

Liberal Democratic Perspective Of The Nigerian State

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Abstract

Since it emergence into the political dictionary centuries ago; democracy has been frequently used as a “loose” concept. It has overtime the years developed off-shoots and branches, part of which is liberal-democracy. This study was undertaken to examine the practice of liberal-democracy of the Nigerian State. The study relied on secondary source of data collection. From the findings of this paper, liberal-democracy in the Nigerian state is characterized by problems of corruption, election rigging, ill-preparedness among others, which have hampered the practice. Furthermore, the study pinpoints how these “democratic evils” have been hindering the practice of free-flow democracy. Finally, the study outlines some suggestions to ensure a democracy capable of guaranteeing maximum practice of freedom in the Nigerian state.

Key words; democracy, Liberal-democracy, State

Introduction

The word democracy originated in Greek around the fifth century E.C. Demos referred to the common people, the masses, kratos meant ‘power’. It is a type of governance in which all citizens exercise power and civic responsibility, directly or through their freely elected representativeness. Thus, a true democracy, i.e. a system in which all citizens meet periodically to elect state officials and personally enact laws, has been extremely rare.

There are different kinds of democracy. Even dictatorial regimes claim some indicators of “democracy”. But the concern of this paper is liberal democracy. It is a democracy that protects the freedom and rights of its citizens which are embedded in a constitutional framework and that guarantee a much broader spectrum of social and economic rights. Today countries all over the world including Nigeria are claiming to be practicing this form of democracy.

Democracy has grown in leaps and bound to become the most widely and popularly used concept in the world today. This has led to the emergence of different kinds of democracy in the world. While it is yet true that Nigeria is governed by democratically elected leaders at the federal and state levels, she is yet to institutionalize democracy after a century of existence as a political entity. This paper discusses/analyses some of the characteristics/features of liberal-democratic theory and it level of conformity in the Nigerian state, these include, free, fair and competitive elections, multiple distinct political parties ,separation of powers into different branches of government ,rule of law ,equal protection of human rights ,political freedom for all persons and constitutional form of government.

Systematically, this paper is sub-divided into four different parts. In addition to the introduction, the next segments of the paper examine the conceptual and theoretical extrapolations and postulations of the major concepts. Meanwhile, the final segment looks at the empirical and concrete perspectives of the liberal – democratic theory on the Nigerian variant of State and politics. The paper ends with conclusion and policy recommendations.

Conceptual And Theoretical Clarifications Democracy

Democracy may be a word familiar to most, but it is a concept still misunderstood and misused in a time when totalitarian regimes and military dictatorships alike have attempted to claim popular support by pinning democratic labels upon themselves. Democracy is a household political concept in many parts of the world today, which often reoccurs at various political participation discussions. Any government (civilian or military) now laid claim to it because it sounds as an ideal form of government. However, the controversy surrounding the employment of the concept is a clear indication that it means different things to different people and societies (Abia; 2003; 55).

In the dictionary definition, democracy "is government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system." In the phrase of Abraham Lincoln, democracy is a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." Sartori (1965; 19) conceive of democracy as "the power of the people and the rule of the people". Furthermore, Appadorai (1975:137) describes it as 'systems of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly through representatives periodically elected by them'. Schumpeter (1967:153) reduces the concept to the procedural, when he defines the democratic method as the 'institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals require the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'. And from the Marxist point of view, as represented in the work of Marx and Engels (1981). The communist Manifesto, democracy connect the dictatorship of the proletariat", that is to say, majority rule of the common people, the plebians.

Democracy is "governance by leaders whose authority is based on a limited mandate from a universal electorate that selects among genuine alternatives and has some rights to political participation and opposition." (Danziger 1998, 159)

Democracy is a political system in which different groups are legally entitled to compete for power and in which institutional power holders are elected by the people and are responsible to the people." (Vanhannen 1997, 31)

Democracy is "government by the people; that forms of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them. . . or by officers h Dictionary, 1933)

Liberal –Democratic Theory

The word "liberal" emerged from "liberalism". Hence, Liberalism is a political philosophy or worldview founded on ideas of liberty (which is especially stressed in classical liberalism) and equality (which is more evident in social liberalism). Liberals espouse a wide array of views depending on their understanding of these principles, but generally they support ideas such as free and fair elections, civil rights, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, free trade, and private property.

It is important to know that there exists different liberal-democratic theorists and virtually all can agree in their endorsement of representative democracy where representatives are chosen in accord with formal procedures combined with state protection of political and civil liberties and a private sphere free of state interference.

