
Economic Foundations of Democratization Process in Nigeria: A Critical Assessment

By

SAT OBIYAN, Ph.D

*Department of Political Science,
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.*

And

OLU AWOFOESO, Ph.D

*Department of Political Science,
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.*

Abstract

The paper discusses the theoretical linkage between economic development and stable democracy. To this end, several opinion held by different scholars on economic development as a prerequisite for democratic stability, including those of Huntington, Laski, Smith and Ake, to mention just a few, were properly represented. The indices of economic development usually highlighted by these scholars include: reasonable and adequate rational wealth which must be equitably distributed, high level of education among the population, industrialization and urbanisation. The presence or absence of majority of these may enhance or negate democratic development in a nation respectively. Having discussed the concepts of democracy and democratization and democratization attempts in Nigeria, the paper positions the on-going democratization efforts in Nigeria vis-a-vis, economic development requirement for stable democracy and observes that the Nigerian economy is far from being developed, hence, the intermittent democratization instability and erosion experienced.

Democratisation process is an integral aspect of any country's political system that seeks to attain democracy, especially, in non-democratic regimes and in 'new' or 'semi new' democracies. Majority of countries in the world today including those that are already practising or claim to be practising democracy are still struggling hard to consolidate their democracies. By consolidation we mean "the process of deepening democratic practices against authoritarian regression in order to avoid democratic brake-down and democratic erosion" (Ikpe, 2006). In fact and as rightly observed by

Sodaro (2001:215), “the ultimate aim of any democratization effort is to overcome authoritarian rule and consolidate democracy”.

Authoritarian and dictatorial regimes abound the world over since ages, but the advent and popularity of democracy in modern time as the most viable and most acceptable form of government for resolving collective problems and attaining common goals has made most countries to embrace democracy. For instance, it is imperative here for us to quote Sudaro’s (2001) account of the on-going democratization process across the globe: thus

In today’s world there are numerous democratization processes taking place in Latin America and Africa, where democracies are replacing discredited military regimes or one-party dictatorships, in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union as well as in East-Central Europe, where democracy is gaining a foothold following decades of communist party rule, in Asia, places like Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and Indonesia; and in other parts of the world as well. In some of these cases, democracy is making a comeback following earlier attempts that ended in failure. Brazil, Argentina and Chile are examples, in other cases democracy is literally being built from scratch, on the basis of virtually no prior history of democratic governance, Russia is a principal example.

This development which engulfed the entire Eastern block and witnessed the overthrow of Right-Wing dictatorship in Greece, Portugal and Spain is what Huntington (1991) referred to as democratic “Third Wave”. In Africa, Nigeria is not an exception of countries currently undergoing democratization having attempted twice and failed in 1960-66 and in 1979-83. None of these two attempts lasted beyond five years, an indication that Nigeria’s democracy was never consolidated before the commencement of the third experiment in 1999 and which, is still on-going. Yet, Nigeria’s democracy cannot be said to be consolidated even after twelve years of uninterrupted democratic experience (1999-2011). Consequently, Nigeria is still within the ambit of countries with new democracies which according to Heywood (2002) are regimes in which the process of democratic consolidation is incomplete and democracy is yet the game in town.

Most scholars of democracy, either of Liberal or Marxist tradition share a common view that economic development is an important condition for democratic stability. This in the words of Lipset (1963) means that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy”. Although, there are few exceptions to this assertion, available statistics seem to support this position. It is therefore our concern in this paper to investigate whether the ongoing democratization process in Nigeria is founded on a solid or otherwise economy to justify a stable or shaky democracy.

