THE POLITICAL ELITE, DEMOCRACY AND NATIONAL UNITY IN NIGERIA

Laz Etemike

Abstract

This paper takes a look at democracy and democratic practice in Nigeria. It discusses the role of the political elite in the democratization process. It discovers that the political elite compete for power in utter contempt of national needs and the prospect of building a collective society. Hence the conclusion that Nigeria is suffering from the antics of a political elite which is allergic to democracy and neurotic in the pursuit of power. The paper thus calls for a committed political class, a people oriented constitution through the convening of a national conference.

Introduction

Nigeria has experienced profound, dramatic and sometimes baffling changes which have become a major feature of its development during the past decade. These changes have been driven by the struggle for the control of state power. It is true that when one component undergoes a major alteration, the others are likely to feel its impact. Unfortunately, the effect of the changes Nigeria has undergone is definitely not integrative so much so that the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo’s description of Nigeria as a mere geographical expression remains relevant even today.

In the light of this, it is necessary to examine the cohesion and integrative role of politics in Nigeria. More specifically the search light should be directed on the role of Nigeria's political elite in bringing about national cohesion and unity in a democratic polity.

Nigeria’s cultural, religious and ethnic diversity should not be obstacles to the creation of a broader political nationality and national integration. It has been argued that such a rich pluralism makes dictatorship less likely by providing opposing power centres, which cannot be cornered into a single authoritarian system. (Coleman, 1971).

Mennis and Sauvent (1975) quoting Haas (1958) defined national integration as a condition in which specific groups and individuals show more loyalty to their central political institution than to any other political authority in a specific period of time and in a definable geographical space. Haas, (1958) went ahead to state that the process of integration is a situation whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities towards a new centre, whose institution possesses or demands jurisdiction over the preexisting national state.

Although integration is indeed employed in grossly different substantive contexts by different people, the concept in its usage has maintained a core idea that is rather well captured by the dictionary definition, "to put or bring (parts) together into a whole, to unify". The success of the process, of necessity, involves the existence of some common interest and some elementary sense of identity or fellowship among the people. Meanwhile democratic practice in Nigeria has succeeded mostly in disempowering the masses, denying them of their right to choose their leaders while encouraging centrifugal tendencies.

Unfortunately, the failure of the political elite class to provide good and purposeful leadership has virtually made it impossible for the Nigerian State to achieve the much needed national integration. The political elite class took advantage of the character and nature of the Nigerian society to exacerbate ethnic cleavage by exploiting the idea of the “son of the soil”. Inter-ethnic religious and communal clashes are encouraged and fuelled. Ife-Modakeke, Warri, Aguleri-Umuleri, Tiv-Jukun, Kataf-Kaduna, etc. are examples of communal and ethnic clashes. Meanwhile corruption has become the order of the day. These factors have virtually made it impossible not only for the Nigerian state to emerge as a truly united nation but for the democratization process to have any meaningful success.

Concept of Democracy

Democracy as a form of political organization dates back to more than 25 hundred years, and as a word or political noun it appeared for the first time in history in the 15th century following its
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coinage by Herodotus. Democracy could thus be said to have spanned across various ages and periods ranging from the period of antiquity, through the medieval period. In these periods various scholars, theorists and philosophers have in varying degrees of specificity defined democracy.

On the whole, democracy encompasses a process with countless number of tenets in a given continuum. This is why perhaps several governments claim being democratic if the given polity only satisfies one or two of these democratic tenets. Some of the tenets could be mentioned as competitive elections, civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, religion, education, health, freedom to form and associate with people of similar ideologies and values (political parties, pressure groups etc.), the freedom to reside in one’s place of choice, accountability of leaders through representative institutions and the rule of law.

Other basic tenets worth mentioning are the right of all citizens to dissent, unprecedented toleration of differences, wide agreement concerning political ideology or the fundamental question about the nature of the state and above all, government by compromise. It could be said that the process of attaining these tenets could be referred to as democratization process.

Magbadelo (1984) explains democratisation process thus -Democratisation as an all-encompassing process must be seen in essence and substance, as an autochthonous and autocentric process of social restructuring in consonance with the prevailing societal values, ethic, norms and nuances of the generality of the society, in which this process of political and social changes are taking place.

It is expected that a true democratic environment encourages self-realization which enables the individual to be lifted above the narrow circle of his egoism, and broadens his interest. The individual thus becomes interested in his country and develops a sense of national responsibility.

Democratic process within a modern state makes greater demand on its members, depending far more on their sense of responsibility. Greater is the demand therefore on the political office holders who must play politics in line with the democratic ideal of building the society with a triology - discussion, negotiation and compromise. It is thus important at this point to discuss the nature of politics in order to have an insight in the relationship between the democratization process and politics.

