

## Politics and the Struggle for Democracy in Nigeria: An Appraisal

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**Abstract:** The paper takes an incisive look at the way politics is being played in Nigeria since her independence in 1960. The fact that politics has all along being played along ethnic lines under different political cultures is fully discussed, not losing sight of the fact that democracy is still in its infancy in the country. The efforts of pro-democracy groups to chase the military back to the barracks paid off when after a long chain of military rule, democracy was finally established in 1999. It is recommended that the only way to sustain democracy in the country is for successive political leaders to imbibe the culture of servant leadership devoid of corruption and sit tight syndrome.

**Keywords:** Political participation, Ethnic politics, Pro-democracy groups, Military intrusion.

Article Received: 01 Dec. 2018

Revised: 24 Dec. 2018

Accepted: 14 Jan. 2019

### Introduction

The dynamics of politics is perhaps the most involving or inclusive activity of man. It was against this background that Aristotle, a famous political philosopher, referred to man as a “political animal”. Various definitions of politics as “the authoritative allocation of value in a society” have been put forward. For Harold Laswell, politics centres on who gets what, when and how”. Laswell’s definition is of great relevance to contemporary politics, especially in Africa, as politics today centres on distribution and sharing of national resources.

However, political activity involves the reconciliation of interest’s aid disagreements in society. Thus as Alan Bali [1] argues, politics “involves disagreements and the reconciliation of these disagreement” within a political community, how conflicts are to be resolved and whether the resolution is to be effectively observed by all the parties to the dispute.

The prevalence of social, economic, religious, and ethnic differences in most societies of the world elicits political activity. Essentially, all politics by definition and in practical terms revolves around the exercise and pursuit of power, whether at the domestic or international level. Power, influence and

authority constitute the main substance of politics.

The foregoing analysis of the concept of politics with emphasis on the fact that it is enmeshed in disagreements is meant to prepare our minds for appreciating the avalanche of disagreements embodied in Nigerian politics from the inception of her independence in 1960. These disagreements are compounded by the fact that Nigeria is one of the most ethnically diverse Countries in the world [2].

The late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, for example, made constant reference to the fact that Nigeria is made up of no less than 259 nationally groups, implying that the centrifugal forces in the body politic of the country are frighteningly enormous.

Indeed, tribal politics characterized by extreme tribal Consciousness and nepotism in the distribution of resources and power sharing remains the most striking characteristics of Nigerian Politics [3]. Full-blown democracy had for almost 40 years eluded Nigeria in the course of military dictatorship during those years. The struggle to regain democracy was fierce and protracted It was eventually achieved in May

1999 when the military finally bowed out of politics. Now that Nigerians are awash with the much talked about dividends of democracy, it is intriguing for a political scientist to write on this interesting area of research in Nigerian Government and Politics.

### **Nigeria and Political Culture**

Political culture according to Almond and Verba [4], is “the general pattern of individual attitudes and orientations of people towards politics.” Political culture is classified into three broad types - participant, parochial, and subject - depending on the mode of participation of a people in political activity. A people’s political culture suggests that the entire people of a country are supposedly bound by unique and uniform attitude and orientation towards political objects.

The uniform patterns of attitude and orientations manifest themselves in the national character, morale, social system and orientations of the people. The prevalence of these factors in a society creates an enabling environment for the ideals of democracy; to thrive; their absence portends political instability and rancour.

The political culture of a people gives an orientation toward their polity and its processes. To be oriented is to have a sense of direction - in the simplest meaning, to know where you are in relation to the points of the compass. To be politically oriented would mean in general knowing how your government operates - having a cognitive of the polity - and also knowing how it ought to operate and what it ought and ought not to do - having a “normative map” [5].

Rather than having a unique culture as a country, each of the three dominant ethnic groups - the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba and the Ibo - could be said to have its own political culture. For example, the political orientation of the Ibo located in the South East of the country tends towards participant political culture.

This type of political culture denotes mass and active participation in politics: The masses of the Ibo tribe are evidently keen on politics, and the political history of Nigeria is replete with active involvement of many Ibo politicians such as the late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Michael Okpara, Samuel Ikoku, etc. This trend continues up to the present time.