Democracy and Democratization Process

On the Concept of Democracy

The general consensus among scholars in the recent time appears to support the view that the concept of “democracy” has ‘attracted an overwhelming influx of interpretative connotations’ (Awofeso, 2000:88), and that “there are now almost as

many definitions of democracy as there are writers on the subject” (Salami, 1994: 74). This development no doubt makes precise definition of democracy a herculean or highly elusive task. The lack of precision and accuracy in the definition of democracy may have prompted (Cnudde and Neubeuer (1969:17) to assert that “the language of democracy is particularly clustered”. Therefore, democracy in its clusteredness has produced diversity and variation both in conceptualization and practice throughout ages. For instances, and as rightly observed by Cnudde and Neubeuer (1969:17), the “Athenian democracy was substantially different from nineteenth century English democracy which in turn, is different from democracy in the United States in the 1960’s”. In similar fashion and stemming from the general distortion over the concept of democracy, democratic practice has equally assumed various forms as it is clothed in many names-direct and indirect democracy, people or popular, authoritarian, grassroots and guided democracies, that the concept of democracy has become somewhat confusing, if not misleading. Perhaps, it is in recognition of the general confusion and distortion over the concept of democracy that Cnudde and Neubeuer (1969:8) made the following observation; “democracy is an inherently difficult concept. It means many things to many people. As a general summary concept, it holds numerous implications and connotations which are frequently complex and often contradictory.”

To this, Satori (1969:24) added that the conceptualization and definition of democracy held by individual scholar over the world have been greatly influenced by their local environment as dictated by prevailing political circumstances. Also Sadaro (2001:166) in an opinion survey based on repeated empirical data have buttressed the fact of environmental circumstances of individual conceptualization of democracy when he observes in the following words, that:

People around the world have different conception of what democracy means: when asked to define the term, a typical American may conjure up images of election campaigns and voting booths, but a typical Russian may define democracy mainly in terms of prosperity and relative economic equality. For a Chinese student, democracy may above all mean freedom of speech or safeguards against arbitrary arrest, for Japanese, it may mean more power for elected officials and less for the unelected bureaucracy. For a black South African, democracy may mean the absence of white domination, for an Italian, it may mean a system of government that is free of political corruption. To be sure, people in all countries may agree that democracy entails a combination of such things as voting, rights, economic opportunity, free speech, parliamentary lawmaking, etc. Even so, people will often differ about what democracy primarily means to them, depending on the political circumstances under which they live.

The Liberal and Marxist conceptualizations of democracy are to a very large extent shaped by their ideological leanings of capitalism/liberalism and economic centralism/marxism. Thus, while Liberal democracy upholds competitive partism, popular sovereignty, fundamental liberties, accountability, etc, as democratic ideals.

Marxian democracy emphasize one partism, economic equality and political centralism. Other variance of democracy equally exhibits their peculiarism in respect of their unique features which differentiate them from the liberal democracy. Since the liberal democracy appears to be a mirror for comparison with other variance of democracy and the variance of democracy Nigeria experimented since independence, our analysis of democratic elements and practise in Nigeria will also reflect this.

Taking the liberal perspective, Sodora (2001:65) described democracy in the following words:

The essential idea of democracy is that the people have the right to determine who governs them. In most cases they elect principle governing officials and hold them accountable for their action. Democracy also imposes legal limit on the government's authority by guaranteeing certain rights and freedom to their citizens.

This conceptualization of democracy no doubt captures several of the core notions most often associated with democracy: legitimacy based on popular free and fair determination of periodically elected government; accountability of those in political office, limited government and guaranteed civil right and freedoms, majority rule as well as minority protection, judiciary independence and economic development. This and others are the values of democracy.

Democratization

Democratisation according to Sodaro (2001), is "the transition from non-democratic to democratic form of government". The same author has in the same work (p.215) defined democratization as the process of building a democracy following the collapse of non-democratic regime. These definitions as similar as they are provide us with the two general perspectives the meaning of democratization have assumed in modern time. The first definition is static and specifically centred on non-democratic regimes such as those under military leadership, dictatorship and totalitarian regimes as they transform from non- democratic government to democratic regime. It assumes that the process of democratization is over once a regime transits from military dictatorship or other forms of non-democratic regimes to democratic ones.

