

An Analysis of Nigeria's Political Leadership: Assessing its Compatibility with Democratic Governance Principles

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at examining the contradictions in Nigeria's democratic system of government as they affect the nation's political leadership. The paper exposes the concept of democracy and some of its core principles that distinguish it from other forms of government. It also confronts some of the devaluating anomalies in Nigeria's practice of democracy and argues that Nigeria's political leadership, which ought to be 'people-centric', will not have the desired demonstrative leadership when it is besieged by inequalities, abuse of the rule of law, intimidation, victimization, ethnocentrism, and other forms of violations that are contrary to what democracy stands for. The paper concludes that Nigeria's political leadership will be successfully geared towards the realization of the common good when the democratic principles that Nigeria's government falls short of, which also contradict her democratic preference, are checkmated and characteristically adhered to. The paper employs the methods of textual and contextual analysis. The procedure is essentially expository, critical, analytical, and speculative.

Keywords: Democracy; Government; Political leadership; Democratic leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Anybody familiar with Nigeria's democratic system of government will attest to the fact that Nigeria has not been true to its practice of democracy. One could describe Nigeria as a nation steeped in contradictions and paradoxes (Diamond, 1988). As a matter of optimism, Nigeria is practicing the opposite of what it professes. In principle, democracy should be a system of government that is people-based, a system where decision-making and leadership should pass through the process of "majority rule," a system where the will of the people rather than the will of the leaders prevails (Sankatsing, 2004). Unfortunately, in Nigeria, the opposite is the case. Often, one begins to question the current democratic system of government in Nigeria. This has significantly impacted the development of the country in all aspects, as the narrative has been characterized by conflict among ethnic nationalities, intimidation, marginalization, victimization, and a flagrant disregard for the stakeholders within the system.

Nigeria, the giant of Africa, which should have advanced in many respects far better than many countries, especially within the African continent, is still dragging her feet to stabilize its government, either due to the failure of the actors that were deeply influenced by military rule to accept the present dispensation or as a result of ignorance of what democracy as a system of government is by application (Akinterinwa, 2001). Despite the long years of democracy in the Nigerian state, the citizens still find it difficult to differentiate between the military junta and civilian

administration. This has not only made Nigeria a laughing stock in the community of democratic nations but also explained why some people use different unfounded systems of government, such as “militocracy,” “democracy,” and the like, to describe the government of Nigeria and its leadership (Akinola, 2015). This is because Nigeria’s leadership, rather than promoting equality, rule of law, fundamental human rights, majority rule, minority rights, and so on, uses a military approach to policymaking where the will of the leaders prevails over the will of the people. These and more, which have contradicted democracy as a system of government, have been a clog in the wheel of Nigeria’s political leadership.

This paper aims to highlight the lack of meticulous implementation of some democratic principles, which has negatively impacted the effectiveness of Nigeria’s democratic leadership. Additionally, it advocates for strict adherence to these principles, both in principle and in action.

DEMOCRACY

Etymologically, the term ‘democracy’ comes from the ancient Greek, which combines ‘demo’, which means ‘the people’, with ‘kratos’ meaning ‘rule’, ‘power’, or ‘strength’. When put together, it literally means ‘rule by the people’. Marx and Engels, on the other hand, describe democracy as the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ (Wood, 1996). According to this description, democracy serves as a tool for the ruling class to exploit the masses. Therefore, they reject the idea that democracy is a form of government that the people control. But Abraham Lincoln, a one-time American President, in 1863, following the Greek origin of the concept, faulted the uncensored description of democracy by Marx and Engels and boldly defined democracy as “the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” In a critical examination of the later, according to Asira E. Asira (2010), “government of the people would mean government run on behalf of the people; government by the people would mean government run by the bona fide citizens of the country in question; while government for the people would imply government in the best interest of the people” (p. 19). From the above expression, one can deduce that democracy favours an equal participatory involvement of people in the decision-making process (whether directly or indirectly) through representation in the best interest of the people.

Therefore, democracy thrives in a setting where the people fully guide an efficient and effective electoral body, register eligible voters, conduct free, fair, credible, and periodic elections, provide social services, maintain existing infrastructure and amenities, provide employment, and promote sound education (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). It is an environment where the general or public good overrides personal interest. Therefore, democracy, as a form of government, has its own principles that distinguish it from other forms of government.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy, as pointed out earlier, is a form of government characterised by some principles that distinguish it from other systems of government (Norris, 2012). These unique principles that are people-centred make for its preference over other systems in many countries, including Nigeria.

