

The Governing Elite and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: An Appraisal of the Fourth Republic

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ABSTRACT

The general objective of this paper is to examine the impact of the political process through the governing elites on democratic consolidation in Nigeria's fourth republic. The paper argued that successive governing elites in Nigeria assimilated the character and attributes of the colonial administrators by being predatory and exploitative, thus have failed to maintain any form of social contract with the Nigerian people through governance. With the adoption of secondary method of data collection and Elite theory as framework of analysis, the paper observed that the much expected democratic dividends are still lacking and the requirements for democratic consolidation are yet to be in place. The paper suggested that the governing elite must tackle multiple tasks of building consensus in the political process, reform institutions, govern with sufficient accountability and uphold constitutionalism.

Keywords: consolidation; democracy; elite; governance; republic

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1 INTRODUCTION

Some scholars contend that democracy is a destination in the political process of nation-states. The process commences with the building of a strong state; progressing through internal security; law and order; and sense of nationalism. A strong proponent of this school is Narang (2002) who argued that it took some countries in Europe, several centuries to arrive at this point. Democracy (especially the Western variant) and its compliments: rule of law; separation of powers; and party system to mention but a few seem to be the vogue across the globe, particularly in post-colonial (African) states who are not careful in adapting same to their peculiar situations and cultural settings.

There is a noticeable tendency to trace the performance of democracy as a form of government in Nigeria to the colonial trappings of the state, the nature and character of successive governing elites and their misrepresentation of the purpose of state machinery to the citizenry (Kukah in Nwankwor, 2004: 313). The contributions of earlier theorists like Rousseau and Locke that governance is a contract between the governed and leaders seems irrelevant in the management of public affairs in Nigeria. This perhaps underscores the lack of appreciation of the purpose or essence of the state. However, in entrenched democratic systems where rulers are held accountable to the ruled through various political and institutional mechanisms which include competitive multi-party elections conducted at regular intervals, this dismal state of affairs can be redressed. Ogundiya and Baba (2007) resonate that participation and accountability as vital ingredients of democracy offer the requisite platforms to determining who governs and the demand for stewardship realizable through periodic elections.

The political process in Nigeria under the current dispensation (Fourth Republic) may qualify as civilian rule, but will not pass the test of democratic rule. This is premised on the fact that political parties largely lack internal democracy in their operations (Onyishi, 2007 and Ikeanyibe, 2009), thus restraining inclusive-style of participation. The combination of weak institutions of governance and self-inflicted inhibitions of agents/officials of these institutions (judiciary, legislature and executive) conjointly render all forms of accountability a nullity. Based on this background, the paper seeks to appraise the role of governing elites in consolidating or entrenching democracy in Nigeria with a focus on the Fourth Republic (1999-2014). This paper comprises: Abstract; Introduction; Conceptual Discourse; Theoretical Framework; The Political Class and Democracy in the Fourth Republic; Conclusion and Recommendations.

2 METHOD AND MATERIALS

In the main, this study relied on secondary data based on textbooks, journals, newspapers and internet sources. The study also benefitted from participant observation based on the fact that the Researchers as citizens of Nigeria have been actively involved in the electoral and governing process as observers and through academic enquiry anchored on textual analysis to data. Asika (1991:17-18) reinforced the utility and relevance of participant observation to studies of this nature thus “there are some...situations where the...method of gathering information is for the person seeking the information to participate and observe”. These methods in combination with elite theory as framework of analysis informed the deductions, conclusion and recommendations of the paper.

3 CONCEPTUAL/THEORETICAL DISCOURSE ON ELITE

Elite connotes “a group of people regarded as the best in a particular society or organization” (Soanes, Hawker, Elliott, 2006: 288). It is deductible from the above that elites can be typologised as: Governing or Political; Business; Traditional; Religious; Intellectual and so on. The focus of this paper is on the governing or political elites. This class of elites is usually located within the political process of any nation-state and is responsible for managing the political and administrative affairs. It is predicated on this, that the discussion of this paper has its theoretical base laid in the elite theory.

