions suffer from harsh and repressive government policies during military rule. Along with other pressure groups in the society, trade unions are prevented from holding rallies, embarking on strike, picketing members during strike and other legitimate activities of trade unionism. For instance, during the military regimes of General Ibrahim Babangida and Late General Sani Abacha; the government clamped down heavily on prominent trade unions in the country particularly those who

embarked on strike to press for the actualization of the annulled June 12 presidential election. These include PENGASSAN, NUPENG, ASUU, and NBA (Olorode 1997; Citedin Yusuf 2005).

- (ii) **Denial of Right of Unionism:** This development is most obvious during military rule. Men and Women working in several government parastatals like the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and paramilitary organizations like customs and immigration services are prevented from forming or belonging to a trade union.
- (iii) **Arbitrariness of Labour – Management Issues:** As an important actor in Nigeria’s industrial relations system; military government often engaged in arbitrariness in dealing with labour-management issues. For instance, in 1984 the military administration of General Muhammadu Buhari sacked a number of striking medical doctors in the public service. Other instances include lay-off of workers without resort to due process (Howard 1991, cited in Yusuf 2005).
- (iv) **Erosion of the Rule of Law:** Industrial relations thrive better in a democratic environment where the rule of law and other ingredients of democratic values are supreme. Military rule is often characterized by flagrant violation of the tenets of the rule of law. Not only is constitutional rule suspended but also more fundamental is flagrant disobedience of court judgements and obvious transgression of justice (Howard 1991; Scheider, 1992 cited in Yusuf 2005).
- (v) **Promulgation of Draconian Labour Legislations:** The military era in Nigeria witnessed the enactment of some draconian laws which have negative impacts on the Nigerian industrial relations system. For instance, as a way of discouraging workers to embark on strike, the “No work, no pay” clause was introduced into the Trade Dispute Act. This law stipulates that employees stand to forfeit their pay for the period they are on strike. In 1984, the Buhari – Idiagbon regime promulgated Decrees 16 and 17 which prevented workers from seeking legal redress against retrenchment and also included automatic payment of all benefits after retrenchment. Aside from setting up military tribunals to try cases that were essentially civilian in nature. Democratic organizations like NANS, NBA, NMA were also banned. In 1987 during the Babangida regime, ASSU was banned as were other prominent trade unions (Yusuf, 2005).

Industrial Relations under Civil Rule: The Aftermaths



Industrial relations during the immediate post-military era can be said to have been characterized by series of crises, which in the main, have inundated the body polity dramatically revealing the fragility of the state and the contradictions inherent in the political democratization that left foreign economic domination yet unaltered (Oyelere & Owoyemi, 2011). However, the labour movement in Nigeria today could certainly be said to be more organized than what obtained in the 1960s and 1970s (Adewumi, 2007). According to Yusuf (2005), because the country had a longer period of military dictatorship than civil rule, the impact of the military is more pronounced. He also stressed that the country tends to be dominated by “military culture” even during civilian regime and he went ahead to outline several implications to this trend;

- First, democratic governments like the military are known to engage in harassment, intimidation and arrest of labour leaders when they are on strike. Physical molestation and arrest of labour leaders and their followers during Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) led nationwide strikes in recent years, is a case in point.
- Secondly, successive civilian governments in Nigeria have engaged in interference with trade union organizations in the country, by embarking on a decentralization policy meant to weaken the existing central labour union. The Labour bill which was passed by the National Assembly in 2005 is an example.
- Thirdly, in the current political dispensation, the dominance of retired military officers is obvious and profound. The effect on the industrial relations system is the intolerance of government towards other principal actors, especially workers and their unions (Yusuf, 2005).

However, whatever be the shortcomings of the nation’s nascent democracy as evidenced in the industrial relations system and other spheres of national life, it must be stressed that democratic rule (civilian rule) provides a healthier environment for industrial relations. The signing into law of the New Minimum Wage bill 2011, and the passage of the bill recognizing the National Industrial Court as a superior court of the land among other positive developments are pointer to the fact that the industrial relations system in Nigeria is slowly but gradually taking its proper form in the scheme of things locally and internationally. Again, positive transformations in the electioneering process in Nigeria in recent years, has indeed added more impetus to the



“democratization drive”. According to Yusuf (2005), no matter what similarities may be observed in the attitudes of both military and civilian governments towards industrial relations. It must be emphasized that not only does the rule of law thrive in a democracy, but also, that democratic rule serves to limit arbitrary actions on the part of management, employer or government.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has attempted to review the difficult process of enthroning democracy in Nigeria in view of the prolonged years of military rule. The main thrust being the effect of this process on the growth of the Nigerian industrial relations system over the years. As a sub-system of a larger system, the Nigerian industrial relations system has not been spared of the consequences of the long years of military dictatorship. Thus, the Nigerian industrial relations system has evolved over the years to assume its present form and as the nation steadily makes headway into its eighteenth year of uninterrupted democratic governance, the internalization and adoption of core democratic values, processes and structures as a sure way of ensuring a vibrant industrial relations system in Nigeria becomes even more imperative in agreement with Clark (1996), where he says that “the institution and maintenance of democracy depends largely on favourable attitudes towards democracy by elite and ordinary citizens. If people believe that democracy will work and are committed to democratic forms, then no matter what the material or social circumstances, democracy can work”. This paper therefore finds it indispensable to make the following recommendations;

- The democratization process must be projected to the status of a national priority to ensure that the democratic culture becomes deeply entrenched in every sphere of national life.
- The legislature must revisit existing labour laws and review them where necessary to reflect contemporary international labour laws, conventions and best practices.
- To boost productivity across the public and private sectors, deliberate policies must be developed and implemented at the level of government and at the organizational level, to promote industrial democracy and deepen democratization of work relations between employer and employee.



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