Politics and Democracy

The term politics is derived from what the Greek philosophers especially Aristotle and Plato call “Polis”. Polis means a small self-supporting community, organized to govern itself. The system therefore through which conflicts are resolved and by which attempts were made to balance the inherent contradiction in the society is through the democratic system. Athenians provided us with an example of a democracy or democratic system.

Athenian democracy, the oldest democracy recognised the dangers of internal conflict, for this reason certain safety devices were put in place. Where matters of such weight were determined at the assembly of the citizens, much depended on the judgment displayed by the leading orators. Decisions are reached by vote of the majority after free and open discussion.

Since the Athenian experience the democratic process has gained a lot of currency. Whatever variation that is adopted by various states the basic fundamental aspect of democracy is usually embraced and upheld. On the whole, the democratic process provides the best means for organizing, resolving conflict and balancing the contradictions within the society. For instance, the process incorporates two principles - liberty and equality. These two principles therefore calls for a healthy competition and a consensus within the polity and among the political actors. In essence the political elites in a democracy are suppose to respect the rights of the people, provide the basic needs, provide education, good health and a secure environment for peaceful co-existence.

The Nigerian Experience

Nigeria's Domestic Structure

Domestic political structure is central to the understanding of the role of the political elite in national integration. Reverberating is the historical antecedent of Nigeria and its influence on the political elite class.

An insight into the assessment of the domestic structure of policy making would bring to the fore the major forces. For example, the creation and existence of social pluralism by the elite class as
amplified by the existence of quasi-autonomous political sub-systems in which the pattern of loyalty is clustered and pre-determined and for which the prospect of succession is an attractive proposition.

The colonial period through to the post colonial period witnessed class struggle. The transition from colonial to neo-colonial political economy brought about a class relation which generated internal contradictions. Thus the claim that the failure to delink the procapitalist antinational interests in the immediate aftermath of independence, the nationalist leaders contributed even more than colonialism to keeping the Nigerian state in its present position as an appendage of imperial capitalism. They also contributed to the crisis of the Nigerian state - That is the exploitation of ethnic and religious differences by the ruling class to promote its economic and political interest, to the detriment of nation building.

Hence in competitive politics as practiced by the Nigerian political elite, they acted as 'compradors engaged as agents of foreign interest'. Thus rather than concentrate or pursue issues that would lead to building a nation, they engaged in negative and destructive competition against each other in the quest to acquire wealth. Majority of them became allies of foreign capitalists. This was in conflict with the task of improving the lot of the peasants, artisans and the working class.

It was obvious that the nature of Nigeria’s federalism and most government decisions and action has tended to bolster the position of the dominant classes vis-a-vis the exploited class.

Furthermore, there has been the strong tendency on the part of the political class to resist any type of competitive politics that has the potentiality of changing the existing balance of forces and power structure. To maintain this status quo lies in and still is one of the most consistent objective of the political class; example is the craze for a second term in the fourth republic with its attendant spate of political assassinations.

Invariably, ethnic chauvinism and religious bigotry became the order of the day. Ethnicity, religion became a ready tool at the hands of the politicians to maintain relevance and thus power, authority and control of the state treasury.

Unfortunately Nigeria has multiplicity of overlapping and competing political communities and as a consequence its people have established no single and compelling political identity. The result is that they have only a tenuous hold on the nation. The picture is that each is made up, in varying degrees of disparate ethnic groups forced into a single political form by the imperial power with the political elite being the major beneficiaries.

Nonetheless as Joseph. E. Strayer (1960) rightly observed, elsewhere in the world nations have been shaped from diverse and hostile communities. They have been brought into a common framework over the centuries often through living together in a superimposed state. Kwame Nkrumah (1961) accused colonialism of having persuaded the Africans that they were alien to each other. A situation which he claim played upon their tribal instincts and sowed seeds of dissension in order to promote disunity among them.

While these arguments are true it is a common knowledge that colonialism created a common nationalism out of very different linguistic and cultural groups. The point is that if the spirit of nationalism as exemplified by the joint struggle for independence had been carried into the post independence period a lot would have been achieved in the area of national unity. Hence since independence, key political players would have had time to gain a clear sense of their regional differences, become attached to the nation system and the institution through which they ascended to power, where the framework of the state should be strong enough and persistent enough.

The Nigerian experience since independence are clear indicators that the identification with ethnic groupings, politics of greed and non-accountability of the elected to the people did produce political, territorial and social fragmentation. This fragmentation has in turn generated political and social instability.