There are several versions of the elite theory ranging from that developed by Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca to those of C.W. Mills, Floyd Hunter and Raymond Aron. A combination of these

versions of the theory will be utilised as framework of analysis. The elite theory was first developed by two Italian Sociologists namely: Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca. The earlier versions of the theory emphasized personal attributes of leaders, which aided their hold or dominance in power positions. Later versions dwelt more on the institutional framework of society (Haralambos, 1999: 107). The thrust of the theory are as follows:

- i. Elite owes its power to its internal organisation and forms a united and cohesive minority in the face of an unorganised and fragmented mass.
- ii. Major decisions which affect society are taken by the elite, and these decisions usually reflect the interest of the elite rather than the wishes of the majority.
- iii. The mass of the population is largely controlled and manipulated by the elite, passively accepting the propaganda which justifies elite rule.
- iv. Major change in society occurs when one elite replaces another. Pareto refers to this as “circulation of elites” and he noted that “all elite tend to become decadent”. “They decay in quality and lose their vigour. They may become soft and ineffective with the pleasures of easy living and the privileges of power...” (Haralambos, 1999: 108).
- v. The rule by a minority is an inevitable feature of social life and that the ruling minority is superior to the mass of the population who lack capacity for self-government and require the leadership and guidance of an elite. Mosca (in Haralambos, 1999: 109) hinged his argument on a historical claim that in all societies, there is “a class that rules and a class that is ruled”. Mosca corroborated that “the first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolises power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class is directed and controlled by the first”.
- vi. Pareto typified modern democracies as merely another form of elite domination. Mosca averred that democracy could be government of the people, “it might even be government for the people, but it could never be government by the people. Elite rule remained inevitable” (Haralambos, 1999: 109).

In addition to the foregoing, C.W. Mills hypothesised that American society is dominated by a power elite of unprecedented power and unaccountability, free from popular control, pursues its own concern which are power and self-aggrandizement. Dahl in Haralambos (1999: 112) argued in reaction to C.W. Mills’s hypothesis that if it can be shown that a fraction of the society has the power to take “decisions on taxation and expenditures, subsidies, welfare programmes, military policy and...overrule opposition to its policies, then the existence of a power elite will have been established”. Raymond Aron in his version on Communist societies added that the elite employ power primarily for self-enrichment and that the mass of the population is left without any means of defence against the elite.

4 APPLICATION OF THEORY

The governing elite in Nigeria deriving from their social characteristics and privileges of office operate as a formidable team against the mass (people) who are encumbered by daily pressure for sustenance and necessities of life. The manipulative tendencies and tool by the elite inhibit any genuine effort to advance common cause in form of qualitative education, shelter, basic infrastructure and other social amenities as deliverables of democratic governance. Madunagu (2005: 1) validated this in his assertion that “the dominant fraction of the Nigerian ruling classes does not use the wealth they loot...for the benefit of ‘their people’, although these poor people whose names are invoked in vain are often mobilized to fight their imaginary enemies”.

The reference to looting of the nation’s wealth above reinforces the serial argument by scholars and public analysts/social commentators that the governing elites in Nigeria (past and present) are complicit in resource plunder, and as an extension of the colonial state, the post-colonial state represented by the governing elite is also predatory and exploitative. Additionally, Onyishi (2007: 197) documented that “...the post-colonial state never became a reflection of the contending social forces within society. This inorganic character of the emergent Nigerian state meant that it would...not encapsulate a social contract

between the citizens and...the government". He corroborated that the emergent statesmen were apprenticed under the colonial administrators and required such anti-democratic traits as arrogance; exclusivity; elitism; executive authoritarianism, censorship of popular debate on public issues.

