

## A Synopsis of the Nigerian Democracy

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### Abstract

This research paper makes a critical analysis of Nigerian Democracy. In the Global North and Global South, democracy has emerged as the most viable governmental system. Since its transition from military rule to democracy in 1999, Nigeria has navigated a complex political landscape marked by progress as well as persistent challenges. That is, the Nigerian State has navigated a tumultuous journey through various forms of democracy, driven by the conviction that it represents the sole acceptable political framework for the nation. Despite encountering considerable challenges, including the perceived inadequacies of the elections in 2003, 2007, and the mixed outcomes of those in 2011 and 2015, 2019 and 2023, the commitment to democracy remains deeply ingrained among the populace. With the adoption of content analysis and the liberal theory of state as a theoretical framework, the research critically explores the Nigerian Democracy since the fourth republic. The findings of this research paper are that, the fundamental measure of democracy lies in effective or good governance while good governance entails; improved living standards for the average person, heightened public perception of fair and judicious allocation and use of resources, restoration and functionality of essential infrastructure, economic diversification and increased trust in the electoral process. The research paper recommends citizens attitudinal change, electoral reforms, political party regulation, civic education, civil society engagement, judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, decentralization of power, ethnic and religious harmony, for effective consolidation of the Nigerian democracy.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Democracy, Political, Challenge, Governance

### Introduction

Democracy has garnered significant global attention and is upheld as a widely accepted system of governance. Across the world, there's an anticipation that all political frameworks should embrace democracy due to its recognized merits and sophisticated administrative methodologies. Nonetheless, there's a palpable sense of disillusionment with democracy, particularly evident in Nigeria, where expectations often exceed the actual outcomes. Kneuer (2020) emphasizes that there's no one-size-fits-all model of democracy. It's crucial to recognize that democracy is not merely a destination but rather an ongoing journey. To effectively yield results, democratic values must be deeply ingrained within any political

system that espouses them.

Since its transition from military rule to democracy in 1999, Nigeria has navigated a complex political landscape marked by progress as well as persistent challenges. The Fourth Republic, inaugurated with the election of Olusegun Obasanjo, promised a departure from decades of authoritarianism towards democratic governance. However, the trajectory of Nigerian democracy has been tumultuous, characterized by a mixture of achievements and setbacks. One of the significant accomplishments of Nigerian democracy is the consolidation of power through regular elections. Despite irregularities and accusations of fraud, successive administrations have witnessed peaceful transfers of power, a testament to the resilience of democratic institutions.

Moreover, the proliferation of media outlets and civil society organizations has fostered an environment of political accountability and transparency, albeit with limitations due to government censorship and intimidation.

Nevertheless, Nigeria's democratic journey has been marred by systemic challenges, including corruption, ethnic and religious tensions, and weak governance structures. Corruption remains pervasive at all levels of government, eroding public trust and hindering socio-economic development (Adekunle, 2023). The concentration of power within the executive branch has often led to abuse of authority and infringement upon the autonomy of other democratic institutions, such as the judiciary and legislature. Furthermore, ethno-religious divisions and regional disparities have fueled political instability and violence, particularly in the oil-rich Niger Delta and the northern regions plagued by insurgency. The failure to address these underlying grievances has exacerbated social unrest and undermined national cohesion. Moreover, the limited inclusivity of the political process has marginalized minority groups and perpetuated elite dominance, hindering the full realization of democratic principles. Women and youth continue to be underrepresented in political leadership positions, reflecting structural barriers to political participation and empowerment.

Following the preceding points, this research paper endeavours to examine the trajectory of Nigerian democracy, focusing on its development, shortcomings, and merits. Delving into the dichotomy between perception and actuality, it seeks to propose actionable suggestions aimed at enhancing the efficacy of the system.

### **Methodology**

This research paper adopts a qualitative approach that involves the use of secondary data sources such as academic journals, government reports, and media reports. The choice of secondary data is because it allows for an in-depth analysis of the democracy. Data collected is analysed via

content analysis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory adopted for this research paper is the liberal theory of state. Several theorists hold different views on the state and the functions it ought to perform.