The Nigerian Experience

At independence Nigeria was to assume her destiny in her hands against the background of a multi tribal composed country reflecting multi tribal interest. Many issues and questions came up for consideration such as, was there going to be a leader who would be acceptable to all? What measures were to be adopted to ensure that Nigerians regarded the nation over and above their ethnic groups? Would Nigerians believe in the common destiny of the nation? The answers and solutions to these questions rest squarely on the shoulder of the political players. It is obvious that if they agree the
nation had arrived. Unfortunately, they could not fashion out a direction for the country, as there were mutual distrust. Nothing captures the disunity amongst the political class more than the run up to the federal election of December 1959. It was the first time that the majority of adult Nigerians with the exclusion of women in the northern region, were called upon to make a choice among the political parties.

Okoroafor (1977) captured the situation when he noted that political opponents were prevented from campaigning in the regions not under their party control. Supporters of opposing parties were marked down for chastisement and sent to varying periods of imprisonment. It was a revelation which exposed a basic fact that the Nigerian freedom fighters who took over the reigns of government from the colonial overlords were not as nationalistic as they would want us to believe.

In fact the then situation could be traced to an earlier event. It would be recalled that the 1950 General Conference Report, the majority report had recommended that Southerners who were resident in the North were to be rendered ineligible for election into the Northern House of Assembly. Though the minority report kicked against the provision on the ground that it was essentially an instrument of disunity in a country whose struggle for unity, was a priority, the views of the minority were conveniently ignored and jettisoned. The opportunity for building a foundation for national unity was thus lost due to the selfish nature of our political elites. They ignored the fact, as was rightly observed by the minority report that the individuals are bound together by political ties of nationality. Hence, identical nationality of any country must surely carry with it identical political rights.

Perhaps it is right at this point to mention the father figure postures of the political leaders. They stood as colossus and were looked upon as champions of their group interest. They were highly revered and trusted by their people. Closely analysed such a perception would have been an opportunity for the leaders to mobilize the people toward the unity of Nigeria. The country would have achieved much in its quest for nation building. It is important to emphasize this point. The reason being that in recognition of the apparent numerous negative factors against national integration, this singular factor was most capable of over shadowing them. Unfortunately, rather than use this singular factor to build a united nation, they were channeled toward consolidating their hold on power which further put a wedge on the process of unity. The more divided they were the more consolidated was their hold on power. In fact one can evidently conclude that it is this desire to dominate by the political elite group that led to the emergence of regional parties during the first republic. Both the Action Group (AG) and the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) which dominated and controlled political process in the Western Region and Northern Regions directly metamorphosed from socio-cultural organisations deliberately created by the leaders from the regions for the promotion of ethnic sectional interest and identification.

It has been generally argued that the colonial authority had deliberately encouraged each of these dominant ethnic groups in the three regions -Hausa -Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba -to assert, its own social, cultural and even political identity and to perceive the issue of political self-determination from its own exclusive, regional-sectionalist perspective, rather than from a national perspective. Arising from this claim it was thus inevitably concluded that when political parties emerged to contest for power in the early 1950s they could not but be the reflections of the primordial interest of these three ethnic groups (Tyoden, 1994). Hence between 1947 to 1960, the critical period of Nigerian history there seems to be a connection between the ethnicisation of Nigeria's emergent federalism, the broadening and democratisation of the electoral process and the ethnicisation of the party system with the conceived plans of the political elite group.

The above argument reinforces the suggestion that our nationalists were not nationalists in the true sense of it. Perhaps it was their perception that a nationalist struggle would provide the only path to power. The essence of it all is that right from the outset the nationalists had no wish to create a unified state.

Ake (1994) also noted that the character of the colonial state did not change significantly at independence since with few exceptions the colonial state was inherited rather than transformed. In chastising the nationalist leaders he remarked that most of the nationalist leaders regarded the state as the instrument of their will. They privatized and exploited it for economic gain and used it oppressively to absolutize their power. Claude Ake thus rightly concluded that even after independence, the state in Africa has not become a reassuring presence but remains a formidable threat to every body except the few who control it.
The state thus produced a few elites who had little in common except endless struggle for power. Its politics is Hobbesian. The dialectics of competitive politics thus generated its own contradictions and crisis.

Basic in Nigeria's experience in democratic practice is the issue of political violence. In 1964 and 1983, Nigeria witnessed varying scales of political violence in virtually all parts of the country. The reasons for these violence can be viewed from two major angles. First is the attempt to dislodge the strong hold of one party by the other. Next is the attempt by the opposition, perhaps the supposedly "outsiders" to wrest power from the incumbent. Notably, political violence tends to be the feature of transiting from one civilian government to another.

It is therefore not surprising that the occurrence of political violence in the fourth republic is something not new. It is the same old music. It is un-natural for an elected official to lose a re-election bid and natural for the opposition to seek help from outside in an attempt to dislodge the incumbent. We can observe that in the history of Nigeria there is hardly an incumbent elected official who voluntarily left office.