The Yoruba in the South-West of the country are associated with subject political culture. This is an inward-looking type of political culture with emphasis on getting substantial share of the national output without significant effort to champion the national cause.

The Yoruba as a group has been accused of being the most tribalistic in their orientation towards politics. The Action Group (AG), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and even the current Alliance for Democracy (AD) were formed and dominated mainly by the Yoruba elements. Their tendencies to confine their political activity within their ethnic boundaries and their weak position at the center have reduced them to a recalcitrant or opposition group in the body politics of Nigeria.

The Hausa-Fulani in the North of the country exhibit parochial political culture. This follows that in terms of number, a greater percentage of the Hausa-Fulani people are politically passive and conservative. However, the relatively few politically conscious and active elements among them are in the forefront of Nigerian politics. The leadership of the country is dominated by these extremely conscious elements among the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group. Most of the past Nigerian Heads of State so far have come from the North.

The minority ethnic groups of the country which include people living in states like Benue, Plateau, Akwa Ibom, Delta, etc as a group has also not developed a common political culture even though they have altogether suffered severe marginalization, deprivation and neglect in the hands of the three major ethnic groups.

Each of the minority ethnic groups tends to adopt the political culture of the major ethnic group nearest to it. For example, Benue, Plateau and Niger states are predisposed to the parochial, conservative political culture of the far North because of their proximity to the far North. And until recently, Kwara State consisting of another minority ethnic group was leaning towards the subject political culture of the Yoruba people due also to geographical contiguity.

On the whole, Nigerian politics is riddled with tribal and religious conflicts. Before the emergence of her Fourth Republic, virtually all the political parties that contested the

previous general elections in the country were not truly national parties: they were formed along tribal lines, each with its own ideological posture campaigning with discordant tunes.

The national political culture prevalent in the country before now could at best be described as “laissez faire” where different ethnic groups formed their own political parties with the sole aim of capturing power at the centre. It was a free political enterprise by various ethnic groups and individuals without an agenda for achieving national goals and aspirations. It was winner takes all, a zero-sum game! This has made it impossible for this potentially great African nation to accomplish the task of nation - building that could have enabled her to realize her full potentials. However, the introduction of the zoning system in the Fourth Republic politics has gone a long way in giving the country a sense of oneness, direction and common purpose.

This involves an equitable sharing of the key political posts taking the state of origin of the beneficiaries into consideration. This zoning formula has for once offset the Hausa-Fulani political hegemony in that the incumbent civilian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, is from South-West to which the presidency was zoned by the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) on whose platform he won the February, 1999 presidential election. Besides, with the ouster of the military from the country’s political scene and the introduction of genuine civilian government under the leadership of an anti-corruption crusader, President Olusegun Obasanjo, the country has entered the new millennium with a sense of mission and a strong will to achieve rapid economic and political development.

### **Nigeria’s Social Strata and Politics**

Apart from the pandemic ethnic factor in Nigerian politics, the social strata of this country has a far- reaching effect on the struggle for power, seizure of power, retention and consolidation of power in the country. Five main layers of social strata are identifiable in the Nigerian society. These are: (1) the bureaucratic bourgeois class; (2) the commercial - financial class; (3) the military elite; (4) the intellectual elite; and (5) the working class. The bureaucratic - bourgeois class is made up of the political and higher administrative elites who wrested

political power from the departing colonial powers.

All the country’s national and state leaders, past and present and their ministers, commissioners, chairmen and directors of parastatals belong to this class. Heads of administrative departments and bureaucratic elites in both federal and state public services also fall into this category. Traditional rulers such as the Emirs of the Hausa-Falani in the North, the Obis of the Ibo land in the South-East, and the Obas of the Yoruba land in the South-West of the country are part of this class. This class occupies the apex of the country’s superstructure.

The commercial-financial class consists of petty bourgeois that acquires their wealth from import-export, real estate, contracts etc. Essentially, this class plays intermediary role, and the people therein are gradually becoming prominent in such areas as manufacturing and oil exploration. They are fully established in commerce, industry, mines and agriculture.

