DEMOCRACY, ELECTION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA: 1999-2011

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Abstract

Democracy encourages the citizens to take part in the political process and at different levels through different means. This paper examines the concept of democracy, elections and political participation in Nigeria since the return of democracy in Nigeria 1999 to 2011. The framework of analysis adopted is Group Theory. The Theory talks about the role of the Group in the political process. After a critical analysis of democracy, elections and political participation in Nigeria since 1999 to 2011, it was discovered that participation was at steady decline as result of so many abnormalities inherent in our democratic process. The paper ends with conclusions, findings and recommendations. Some of the recommendations include among others strengthening the political institutions to serve as agent of change and serious punishment for electoral offenders.

Introduction:

Democracy has been in use in the tradition of western political thought since ancient times. It is derived from the Greek root “demos” which means the people “kratos” stands for “rule or government”. Thus literary democracy as a form of government has become very popular among nations of modern world that it has become a household name. Almost all countries of the world look forward to electing their members to occupy one office or the other and the citizens are encouraged to take part either stand for election (contesting) or voting for those that are contesting. Democracy encourages the people to take part in electing those that occupy various offices in the country. Election affords the people the opportunity to express themselves by electing their representatives. Citizens can participate in many ways, some stand for elections, others vote for those that are contesting while others resort to riots and demonstrations.

Methodology:

This study anchored on the pluralist theory of Democracy. The pluralist theories of democracy fall into two categories: (a) the elitist theories which regard the plurality of elites as the foundation of modern liberal democracy, and (b) the group theories which interpret democracy as a process of bargaining among relatively autonomous groups. The existence and functioning of these groups in a democracy lends a pluralistic character to the polity. A.F. Bentley (1908) and Truman, D (1951) interpreted democracy as a political game played by variety of groups. According to this interpretation, the government is focal point for public pressure and its task is to make policies which reflect the highest common group demand. Thus democratic society is

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seen as a pluralist, differentiated society where the management of public affairs is shared by
number of groups having different values, sources and methods of influence. Robert Dahl
(1956), developed a model of the democratic process which he described as polyarchy. This
corresponds to group basis of politics developed by other group theorists, Bentley and Truman
also known as pluralism or group theory. The term is used in sociological sense, that is to
describe the pluralistic nature of democratic society. The group theory of democracy introduces
pluralism for a scientific explanation of the political process. The main thrusts of group theory
are as follows: The policy making process however centralized it may appear in form, is in
reality, a highly decentralized process of bargaining among relatively will of the elite or the
chosen few as the elitist theories of democracy holds. On the contrary, it is an outcome of
interaction of all groups who make claims upon or express interest in a particular issue. The
extent to which different groups will get their way, is a function of the strength of the groups and
intensity of their participation. This therefore explains the rationale for the adoption of the theory
as explanatory framework. This theory becomes much more relevant when we consider the fact
that election is the major component of democracy. For the citizens to benefit from the political
process they have to take part in the democratic process in one way or the other through
participatory election. It is observed that different groups have lost hope in the political process
in Nigeria. This has equally affected the level of participation and voters turn out during
elections.

**Democracy: Conceptual Analysis.**

In the views of Bernard C, (1998) “democracy” is perhaps the most promiscuous word in the
word of public affairs”. A term that can mean anything to anyone is in danger of meaning
nothing at all he concludes. Perhaps a more helpful starting point from which to consider the
meaning of democracy is Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, delivered in 1864.

At the height of the American civil war Lincoln extolled the virtues of what he called
“government of the people, by the people and for the people”. By this, it becomes very clear that
democracy links government to the people. Dicey in his work, laws and opinion in England
(1905), treated democracy as a form of government under which majority opinion determines
legislation. According to him, “it would be unwise in a democracy to enforce laws not approved
by the people”. Bryce, (1921) sees democracy as a form of government in which the people rule
by expressing their sovereign will through the votes. The test of government being the welfare of
the people. Seely (1995) describes democracy as a form of government in which everybody has a
share.

