CONCEPTUALIZING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY: AN ANALYTIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT: *The quest for a system of government that should take into cognizance the recognition of each individual brought about the notion of democracy. As a concept it has become a cliché to our system both for civilized and unenlightened minds, with little regard for its meaningful application. Going through some conceptual analysis, we submit that the idea of participatory democracy exists independently of a people's system of government. Thus, if we must be said to be democratic in our polity, we ought to conform our practices to the principles of democracy and not compel democratic principles to fit into our system.*

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Public, Democratic Education, Leadership

UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY AND ITS PROBLEMS

In order for us to understand the meaning of democracy and live by its implications, we must go beyond mere definitions of dictionaries. It is pertinent to state that the author limits himself to the practice of participatory democracy within Africa, using Nigeria as a focus. During the period of antiquity when democracy began, 'demos' included all male citizens of Attica with political rights. So each time it was said that the demos rule, it either means the masses, that is, 'plethos', the many, that is, 'polloi', or the people (demos).[1] Also, the concept of isonomy which implies that the equality of citizens precedes the concept of democracy was of great importance. For Charles Lummis, democracy refers to an ideal and not a method of achieving it. It is not a historically existing institution, but a historical project.[2] Gastil also describes democracy as a wide-ranging liberty, which includes the freedom to decide one's course of life and actions and equality of roles towards the forging of a common destiny, as against the rejection of discrimination and prejudice. It involves pluralism and cultural diversity, peaceful coexistence and searches for fair and non violent ways of resolving conflicts. Summarily, it is encapsulated in these three words: liberty, equality and fraternity.[3]

The classification of different models of democracy by Barber is worth noting, ranging from the authoritative model, juridical model, pluralist model, unitary and strong models respectively. The authoritative model focuses on a centralized power based on the excellence of a governing elite, but it is still representative because it is accountable to the people that select it. It resolves conflicts in the absence of an independent ground by making recourse to representative executive elite that employ authority in the interests of their various constituencies.[4] The juridical model is marked by the protection of the rights of citizens through the instrumentality of an independent judiciary. Pluralist democracy resolves problems through bargaining and exchange among individuals who are equal and free. In this regard, there is active participation of the citizenry.[5]

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Direct democracy on the other hand has two forms, which are unitary and strong. Essentially, the former is marked by consensus, while the latter is marked by its populist bias of participation.[6]

From the various models, it becomes very difficult to place the Nigerian form of government into any of the models of democracy. However, it bears semblance with the authoritative model. Yet we cannot entirely fit it into such models since there is want of excellent executive elite that employs authority for the interest of the citizens. We find ourselves making our choices amongst various incompetent individuals and we are bound to make a choice and our refusal to choose in such circumstances would in itself be a choice, yet it is a form of consent without autonomy, which also invariably makes the choice less meaningful.

Democracy is a concept with a wide ranging involvement. Thus, there could be democratic schools, democratic clubs, churches, homes, communities, etc. A group is therefore democratic if it has equally distributed the right to decision making among its members. The kind of democracy that is being practiced in many African countries and Nigeria in particular is not one that equally distributes the right to decision making; it is a small group democracy whereby the voters elect those who should represent them, but eventually the citizens almost immediately become irrelevant after elections. Gastil captures it succinctly: powerful members might make and implement decisions long before other members hear of it. However, there still exist a grave danger; if the distant masses who are intentionally tuned off the political drama fail to act on the short-term power of such centralized government, it becomes a long-term approach and is considered a norm in political affairs.[7] Politicians are quite aware that lack of commitment of members and avoidance of awareness is necessary so as to keep the populace out of democratic processes. Little wonder, ours is a kind of democracy where many persons who represent their constituencies at the National Assembly do not know the location of their constituency offices and if at all they have such awareness, then the offices remain permanently locked as soon as elections are over. This is a salient signal that is sent to the citizens that the purpose of election and end of it are one and the same, that is, for self-gratification. The people therefore lose both their individuality and humanity because they are depersonalized in the democratic process.

We are bedeviled with a self inflicted threat to think that democracy in Nigeria 'will not', 'is not', or 'may not' work. Thus, we hear various illustrations such as "Nigeria is a failed state" "a failing state" "an almost failed state." The reasons for these various phrases and illustrations are not that democracy cannot work, but because we have not defined the system of government we want to fashion out for ourselves as a nation. If democracy fails as a system of government in Nigeria, there is likelihood that all other systems, if adopted, will also fail. The problem is that we want democracy as a principle to fit into our psyche. We fail to realize that like every other principle that bear universal character, democratic principles when violated, has no regard for nation-states or persons. What we invest in a democracy is what we get out of it; hence, they are referred to as principles.