The second definition is more dynamic and elastic to the extent that democratization is perceived as a continuous process towards democratic perfection. The two definitions are very relevant to our study, in that Nigeria has attempted and experimented a number of democratic transitions from the military regime to the civilian administration and is still aspiring towards democratic perfection despite a successful transition in May, 1999. The first definition fits into the Nigerian experience of various military transitions to civil rule since 1966. Although, only two of these transition programmes were successful, they both represent transition from non-democratic military dictatorship to a democratic regime. The second definition explains Nigeria's continuous attempts at perfecting democratic practice during the Second and

Fourth Republics, even after successful transition from military regimes to civilian governments in 1979 and 1999 respectively. The 1979 experiment lasted for only five years and three months partly due to lack of a fully blown democratic culture in the country, also, the 1999 experiment is yet to fully imbue democratic ethos in the people. Hence, it will not be wrong to say that the Nigerian society is still undergoing democratization process. Thus, the Nigerian nascent democracy under President Goodluck Jonathan still requires much improvement if it must match towards democratic stability.

Economic Development as a Prerequisite for Democratic Stability: Some Theoretical Expositions

Since the period of Aristotle, political philosophers unanimously accepted the interdependence of economics and politics. Medieval writers, equally, long before Marx and Marxism “ recognized the obligations of Monarchs to advance the economic and social well-being of their subjects” (Rodee, 1981:66), if stability must be ensured. To Karl Marx, the economic foundation of any society dictates the nature and character of its super-structure, including the political system. In more recent times, scholars are overwhelmingly focused on the socio-economic and political conditions that promote political democracy. Our concern in this section however is to elucidate scholarly opinion on the relationship between economic development and democratic stability. Lipset (1969:156), in his empirical study on socio-economic requisites of democracy in selected countries in Europe, Asia and Latin America argues that democracy is related to the state of economic development and that “the more well-to-do a nation is the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy”. This implies that the chances that a predominantly poor nation to sustain democracy is very slim, if not zero, while rich nations would easily sustain democracy. According to him.

From Aristotle down to the present, men have argued that only in a wealthy society in which relatively few citizens live in real poverty could a situation exist in which the mass of the population could intelligently participate in politics and could develop the self-restraint necessary to avoid succumbing to the appeals of irresponsible demagogue.

Despite the criticism levelled on the modernization theory, a sizeable number of scholars of this tradition are still convinced that “the growth of democracy requires a minimum level of economic development,” while extreme poverty is anti-thetical to democratic growth. Samuel Huntington (1991) has argued that, before a country qualifies to enter “the political transition zone” in democracy, such country must first satisfy the requirement of being in the middle economic stratum. Commenting on the negative impact of poverty on democratic development. Huntington observed that; “poverty is a principal- probably the principal –obstacle to democratic development. The future of democracy depends on the future of economic development. Obstacles to economic development- are obstacles to the expansion of democracy.”

Many other scholars including Max Weber who suggested that modern democracy in its clearest form can only occur under the unique conditions of capitalist industrialization; and those that contended that democracy is impossible without private property and freedom of business enterprise (Hayek, 1944), have all demonstrated the inextricable link between economic development and democratic consolidations, On the other hand, few among all these scholars were quick to point out the need for democratization of wealth as a necessary requirement for the growth of democracy (Isumongh, V.A 1994:215). It is one thing for a country to be developed, it is another to have the nation's wealth equitably distributed among the citizens such that cases of extreme wealth and extreme poverty are reduced to their barest minimum. Yet, this economic condition is considered by scholars as an important requirement for democratic stability.

Both Laski (1925) and Turok (1990) at different times posit that economic democratization must necessarily precede political democratization in order to give people equal access to power otherwise, the economically advantaged will most likely "use their wealth to perpetuate unpopular government" In a similar tune, Lipset (1969:156) argued that "a society divided between a large impoverished mass and small favoured elite would result either in oligarchy (dictatorial rule of small upper stratum) or in tyranny (popular base dictatorship)" Laski (1925) also shared the same view with Lipset in the following word; " a state divided into small number of rich and a large number of poor will always develop a government manipulated by the rich to protect the amenities represented by their prosperity."

Classical political philosophers including John Locke, Jean Jeacques Rousseau and Montesqueiu have also stressed the importance of equitable distribution of wealth for level playing politics where everybody has equal opportunity in political participation and therefore reduces conflict to guarantee domestic peace essential for democracy. Lipset(1967:157) identifies indices of economic development to include wealth, education, industrialization and urbanization. We have already discussed the impact of national wealth, that is, the impact of relative richness and poverty, on a country's democratic stability.