It goes without saying that the Nigerian military have all this while, especially from 15 January, 1966 when they staged the first coup d’etat in the country up to 29 May, 1999 when they voluntarily surrendered political power to the Obasanjo civilian government, could be said to constitute a class in the country. It is on record that in her forty years as an independent, sovereign nation, the military as a class has ruled the country for a total of twenty-nine years. During the period, they took all measures to safeguard their corporate interests [6].

It is common knowledge that the present civilian Head of State, President Olusegun Obasanjo, a retired general in the Nigerian Army, was sponsored for the presidential race by affluent military officers, active and retired, with the sole aim of protecting the collective interests of the military even in a civilian setting. It is significant to note that both the ruling party, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and All People’s Party (APP), the two strongest parties in the Fourth Republic, were formed and are being financed mostly by retired military officers who remain the staunch members of the parties. Thus even while in the barracks, the

military still control the destiny of the country. For example, such key position as Minister of Defence and other sensitive positions in the Obasanjo government are securely in the hands of retired military officers.

The educated elites comprising medical doctors, lawyers, university lecturers, etc constitute a socio-political class in the Nigerian society. Sometimes members of this class are co-opted into government through political appointments. The managerial sector, otherwise known as the “middle class,” constitutes another social class’ in Nigeria. Most of the people who make up this class had received training abroad in such areas as public administration, organization theory, and managerial techniques Etc. The working class a proletariat of sorts is at the bottom of the rung in the -socio-economic-and-political spheres of the Nigerian society.

This class consists of the peasantry, factory workers, rank and file soldiers and policemen, students, tailors, shoemakers and the unemployed. These re the proverbial “wretched of the earth.” However, the existence of these classes does not suggest that there is intense class struggle in the country. Judging from the voting patterns in all the past general elections, ethnicity or state of origin rather than class struggle clearly determines voting behavior and other political considerations in Nigeria.

### **The Changing Fortunes of Democracy in Nigeria**

Several definitions of the term democracy now abound. For example, Black [7] defines democracy as: That form of government in which the sovereignty power resides in and is exercised by whole body of free citizen directly or indirectly through a system of representation as distinguished from a monarchy, aristocracy, or oligarchy. In the Oxford Companion to Law, Walker [8] define democracy as “Ruler by the people, the form of government in which the general body of the people ultimately exercise the power of government.

However, the most popular definition of democracy remains the conventional definition given by Abraham Lincoln: “Government of the people for the people and by the people”. The definition is based on the direct form of democracy that was originally

practiced in Athens, a Greek city-state, where it is believed to have originated from. Essentially, in a democratic society the people constitute the political sovereign.

The main features of modern democracy include free and fair election, periodic change of government, free press, independent judiciary, the rule of law and fundamental human rights of citizens. Making allusion to the existence of democracy in a country would imply the prevalence of the above-named features of democracy in that country. In the specific case of-Nigeria, the long history of military dictatorship has had far-reaching implications for these features in the country.

Most of these features were completely eroded or constantly trampled upon with ruthless abandon by the military to the extent that one could completely deny their existence during the-period. No doubt, military rule is an antithesis to democracy. Despite the spurious claims of the opposition during the First Republic the Balewa government did a lot to protect and promote the tenets of democracy.

For example, the independence of the judiciary was not in doubt, the press enjoyed total freedom and the rule of law and fundamental human rights of the people were safeguarded. After taking over power from the civilian leaders on 15 January 1966, the military went ahead to suspend the constitution of the First Republic.

This paved way for them to make ceaseless assault on democracy. From 1966 to May 29, 1999 when the military finally went back to their barracks for good, the military had used certain institutions such as Supreme Military Council, Armed Forces Ruling Council, Nation Council of States, Federal Executive Council, Council of Ministers, etc to rule the country. Decrees were formulated to facilitate the day – to – day administration of the country and to supersede acts and laws that tended to frustrate their intentions.

### **The Struggle for Democracy**

The road to the present Fourth Republic democracy was rough and tortuous for pro-democracy activities. But they became more daring and more determined than ever before after the painful annulment in 1993 by the Babagida military government of what was

considered to have been the freest election so far in the country. General Babangida (rd), so far the most controversial Head of State of Nigeria, initiated a long drawn, grandiose but deceptive transition to civil rule programme that produced the late Chief Abiola, a prominent businessman from Yoruba land, the controversial winner of the presidential election held in June 1993.

