



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 3.4
IJAR 2015; 1(4): 12-15
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 01-02-2015
Accepted: 20-02-2015

**Chukwuemeka Egberase
Okuchukwu**

An Independent Political and
Social Researcher Based in
Nigeria, And a Graduate of
Delta State University,
Abraka, Nigeria.

Democracy and democratic experiment- The Nigerian experience; A historical analysis

Chukwuemeka Egberase Okuchukwu

Abstract

Democracy is the most popular concept in the world today. Democracy has been seen as a prerequisite for whatsoever assistance the developed countries and the international community would want to give to the third world countries whether loans etc. This has led to the process of democratic experiment in Nigeria. This paper examines democracy and democratic experiment using the Nigerian experience as a reference point. It also analyzes the challenges facing democracy and the process of democratic experiment in Nigeria, with historical analysis of First – Fourth Republic (1960-date). The study adopted the use of secondary data and historical analysis in data collection and analysis.

However, it was discovered that ethnicity has been a major challenge to the Nigerian democracy and democratic experiment right from Nigeria's First Republic 1960's. The study however, made recommendations to the problem.

Keywords: Democracy, Democratic Experiment, Nigeria, Corruption and Ethnicity.

1. Introduction

Democracy is a controversial concept. Easy to say, difficult to define. The question often asked is what are the virtues of democracy?

The most popular definition of democracy was given by Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address in 1864. He saw democracy "as the government of the people, by the people and for the people". By this he meant that sovereignty belongs to or resides with the people. According to Jike and Akpotor (2007) ^[5] "democracy denotes representative government which ought theoretically to stimulate a sense of attachment to policies and programmes of the state by the governed. By this, they meant that the ultimate or absolute power rests or resides with the people in a democracy.

The late Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the great Nigerian musician, who was the voice of the people, exposing the ills of African politics especially Nigerian democracy, saw democracy as "the demonstration of craziness". By democracy, he meant that African democracy especially Nigeria's is the demonstration of craziness, because its practice and enormous challenges faced in African political system especially in Nigeria is synonymous with craziness.

The fate of democracy in Africa especially the Nigeria experience is one plagued with ethnicity, corruption, mismanagement of public funds, electoral fraud and malpractices, fragrant disregard for the rule of law, constitutionalism, and fundamental human right being perpetuated by political office holders especially in Nigeria in the early 1960's and 1980's, which are still the case in this current democratic era (1999-date) are clear examples.

Similarly, Kymlicka (1995) ^[6] noted that "democracy most basic commitment is to freedom and equality of its individual citizens". The foregoing suggests that freedom and equality of individual citizens as reflected in the constitutional bills of rights are the basic hallmarks of democracy.

On the other hand, democratic experiment is a multi faceted and controversial concept. However, the concept has not been widely used by scholars in the field. Democratic experiment is the practice or application of democracy in a country especially that of new states. In other words, it is the testing of democratic principles in a given political system at independence or return from dictatorial or military rule. Democracy was put to test in Ghana in 1958, Senegal in 1960 and even in Nigeria in 1960, 1979, and 1999. Democracy has also been applied in Asia, Latin America and even Eastern Europe.

Correspondence:

**Chukwuemeka Egberase
Okuchukwu**

An Independent Political and
Social Researcher Based in
Nigeria, And a Graduate of
Delta State University,
Abraka, Nigeria.

After the attempt at democratic experiment in Nigeria in 1960, when the new African state was born, democratic experiment however failed in the First republic Nigerian politics in 1960-1966, due to the complex structure inherent in the west minister model of parliamentary democracy, coupled with the problem of ethnicity caused by the tripartite structure inherent in the colonial era.

