IMPERATIVES FOR GENUINE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS IN NIGERIA: MATTERS FOR URGENT CONSIDERATION

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Abstract
Democracy is people oriented and therefore, embedded in social justice and equity. To this end, it is only when the democracy of our day satisfies the mental, moral and physical wants of the masses living under it can it be regarded as existent and genuine. The political actors in Nigeria do not maintain the operational principles of genuine democracy. The electoral process and governance are manipulated to suit non-democratic agenda in contravention of the established laws thereby denying the populace the much craved social equity and justice. The operational principles and bedrock of genuine democracy are: respect for the constitution and the rule of law; separation of powers between the executive, legislature and judiciary, and holding of elections at regular and periodic intervals. It is, therefore, concluded that until all these principles are practiced accordingly in Nigeria, the desired conditions of social justice and equity in our society will remain a dream.

Key Words: Genuine Democracy, Electoral Process, Social justice, Equity.

Introduction
The word “democracy” is coined from Greek words “Demos” and “Kratos” meaning “people” and “power” respectively. Abraham Lincoln has given a popular definition of democracy. He defined it as the “government of the people, by the people and for the people”. The definition implies that democracy is people centered. Democracy may either be direct or indirect. It is direct when exerted by popular assemblies or by plebiscites on all legislations, and indirect when exerted by representative institutions (Asogwa and Omemma, 2000). We are however concerned with the indirect type of democracy for the fact that it is better suited to nation states with large human populations. Aristotle (384-322 BC) argued that if liberty and egalitarianism are chiefly to be found in democracy, they are best attained when all persons participate in the governance to the utmost. Commenting on democracy, the former U.S. President, Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1976) was quoted in the Webster’s English Language Encyclopedic Dictionary (1999) to have said: “Only if basically the democracy of our day satisfies the mental, moral and physical wants of the masses

living under it, can it continue to exist”. Similarly, Thomas Mann (1875-1955) was quoted to have perceived democracy as “that form of government and society which is aspired above every other’ with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man”.

The above concepts and definitions notwithstanding, the New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, (Encyclopedia Edition), (1999) gave a definitive outline of democracy as the theory of government which, in its purest form, holds that the state should be controlled by all the people, each sharing equally in privileges, duties, and responsibilities and each participating in person in the government as in city-states of ancient Greece. The practice of true democracy in the world today is based on the theory of separation of powers: legislation carried out by freely elected parliament or body and executive power vested in a government responsible to either the legislature as obtained in the United Kingdom (UK) or in an executive President responsible to the people as practiced in he United States of America (US). In whichever case, the understanding is that there is free choice of parties and candidates between two or more political parties. A situation where the electorates are made to accept a single list of candidates, some of whom may not have passed through the primaries, is not in any way democratic. It should be noted here that the Nigerian democracy is modeled after the type practiced in the US, where a freely elected parliament and a freely elected executive are vested in a government responsible to the people. Democracy as a system of governance portends social justice and equity for the masses given the tenets and philosophy on which it is founded and operated.

Two issues that mostly agitate the minds of many Nigerians are: whether the operational principles of democracy are ever put into practice by the political class, and whether the tenets of genuine democracy are maintained. It does appear that the practice of genuine democracy has eluded the political players in the country whereby those in power design and implement political programmes that are alien to laid down laws and systems, while those elected to represent the masses and cater for their interest decide to take to represent themselves and their families.

The bedrock of true democracy

One will make bold to observe that Nigeria’s democracy is tending towards a make believe show whereby what is being practiced is different from what is universally perceived. A genuine democracy is the type that is strongly embedded in the principles of: (1) Constitution, (2) Rule of law, (3) Separation of powers, and (4) Regular and Periodic elections.