The idea of participation is always taken for granted in political sphere with little regard to its implications. To speak of participation in a democracy implies that such right is at the discretion of the individual who participates. Thus, while he has the right to vote for example, he also has a

right not to vote. Nothing therefore should be done under compulsion; however this is an extreme position to maintain because of its numerous loopholes.

If you could have the right not to participate in all ramifications, then everything becomes static and a rehearsal of the Hobbesian state of nature. However, participation if not approached with caution, would also be injurious. Dowd noted that the main tragedy of political government is that most people have been conditioned to see government as a natural part of the environment, something they can complain about but cannot change. Basically those who complain are the electorates who are being threatened at gunpoint to fill the coffers of government and obey its mandate; yet the structure of the political process permits this act to be done in anonymity to the extent that even the perpetrators conceal the evil nature of their deeds from themselves.[8] With this in mind however, the individual must participate in government in any little way possible that enhances its development.

The simplest form of participation is through the voting process. Hence, citizens are always encouraged to come out and vote in mass during election processes. However, the danger arises from the fact that people do not have the right motivation in such process. Most times history has shown in our century that the end of the electoral process is not always the electorate but the politicians who are voted into offices. No wonder the means of the electoral process is always fraught with numerous irregularities. Participation is good in itself as long as it does not derogate from the end in view that it hopes to attain.

In the first place, participatory democracy entails dynamism, reconstructiveness cum constant evolution. Fitting/compelling the principles of democracy to fit into our system is tyrannical and that exactly is the meeting point between the current form of democracy practiced in Nigeria and the military system of government. If the military system of government is impermissible and unjustifiable because it does not catch up with the principles of democracy, then our current practice of democracy in disguise is but a lip service to the concept and will end up in the same categorical error like that of the military. It is therefore quite logical to think that until the form bears some likeness with the matter, it remains eternally an ideal to be desired far from accomplishment of natural existence of the human person.

We still crawl from the long twilight of rule by military juntas into a new form of democratic tyranny that lies between anarchy and democracy. We cannot speak of the 'Nigerianization' of democracy; we can only speak of the democratization of Nigeria. Invariably, to practice democracy, a people have no choice than to adhere to its tenets, lest it ceases to be democracy. Alternative choices are only possible if we are to pick from various options ranging from fascism, communism, and monarchical systems and so on. Yet even in countries that practice these various forms mentions above, some have democratic tendencies that make their system stronger than some democratically programmed systems of government.

However, we cannot ignore too quickly repatrimonization[9], coupled with the extractive nature of institutions[10], which have deterred us from democratic progress and economic prosperity. The former redistributes goods and services among friends and family members with whom one has shared some memorable moments to the detriment of an entire nation; there is a patron-client

relationship whereby leaders exchange favours in reciprocity to a group of followers. This necessarily leads to the latter (extractive institutions), which constitutes an elite that designs economic institutions to enrich themselves and the wealth of many individuals have been a result of this process in many developing countries. On this note, the seizure of government by the proletariats in Marxist political thought has always been a failure to democracy in Nigeria; this is because when there is a communal outcry for a change of governance from the lower class, coupled with the fact that there is need to have a citizen among the proletarians at the helm of affairs of government, it has always been a failure. Democracy in Nigeria has shown that when a proletariat gets to the level of political governance, he probably joins the elites (bourgeois). However, some developed nations of the world progress rapidly, because the middle/marginalized class never gave up in their quest to have a proper representation in the government of their various states and join the elite class to decide what the future of everyone shall be.

The Notion of Public Participation
To understand the concept of "the public", we must bear in mind its etymological root. From the Latin word, 'populus', it denotes mass population or the people in association with matters of common interest. One of the key characteristics of Athenian democracy was discussion on affairs of the people by the people themselves in public places. In the 'Assembly of the People', matters brought forward for deliberation must have greater utility for the masses, else it stood the risk of being rejected. This is based on the notion that if an idea has strong utility for the people and not simply for an individual, then it is equitable. The subject of government therefore should not be an aggregate of single citizens, but the totality of the demos. In order to ensure that this is workable, we must have representative democracy that is guaranteed largely through the electoral process. The notion of representative democracy insists that democracy should be more accountable. At constituency level, there should be some sort of town-meeting democracy for concerns of the people at the local level, which would eventually be an extension of what is presented at the national level. On this note, representative democracy would be more participatory. But the danger we still face is to the effect that representative democracy had been impossible in political governance, because even if there was to be a sane electoral system, we would still have difficulty of the quality of representatives in politics. Most times, we are left to choose among many evils, and since we must choose, we are limited in our alternatives; hence, even a most preferred candidate for political representation would still be an error to contend with.