The Principle of Equality: This is a fundamental ingredient of democracy. It implies that everyone in the same or similar condition should receive equal treatment in society. In practical terms, what is given to Mr. A should not be at variance with what Mr. B should receive, as long as they are in the same and similar condition. Therefore, we should treat equals equally in identical conditions, irrespective of their age, gender, ethnic cleavage, and other factors. Here, equality does not imply treating everyone equally without considering their needs; rather, it implies equality of opportunity.

The Principle of Majority or Popular Consultation: It implies that we should always pursue the desires of the people. This suggests that the people must approve any proposed policy. In other words, the will of the people should prevail over the will of the government. Therefore, the governing body should not make any policy without due consultation and approval from the majority, if not the entire population. Democracy is therefore synonymous with “majority rule.”

Majority Rule and Minority Rights: Democracy, otherwise known as majority rule, acknowledges the opinions of the majority in any decision-making process (Lijphart, 2007). Because the majority carries the vote in the decision-making process, we interpret the majority's opinion as the will of the masses. However, this does not imply that we should denigrate or deny the legitimate rights of the minority group. It also implies that, irrespective of the majority rule, minority rights should be considered for proportional representation.

The Principle of the Rule of Law: This principle simply implies equality before the law. In other words, no one is above the law. This principle ensures a fair hearing, trial, and defense for an accused citizen before determining their guilt or innocence. It bridges the gap between the leaders and the masses on legal matters. Further, it is the idea that the law is not made for a particular set of people but rather for all within a particular geographical area, irrespective of one's political, social, or economic standing. Conversely, it prevents victimisation, deprivation of citizens' rights, and tyranny by the leaders.

The principle of freedom is one of the fundamental human rights. It simply means the absence of restraint. freedom to do as one likes, even when one's action is an infringement on another's freedom or an infringement on the government's constitutional laws. It categorically implies freedom with responsibility. Some of its kinds include:

1. **Freedom of Speech and Expression:** We guarantee citizens the freedom to express their opinions. They are made to enjoy the freedom to express what affects them as citizens and stakeholders in their country. The advantage of this freedom is that it not only helps the government to know the plights of the citizenry, but it also helps the government to know where they are erring in their governance (Waldron, 2013). This gives citizens the

sense of involvement and belonging that the government is for them and under their control.

2. **Freedom of Association:** Citizens are, by this principle, at liberty to join associations and political parties of their choice and also have the freedom to form associations within the framework of the law. This freedom comes with undue influence or force from anybody.
3. **Freedom of Ownership of Private Property:** This guarantees an individual or a group of individuals the right to own property. Therefore, neither the government nor any individual or person has the right to deny anyone this freedom, provided the ownership is legit.
4. **Freedom of Movement:** Citizens in a democratic government could move from one part of a given country to another without any form of molestation, restriction, or intimidation. They can equally transit from their places of origin to another part of the same country for settlement without any discrimination.

From the foregoing, one can deduce that democracy has rules and principles that regulate and guide its operations. Hence, for the system of democracy to have its true test and uniqueness and serve the purpose for which it is made, the principles inherent in it must be observed, respected, and adhered to by all within the democratic environment, irrespective of one's status in all spheres of human and national existence.

CONTRADICTIONS IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

As previously mentioned, democracy's principles are what distinguish it from other forms of government. Any country that practices a system of government but fails to translate and implement its principles in its governance is contradicting itself. Nigeria, the giant of Africa under democratic dispensation, is far from democratic in leadership. The Nigerian leadership has not adhered to democratic principles, either due to a disregard for these principles, their selective application, or a deficiency in leadership expertise. The reality of the Nigerian situation is that there is a huge chasm between principles and practice (Oluwagbemi-Jacob, 2018). A democratic government that does not respect the opinions of the people but rather lords over the citizenry and the will of the leaders is not a true democracy. This has not only rocked the wave of unity and progress in the nation but has also questioned Nigeria's democratic system.