Constitution: This is a body of doctrines and practices that form the fundamental organizing principles of a nation state. The constitution may be written or unwritten. Aristotle was the first to propound on constitution the types of which he used to classify government in terms of monarchy, tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, and democracy, etc. To him (Aristotle) the best constitution is that which combines all forms of government in such a way that citizens of every class are enabled to enjoy their respective privileges and are encouraged to exercise their respective responsibilities in the interest of the whole. Constitution, as it were, is the major bed rock of the political state and for it to worth its salt, it must have certain attributes, namely, political, social, economic and technological stability both in form and procedure, accountability; representation of the governed, power distribution, and checks and balances among the organs of government.

Rule of law: The principle of the rule of law clearly proclaims the supremacy of the law and land over other beliefs and bonds and over any person whether poor or rich, educated or uneducated. It implies that all are equal before the law and none is above it. One of the 19th century great advocates of the rule of law is A.V. Dicey who popularized it in his book “Law of Constitution” published in 1885. Rule of law also includes impartiality in the administration of law by any approved court
of jurisdiction. This means that accused persons or alleged law breakers should be treated and regarded as “innocent” until they are proved guilty by a competent law court and that no body should be arrested and dumped in detention and prison cells without trial by the law court. Respect for the fundamental human rights is enshrined in the rule of law. In this context, citizens are allowed to exercise their basic human rights and freedom as provided in the constitution, provided that such rights and freedom do not infringe on those of other citizens under the same law.

**Separation of powers**: This is a laid down rule in most democratic states where the powers of government devolve into three arms, namely, the legislative, executive and judiciary. The principle outlines that none of the three powers should impede, control, interfere, neglect or render powerless those of the others. Each of the three organs of government acts as a watchdog over the others thereby, ensuring that the respective powers do not over-step their bounds. The French philosopher, Baron de Montesquieu, in his book “The spirit of law”, propounded the theory of separation of powers. The principle was formulated to stem the tide of monopoly, tyranny and dictatorship. Montesquieu argued that the rights, liberty and egalitarian status of the people could only be protected and maintained if the three organs of government are in the hands of different groups of persons at the same time because according to him, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. If each arm or organ acts as a watchdog on the other, checks and balances of political power are maintained. Thus, social justice and equity is embedded in true democracy where there is a constitutional separation of powers. In Nigeria, it seems that until our democratic process is straightened and properly practiced, the issue of justice and equity in our society would remain a farce.

**Regular and periodic elections**: The constitution of a genuine democracy should outline the political offices to be contested, the tenure of each office, time frame for elections, regularity/frequency of elections, and the mode and manner of conducting the elections as well as the method of declaring the results. Conducts outside what have been laid down in the electoral laws will amount to violation of the constitutional provisions sustaining the democracy.

**Factors Impeding Genuine Democratic Process in Nigeria**

Having expounded on the principles underlying a true democratic foundation, it is pertinent to look at some of the factors constituting the cog in the wheel of genuine democratic progress in Nigeria. Political Apathy: These days, many Nigerians within the political suffrage class tends to show a responsive indifference to the electoral processes and activities of the country. That many people openly shy away from partisan politics is no more news; what is news, however, is the impact of the voluntary suffrage withdrawal by the masses on the evolution of true democratic process where citizens come out freely to participate. By becoming passive, isolated and withdrawn from political activities, such people shall have at the same time abandoned the political fortunes and power to the very few that dare to participate. Results? The political process is left in the hands of amateurs, “mediocre”, and people of questionable character who could {as has been shown repeatedly} dictate and reverse the interpretation of the electoral laws to enable them remain in power or, to thwart, manipulate, and supervise the voting process that would get themselves and their candidates “elected”. What can cause political apathy? The causes of political apathy are not far fetched. They include faith-driven attitude, lack of political education, ignorance of one’s fundamental human right, morbid fear of violence and mayhem which most times, come with the campaigns and total oblivion of the good changes which the electoral process and democracy could bring.