#### **John Locke View on the State**

Locke's view centered on natural rights, government legitimacy, and the social contract. Locke believed in the concept of natural rights, positing that individuals possess inherent rights to life, liberty, and property (Zhang, 2020). He argued that these rights are inalienable and preexist any form of government or societal structure. Regarding the state, Locke advocated for a limited government with specific purposes: to protect the natural rights of its citizens. He contended that the primary role of government is to safeguard individual liberties and ensure justice, rather than impose its will upon the populace. Moreover, Locke proposed the idea of the social contract, wherein individuals voluntarily enter into a collective agreement to form a government. This contract establishes the authority of the state, contingent upon its fulfillment of protecting citizens' rights. Importantly, Locke asserted that if a government fails to uphold its end of the social contract by violating citizens' rights, individuals have the right to resist and even overthrow it.

#### **John Stuart Mills View on the State**

John Stuart Mill, a prominent 19th-century philosopher and political economist, advocated for a liberal state that prioritized individual liberty and limited intervention. Mill believed that the state's primary role should be to safeguard the rights and freedoms of its citizens while promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Central to Mill's philosophy was the principle of liberty, which he famously articulated in his work "On Liberty" (Miller, 2021). He argued that individuals should have the freedom to pursue their own interests and express their opinions without interference from the state or society, as

long as they do not harm others. Mill emphasized the importance of tolerating diverse viewpoints, even those that may be unpopular or offensive. However, Mill also recognized the need for certain limitations on individual freedom to prevent harm to others or maintain public order. He supported the idea of the "harm principle," which suggests that the only justification for limiting someone's liberty is to prevent harm to others. In terms of governance, Mill advocated for representative democracy, where citizens participate in the decision-making process through elected representatives. He believed that democratic institutions could ensure accountability and prevent the concentration of power in the hands of a few.

### **J.J. Rousseau on the State**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an influential philosopher of the 18th century, presented profound insights on the nature of the state in his work, particularly expounded in "The Social Contract" (1762). Rousseau argued that the state, or civil society, arises from a social contract among individuals who surrender some freedoms to the community in exchange for protection and the benefits of organized living (Ogan, 2020). Central to Rousseau's philosophy is the concept of the "general will," which represents the collective desires and interests of the citizens. He believed that legitimate political authority stems from this general will, rather than from monarchs or ruling elites. Rousseau emphasized the importance of direct democracy, where citizens participate actively in decision-making processes to ensure that the general will prevails. However, Rousseau also cautioned against the dangers of excessive government power and the potential for tyranny. He advocated for a form of government that safeguards individual liberty while upholding the common good. Rousseau's ideal state is one that maintains a delicate balance between individual freedoms and the needs of the community.

From the above explanation of aforementioned theorists, we can agree that

they all see the state as the legal entity that fosters the wellbeing of its citizens and most importantly safeguard the lives and properties of its people. The state pursues these goals to secure the allegiance of its citizens and ensure their compliance without resorting to coercion. Thus, in a democratic context, the government functions either as a direct representative of the state or as an intermediary between the populace and the state. Nonetheless, the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of these functions depends on various circumstances.

Based on the foregoing, three important indices can be identified from the liberal theory of state.

1. Ensuring performance responsibility
2. Enhancing managerial efficiency
3. Maximizing resource mobilization and utilization effectiveness

Thus, the liberal state theory comprehensively tackled the primary dilemmas within Nigeria's political, social, and economic landscape with exactitude, which elucidates its adoption as the analytical framework. Upon close examination of this theory, it becomes evident that its core concerns revolve around accountability, the rule of law, fundamental human rights, good governance, and more. Nevertheless, the pertinent inquiry remains: To what extent has the Nigerian democracy progressed in actualizing the core tenets outlined by the theorists?

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **The Nigerian State: An Analysis**

In 1999, Nigeria transitioned back to democracy following nearly sixteen years of continuous military rule. Prior to this, democracy had intermittent periods in the country's history (Ebong, 2020). From independence in 1960 until January 15, 1966, Nigeria practiced a Westminster model democracy, which was halted by the initial military coup. In 1979, democracy resurfaced, adopting the American Presidential model, featuring an executive

president as outlined in the constitution. However, this endeavor was short-lived, as it was terminated by another military coup in December 1983. The 1989 Constitution, marking the advent of the third Republic, follows a similar framework to the United States model (Ebong, 2020). It encompasses an executive president, a bicameral legislature, an independent judiciary, a free press, the separation of powers, a system of checks and balances, as well as the protection of fundamental rights and civil liberties.