Democracy according to Appadorai (2004) may be described as a system of government under
which the people exercise the governing power directly or through representative periodically
elected by themselves. This means that a state – Nigeria may be termed a democracy if it
provides institutions for the expression of supremacy of the popular will on basic questions of
social direction and policy. Democracy can therefore be seen as a system of government in which
the citizens directly or indirectly take part in deciding who should hold one office or the
other at a regular interval.

**Essential Principles of Democracy.**

Democracy today is distinguished from other forms of political system by certain principles and
characteristics, that is, its procedures and institutional arrangements. Principles of democracy include:-

i. **Government by Consent:**- Democracy is government of the people. Rational consent
can be obtained by persuasion for which an atmosphere of free discussion is essential. In view of
the technical nature large volume and sometimes the urgency of governmental policies and decisions, it is not always possible to consult the people on every detail of every issue. The people can participate in decision making and discussions through two major levels:

a. Among the representative of the people in the legislature (Legislative Assemblies) where every member is given the opportunity to contribute irrespective of party leaning.

b. At the public level (public hearing) where there will be direct communication between leadership and the people, mass media (Newspapers, Televisions, Radio etc) also serve as effective means of communication between the leadership and the people. However, in Nigeria the voice of the opposition is not usually heard because of the fact that the leadership is always apprehensive about opposition and therefore not ready to face criticism no matter how constructive.

ii. Public Accountability

Liberal Democracy is based on the consent of the people, this is why John Locke (1704) describes government as a “trustee” of the power vested it by the people, for the protection of their natural right to life, liberty and property, however cautions that the people should not trust the government fully. He therefore advocates that the people should be vigilant constantly and keep its watch on the government. Bentham J. (1832) believes that democracy is a political apparatus that would ensure the accountability of the governors to the governed. For Bentham (1832) the governors’ who are endowed with power may tend to abuse it, as it is very common in Nigeria and may other developing democracies hence in order to prevent abuse of their power, governors should be directly accountable to the electorate who will frequently check whether their objectives have been reasonably met. It is the views of these philosophers that government and governors should be able to give account of their stewardship to the people since the sovereignty belong to the people. Nigerians should wake up to their civil responsibility by demanding public accountability from their leaders.

Majority Rule:-

In modern representative democracies, decisions are taken in several bodies- legislatures, committees, cabinets and executives or regulative bodies. Majority rule means that in all decision – making bodies from the electorate to the last committees, the issues are to be resolved through voting. Political equality is secured through the principle of “one man one vote” which implies that there will be no privilege sections claiming special weightage nor any under privileged sections whose voice is ignored. No discrimination is allowed an the grounds of religions, race castle, sex, place of birth, ownership of property and even educational qualifications. Any restriction of suffrage should based on sound reason, that is where the ballot cannot be used in rational and responsible manner. Such as in the case of convicted criminals, mental patients and persons below a legally fixed age. The principle of majority rule relies on the wisdom of majority. Minority opinion has the option to enlist the support of larger numbers by persuasions in an atmosphere of free discussions. The principle of majority rule by no means implies the suppression of the minorities. However in Nigeria, the principle of “one man one vote” does not hold much water as candidates’ are imposed on the masses by those in various political offices.

Constitutional Government:

Constitutional government means a “government by laws” other than by men. Democracy requires an infinitely complex machinery of processes, procedures and institutions to translate the majority will into action. It makes enormous demands on this time, goodwill and integrity of its citizens and public servant. Once the prescribed procedure is set aside even for a legitimate
purpose, it can set precedent that may be followed for pursuing illegitimate purposes and the flood gates of corruption might be thrown open. This is the bane of democracy in developing country like Nigeria as the democratic institutions in the country are also weak thus giving rise to all manner of corruption and violation of the constitution. It is, therefore, essential to have a well established tradition of law and constitution for the stability of a democratic government.