For this reason the incumbent political leaders are prepared to use the power of incumbency such as state agencies, e.g. state security, state owned media and the electoral body to retain power. For instance in 1983 and even in the 2003 elections the police and the electoral commission carried on as if they were arms of the N.P.N. and P.D.P. Besides, the incumbent and the opposition were and are unscrupulous riggers. The rigging starts right from the stage of registration process. It is such that the political class and their agents stockpile bundles of voters card registered under false names. For the 2003 election the ruling party had gone further by producing results even when there were no elections in such areas.

On the whole electoral victory in Nigeria is based on the best rigger and the one that can employ the 'best' thuggery in which an incumbent government has an advantage. Perhaps an important aspect of the Nigerian electoral fraud and democratic process is the disempowerment of the electorate. The much needed democracy of empowerment which allows the will and wish of the people to prevail is denied through the process or act of rigging and electoral fraud. For this reason the electorate and the losers in some cases did employ violence to seek redress.

Few examples will suffice to elucidate this point:
(a) In 1964, rigging of election in the Western region led to the operation "Wetie" when the opposition was declared winner. The people rose to protest the result.
(b) Chief Akin Omoboriowo who was purported to have won the Ondo State governorship position could not present himself for the swearing in ceremony because of fear of the very people who supposedly elected him.

The simple reason that the Nigerian federal structure is jaundiced and the fact that democratic practice has disempowered the Nigerian masses, the elite political class has thus had a free reign. The masses unfortunately are not organised enough to act as a check on the political class, who incidentally control governmental coercive power. The low poverty rate in Nigeria has made it possible for the political elite to enslave the electorate.

The exacerbated, inflamed and exploited rivalry and distrust within the society by the political class has virtually made it impossible to have an organised masses. In addition the educational backwardness and poverty level of the majority of the population have turned the masses into 'zombies'. They have become mere onlookers in the affairs that affect them. Majority of them are ready tools to be manipulated by the political class for their selfish reasons. Consequently the masses have suddenly resigned their fate to divine intervention. The nation is thus witnessing the proliferation of churches and mosques.

Conclusion

Studies on rulership in Africa have shown that all over Africa, ordinary people are un-happy with a leadership whose performance has become life-threatening. The masses link their misery to poor leadership performance and the kleptomaniac capitalist elite class. This perception by the masses of the political elite class has apparently provided the military adventurers the opportunity and legitimacy whenever they venture into politics. Unfortunately they have fared no better.
Hence it has been the conviction of the masses that for their lot to improve they have to be empowered to the extent that they can intervene in public life. Their wish and will must be seen to prevail.

The collapse of social and physical infrastructure as a result of poor leadership have impoverished the people and created a great stress as well as a proliferation of violent conflicts in the polity. State power is constituted in such a way as to render democracy impracticable. The political elite class are least keen in transforming the autocratic post-colonial state. They are comfortable with the status quo which favours them. The opposition on the other hand, though victims of the ruling class, harbour the hope of capturing power some day which has been strengthened by the new opportunities of political pluralism. They are just like an averred gambler who believes that he will be luckier the next time.

The attitude of the political class in the 2003 elections has indicated that they have learnt nothing from the long years of military rule. The political class and the democratic process has once again been put to test. Many have thus expressed pessimism. Events in the polity they opined is nothing to cheer about.

The determination of our elected officers for second "termism" is issues to worry about. This has heightened the rate of corruption amongst them and the build up of private armies. Retired military officers and yesterday’s men of power are seeking political relevance. The stakes are high.

They all portend danger in a system that lack checks on the excesses of the political class. To avert the impending storm the following are imperative:

(a) A truly people-oriented constitution should be put in place to replace the military constitution of 1999.

(b) Elimination of political exclusion. The political space should be made wide enough to accommodate all. Critical voices and the opposition should be recognized and given their due right.

(c) The devolution of economic and political power to the federating units.

(d) Massive political and moral education of the masses.

(e) The reengineering of the economic sector in order to bring about a welfarist state.

(f) And above all the holding of a national conference aimed at arriving at a generally acceptable condition of governance and political culture.

Conclusively, Ake (1994) had rightly reasoned that the concerns and interest of the leadership and the base of the democracy movement are in conflict, a conflict that is apparently irreconcilable. Understandably there is the need to bear in mind that political and democratic participation is precisely the operational definition of societal membership. People participate because they see themselves as part of an interconnected whole. Hence participation rests on the premise of the social nature of being and the organic character of society. It boils down to the individual taking part in sharing the burdens and rewards of societal membership.

Ake (1994) explains the gains of participation thus:

...(it) does not simply enjoin right it secures concrete benefit. It is not simply an occasional opportunity to satisfy approval or disapproval of people who exercise power on our behalf, it entails the exercise of power however small or symbolic (6).

This will bring about some elementary sense of identity and fellowship among the people. Thus creating a cohesive and united nation in which individuals show more loyalty to the central political institution than to any primordial group or institution.
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References