Nigeria's federalism, for instance, is far from democratic. Dorothy Ucheaga (2009) could be correct in her observations when she made the point that "the problem Nigeria has experienced is not due mainly to federalism as a concept but the Nigerian variant of it. Unlike elsewhere, where the federating units come together to define the terms of the federation as equals, in Nigeria, states are at the receiving end of the federal government" (p. 115). Federalism is a system of government where the units come together by free choice under one umbrella. However, Nigeria's implementation of federalism, which aims to unite its citizens from diverse religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, has fallen short of expectations. The federal constitution aims to ensure that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few ethnic or other sectional groups or of its

agencies (Section 8: 1b, 1999 constitution). It is quite unfortunate that Nigeria's system of federalism, which should carry every citizen along, has not known stability because the union of the units that make up the nation is suffocating many nationalities that have no access to national resources and power in an equitable manner.

Chris Alli (2001) could be correct to say that "the Nigerian federal system is a colossal deception of the highest order" (p. 104), when one considers how the Nigerian state professes the opposite of what it claims to be. The federal government tampers with and violates the freedom and autonomy granted to the federating units in a federal state with a democratic dispensation like Nigeria, thereby creating a contradiction.

The principle of equality is not far from being contradicted in Nigeria's practice of democracy. This principle advocates treating everyone in the same and similar condition, irrespective of ethnic affiliation, gender, age, religion, or other characteristics. Equality is the hallmark of this principle. But it is a regrettable scenario in Nigeria's political leadership, as what is witnessed today in the educational and political terrains falls far short of being democratic. In the educational sector, for instance, unequal treatment has been the order of the day. A cursory look at Nigeria's 2013 National Common Entrance Examinations cut-off marks in different states gives one a clear insight into how the policy and quota system fall short of the democratic principle of equality. As Oluwagbemi-Jacob noted, "In that national entrance, a pupil from Anambra State was expected to score at least 139 points to gain admission into the unity schools, while his counterpart from Yobe and Zamfara states was required to score only 2 marks out of a possible 200. This implied that candidates from Anambra, who scored 138 points, failed to gain admission, while candidates from Zamfara, who scored just two points, received the same offer. (p. 197).

One may put up the argument that such was the case so as to accommodate the educationally disadvantaged. However, a critical examination of that policy would reveal two unfavorable outcomes: firstly, it would overstretch the concept of meritocracy, and secondly, it would stifle the interests of the educationally advantaged. It is in this connection that Alli made the point that "the philosophy of federal character, unity schools, secularity, and similar pretensions, instead of institutionalising fairness, polarised us, enthroned mediocrity, and subverted the principles of nationhood" (p. 122). The case of unequal treatment in the educational sector is glaringly against the principle of equality, the core ingredient of democracy, as it will end up, rather than uniting, breeding discrimination and marginalisation in the nation.

In the political sector, the implementation and adherence to the principle of equality appear elusive under Nigeria's leadership. Political equality requires that every individual and group (major and minor) in a democratic setting should be given a say in decision-making and at all national representative forums. Also, every eligible citizen has equal freedom and the right to vote, be voted for, and contest for any political position or be appointed to serve without discrimination. In the political sector, within a democratic environment, equal opportunity is given to everyone to hold political offices and serve in the interest of all, regardless of

their differentiating characteristics. It is a sorry scenario that since independence, the narrative of Nigeria's politics has been that of ethnic domination, which has not only affected the minorities' representation but also excluded them from the scheme of things. Ethnic sentiments fueled by selfish political motives have crippled socio-political and economic developments as some ethnic groups are relegated to the background. Contests for political offices in Nigeria today are ethnically based. Ethnic groups field and support candidates to advance their political interests.

Appointments as ministers, commissioners, and other political offices are ethnically based. People in positions of authority only care for and fix those who are close to them, even when they are not fit to handle such positions or offices. It is not unconnected with the above claim of discrimination that is commonplace in Nigeria that Dr. Fredrick Fasheun, the President and founder of O'odua People's Congress, as recorded by Yinus Olaleka (2017), alleged that "the north holds firmly to the positions of National Security Adviser, Inspector General of Police, Chief of Army Staff, Chief of Air Staff, Chief of Defence Intelligence, Director General, State Security Services, SSS, Comptroller General, Nigerian Immigration Service, and Chairman, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC" (Stop polarising Nigeria, www.thewillnigeria.com). When one evaluates the above allegation, one will, without fear or favour, brand Nigeria as a country that enthrones inequality. From the foregoing, one may ask: Are the northerners more skilled in leadership than other ethnic groups? Are there no people outside the northern enclave qualified to handle some of those positions? Small wonder Alhaji Maitama Sule, the one-time Dan Masami of Kano, without reservations, said that "the Hausa/Fulani have the gift of leadership and that this role should be their exclusive privilege in the Nigerian state, an exclusive birthright" (Alli, p. 94).