2. The Statement of Problem

Democracy and the process of democratic experiment in Nigeria has been faced with enormous challenges and prospects. The fate of democracy especially the Nigerian experience is one bedevilled with ethnicity, massive corruption, mismanagement of public funds, electoral fraud and malpractices, flagrant disregard for the rule of law, constitutionalism and abuse of fundamental human right being perpetuated by political office holders and politicians which are still prevalent in this current democratic era (1999-date) are clear examples of pseudo-democracy.

Aboribo and Akpovona, (2007) ^[7] rightly stated that “a critical look at the Nigerian political scene reveals that Nigeria’s failure in the practice of democracy is attributed to the role of its state in the economy and its role in the process of class formation”. They further asserted that, “a critical examination of the Nigerian political terrain reveals that the practice of democracy in Nigeria only caters for the interest of the dominant class”.

This paper however, explores democracy and the process of democratic experiment using a historical study of the Nigerian experience as a clear example of pseudo-democracy. Also this work tends to proffer recommendations to the challenges confronting democracy and the process of democratic experiment in Nigeria.

3. The Origin of Democracy

The origin and tenets of democracy can be traced to the ancient Greek city- state of Athens. Appadorai, (1974) ^[4] asserts that “when the Athenians called their constitution a democracy, ‘they meant literally what the word itself expressed- that the people itself undertook the work of government”. The Greek city state of Athens practiced direct democracy where the adult citizen undertook the work of government and governed themselves directly.

Today, direct democracy is obsolete, due to the enormous size and population of a country. What is obtainable presently in different countries is indirect or what is referred to as modern or representative democracy. A system of government whereby the people exercise the governing power through their elected representative periodically elected by themselves. This means that elections are periodically held in a state to elect those who will govern the state on their behalf.

However, according to Anifowose and Enemu, (1999) ^[3], “the word, ‘democracy’ derives from two Greek words, ‘demos’ which means the ‘people’ and ‘kratein’ which means ‘rule of or by’”. They further asserted that “the term democracy, therefore literally means ‘rule by the people’”.

4. Democracy and the Process of Democratic Experiment in Nigeria

A Historical Analysis.

First Republic (1960-1966)

Democracy and the process of democratic experiment is one that arouse pity and that has cost Nigerians pains especially

in the first republic (1960-1966). With an emerging civil war 1967-1970 this taught Nigerians a bitter lesson after the failed attempt of democratic experiment.

When Nigeria was set to gain independence, in 1959 all hopes were high for a new Nigeria, citizens commented on the type of government Nigeria desired. The general elections were held into the federal house of assembly and the three regional assemblies. Nigeria finally gained independence from her ex- colonial master, Britain on 1st October, 1960, democracy was put to test. Democratic experiment failed in the first republic when the country was introduced with a west minister model of parliamentary democracy, like the type in Britain, where there were two political leaders (the head of government who in charge of the day- to- day running of the government on one hand and the head of state who performs ceremonial functions on the other hand) like that of Britain were Queen Elizabeth II is the head of state and David Cameron, on the other hand is the prime minister. This institution was used to preserved monarchy which was converted to constitutional monarchy in the seventeenth century medieval era.

After the 1959 general elections, the NPC and NCNC formed an alliance, in other to form the government at the centre, and Sir Tafawa Balewa became the first prime minister (i.e the head of government) and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe became the Governor General (i.e ceremonial head).

Furthermore, immediately after independence in 1960 when the Nigeria’s ‘Green, White, Green’ flag was hosted in the air and the sound of gun salutes, barely a month, the state of the country was threatened as things began to go worst. As the country’s political system was plague with tribalism and ethnicity which threatened the future of Nigerian democracy and led to a brutal ethnic cleanings and civil war in 1967-1970 which claimed lives and properties worth millions were destroyed, leaving the country battle wrecked.

There was also high level of corruption and mismanagement of public funds by public office holders which was left on checked, with the case of police brutality of citizens, saw the clamour for change in Nigeria’s political process which was plagued with indiscipline and no respect for moral values. The hopes of a new Nigeria diminished as the citizenry were disillusioned with the Northern oligarchy and the NPC-NCNC alliance; political leaders were able to manipulate the various institutions such as the police force, armed forces etc. to suit their political interests. Opposition parties to the government of the day were not tolerated by the ruling NPC-NCNC government as they were been manhandled by security personnel.