**Conditions for the success of Democracy.**

The advocate of liberal democracy recognize certain institutions and procedures as essential characteristics of democracy. The presence or absence of these conditions will determine if a system is democratic or not. These conditions are:

1. **Sound System of Education:**- Where the large proportion of the citizens are illiterate as is the case in Nigeria and other developing countries, it becomes difficult to make democracy successful because many qualities are needed to make democracy a success. The citizens can acquire these qualities only through literacy. The people should have a sense of understanding political problems. They should possess such qualities as sacrifices, selfless service of the country, discipline, fraternity etc. Education should be free and compulsory at certain levels to enable both rich and poor to have equal opportunities for development. The citizens should strive for mental and physical development through education as ideal citizens are prepared through education.

2. **Enlightened Citizenship:**- People should have the knowledge of their rights and duties to make democracy a success. Eternal vigilance which is the pride of liberty, it equally follows that citizens should become conscious of their rights and duties.

3. **Freedom:** Democracy guarantee the citizens the freedom of expression, freedom of religion and freedom of association. In Nigeria, chapter iv of 1999 constitution as amended(2010) captions it “fundamental right”. There is also the freedom of information bill which enables Nigerians to access information regarding the workings of the government and give suggestions when and where necessary.

4. **Equality:** Democracy does not recognize class distinctions. It is based on social, economic and political equality. In democracy all are equal before the law and there is no discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, religion, sex and economic status. Economic equality does not mean that everybody should be given equal emoluments, it means equality of opportunity and fair and open field for all. This kind of equality ensures social justice, which is the very life breath of a democracy. However, the inclusion of immunity clause in the 1999 Nigerian constitution places some people above the law.

5. **High Moral Standard:**- The success of democracy also depends upon the high moral standard of the people as well as of the government. Where there is dishonesty, black–marketing, hoardings and smuggling and where the ministers and public servants are corrupt, the question of success of democracy does not arise. The people should have the spirit of patriotism, discipline, self control, honesty in payment of taxes and willing to obey the laws of the land. This is not the case in Nigeria as often times those in power and those outside the corridors of power display dishonesty, indiscipline and invasion of taxes. Only the civil servant appear to be honest in payment of taxes as this is deducted from their salary on monthly basis. There is therefore lack of high moral standard among many public office holders in Nigeria.

**Social and Economic Security:**- This has to do with the provision of employment opportunity for the citizens and payment of living wages to the people. It is the responsibility of the government to ensure adequate and suitable employment to the people, the reduction of poverty and inequality amongst the people. It is also the duty of the government to ensure that the people
meet the basic needs of shelter, clothing and food. Besides, social security is also essential. The government fixes the hours of work, salary, bonus and allowances of all kinds and compensation in case of accident. The social security also covers old age, pension illness etc. However, in Nigeria, both serving and retired workers have never had it so good as often salaries are paid in arrears and pension and gratuity are paid after several years of retirement.

**Spirit of Tolerance and Unity:**- It is the responsibility of the people to make democracy a success, for this reason the spirit of tolerance and unity is needed, especially in a Country like Nigeria with over two hundred and fifty languages and two dominant religions, Christianity and Islam with wide spread poverty and widening gap between the rich and poor, these qualities are very important. In spite of these differences, the people should be ready to join forces together to preserve the freedom of the country with a spirit of devotion and sacrifice. This has been the bane of democracy in Nigeria as often people fan the embers of ethnicity, religion and creed.

**Sound Party System:**- In democracy difference in views is not only tolerated but also encouraged. When there is a free competition between more than one political parties for power, the people get an opportunity to consider various alternative policies, programmes and personalities to exercise their choice. In the views of Leman (2001). A political party is one of the institutions in a competition democracy. Political parties serve as an index through which democratic governance could be compared in states, in that, the structure and operation of party politics in politics tend to serve as measuring rod for determining the fragility or otherwise of democratic systems. The situation where political parties are poorly structured to perform articulative, aggregative, communicative and educative functions, such a system is likely going to be associated with poor political culture which tend to make the system democratic process so fragile. Conversely in a situation where political parties are well structured to perform articulative, aggregative, communicative and educative functions such as system is often associated with participant political culture which tends to ensure a stable democratic process (Almond 2000).