The fundamental concept of the ballot and suffrage, along with the arrangement for regular elections, is entrenched in the 1999 Constitution. However, these stipulations are not novel. Throughout the annals of our constitutional development, dating back to the Clifford's Constitution of 1922, followed by the Richard's Constitution of 1946, the McPherson's Constitution of 1951, the Littleton Constitution of 1954, and extending to the Independence Constitutions of 1960, the 1963 Republican Constitution, as well as the 1979 and 1989 Constitutions, democratic ideals have been prominently featured. Despite this historical continuity, the prevalence of true democratic governance has been sporadic until the current democratic era, which has endured remarkably for a continuous span of sixteen years, marking an unprecedented phase in our history.

This malaise stems from two interlocking factors. Firstly, our lack of democratic inclinations contributes significantly, while secondly, our innate tendency to undermine the sanctity of the ballot, which is deemed central to democracy, exacerbates the issue. Democracy is esteemed as the paramount system of governance due to its foundation on respecting humanity's rationality (Rascão, 2023). However, it is also a demanding governance model, necessitating utmost levels of self-control, restraint, readiness to prioritize collective welfare, as well as profound knowledge and sagacity. Cultivating these attributes and translating them into instinctive behaviors

necessitates continual practice and cultural integration.

This is why Iten stressed that, "Democracy possesses an added virtue as it encourages individuals towards self-improvement. The involvement of the populace in governmental affairs through democracy expands personal horizons and fosters broader interests" (Iten, 2023). In 1960, during the initiation of parliamentary democracy upon Nigeria's independence, the concept of democracy, let alone the Westminster model, remained unfamiliar to the various tribes within Nigeria. Consistent practice could have led to cultural assimilation. Regrettably, the deficiency in essential democratic cultural values swiftly undermined the fledgling democratic institutions of the First Republic. The final blow came with the instinctive tendency to violate the sanctity of the ballot, thus thwarting the people's will.

The extensive manipulation of the 1965 Western regional elections sparked disorder and turmoil, ultimately leading to the downfall of the First Republic in 1966. This event initiated a series of circumstances that eventually escalated into the Civil War. Unfortunately, upon the restoration of democracy in 1979, it became evident that the political elite had not absorbed any lessons from the collapse of the First Republic. This lack of learning was somewhat expected given the thirteen-year military rule from 1966 to 1979, which disrupted the cultivation of democratic principles. Consequently, the political landscape of 1979 had to begin anew without a clear precedent. Once again, the recurring issues of wastefulness and electoral corruption, diametrically opposed to democratic ideals, resurfaced. The demise of the Second Republic on December 31, 1983, marked a period of authoritarian rule until the emergence of the third Republic on May 29, 1999. During this time, Nigeria was effectively under military control. Despite the provision of periodic elections in our constitutions, the persistent challenge has been to ensure the integrity of every valid vote. Only through this assurance can ballots genuinely triumph

over bullets, as Tom Stoppard, the British playwright, aptly noted: "It is not the voting that is democracy, it is the counting."

It has been previously observed that the 1999 Constitution has initiated a continuous twenty four-year democratic period in our nation, which is a positive development. From the research's perspective, two key factors contribute to this phenomenon. Firstly, the collapse of global Communism and the emergence of a unipolar world have led to almost no tolerance for unconstitutional changes in power. The Cold War-era support for military coups against democratically elected governments has significantly diminished. Secondly, and of greater significance, is the emerging willingness within the political class to introspect, acknowledge its numerous shortcomings, and address them. Late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua initiated and encouraged this constructive trend. He openly admitted that the 2007 elections that brought him to power were flawed and committed to electoral reform.