It was believed that the then military leader, General Ibrahim Babangida (rtd) and his cohorts decided to cancel the result of the election to forestall civil rule so that they could perpetuate themselves in power. In the midst of the confusion that greeted the annulment of the Presidential election, popularly known as "June 12." it became clear that both the civil society and the military wanted Babangida to vacate office to pave way for the commencement of genuine, political processes that would lead to the entrenchment of a civilian rule.

This gave rise to the formation of pro-democracy movements and civil liberties associations as the "revolutionary vanguard" of the people. In the heat of the pressures on him, General Ibrahim Babangida (rtd) had no choice but to step aside." Babangida was replaced by Shonekan; a highly respected man from Abeokuta, as the Head of Interim Government.

The hope that Shonekan would reverse the annulment of the election results and set the necessary machinery in motion for the installation of Abiola and the other elected officers was soon dashed as Shonekan was after a few months in office removed by - no other people than the military again.

The late Head of State, General Abacha emerged as the next military Head of State of Nigeria. Rather than revalidating the annulled election results or prepare grounds for the entrenchment of genuine democracy, General Abacha embarked on a kangaroo transition to civil rule programme calculated to succeed himself as a civilian Head of State of the country. All this infuriated the pro-democracy movements and the civil liberties associations in the country, making them to intensify their pro-democracy activities. The emergence of late General Sani Abacha on the scene at a time when the nation was at the verge of

disintegration and war brought relief to the unsuspecting majority of Nigerians, and rekindled confidence and hope in the late Abiola, that Abacha would use his good offices to overturn the annulment of the Presidential and other election results under General Babangida.

But subsequent events soon belied this hope, as it soon became obvious that Abacha was there to stay. To make it clear to all doubting Thomases, Abacha warned all people clamouring for the revalidation of the 1993 election results to either forget about it or face the wrath of the law. He reiterated on several occasions that the 1993 elections had been consigned to history and that he would fashion out a credible transition to civil rule programme Abacha did not only fashion out a transition to civil rule programme but, curiously enough, he designed the programme in such a way he would succeed himself as civilian Head of-State with effect from October, 1998.

The hostile reactions to Abacha's gimmick to succeed himself were vehement and in some cases violent. Earlier on, the late Chief Abiola basking in his supposed victory in the presidential election had vowed to exercise the 'mandate given to him- by the masses of; Nigeria. He insisted that "I am a custodian of a sacred mandate it can only be taken away from me by the people." Damning all consequences, Abiola in what looked like a mock swearing in ceremony in Lagos, went ahead to declare himself president of the country.

The events that followed were swift and decisive. He was arrested and charged with treason; and thereafter, held behind bar without trial until he died. Ironically, Abacha himself had died in office a month earlier. The significance of establishing genuine democracy and ensure human rights in a country cannot be overemphasized. Among other things democracy ensures political stability and popular government. This is particularly important to Nigeria which is regarded world-wide as the giant and beacon of-Africa. As the greatest power on the continent the onus rests on Nigeria to build a model of the western liberal democracy for sister African countries to emulate.

The adoption of democracy, which is a *sine qua non* for a stable government, has become

a factor in the analysis of state power. Instability of government has become factor in the analysis of state power. Instability of government and the existence of illegal regimes detract from the power of a nation. Such a nation cannot command respect in the comity of nations and may even be isolated diplomatically or subjected to economic sanctions. All this underscores the need for a scholar of political science to develop keen interest on issues of governance.

Nigeria has experienced frequent change of government and the body politic of the country has all this time been riddled with tribalism, nepotism, corruption and religious fanaticism. Various pro-democracy movements were formed particularly during the Abacha regime, first, to press for military disengagement from politics and, two, to press for the actualization of what they considered to be "June 12 mandate" to Abiola. The most popular by far of these movements was the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) with most of the prominent members coming from the South-West of the country. Civil liberties associations later joined forces with NADECO to free the country from the strangulating clutches of the Abacha regime.