Successive governing elites in Nigeria are not accountable to the citizenry. This is attributable to the fallen status of Nigerian laws and weak institutions of governance which ensures that the internal and external mechanisms for upholding public accountability are grossly circumscribed (Ibietan, 2013). Support for these averments hinges on various allegations of public treasury looting by public officials, Governors and local government chieftains to mention but a few. The institutions (CCB; EFCC; ICPC; Judiciary) saddled with the tasks of maintaining probity in office, moral rectitude in the conduct of government business and integrity in public affairs have not been able to do much due to the reasons adduced above. It is however doubtful if there is anything the defenseless mass of the population can do about this, in view of the instrument of coercion at the disposal of the elite. This validates Pareto's assertion that modern democracies are merely another form of elite domination. C.W. Mills's hypothesis on unaccountability, unprecedented use of power for selfish pursuit and personal aggrandizement are very apt as reflected in the foregoing analyses.

The challenge of service delivery, infrastructural deficits and qualitative life for citizenry among others demonstrate that the expected democratic dividends have not been delivered. The governing elite in Nigeria may have become decadent and ineffective due to pleasures of easy living and privileges of power in the words of Pareto. ANEEJ (2004: 16) reinforced this issue while identifying the existence of a predatory state and elite in Nigeria, and submitted with finality that "this may therefore explain the lack of development in the country..."

From independence to date, Nigeria has witnessed the "circulation of elites" as theorized by Pareto; this implies that one elite replaces another in order that major change in society can occur. It is however doubtful if major and qualitative changes had taken place to position the country in the big league in development terms. As 2015 elections beckon, it would be a matter of conjecture (which this paper is careful not to engage in) to evaluate what the All Progressives Congress (APC) or Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) or any other Party can do to alter for good, the seemingly dismal development outlook and performance of Nigeria.

5 DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

There is a convergence of opinion by scholars and writers that Democracy as a concept in the Social Sciences is nebulous and its usage can sometimes be misplaced due to its immense "propaganda value" (Omeje, 2001; Sobowale, 2013). It is therefore not surprising that Oyovbaire in Obasi (2001:21) posited that "democracy has no settled meaning. It connotes image as well as reality of politics for different political systems, rulers, citizens, actors and scholars. As a theory of politics, it has had a turbulent history". The historical nuances and landmarks of democracy are traceable to the Greeks, where it was practiced in its direct form, and as noted by Alapiki (2004: 50), it is "a situation where all the citizens took part in law making and policy formulation". This is no longer practicable in contemporary situations with manifestly large population and wide geographical coverage. It is predicated on this that representative democracies in which people exercise governing power either directly or indirectly through representatives elected periodically by themselves (Ezeani, 2010: 114) has proved to be suitable.

Gana in Ogundiya and Baba (2007: 245) opined that democracy is "a government by persons freely chosen by the governed who also hold them accountable and responsible for their actions while in government". These authors inferred from the above definition that the two core ideas and ingredients underlying democracy are participation and accountability. A thorough scrutiny of the political process in Nigeria's fourth republic reveals that the governing elite have made caricature of these ingredients (participation and accountability). To be sure, elections which ordinarily should ensure, confirm or re-affirm legitimacy of the elected in governance through regular consent, and also provide a virile platform for democracy to blossom has become grossly compromised. This position is buttressed by the works of a galaxy of authors, such as Onyishi, 2007; Ikeanyi, 2009; and Sobowale, 2013.

In addition, democracy requires strong political culture and durable institutions to thrive. Curiously, the political process in the fourth republic is devoid of optimism as far as political culture and institutions of governance are concerned. It is on this reckoning that Onyishi (2007: 205) averred on a cautionary note that "...some basic institutional reforms are needed as a matter of urgency. The state of the following institutional guards of democracy needs to be tinkered with: election management organisation, the legislature, the judiciary, the police, the constitution, the civil society".

The observation made by Umezurike (2011: 37) that democracy has remained largely tenuous in Nigeria raises a fundamental poser on whether it is apt to discuss democratic consolidation in the context of its wobbling and fumbling experience. Rustow in Mclean and McMillan (2003: 145) may be right in his allusion to "transitions" and "consolidation" as vital factors in democratic stability. He corroborated that "attention must be given to political institutions and procedures (free and fair political participation and contestation, and wide protection of civil rights)".