The National Assembly swiftly embraced the challenge. In May 2009, to invigorate the Constitution and electoral review process, both chambers of the National Assembly established committees dedicated to reviewing the 1999 Constitution. Instead of opting for a comprehensive overhaul, these committees concentrated primarily on electoral reforms. In 2010, the National Assembly achieved a significant milestone. It not only successfully modified the Constitution but also enacted the Electoral Act of 2010. A pivotal aspect of the electoral reform initiative involved incorporating a Constitutional provision granting both the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the judiciary precedence in accessing the Consolidated Revenue Fund. This move immediately bolstered the autonomy of the election management body and the judiciary, which serves as the mediator in election disputes. The general elections of 2011 and 2015 reaped the rewards of these legislative endeavors. However, the 2019 and 2023 elections has its own controversies too. The

2023 general elections was a repeat of the 1979 elections where we had four major contenders vying for the Presidential seat. The Supreme court subsequently upheld INEC's proclamation of the winner of the elections. Thus, while the Nigerian electoral system may not have achieved absolute flawlessness, there is now an emerging acknowledgment that impunity holds no place within it.

### **Effective Governance**

A fundamental measure of democracy lies in effective governance. Despite widespread belief in Nigeria's shortcomings regarding good governance, some argue that it cannot yet be labeled a democracy. However, it's essential to understand that democracy is a process, not a fixed state. Thus, the question emerges: Does Nigeria truly embody democracy given its acknowledged governance issues? The response is affirmative. Despite flaws, the 1999 Constitution encompasses key elements of a democratic framework. Moreover, the ongoing democratic experiment fosters a gradual assimilation of democratic principles and values. Importantly, there exists a widespread recognition within the political sphere of Nigeria's governance deficiencies. Simultaneously, there's a growing determination to break from traditional norms and address the structural impediments hindering good governance. In essence, it's essential to emphasize that effective governance speaks for itself and doesn't rely on excessive propaganda. Once established, its impact becomes evident through various indicators:

- I. Improved living standards for the average person.
- ii. Heightened public perception of fair and judicious allocation and use of resources.
- iii. Restoration and functionality of essential infrastructure.
- iv. Economic diversification.
- v. Increased trust in the electoral process.
- vi. Strengthened checks and balances system, fostering greater

accountability and transparency in government spending and overall governance procedures.

Effective governance entails the intricate process of decision-making and the subsequent execution or non-execution of those decisions. It encompasses a spectrum of actors, both formal and informal, engaged in decision-making processes, as well as established and unestablished frameworks for decision implementation. While governmental bodies constitute a pivotal formal element within governance, they are just one among many actors. Other participants encompass professional organizations, non-governmental entities, research institutions, religious entities, traditional leadership, political factions, societal critics, media outlets, donor agencies, personal advisory groups, influential circles, and even criminal networks, including first ladies, embodying the informal sector of governance.

The involvement of informal actors in governance should not solely revolve around safeguarding narrow interests. Their undue influence can foster corrupt behaviors, thereby hampering the formal structures' ability to formulate and enforce progressive policies. This phenomenon often occurs during periods of institutional infancy or when formal structures falter. Ideally, formal and informal structures should operate synergistically. In an optimal scenario, informal networks inundate formal structures with innovative ideas, which the latter transform into actionable policies, ultimately fostering good governance.

Effective governance encompasses several fundamental characteristics. These include fostering participation, seeking consensus, ensuring accountability, promoting transparency, being responsive, striving for efficiency, upholding equity, and fostering inclusivity. However, its most critical aspect lies in its unwavering commitment to the rule of law. It serves as a formidable barrier against corruption and ensures that marginalized voices are heard through their elected representatives.

Various factors serve as catalysts for good governance, including:

- i. The foundational principles enshrined in the Constitution.
- ii. The actions and policies of the government.
- iii. The engagement and involvement of the general populace.
- iv. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), including donor agencies.
- v. Moral and ethical teachings propagated by religious institutions.
- vi. Advocacy and lobbying efforts by pressure groups.
- vii. The ideologies and practices upheld by political parties.

These elements collectively contribute to the promotion and sustenance of good governance within societies.