J.S Mill set out what is often considered the first systematic explication and defence of liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy is a political system with representative governments elected by popular majority, the rule of law enshrined to protect individuals and minorities, and a significant sector of economic, associational, and communicative activity that is largely autonomous from government control. It rests upon the principles of individual liberty, civic equality, popular sovereignty, and government by the consent of the governed. Liberal democracy's institutional characteristics and principles are mutually dependent. Popular sovereignty exercised through the periodic election of representatives, together with a representative government constrained by the

rule of law, a separation of powers, and constitutional rights, helps to secure individual liberty. Concomitantly, individual liberties, civic equality, and limited government support democratic governance. They undergird a vibrant civil society, a prerequisite for the effective exercise of popular sovereignty.

State

It is difficult to do away with the State as a concept in the study of politics. There is no single universally acceptable definition of the State. The state is the most powerful of all social institutions. It has become one of the important factors in our social life today. Different scholars have defined state differently according to their individual view point. Scholars from the two major ideological strands of Liberalism and Marxism have neither agreed on a universal definition of the concept of State. Some of the important definitions of the state are mentioned below;

Liberal theorizing on the State, as a concept, contends that the State is a political organization of human society that comprises organized attributes of contemporary institutions like the legislature, executive and judiciary, with respective roles. These are governmental institutions that make and enforce laws that are binding upon the people within a defined geographical territory. Liberal scholarship therefore sees the State as an institution for orderly progress of the society and an embodiment of justice for all, not just for a few (Bourgeois class).

Classical Marxist View of the State therefore shows that it is an institution with established apparatuses purposely and directly meant to defend and maintain a class domination and class exploitation. Thus, the control of the State apparatuses by the ruling elites is for, and in the whole interest of the bourgeoisie (Abbass, 1990; Shaapera, 2009 and Abbass, 2010)

Marx Weber gives the rather most popular definition; he defines the state as "the human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of force"

Woodrow Wilson defines "state as a group of people organized for law within a definite ternary." Burgess defines state as "a particular portion of mankind viewed as organized unity."

Bluntschil says that; "the state is a combination or association of men in the form of Government and governed, on a definite territory, united together into a moral organized masculine personality, more shortly person of definite territory."

Prof. Laski defines state as "a territorial society divided into Government and subjects claiming with its allotted physical area of supremacy over all other institutions.

J.W. Garner gives a very comprehensive definition of the state. He holds the view that the state as a concept of political science and public law, is a community of persons, more or less numerous, permanently occupying a definite portion of territory, independent, or nearly so, of external control and possessing an organized government to which the great body of inhabitants render habitual obedience." It is considered to be the best definition of the state. It can be summed up as "the state is a collection of human beings occupying a definite territory under an organized government and is subject to no outside control."

This paper adopts the elite theory as the theoretical framework for this discourse. The theory was made popular by its major proponents such as Vilfredo Pareto (1935), Gaetano Mosca (1939), Wright Mills (1956) and Geraint Parry (1969), etc. In this theory elites are observed as the few powerful people in the society who have and wield a lot of influence in the political, economic, and social realms. According to Okereke(2003),Mosca is quoted to have argued that "in all societies from societies that very meaningful developed and have barely attained the dawning of civilization down to the most advanced and powerful societies-two classes of people appear-a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class ,always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class ,is directed and controlled by the first ,in a manner that is now more or less legal ,now more or less arbitrary and violent"

The essential theme of this theory is that there is in every society a minority of the population which takes the major decision in the society. As those decisions have political implications, the elite exercise considerable political influence. Clearly, elite theory describes a government that operates in an undemocratic fashion.

Relating the elitist theory to this paper is for some facts that Nigeria is divided along segmental elite lines. However, how this decision is taking viz – a - viz the tenets of liberal democracy and its practice in Nigeria is the major concern of the paper.

The various principles of liberal-democratic theory highlighted above would be carefully x-rayed in the light of the Nigerian state. The principles include; government by the consent of the governed, individual liberty, civic equality, and more importantly, private sphere free of state intervention.

Government By The Consent Of The Governed

This principle is a basic fundamental pillar of the concept of democracy. It can also be termed as representative government which stems from the conduct of free and fair elections competitive elections. Government by consent can only be achieved through the conduct of elections. Elections play important part of representative democracy. Individuals and groups have to compete in an open contest for the peoples votes. When this is done fairly and creditably, the wishes of the people would easily prevail.

Nigeria since her independence as a political entity has experienced several types/forms of government; that is, government by the consent of the governed and the government without the consent of the governed, i.e civilian and military government and regimes. All the military regimes that we have had in Nigeria have all come into power without the propel approval from the governed/electorates. Hence, it has failed/fall-short of this principle of liberal-democracy. In total, Nigeria experienced her first military intervention in politics on January 15, 1966 and since then there has been four other successful coups, 2 abortive coups, one attempted coup and 3 alleged coups all by different military government at different times in history.