Democratic consolidation connotes "the challenges of making new democracies secure by extending their life expectancy beyond the short-term and making them immune against the threat of authoritarian repression..." (Beetham in Ainabor, Idomeh and Braimoh, 2010: 17). This makes it clearer why Obasi (2001: 21) posited that "democracy is...the opposite of arbitrary, despotic or tyrannical rule". The conditions for democratic consolidation are: popular legitimization; the diffusion of democratic values, the routinization of anti-system actors, civilian-military relations, party building, organization of functional interest, the stabilization of electoral rules, judicial reforms, alleviation of poverty and economic stabilization.

The above requirements for democratic consolidation appear quite omnibus and converges with Onyishi's (2007) recommendations, and these explain why democratic consolidation looks like a tantalizing mirage or tall order in Nigeria's fourth republic. From the experience within the last fifteen years, perhaps it is safer to posit that Nigeria should sustain or stabilize civilian rule based on the foregoing narrative, rather than pointing to democratic consolidation.

In a related discourse, Usman (2010) opined that transition to democratic rule is not an automatic guarantee for consolidation. He stretched the argument that democratic consolidation (process) requires redefinition of institutions and relations among political actors. There is therefore the tendency to associate consolidated democracies with their stability. This view agrees with Rustow in Mclean and McMillan (2003) that transitions and consolidation are common denominators in democratic stability. Ainabor et.al (2010: 18) building on Diamond (1995) conceptualized democratic consolidation as "the process by which democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate among its citizens that it is unlikely to breakdown".

This implies that behaviour and institutional change normalize democratic politics and narrows its uncertainty. As a process, democratic consolidation is an amalgam of several factors or conditions (listed above) operating in a symbiotic manner. As a corollary, democratic consolidation calls for deliberate efforts by the governing elite and political class to adopt common interest in establishing and upholding electoral procedures, obeying electoral rules, avoiding destabilizing political conducts, entrenching robust conflict management mechanisms in the political process. The net effect is that democratic structures, institutions and processes are strengthened. A high degree of consensus building among political class tends to create peaceful political climate. This combined with transparent and accountable leadership plus people-centred (public) policy orientation, persuasively explains mass mobilization and galvanizes development via democratic dividends.

The balance sheet or synopsis on this discourse based on foregoing evidence dictate that succour be drawn from Narang (2002: 377-378) that "...elected leaders must...tackle multiple tasks. They must build institutions, reform institutions and in some cases dismantle institutions... procedurally; they must govern with sufficient accountability and faithfulness to the law and constitution to enhance the legitimacy of the constitutional system..." These postulations offer enduring path to democratic consolidation which is feasible but quite herculean, and creates the necessary bulwark against democratic instability. The next

section of this paper discusses the activities of the political class and governing elites and the impact on democracy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria's fourth republic.

6 THE POLITICAL CLASS AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN THE FOURTH REPUBLIC

At the re-emergence of democracy in 1999, public expectation from the democratic process was very high; this implies that the political class in Nigeria would come under public scrutiny in governance and to provide solutions to most of the nagging issues in the socio-economic and political arena. The political class whether elected or appointed, owe a duty to the citizenry to uphold the socio-economic objectives/directive principles of state and maintain rectitude in governance. Sadly, much of these have not been seen in the Fourth republic. It is even more disturbing that elections which could have served as platform to correct deviations and a veritable mechanism for the realization of the objectives of democratization have been reduced to a charade, thus, making democratic process/practice in Nigeria, a political liability, a source of multiple societal problems and decay (Ogundiya and Baba, 2007: 245).

To be sure, electoral process in Nigeria since 1999, have been characterized by irregularities, brigandage, unrestrained violence, wanton destruction of lives and properties. In fact, electoral politics in Nigeria since 1999 raises grave concern, and as corroborated by Ibeanu (2007:295) "... elections failed woefully and those who conducted them set back the hands of the clock of democratic consolidation in Nigeria..." This state of affairs tends to position the country on the precipice for some years now. The past fifteen years have been characterized by tragic regression in some spheres of national life. Nigerians have indeed passed through harrowing times and watched their standards of living plummet drastically as successive Human Development reports show.