Induced Poverty: For the purpose of muzzling the political will of the people, certain persons in the corridors of power introduce programs that impoverish the masses. The period of the
impoverization programme {which may assume several names, including “austerity”, “reform”, etc} may range from 1 to 3 years after assuming office. The longer the better to achieve near-total poverty across the land. When the programme is happily observed to be taking its toll on the masses, another one is cleverly brought in to “alleviate”, “reduce”, or “totally eradicate” the poverty during which billions of money are released most of which is diverted before they get to the people. In the end, more poverty! Towards the beginning of another round of the electoral processes, most people would be left with no option than to readily accept gifts of rice, salt, soap, piece of cloth and other “relief materials” including money “donations” prior to and during campaigns. By so doing, the consciences of most people are so bought and mortgaged that they act according to the will of the candidates.

Political Thuggery and Violence: Political thuggery has come to stay in Nigeria in spite of the seeming campaigns and warnings against it. The political player with an untoward ambition would perceive elections as a “do or die” affair and could go to the extent of importing and distributing weapons to the eagerly waiting youths ready to die, kill or maim opponents of their masters. In the end, the youths that survive find out that they have been used and dumped. The purpose of engaging thugs is to physically intimidate opponents and force them out of contest and to violently disrupt elections and make way for the manipulation of election results or the declaration of wrong candidates as “winners”.

Vote Rigging: Rigging at elections involves all efforts perfected to control fraudulently, or to manipulate the electoral process in any of the following manner: thwarting the electoral guidelines, substituting popularly nominated candidates with less popular persons who might not have participated in the nomination contest, driving away the electorates from the polling and collation venues, snatching of ballot boxes and other polling materials during voting, falsification of figures, and deliberate declaration of wrong results. This practice negates the genuine democratic process in which people vote freely to elect popular candidates. When rigging is involved, candidates of popular choice loose while the unpopular ones win. These to a large extent, demoralize people from voting.

Weak and Non-chalant Attitude by Religious Institutions:

Religious institutions, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders in Nigeria have tried much to lend vocal campaigns against undemocratic practices by the political players. This is not enough. Communique’s upon communique’s released to the press to alert the nation of the dangers of tyranny and dictatorship and wrong manipulation of the electoral laws including deliberate violation of the constitution have never mattered to the politicians and the people in the corridors of power. Efforts of the church and other stakeholders cannot as at now, be the best approach if not backed with more tangible and physical action. Street protests greet doubtful and incredible election results in other civilized and advanced democracies. Fraudulent election results and all manipulations leading to it are massively resisted in addition to resorting to the court of law where the credibility of the judiciary is not in doubt. In Nigeria this physical action is conspicuously lacking. The religious organizations seem to get compromised in arranging church services for “successful” candidates in the name of thanksgiving and receptions during which the “good and exemplary” qualities of the host are extolled.

Non-Participation of Professionals and Technocrats: Politics in Nigeria appear to have been abandoned largely to the mediocre class and touts whose sole interest is to seek and accumulate wealth but not to develop their fatherland. On the other hand, the professionals and technocrats who understand the tenets and elements of governance shy away from active partisan participation for reasons not far fetched. Politics in the hands of the amateur, uneducated, undeveloped and
inexperienced people has brought untold disappointments and retrogression in the land due to monumental corruption and ineptitude. Such a result is expected because it is impossible to give what one does not possess.

**Prerequisites for genuine democratic process**

The laws of the land and constitution: Nigerians whether they govern or are governed should learn to respect and be guided by the constitution of the Federal Republic and should have regard for the laws of the land. All persons must respect the executive, legislative and judicial powers of the government and every arm of government should respect each other in role-play and function. The exercise of power should devolve separately into the other and collectively, effect a harmonious administration.

Integrity of The Elector: The electoral laws must be followed to the letter while the body in charge of the elections must be established by law to make it truly independent of the executive, legislative and judiciary arms. The electoral commission that is made truly independent by law should recognize its powers, rights and obligations to the people that make up the federal republic and not to any of the arms of the government of the federation.