Democracy takes into consideration the involvement of everyone in a particular dispensation and the leaders in a democratic age form their duties, bearing in mind the future consequences of their actions. Those who elect their representatives do that with the idea of posterity in mind. It therefore becomes pertinent that while democracy is representative, it is first of all participatory. The task of representation in a polity involves both the electorates and those who are elected, since even the elected participates in making the process fruitful. Before we therefore speak of the incompetence of a leadership, we should in the first place focus attention on the populace (electorates) in whose hands should largely lie the success of the democratic process. Weak leadership is not happenstance, for it evolves from the quality of followership that a leader governs. As the concept of republic has to do with the public thing, the power of a part of it

stems from the whole. To participate therefore, is to take part, to prove oneself as part of a unit or whole and to assume the active role that results from such membership. But it is more than just political; it is also social, for it can help to reconstitute the weak organic solidarity that exists in a system and extends to all spheres of life, ranging from workplaces, neighbourhoods, pressure groups, etc.[11]

Here, participatory democracy involves elements from both direct and representative democracy. While citizens determine policy proposals, the job of representatives is to implement such policies. But citizens can only affect policies to the degree of their engagement in the democratic process. This was clearly described by Aragones and Sanchez-Pages; they hold that citizens are the first to move by making policy proposals and their representatives react to such proposal, deciding whether to implement them or not. In a standard model of representative democracy, representatives make policy decisions and citizens approve or disprove such policy choices in their future elections.[12] However, this is only possible where leaders fear that their action and inactions would arouse public pressure and may thus be sanctionable under conditions where the judiciary has not been compromised. The people govern through their representatives because sovereignty belongs to the people. The pattern of governance practiced in many countries in Africa is antithetical to democracy, whereby sovereignty belongs to the people only in written codes. But if sovereignty belongs to the people and their representatives hold power, when they determine when to take and give it and shelve the public out of governance, then it loses its status as a sovereign state. This hegemonic domination promotes individualism with representatives making decisions that endures as long as they are able to sustain their positions. True leadership enshrines principles that outlives the leader. Applying the principles to institutions, Fukuyama opines that "institutions are rules or repeated patterns of behaviour that survive the particular individuals who operate them at any one time."[13]

Democratic Education as a Viable Tool to Enhancing Democracy
This is one of the salient issues that has evaded our polity. In well governed democracies, there is greater civic engagement and citizens' participation. Participatory institutions built on a foundation of liberal rights and respect for law, as well as on a civil religion whose core beliefs include pluralism, tolerance and the open society are easier to mold, than institutions created in the absence of such foundations.[14] This informs the notion of the global struggle for freedom through human rights rather than focusing on democracy. How can we nurture democracy in a developing state like Nigeria? Barber avers that when fashioning democracy in an evolving society, it is necessary to establish the educational and civic conditions to cultivating engaged citizenship before constructing an elaborate top-down constitution that can function properly when nurtured by a competent citizenry.[15] Thomas Jefferson rightly puts it in one of his quotes when he said that; if a nation expects to be ignorant and free at the same time, such a nation expects what was not and will never be. For us to become citizens we first of all have to be free because only individuals living in a freely guided atmosphere can choose to be citizens. To be a competent citizen therefore, there must be absence of fear that comes from oppressiveness. It implies that absence of freedom is a negation of citizenship. "Democratic engagement offers an alternative to the politics of fear… Fear's empire is an empire without citizens, where passive spectators watch in fearful awe as criminals and lawmen shoot it out."[16] But in the republic of citizens, people throw off their fear and engage in democratic action.

Democratic education is largely a product of effective school management condition. Our democracy/economy is largely a reflection of our education and the quality of our democracy/economy cannot be better than the quality of our education. What the school produces is what the society eventually becomes and the products of the school system would most likely be engaged in policy-making for the economy and also for the educational system. Impliedly, there would always be a vicious cycle into what the school produces either progressively or retrogressively. Leadership, sharing of responsibility, skill acquisition and habits of civic activity are qualities that the society needs and it is a function of successful college formation.

CONCLUSION

The concept of democracy as simplistic as it appears, is without easy answers, since its success depends on both the electorates and their representatives. Systems do not build themselves, they are made and recreated by people. Thus, to have a high success rate that is citizen-centric, there is need for a committed populace that would be active participants in that which guarantees their sustenance.

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