In Nigeria, democratic process no doubt has been be deviled with poor party politics, as a result of not only ethnicization of party politics, poor political leadership, excessive westernization of the concept “democracy” party indiscipline, lack of clear cut party ideologies, the politicization of higher echelon of the military profession among others but also and worrisomely, lack of internal party democracy (Nta Laja 2000). Democracy and party politics are symbiotic in relationship. Political parties are indispensable institutions of sustainable democracy and democratic societies.

**Written constitution and independent judiciary.** For the successful functioning of democracy, people are given fundamental right. This is contained in chapter iv of the constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended 2010 and the same constitution guarantees the independent of the Judiciary and the custodian of the constitution. Political security, good administration, economic prosperity and wise leadership. Efficient administration is another condition for the success of a democracy depend upon efficient administration. The citizens’ faith in democracy is shaken in a corrupt administration. That is why Nigerians appear to have lost hope in the government and administration in the country as a result of high level of corruption. The widening gap between the rich and the poor and the level of poverty in the country casts doubt on democracy and democratic process as Aristotle once said that “democracy cannot thrive in the sea of poverty” political security is also essential as it is the duty of the state to protect the citizens. A state of insecurity is a threat to democracy as we witness in many parts of Nigeria today from Niger Delta to North East and North Central geo – political
zones of the country. The current insurgency in the country is a threat to the sovereignty and corporate existence of Nigeria.

**Election.**

Democratic government is government by “consent of the governed”, election gives practical meaning to this notion of “consent”. According to Schumpeter (1942) Election is the very heart of democracy. He goes on to state that it is an “institutional arrangement”, as a means of filling public offices by a competitive struggle for the people's vote.

According to Olisa et al (1991) Elections are the mechanisms for selecting people into public offices or other private positions. In the views of Gausa (2007) election is the process by which the members of a community or organization choose one or more persons to exercise authority on their behalf. The provision of election in democracy is intended to ensure that the government will exercise its powers with the consent of the governed. In other words, election lends legitimacy to the authority of the government. Election is therefore a process through which members of a group, club, societies, communities and organizations choose some of their members to hold offices at regular intervals.

**Functions of Election.**

Harpop and Miller (1987) explained that there are two contrasting views of the functions of competitive elections. The conventional view is that elections are mechanism through which politicians can be called to account and forced to introduce policies somehow reflect public opinion. This emphasizes the bottom – up functions of elections on the other hand, Ginsberg (1982) portrays the functions of election as the means through which the government and political elites can exercise control over their population, making them more quiescent, malleable and ultimately governable. This view emphasis top – bottom functions. In reality, elections have no single character, they are neither simply mechanism of public accountability nor a means of ensuring political control. Like all channels of political communication, elections are “two – way streets” that provides the government and the people, the elites and the masses, with the opportunity to influence one another. The central functions of elections include the following:-

1. **Recruiting Politicians:-** In democratic states such as Nigeria, India, U.S.A, elections are the principal sources of political recruitment, taking account also of the process through which parties nominate candidates. Politicians thus tend to possess talents and skill that are related to electioneering, such as chrisma, oratorical skills and good looks not necessarily those that suit them to carry out constituency duties, serving on committees, running government departments and so on.

2. **Making government:-** Elections make governments in states in which the political executive is directly elected. In the more common parliamentary systems, election influences the formations of governments most common strongly when the electoral system tends to give a single party a clear parliamentary majority. The use of proportional representation may mean that governments are formed through post – election deals and that government can be made and unmade without the need for election.

3. **Providing Representation:-** When they are free, fair and competitive elections are a means through which demands are channeled from the public to the government. Short of the use of initiatives and recall, however the electorate has no effective means of ensuring that mandates are carried out apart from its capacity to inflict punishment at the next election. Moreover, elected governments nowhere constitute a microcosm of the larger society.

4. **Influencing Policy:-** Elections certainly deter governments from pursuing radicals and deeply unpopular policies, but only in exceptional cases, when a single issue dominates the
election campaign, can they be said to influence policy directly. It can also be argued that the range of policy options outlined in elections is typically so narrow that the result can be of only marginal policy significance.