Free and Voluntary Participation: Nigerians of all classes should have courage and interest to participate in politics and have faith in the electoral process. The great philosopher Plato asserts that the penalty paid for not being in politics is to be governed by men worse than us, while another great thinker, Edmund Burke regretfully observes that what good people suffer for not taking part in politics, is to be ruled by fools. In Nigeria, to ensure mass involvement of the citizenry in partisan politics, all conducts and practices that scare quality people from politics (such as rigging, thurgery, disrespect to the people of law, “godfatherism” and the likes) should be done away with. Serving civil servants of certain cadre (example, personnel on grade levels 14 and above), should be provided a window of leave of absence of not more than five years to get into partisan politics and serve nation if they want to.

The Church: Christianity can rightly discern the difference between the injunctions “gives to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” and God’s intention that man should be ruled under good governance where there is social justice, liberty and equality. Genuine Christians should, therefore, not look at politics as a dirty game. This attitude leaves politicking in the hands of people mostly with questionable characters. Unless the Christian laity get involved deeply into partisan politics for the purpose of achieving good governance, it would continue to make a mere “scratch” in trying to solve the problem. It is impossible to correct a system from the outside in this country. It is expected that the church should mobilize, monitor and checkmate the system to ensure a smooth and correct democratic order. When the church mobilizes her members and encourages them to participate actively in the electoral process, it is the duty of the same church to ensure that a free and fair election is obtained. Should anything to the contrary results, the church should come out to resist it vehemently including going to the law court to challenge it. The church should reject the “winners” that emerge fraudulently and should have nothing to do with such people till they leave office or resign.

Genuine Poverty Reduction Programme: The government and all agencies of human development must work out genuine ways of empowering the people economically without considering any geographic, ethnic, tribal, religious and partisan differences. Employments opportunities should be extended to all Nigerians that are qualified. Employments through the backdoor must be stopped and all positions vacant must be advertised publicly. Contract appointments for people who have retired not more than five years ago should be withdrawn for replacement with qualified younger
elements. The rural towns should be industrialized to give job positions to the teeming middle level manpower and to empower the rural people. Only economically viable people can shun money politics and enticing gifts that lure the youths to thuggery and violence.

Gifts Rejection: The masses should realize that once one collects gifts from candidates seeking electoral position the individual has been “settled” by the politician and therefore, has no moral justification to question the politician’s performance and responsibility to him. The recipients of the gifts have by so doing, exchanged their democratic right with the gift items.

Stop Political Violence and Thuggery: Political thugs are people’s children and relations. They are also their future. Parents should call the children to order before they become mere sacrificial lambs in the hands of the political gladiators. Besides, thuggery negates the whole essence of the democratic process.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

From the discussions in this paper, one can see that democracy is people oriented and it is embedded on equity and social justice. The bane of true democracy in Nigeria is the way and manner the political actors and those in power practice it. For a genuine democratic process to be obtained in Nigeria, it is recommended that: political participation be encouraged at all levels since no one can correct the system from the outside; technocrats and professionals should not regard politics as a dirty game and as such, not leave it in the hands of tout, mediocre and people who have no business with governance. It is also recommended that the electorates should reject pre-electoral gifts from persons seeking electoral position since the gift items are meant to mortgage people’s conscience and buy their rights; the religious institution (the church) and other stakeholders should mobilize, monitor, defend and protect the votes of the masses to obtain a free and fair election, and that parents should guard against their children being used as political thugs. When the numbers of thugs is reduced sufficiently the occurrence of electoral violence will be minimal thereby, encouraging the masses to come out in large numbers to exercise their franchise during elections. Finally, it is recommended that Nigerans, including the governed and those that govern, should be patriotic enough to tackle the national challenge of uprooting the un-democratic scepter from the polity and in its place, entrench the culture of free, transparent and participatory democracy in the country.

**References**