Within the country, NADECO shook the Abacha government to its foundations Even when the Transition to Civil Rule Programme under Abacha was in full force and it had become apparent that Abacha was predisposed to the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP) as his launching pad to the presidency, NADECO still, had the guts to insist on the actualization of the June 12 election results.

In the process, many NADECO chieftains were arrested, brutalized and held behind bar indefinitely. Journalists who seemed to be in sympathy with NADECO were also arrested and locked up indefinitely. Others went on self-exile to escape the cruelty of Abacha's security agents. In spite of all this, people like Tunji Braithwaite, Gabriel Adesanya, and Gani Fawehinnii were unrelenting in their condemnation of Abacha's dictatorship and self-succession bid. Professor Wole Soyinka was one of the NADECO activists who fled the country.

As the arrow - head of pro-democracy forces abroad, Soyinka gave the dictatorial, regime

of late General Sani Abacha sleepless -nights. Soyinka formed a Liberation Movement and a pro- democracy group abroad and even set up a propaganda radio station, Radio Kudirat, named after the slain wife of the late Chief Abiola. Soyinka's pro-democracy campaign abroad produced palpable results. First, his fearless pronouncements against the Abacha regime rekindled democratic hopes in many Nigerians back home.

Secondly, and more importantly, the international community was fully sensitized about Abacha's reign of terror. This led to diplomatic isolation of Nigeria by the western capitalist countries, and the imposition of sanctions (military and economic) on Nigeria. All this went a long way in checking the excesses of Abacha. Another fearless pro-democracy crusader was Olisa Agbakoba. He was the organizer of the pro-democracy group known as United Action- for Democracy (UAD). In collaboration with other pro-democracy elements, UAD brought severe pressure to bear on the Abacha regime. Agbakoba was also the founding president of the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), the most credible Human Rights group in the country.

Agbakoba's activities with the CLO and his uncompromising posture, with the Abacha regime is a pointer to the fact that with determination, the law can be made to work even in an authoritarian society, characterized by terrorism, abuse of press freedom, and violent repression of real or imagined enemies. Agbakoba combined legal and practical actions in pursuing his objectives. He was ready to, go to any length and pay the supreme sacrifice for what he believed in.

For example, in March 1998 he encouraged the UAD to organize a five million man march in response to the two million man march organized by Abacha for President Campaigners, the National Association of Nigerian Youths in Abuja on March 3, 1998. Although Agbakoba was tortured and brutalized by the police in the course of the counter five million man march, the fact remains that it meant to demonstrate the disenchantment of many Nigerians who were opposed to the Abacha self-succession plan. However, his effort seems to have been rewarded with the Senior Advocate of Nigeria (AN) award recently.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

### Recommendations

- Democracies can country only if the military are kept out of the political scene. Precisely, the military should be out-lawed from politics and this should be written into the constitution of the country. The notion of civilian supremacy should be imbibed by the military. Professionalism and the defence of the country's territorial integrity should be upper-most on the agenda of the military.
- Politicians, on their own part, should endeavor to live up to the expectations of the people in order to forestall any military coup d'état in future. If there is no evidence of ineptitude and inefficiency on the part of the civilian leaders the military will have nothing to capitalize on.
- Vigorous process of political education and enlightenment should be carried out by the National Orientation Agency (NOA) to sensitize the people on the gains of democracy. The political education should be targeted at the illiterate masses who are unable to understand complicated issues of social and economic policies involved in modern government, who are vulnerable to

the ever-present danger of being deluded by popular leaders to support causes which are attractive and easy, and who are ignorant of their liability to be influenced by motives of greed, jealousy and selfishness.

- The Federal Government should come up with a deliberate policy to discourage tribalism and religious bigotry in political processes. The zoning system of the People Democratic Party (PDP) is a step in the right direction and should also be adopted by the other political parties in the country.

### Conclusion

As a leading power in Africa aspiring to occupy a permanent seat on the Security Council, it is of crucial importance of Nigeria to do all she can to entrench and sustain democracy. It is only by so doing that the international community can take the country seriously on a crucial matter like becoming a permanent member of the Security Council as Africa's representative. Besides, democracy has become a worldwide movement and Nigeria cannot be left out of it, more so, as the USA and other donor nations have made democracy and human rights a conditionally for giving assistance to needy nations [9-10].

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