5. **Educating Voters:** The process of campaigning provides the electorate with an abundance of information, about parties, candidates, policies, the current government’s records, the political system, etc. However, this leads to education only if the information that is provided and the way it is provided, engages public interest and stimulates debate as opposed to apathy and alienation. As candidates and parties seek to persuade rather than educate, they also have strong incentive to provide incomplete and distorted information.

6. **Building Legitimacy:** One reason why even authoritarian regimes bother to hold elections, even if they are non-competitive, is that they help to foster legitimacy by providing justification for a system of rule. This happens because the ritual involved in campaigning somehow centers on an election.

7. **Ceremonial status and importance.** Most importantly, by encouraging citizens to participate in politics even in the limited form of voting elections, mobilize active consent.

8. **Strengthening Elites:** Elections can also be a vehicle through which elites can manipulate and control the masses. Political discontent and opposition can be neutralized by election that channel them in a constitutional direction and allow governments to come and go while the regime itself survives. Elections are particularly effective in this respect because at the same time they give citizens the impression that they are exercising power over the government.

**Political Participation.**

The concept of democracy implies that ultimate authority of governance should rest with the people themselves. When this role is sought to be implemented through the mechanism of representative democracy, it is possible that people may become inactive after choosing their representatives. Community expands geographically and includes a large population like Nigeria with over 180 million and a variety of composition in terms of race, religion, language, and culture, the distance between the people and their representatives is likely to widen. This has made Schumpeter (1954) to argue that the classical theory of democracy in which it was stated that “all adult citizens contributed to the making of public policy was deficient to the point that it could not explain the concept of popular participation in modern terms”. He goes on to argue that “running of government and framing of public policies is the task of professional politicians the role of ordinary citizens is confined to voting for the politicians, the political parties, and the programmes of their choice at the time of periodic elections”.

Political Participation is the basic principle of democracy. Political participation is therefore the active involvement of individuals and groups in the governmental processes affecting their lives (Gauba 2007). Put differently when citizens themselves play an active role in the process of formulation and implementation of public policies and decisions, their activity is called political participation.

McClosky (1968) posits that political participation involves those activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly and indirectly in the formation of public policy. He goes on to state that the most active form of political participation are formal enrolment in a political party, canvassing and registering votes, speech writing and speech making working in campaign and competing for public offices.

Gauba (2007) identified conventional modes of political participation to include among others voting, standing for office, campaigning for political party or contributing to the management of a community project, etc. He concludes by saying that “an act of opposition or public protest also
involve political participation such act include signing petition, attending peaceful demonstration, joining a protest march, civil disobedience and political violence are all forms of political participation. Milbrath (1965) has identified three broad categories as constituting political participation. They are:-

1. **Gladiator Activities** which include holding public and party office, being a candidates for office, attending a caucus or strategy meeting contributing time in a campaign.

2. **Transitional Activities:** Attending a political meeting/rally. Making monetary contributions. Contracting a public official or political leaders and

3. **Spectator Activities:** Wearing a button or showing in sticker. Attempting to influence another into voting in certain way. Initiating a political discussion. Voting and exposing oneself to political stimuli. He goes on to say that some sixty per cent (60%) of the population play spectator role and only about one to three percent (1 – 3%) is fully involved leaving about seven to nine percent (7 – 9 %) in a transitional stage from which they may ascend or descend.

Ascending the hierarchy involves increasing costs in terms of time energy and resources at each level fewer people are able to make the necessary investment.

**Political Participation in Nigeria 1999 – 2011: Analysis**

Political participation involves an active interaction between citizens and government. It is a two-way process. One party initiates and the other responds. The importance of elections cannot be doubted. At the very least, they provide the public with its clearest formal opportunity to influence the political process and also help directly or indirectly to determine who will hold government power. There was an increase in the level of participation in 2003 compared to 1999. The level of participation increased by ten (10%). Factor that could be responsible for this was the fact that Nigerians electorate doubted the sincerity of the military to relinquish power in 1999. So when they noticed that the Nigerian state had really democratized, then the level of participation increased in 2003. In 2007, there was decrease in the level of electoral participation. The level of electoral participation dropped by twelve percent (12%) in 2007. The main factor responsible for this was imposition of candidates and election rigging that was the order of the day in 2003 elections and the do or die affair syndrome injected into the polity in 2007 elections by the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).