More so, with the crisis that rocked the Action Group (AG) namely the Awolowo- Akintola crisis in 1963, with the pass of a vote of no confidence on the chief S. L. Akintola’s government by the western regional assembly members who were loyal to Chief Obafemi Awolowo.

The federal government intervened in the crisis by supporting one party in the conflict, making the crisis to take new dimensions. The politics then, was the politics of regionalism where whosoever capture the larger regions wins the highest number of seats in the legislature so as to form the government at the centre. So this means that whosoever controls the parliament controls the government.

The 1914 amalgamation by Sir Lord Lugard was an incomplete one, as the merging of the Northern and the Southern protectorates and the colony of Lagos, was not implemented to the later. It was only a theoretical

arrangement and not in practice. The worst evil committed by the British administration in Nigeria was the tripartite policy in 1946 by dividing the two existing regions into three regions making the Northern part the biggest part, that way one region can hold the two other regions to ransom. Instead of making it four regions by dividing the North part into two parts, given way for one of the important principle of federalism, which is equality of states, instead they made it three regions.

“Critics maintained that if a nation as large and heterogeneous as Nigeria was to survive and prosper, its citizens must feel themselves as part of the larger community with a stake in the preservation of national unity and stability” (Ojiako, O. J, 1983) ^[7]. Nigerians then blamed the ugly situation on parliamentary system of government in its practice of democracy and democratic experiment. They however put their blames on the structure of the first republic, that it was not conducive to national unity.

Second Republic (1979- 1983):

The road to a second republic witnessed pitfalls. Politicians and political office holder did not learn from the events that bedevilled the first republic 1960-1966.

The Murtala Mohammed/ Obasanjo military regimes who seceded Gowon military administration promised to hand over power to civilian rule 1st October, 1979. After the brutal assassination of General Murtala Mohammed, General Obasanjo, the second- in- chief, who later became head of state, kept of this promise.

The transition programme as earlier announced by Murtala Mohammed, that on 1st October, 1979, the military will hand over power to civilians was yet another attempt of the process of democratic experiment. A five stage transition programme which include;

1. Appointment of a constitution drafting committee in October 1975, to work on the preliminary draft.
2. The creation of new states and establishment of the newly created states by April, completion of the first draft of the constitution by September 1976.
3. The election into a constituent assembly in October in 1977.
4. Ratification of the draft constitution by the constituent assembly by October 1978 and lifting of the 1966 Ban on political activities.
5. States and federal elections by October 1979.

The 1979 Nigerian constitution however adopted the presidential system of government, modelled after that of the United States of America (USA), whereby there is the separation of powers among three arms of government (i.e Executive, Legislature and Judiciary). Alhaji Shehu Shagari became the first civilian executive president in 1979.

The Nigerian democracy during the second republic witnessed four years of political wrangling, failures of zoning system, corruption, mismanagement and embezzlements of public funds, flagrant disregard for the rule of law, fundamental human right and constitutionalism and also north – South confrontation.

The second republic also collapse in 1983, due to the above problems witnessed by the country after return to civilian rule.

Third Republic (1992-1993)

The third republic was not an exception. There was the controversy of which ethnic group should capture political

power. The federal military government of President Ibrahim B. Babaginda, created two political parties in 1992 namely NRC and SDP for the purpose of contesting political office, but the military was cut in a praetorian trap. Due to the election crisis then, with the presidential election dispute and the unwillingness of the military to leave office led to the collapse of the third republic in 1993.