This implies that the northerners, by inclination, temperament, and administrative skill, should pilot national affairs. Political inequality of this kind has not only caused agitations among the groups that are perceived to be marginalized but has also brought rancor among the ethnic groups. Ayomola & Oketokun (2021).corroborate this when they say that "it is within the above context that we can locate separatist agitations among the Igbo ethnic group in southeast Nigeria. The existence of separatist movements such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Biafra Zonist Movement (BZM), and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) all point to the perceived feelings of marginalisation and discrimination of the Igbo" (The Case of Biafra.pdf). From the above, one can deduce that political inequality is not only affecting the minority groups in Nigeria but also the group considered a'minorized majority'.

The principle of majority rule and minority rights has its own share in Nigeria's political leadership, which is besieged with contradictions. The majority rule, or popular consultation, is the idea that the desires of the people or the entire population rank higher than those of anyone or a group of people. It is the idea that the desires of the masses should prevail over ethnic, individual, or group sentiments. In other words, in any case, if the desires of the sectional or ethnic group prevail over the desires of the entire population, then the practice is at variance with the principle of majority rule. Therefore, favoring a specific ethnic group in the

government at the expense of others does not align with the principles of majority rule and minority rights. This is because democracy, which upholds the rule of the majority, does not imply depriving the minority of their rights to participate in matters of national importance, secure key positions, and receive political appointments alongside the majority. For if the case made by Dr. Fredrick Fasheun, the President of the O'odua People's Congress, against the government under the leadership of Buhari was true, it then means that the leadership of Nigeria is "north-based" and, as such, a contradiction to the democratic leadership of the multiethnic state of Nigeria. Given this situation, the government does not consult the desires of all citizens, instead favoring those of the northerners. And it is against this scenario that Ucheaga warned that "no one or group should be seen as a second-class citizen or be perceived to dominate" (p. 114). Therefore, no group should assume superiority over others, take others or the minority as second-class citizens in political and economic matters, or dominate the democratic leadership of the nation, for such amounts to nothing more than a democratic deficit.

Nigeria has yet to judiciously implement and adhere to the principle of the rule of law. The principle advances equality before the law. In other words, it is the idea that no one within a democratic system is above the law. Put differently, it is the idea that the law is supreme over every individual within a democratic space. But unfortunately, in Nigeria, it appears that the reverse of what the principle advances is the case. People at the helm of affairs consider themselves to be above the law. They hold the belief that the law serves the interests of the masses. Nigeria appears to be a country where the executive, legislature, or judiciary can manipulate the law to suit their whims and caprices. At times, it goes as far as one arm of government undermining the other or imposing an order on the other. It appears to be a country where the judiciary would show that they are custodians of the law by giving verdicts in favour of those in leadership. And this explains why justice appears to be unattainable in our country. Once the Chief Justice of the federation gains power, Nigeria seems to disregard the rule of law. The so-called giant of Africa appears to be a country where the executive arm of government detects verdicts for the judiciary. It appears to be a nation where verdicts are given in favor of the highest bidder. Without a doubt, this has led to leaders and influential politicians in Nigeria portraying themselves as superior citizens. A scenario where the executive will manipulate and upturn the verdicts of the court is a contradiction. It is contradictory when one offender from an opposition party faces public punishment, while another from the same party commits the same offense and receives immunity. These contradictions will end up breeding victimisation, segregation, oppression, marginalisation, and intimidation rather than peace, unity, progress, and national development.

The violation of the principle of freedom, especially freedom of speech, is another problem besieging the country's leadership. Among the human rights principles is the principle of freedom, and by extension, freedom of speech. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 19 of 1948, "freedom of expression is the right of every citizen to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of the frontiers" (Universal Declaration, <http://www.un.org>).