However, the government by the consent of the governed which must come from the conduct of a free,fair and competitive elections, as also been slightly dysfunctional due to the fact that elections conducted in Nigeria have to a large extent been far from been free,fair and competitive. Elections serve as one of the major instrument for selecting political officeholders. It serves as means of ensuring accountability and mobilization of the citizens for political participation. Yet, elections in Nigeria have always been characterized by malpractices such as: election rigging, snatching and stuffing of ballot boxes, political intimidation and assassination prior to during and after elections.

Elections are critical aspects of democratic framework for governing modern political societies. They serve as instruments of political choice, mobilization and accountability. In the context of liberal democracy in the world, elections are to facilitate the smooth transition from one civilian administration to the other and help in legitimizing sitting governments.

Since her return top civil rule in1999, the Nigerian experience with general elections has shown that the political elite have not truly come to terms with the referents of elections for democratic sustenance. More often than not, the elite has failed to play by the rules of competitive electoral politics has failed to play by the rules of competitive electoral politics which prioritizes politics of tolerance, conflict and consensus, bargaining and compromise. They see elections as warfare, characterized by gangstreism and political disorder. Political parties which organize for elections are also, like armband of men and women going to war, where there must be victors and the vanquished. Elections in Nigeria have become warfare where it is a sin to lose.

Election is central to the effective functioning of modern representative democracy. Since direct democracy has become almost impossible to practice on account of the large population in every modern political society, electing or selecting political leader through periodic elections has become the norm. This particularly so under liberal-democracy. Under liberal-democracy, elections play wider roles such as instruments of accountability, mobilization of the people, promotion of legitimacy.

All these principles/features listed above have been noticeably absent in Nigeria, thereby making void the feature of government by the consent of the governed through the conduct of elections under the general umbrella of liberal-democratic theory. Looking at all the present happenings that are currently beclouding the 2015 general elections, it seems evidently clear that the 2015 general elections would actually have all the trappings of a “liberal-undemocratic” theory that previously surfaced during the 2003, 2007 and 2011 elections in Nigeria.

Individual Liberty

One of the holding principle/pillars of both liberalism and liberal-democratic theory is liberty, which is encapsulated in sub-principle such as; civil rights, freedom of press, freedom of religion, freedom of movement, speech, association, etc, i.e Fundamental Human Rights. All these are needed in a society where the principle of democracy is widely pronounced and held in high esteem.

Going by the fact that Nigeria as experienced both sides of the coin of governance, i.e, military and civilian rule. It is imperative to note that there exist different levels of individual liberty. Military regimes in the country are normally known for the suspension of constitution and these constitutions contain the fundamental Human Rights in which the principle of liberty is embedded. This made the principle of individual liberty to be totally absent in Nigeria during this period.

Furthermore, the promulgation of decree no 2 of 1975 also during the military regime is an instance whereby the principle of individual liberty was totally absent. The promulgation of the decree no 2 (1975) granted the state the full rights to arrest detain and prosecute anybody who opposed it policies and government, without giving such an individual the opportunity to stand for trial and appeal before the court of law.

In partial contrast, democratic dispensations in Nigeria have not fared any better. Though, civilian/democratic regimes are not known for suspension of constitution, hence the FHRs remain intact. Yet, notwithstanding the principle of liberty still remains seriously threatened. Different democratic regimes have limited the liberties of citizens of the country in various ways; the freedom of press which is part of the principle of individual liberty has been greatly inhibited and constrained. The Nigerian media only broadcast news items which the government gives it permission to do. Also, despite the promulgation of the freedom of Information bill in 2007, information still has been limited and not free and available to the Nigerian public for scrutiny. Cases of pressmen been suspended and arrested for performing their rightful duties and obligations have also been the order of the day in Nigeria.

All these and many other more does not speak well of a country that is widely acclaimed to be practicing liberal-democratic theory.

Civic Equality

According to J.S Mills, one of the leading advocates of liberal-democracy ‘the pure idea of democracy’ is “government of the whole people by the whole people, equally represented”, which requires proportional representation so a minority is not denied government representatives, hence he was justly classified as an egalitarian. He insisted not only on political equality, but also social and economic equality. Hence, it can be pointed out here that Mills’ principle of civic equality was based on proportional representation, so as to avoid the denial of minority government representatives.

Nigeria is a country of extraordinary diversity and extraordinary complexities, these complexities are a reflection of the avalanche of ethnic groups co-habiting the territory and intricacies of interaction among them. Hence, there are over 450 ethnic groups in the country. The avalanche of the ethnicities that are present in the country had made the issue of equality and proportional representation a very difficult task to achieve, despite every attempt by the federal government to achieve a considerable amount of civic equality in every sector of

the country. Different measures have been adopted by the federal government of Nigeria to ensure the required level of equality and proportional representation, some of these include; federal character principle and resource allocation, amongst others.