The United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report of 2004 ranked Nigeria as the 30th poorest country in the world, and according to the Global Competitive Index (GCI, 2013-2014), Nigeria ranked as 120th country among 148 countries in the world. The socio-economic and political characteristics of the country over these years include: persistent poverty; unemployment; poor economic management; widespread corruption; infrastructural deficits; low investor confidence; debt overhang; inefficient public institutions; and lack of confidence in government (on the part of the governed). The antidote to these maladies inheres in good governance anchored on durable and sustainable democratic process and institutions. The governing elite and political class has tremendous roles to play in this regard and it stands to good reason that constitutionalism and viable political culture must constitute the fulcrum of democratic consolidation.

It is obvious that the political party system within this period has failed to chart a course that could entrench genuine democracy. This position was taken further by Ikeanyibe (2009:70) while building on the works of other scholars that political parties, especially in Nigeria's fourth republic are "...lacking in organization, discipline focus or souls. Their membership is filled by corrupt, unpatriotic and undisciplined political elite that sees election more as an investment than a call to serve people." The desperation of politicians to capture state power becomes clearer in the light of these averments.

In a related discourse, Onyishi (2007:199) was more pungent in positing that the inordinate quest to acquire and retain state power implies the deployment of "...resources of the state in the ... struggle to retain it." He submitted further that they "block every democratic tendency... (and) continue to use all kinds of means to capture state power in order to protect themselves against the vagaries of politics." These expositions present cogent explanations on the palpable nature of democratic experience in Nigeria's fourth republic. This is exacerbated by lack of ideology, values and internal democracy within and among political parties. It is axiomatic and revealing that credible and robust opposition politics anchored on democratic tenets have been quite elusive within this period, and this was typified pejoratively by Ikeanyibe (2009:60) as "the irony of one-party state in a multiparty system."

7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper examined the role of governing elite and impact of the political process on democratic consolidation in Nigeria's fourth republic. From the foregoing, it is deductible that there has been massive rape and assault on democratic process and practice due to the avalanche of factors discussed in the paper. The political class and the governing elite have not sufficiently aligned themselves with the required democratic values and ethos, by being sportsmanly in electoral process and this seems to give an impression that they are far from being altruistic. The serious business of governance have been reduced to a huge joke, because the average Nigerian who is supposed to be the subject of development is not in the permutation and daily actions of the governing elite, such that the standard of living of the masses have shown deceleration in relative terms to the period before the fourth republic.

The elite theory as framework of analysis utilized in this paper has proved useful in exposing the characteristics and trappings of governing elite and political class. It highlighted elite complicity in resource mismanagement and dysfunctional approach to governance occasioned by avarice and rapacious inclinations which partly account for Nigeria's developmental challenges.

One major suggestion to arrest the dismal state of affairs discussed above is attitudinal reorientation among the governing elite to encapsulate codes of conduct and selflessness in public office. This has the advantage of changing the lack of social contract between the elite and the governed, such that the much desired dividends of democracy could be delivered to the populace.

Robust political culture with positive effect on vital institutions such as the judiciary, legislature, electoral body (INEC) and civil society (among others) is urgently canvassed. This has the tendency to deepen democratic process and practice.

As a corollary to the above, there is the need to cultivate a collaborative approach between the public, government and political parties to galvanise civic engagement and commitment to the ideals and tenets of democracy. This is partly achievable via improvement in public consciousness anchored on advocacy and targeted at credible cum transparent electoral process that entrenches orderly voting, ballot monitoring and protection.

The mechanisms and institutions responsible for maintaining public accountability should be invigorated; this is with a view to plugging the perforation of public wealth and resources. The anti-graft campaign and drive should be resuscitated and given serious bite in order to halt the kleptomania tendencies of the political class/governing elite.

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