Freedom of speech enjoins every citizen to be at liberty to express his or her opinion. It gives the citizenry the liberty to express themselves as to what affects them within a democratic environment. It gives them the liberty to praise or condemn any action that is undemocratic. It is so sad that, in Nigeria today, citizens are no longer enjoying this right for fear of intimidation and are at risk of condemning any anomaly in the government. The government of Nigeria, in a democratic dispensation, wants only praise, not blame. However, inasmuch as citizens are at liberty to air out their opinions, it does not mean that they are at liberty to abuse the government. They are not at liberty to cook up false stories or incite the public to violence or similar behaviors. With the present heating issue on 'hate speech', which led to the proposal of passing a bill that will attract a penalty of death sentence to the culprits, one may assume that freedom of expression has been abused in Nigeria. But I think Nigeria is making a big mistake with that proposal, though not yet implemented, by not giving criteria upon which 'hate speech' will be evaluated.

After all, what one considers hate speech might be another's legitimate opinion. Even though I do not encourage spitefulness and false presentation of facts, I am still battling to know how this hate speech will be taken to the point that culprits would have to face a death sentence. This proposal of a death sentence does not only appear as intimidation but also makes the masses think that the government wants to silence the citizens and deny them those fundamental human rights. That will be the height of the contradiction of democracy if the citizens within this system of government are asked not to express themselves in matters that concern and affect them. Let it not be the case in Nigeria, as Adrian Shahbaz (2019) alleged that, in democratic states, leaders intent on consolidating power are finding new ways to repress independent journalism (<https://freedomhouse.org>).

While Nigeria has exposed some violations of democratic principles, there are other principles that require practical consideration and review. These violations are contradictions and a clog in the wheel of Nigeria's political leadership. Leadership ought to be the capacity of an individual or group of individuals within a geographical space to influence attitudes, inspire, and engender the cooperative actualization of a set goal. It is also a "relational act, a two-way spiral between the leader and the led, or the leadership and the followership" (Ushie Thomas and Ogeyi Rose, 2018, p. 71). The relational dimension of leadership aims to balance the interests of both leaders and followers. It is within this ambience that Innocent Asouzu (2003) describes leadership as "the unification of all human interests towards the determination of the destiny of the whole man" (p. 67).

The position of leadership subsists in gearing it towards the realisation of the good and welfare of all and in harmonising all interests to a higher point of legitimization. Therefore, any one-sided approach to leadership will lead to destruction. Asouzu corroborated this claim when he made the point that "no society can function well without a coordinated functioning of its parts. Where each part is isolated from the whole, it can hardly maintain a balanced, healthy existence" (p. 49). Parts of society are the ethnic nationalities, tribes, and people of diverse cultures that are under the umbrella of a unified nation. It is on this ground that Nigeria, a multiethnic and multicultural nation, retains its identity in the community

of nations. But it is a thing of regret that the above-violated principles of democracy have questioned the leadership of Nigeria, so much so that the Nigerian citizens are crying for restructuring, devolution of power, and the like. These leadership upheavals have affirmed Andrew Uduigwomen's (1997) contention that a nation without functional leadership is doomed to chaos, exploitation, and backwardness (p. 61). Indeed, Nigeria's political leadership, as a matter of optimism, has marred rather than made the nation.

CONCLUSION

This paper sets out to examine the contradictions in Nigeria's democratic system of government and how they have been a clog in Nigeria's political leadership. The paper was quick to point out that the principles of equality, popular consultation, majority rule and minority rights, the rule of law, the fundamental human rights, and freedom of speech, among others, inherent in democracy as a system of government were grossly violated and, as such, did not only pose a challenge to Nigeria's leadership but also contradict what democracy stands for.

In view of the above, the paper concludes that Nigeria's political leadership will be people-centric and inclusive if and only if democratic principles are strictly adhered to by all, especially those in leadership positions, irrespective of party or ethnic affiliation. Any act done by Nigeria's government within the democratic space to favour some while disregarding others and imposing their own will on the people rather than the people's will taking precedence is contradictory. To this end, therefore, the paper maintains that Nigeria's leadership and Nigeria as a nation will only experience peace, unity, progress, socio-economic developments, and democratic advancement when these anomalies that contradict and question Nigeria's preference for democracy over other forms of government are checked.

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