In 2011 it further slipped down by 5.1% as a result of the fact that electorate had lost confidence in the electoral process because they thought the trend would continue.

Apart from presidential elections, the level of citizens participation in elections in Nigeria since 1999 has been on a steady decline. In 1999, 57,938,945 voters were registered those who actually voted in presidential elections were 30,280,052, representing almost sixty percent (60%) of those on the roll. In 2003, 60.82 million were on the voters register and 42,018,735 voters cast their vote during elections. Thus about 70% of those on the roll actually participated in the presidential poll. In 2007, 61 million, voters were registered while 35.41 million voted. In percentage terms, 58% of those who registered turned out for voting during the presidential elections. While in 2011, 73,528,040 voters were registered the presidential election results should that the average turn out of voters was put at 52.9%. (INEC Election Review 2011).

According to the chairman of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Prof. Attahiru Jega, only 35% of the 70 million qualified voters participated in the general elections. This was due to the fact that the entire electoral process was shoddily handled. Apart from political apathy displayed, the elections were scuttled by problems like poor – printed ballot papers and none availability of essential materials including result sheets (see the punch Newspapers June, 2011).
Social Scientists in the field of political science have explained reasons why variations exist in participation from country to country over the years. Several explanations have been offered on micro – level. Some on the macro – level. Micro – level characteristics are those that centered on political individual and his/her beliefs, altitudes and values. Such characteristics as resources including income, education and perhaps employment, transportation and psychological including political attitudes and orientations are clearly of great significance in explaining why individuals behave as they do. Macro – level characteristics affecting political participation include those factors as electoral rules/laws, opportunity cost in time, money and efforts (Mahler 2003).

**Findings**

Democracy encourages the citizens to participate in deciding who should hold what office at regular intervals. It also ensures that the “governor” does so on the consent of the governed. There is, therefore close relationship between democracy, election and political participation. Since the return of democracy in Nigeria, 1999-2011 there has been a steady decline in electoral participation due largely to non-democratic processes – imposition of candidates at all elective positions, election rigging, corruption, violence during and after elections and politics of exclusion and victory is viewed as a must, according former president Obasanjo “do or die affair”. Electoral victory ensures material benefits to the victors. The irregularities and the level of violence discourage an average Nigerian from taking part in politics including voting during elections. There is weak political institutions in the country and this contributes to the problem. The political parties lack ideologies and wallow in ideological confusion. There is high level of inequality, poverty and massive youth unemployment.

**Conclusion**

Democracy is government by consent of the people, this consent is obtained through reconciliation between varying interests and ideologies of different groups. When there is a free competition between more than one political parties for power, the people get opportunity to consider various alternatives policies, programmes and personalities to exercise their choice. This choice can only be made possible through periodic elections. There is therefore, symbiotic relationship between democracy, elections and political participation. In Nigeria, there is steady decline in electoral participation since the return to democratic rule. This is as a result of irregularities inherent in the political process in Nigeria. It must be understood that political participation does not mean just voters turn out at the polls. Participation implies breaking down standing barriers to enfranchisement, be it legal, political or socio-economic and to dismantle the barriers inherit in our polity.

**Recommendations:**

Democracy allows popular participation of the citizens in the electoral process, in politics the expression of the “will” of the people through vote should be respected by the political class. The citizens should be educated on the basic tenets of democracy and electoral victory. The youths of this country should be provided with jobs to avoid being used by disgruntled politicians. There is urgent need to address the problem of inequality and poverty in the country. The various political institutions should be strengthened to act as agent of change. Politics is governed by rules and regulations, these rules and regulations should be respected by the political actors. There should be serious punishment for those that violated the electoral laws of
the land. There is need to evolve a clear cut political ideology as this will enable the citizens to choose between candidates during elections. Finally, the electoral administrators should be men and women of proven integrity, this can assure the citizens that their votes will count and they will be willing to participate.

References


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