In Nigeria's present-day constitutional framework, political parties serve not only as the driving force behind democracy but also as the cornerstone for its establishment and institutionalization. Regrettably, the majority of our political parties exhibit weakness, including even the larger ones, which are susceptible to internal conflicts. These parties frequently grapple with internal turmoil, a lack of coherent ideology, disciplinary issues, and a deficiency in internal democratic processes. This undermines effective governance, as according to the constitution, participation in Nigeria's democracy hinges on affiliation with a political party. The essence of contemporary representative democracy demands robust political parties grounded in ideology, capable of presenting distinct policy options. Hence, there exists a compelling imperative to fortify our political parties. When political parties lack strength or viability, it undermines both democracy and effective governance since these parties become incapable of fulfilling their essential functions. Some of these crucial functions include:

- i. Facilitating Campaigns: Parties are responsible for recruiting candidates for elections and operating within the framework of the electoral process.
- ii. Promoting Participation: Parties

- mobilize the electorate to participate in the electoral process by encouraging voting.
- iii. **Articulating Ideologies:** Parties disseminate various policy alternatives and choices, thus linking citizens with ideological perspectives.
  - iv. **Ensuring Policy Consistency:** Parties establish coherence between the policy alternatives proposed during election campaigns and the actual policy implementations once they attain political power.

The primary aim of effective governance revolves around expediting social, economic, and political progress while striving to minimize, if not eliminate entirely, poverty from society.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research paper underscores both the strengths and challenges of the Nigerian Democracy. Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999 marked a significant milestone, signaling a departure from decades of military rule. The country has experienced periodic elections, fostering a semblance of political pluralism and citizen participation. Moreover, Nigeria's democratic institutions, though flawed, have demonstrated resilience amidst socio-political pressures. The research also concludes that Nigeria's democracy faces formidable obstacles. Widespread corruption, ethnic and religious tensions, electoral malpractices, and security threats impede the consolidation of democratic governance. The concentration of power within political elites further exacerbates these challenges, limiting the inclusivity and responsiveness of governance mechanisms.

### **Recommendation**

In order to strengthen the Nigerian democracy as well as achieve accountability and efficiency in management of resources, the research study recommends the following:

- i. **Citizens Attitudinal Change:** Merely

- conducting a constitutional review is insufficient to eliminate the pervasive issues of insurgency, corruption, kidnapping, and criminal insurgency that are currently plaguing the Nigerian state. Real change requires a shift in attitudes and mindsets.
- ii. **Electoral Reforms:** Implement comprehensive electoral reforms to enhance the credibility, transparency, and inclusivity of the electoral process. This could involve updating voter registration systems, improving the independence of electoral bodies, and ensuring strict adherence to electoral laws.
- iii. **Political Party Regulation:** Enforce stricter regulations on political parties to promote internal democracy, accountability, and transparency. Parties should be required to adhere to democratic principles in their operations and candidate selection processes.
- iv. **Civic Education:** Promote civic education programs to educate citizens about their rights, responsibilities, and the importance of active participation in the democratic process. This includes educating voters on how to make informed choices and encouraging peaceful political engagement.
- v. **Media Freedom:** Safeguard freedom of speech and press freedom to ensure that the media can operate independently and hold government officials accountable. Encourage diverse media ownership and support initiatives that promote responsible journalism and fact-checking.
- vi. **Civil Society Engagement:** Foster a vibrant civil society by supporting non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups, and community-based organizations. These entities play a crucial role in promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance.
- vii. **Judicial Independence:** Strengthen the independence of the judiciary to ensure impartial adjudication of

- disputes and protection of human rights. This involves safeguarding judicial appointments from political interference and providing adequate resources for the judiciary to function effectively.
- viii. Anti-Corruption Measures: Intensify efforts to combat corruption at all levels of government through robust anti-corruption laws, enforcement mechanisms, and institutional reforms. Emphasize transparency in public procurement processes and strengthen anti-corruption agencies.
  - ix. Decentralization of Power: Promote decentralization by devolving more powers and resources to local governments and communities. Empowering local authorities can enhance citizen participation, improve service delivery, and foster accountability at the grassroots level.
  - x. Ethnic and Religious Harmony: Promote national unity and social cohesion by addressing ethnic and religious tensions through dialogue, inclusion, and respect for diversity. Encourage policies that promote interethnic and interreligious understanding and discourage divisive rhetoric.
  - xi. Youth and Women Inclusion: Enhance the participation of youth and women in politics and governance through affirmative action measures, mentorship programs, and capacity-building initiatives. Ensure that their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed in decision-making processes.
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