Fourth Republic (1999-date)

Towards the return of Nigeria to democracy in 1999, expectations were high and the country was look at as a power bloc in the African continent. In 1999, saw the transition from military rule to civilian rule. The general elections came by in 1999, voters turn out in mass to vote for their preferred candidate but, the electoral success was upturn in favour of the Nigerian political elite, installing Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the president and commander in chief of the Armed forces.

During Obasanjo’s administration 1999-2007, the Nigerian democracy was bedevilled with the challenges of corruption, embezzlement of public funds, project abandonment, disregard for court order and the rule of law, violation and abuse of fundamental human right, electoral fraud and rigging, and the Niger Delta crisis.

Oromarephake (2007) ^[8], opined that the result is lack of accountability and good governance, project abandonment, infrastructures decay, ostentatious living of leaders, social inequality and continued underdeveloped democracy”.

The 2007 presidential election witnessed the emergence of Alhaji Umaru Musa Ya’radua as the president of Nigeria after the administration of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. The Ya’radua/ Jonathan administration introduce the Niger Delta amnesty programme which has considerably solve the problem of the Niger Delta militancy and brought peace to the troubled region.

With the death of late President Umaru Musa Ya’radua in May 2010, witnessed the swearing in of his vice president, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan. President Jonathan later contested the 2011 presidential election and won on the platform of the PDP. In recent times, Nigeria’s democracy and the process of democratic experiment has enormous challenges. The country’s democracy is been plagued with massive corruption, mismanagement and embezzlement of public funds, undue interference by the executive arm of government in the affairs of the other arms of government, human right abuses, flagrant disrespect for the rule of law and constitutionalism and very recently the Boko Haram insurgency.

With the 2015 presidential election around the corner, expectations are high as to the credibility of the process and there has been a clamour by the main opposition party, the APC for change of political leadership of Nigeria in 2015. There has been the question as to what will become of Nigerian democracy in after 2015 general elections?

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

From the above analysis, democracy and democratic experiment-the Nigerian experience has witnessed enormous challenges and prospects. With the challenges facing Nigeria’s democracy in recent times and the Boko haram terrorism in the Northern part of the country which has claimed millions of lives and properties. Critics have maintained that the Nigerian democracy may collapse if the current Boko haram crisis is not tackled by the Jonathan

administration.

For the Nigerian democracy and the process of democratic experiment to survive in this current democratic era 1999-date, it must ensure equitable distribution of resources to the various class and ethnic groups in Nigeria, and also ensure democratic virtues and hallmarks which include freedom and equality, the rule of law, constitutionalism and separation of power. Ensure a free, fair and credible election in 2015 and a far-reaching solution to the Boko haram crisis in the North part of Nigeria.

Nigerian politicians and public office holders should learn from their past mistakes especially in the first, second and third republics and play politics according to the rules of the game and uphold democratic tenets. Nigerians should be passionate in preserving the nation's democracy at all cost.

6. References

1. Aboribo RI, Akpovona V. The state and democracy in Nigeria, Nigerian Sociological Review, a Special Edition of NSS Journal: The State, Society and Development 2007; 2(1):1-14.
2. Ademoyega A. Why we struck: the story of the first Nigeria coup. Ibadan: Evans Brothers Publishers Limited, 1981.
3. Anifowose R, Enemufo F. (ed.) Elements of politics. Lagos: Sam Iroanusi Publications, 1999.
4. Appadorai A. The substance of politics. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974.
5. Jike VT, Akpotor J. Democracy and the problems of development in Nigeria, Nigerian Sociological Review, a Special Edition of NSS Journal: The State, Society and Development 2007; 2(1):27-35.
6. Kymlicka W. Multicultural citizenship. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
7. Ojiako OJ. 1st four years of Nigeria executive presidency, success or failure. Daily Times of Nigeria Limited, 1983.
8. Oromarephake P. Democratic governance and the problem of corruption in Nigeria, Nigerian Sociological Review, a Special Edition of NSS Journal on: The State, Society and Development 2007; 2(1):112-119.