The federal character principle was a policy that was entrenched in the 1979 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria to cater for the diversity in the country. The principle state thus “the composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional. Groups in that government or any of its agencies” according to the designators of this principle, it is described as a distinctive desire to give every citizen a sense of belonging to the nation notwithstanding the diversity and multiplicities of ethnicities present in the country. Nigeria has over the years experienced various inter-ethnic rivalry between groups, hence, there was the need and importance to make a provision that would prevent against the domination of the government and its various agencies by a single ethnic group, that is, ensure equality on all levels. However, a twist to the attempt to ensure equality in the country through the entrenchment of this principle has been met by different forms of opposition either directly or indirectly. Some of the critics of this principle have argued that the principle aims at disregarding the major principle of merit in the various appointments into the civil service, military. Police force etc therefore they believed that instead of the principle promoting the idea of equality which it was created for, it otherwise promotes inequality in the country.

Private Sphere Free Of State Interference

This is a very crucial principle of liberal-democracy theory. It emphasizes the significant sector of economic, associational, and communicative activity that is largely autonomous from government control, that is, it can also be termed or referred to as a system of capitalism. The Nigerian state is pursuing the economic policies aimed at formation of the market environment, private business, and improvement of investment climate in the state. Three problematic factors have been identified for doing business in Nigeria; access to financing, inadequate supply of infrastructure and corruption, infrastructure that constrains development. Hence, it can be agreed that what actually operates in Nigeria is pseudo-capitalism, which means capitalism that pretends to be what it is really not. Notwithstanding, the government has taken some steps in attempt to be less involved in the economic and other related affairs of the state, therefore undertaking different policies meant to achieve this, some of which include, privatization and deregulation of various sectors of the economy.

The federal government of Nigeria through its privatization policies has been able to less interfering in the power sector of the country. The federal government was able to successfully privatize the power sector of the country, that is, the Power Holding Company of Nigeria was successfully handed over to foreign private investors to take over its management and ownership. However, this is not without having some elements of government stake in the investment. It was reported that some of these foreign companies that hold ownership of this business acted as frontrunners for government politicians who are actually the real owners of this business. Therefore, the earlier claim of Nigeria operating a pseudo-capitalist economy is rightly justified. State has continued to inherit public policies for national development from the International Capitalist system and thus continues to deny its citizens the right to basic amenities of life for socio-economic development.

Liberal-democracy in Nigeria is anti- people, anti-intellectual and anti-development. It has zero tolerances for criticism. Additionally, there is de-industrialization and de democratization. Liberal democracy in Nigeria has witnessed and still witnessing the cult of mediocrity. Our leaders, from Federal to the Local levels have failed to deliver the dividends of democratic governance to the Nigerians because they themselves do not possess the credentials of good leaders, nor do they seem to have due governance. A good number of them are ill – prepared or un-prepared for the challenges thrust on them by the electorate. Nigeria was and is still ruled by political

sycophantic lieutenants who are only concerned about their pockets alone. Such mediocre leaders lack the spiritual and political stamina to confront the socio-political upheavals that assail their people. Mediocre leaders also thrive on cheap popularity as a means of hiding their lack of definable ideology or agenda. They do not bear criticisms with equality; rather, they resort to witch-hunting and mudslinging to mask their ineptitude. The result of hoisting a mediocre leader in power is nothing but inefficiency, a decline in national productivity and under-development. It can also lead to social unrests (Machungo: 2001 ;).

Conclusion

The focus of the paper is to assess the practice of liberal democracy Vis – a Vis, its tenets under the Nigerian state. To do this, the paper is structured into 4 parts with introduction as part 1. Part 2 is conceptual and theoretical clarifications. Part 3 is tenets of liberal-democratic theory Vis-a Vis its practice in Nigeria. Part 4 is conclusion and recommendations. The paper concludes that; liberal democracy in the Nigeria state is characterized by problems of corruption, thieving, election rigging, ill – preparedness, destruction of necessary infrastructures that are needed for development, etc

Recommendations

Nigeria needs a democracy capable of guaranteeing maximum practice of freedom at its peak by the citizens without any fear of oppression, not only that, but also addressing the overwhelming material poverty of the people.

We need the type of democracy which promotes the equality of all the socio-linguistic groups irrespective of their sizes. Democracy must be viewed as a vital element of the humanitarian process. In this case, the way in which we should account to each other to express our human needs and thus achieve the full realization of the human task in the interest of our liberal democracy and the people is crucial.

We also need a democracy that ensures the practice of true capitalism; where the private sphere is free from state interference, and not a pseudo-capitalist kind of system that is prevalent and common.

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