Just as wealth, studies have revealed that the higher ones education, the more likely one is to believe democratic values and support democratic practices (Smith, 1948; Throw 1957:17 , Stouffer, 1955) Although, there are deviant cases, Bryce believes that education, if it does not make man a good citizen makes it at least easier for them to become so. Education, it is argued, "broadens men's knowledge and enable them appreciate the need for norms of tolerance, restrains them from adhering to extremist monistic doctrines and increases their capacity to make national electoral choices". Also, Almond and Verba (1963) in their part breaking work, the Civic Culture, studied the political culture of five nations- United States, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and Mexico, and came to the conclusion that educational attainment is an important contributive factor to political attitude congruent to stable democracy. According to them, the uneducated man or the man with limited education is a different political actor from a man who has achieved a higher level of education Almond and Verber (1963:316) also identified seven reasons why an educated political actor will

display attitude more congruent to democratic stability than an uneducated actor. Other studies including those conducted on six Middle East countries by the Columbia University Bureau of Applied Social Research in 1950-51, have all linked democratic stability to high level of educational attainment.

Both industrialization and urbanisation have also been linked to democracy. With reference to industrialization, Max Weber argues that democracy is more stable in a productive capitalist industrialization. Lipset (1969) also argued that the “average percentage of the employed male working in agricultural and related occupations was 21 in the ‘more democratic’ European countries, and 41 in ‘less democratic’, 52 in ‘less dictatorial’, Latin American countries, 67 in the ‘more dictatorial’”. What this implies is that agrarian societies are more prone to dictatorial or unstable democracy, while industrialised societies are more democratically stable. Indices of wealth such as high per capita income and others are clearly related to state of industrialization. The degree of urbanization is also related to the existence of democracy. A re known political theorist, Harold Laski (1937) asserted that “organised democracy is the product of urban life” as it was not surprising that it made its first effective appearance in the Greek City State.

So far we have discussed the theoretical linkage between economic development and democracy with special reference to four indices of economic development-wealth, education, industrialization and urbanisation. We can now examine the extent these economic variables are applicable to Nigeria’s democracy.

Economic Impediments to Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Needless to reiterate the obvious that Nigeria’s democracy is still very young and perhaps in its embryonic stage, especially when compared with older democracies like the United States and Great Britain. Nigeria’s twelve years of uninterrupted democratic experience cannot in any way be compared with the United States over two hundred years or with Britain over three hundred years. Not even with India’s over sixty years experience. In Nigeria, there are still cases of anti-democratic practices, especially in the areas of electoral processes, rule of law, constitutionalism and corruption. We are more concerned here with the economic factors that brought about this undemocratic culture in Nigeria. One major economic challenge to democratic stability in Nigeria is poverty arising from inequitable distribution of wealth and lack of determination on the part of successive governments to tackle the problem. Despite several implemented policy measures aimed at reducing poverty level in Nigeria, available data shows that over 65% of Nigeria’s population still live below the United Nations’ specification for poverty level. Thus, majority of Nigerians still feed on below \$1.00 daily.

Extreme poverty no doubt has negative impact on a nation’s democratic stability, especially, in countries with high level of illiteracy where the electorate vote on the basis of primordial cleavages, such as religion and ethnicity. Also, ignorance, monetary rewards for votes cast, thuggery and violence during and after elections usually characterise such polity. Nigeria by all standards typifies this (Ake, Onimode) Besides, democratic governance is an expensive regime which many poor nations will

find difficult to fund without external support which, also has its own negative impact on recipient nations' democracies. Recently, and during the 2011 presidential election, President Goodluck Jonathan observed on a programme on the Channels Television that, elections are very expensive to conduct in Nigeria, and wished the winner of the presidential election is not decided by a re-run election because of the financial implication on the country. Although, the causes of poverty in Nigeria can be traced to many factors, we intend to streamline them into two namely; the dependent nature of the Nigerian economy and the culture of primitive accumulation. The negative impact of these factors on Nigeria's democratic stability would also be highlighted.

The dependent nature of the Nigerian economy can be traced to colonialism. The main reason behind colonialism in Africa was identified to be economic exploitation (Rodney, 1972, Fanoz, 1974, Aka, 1978) Nigeria was also a victim of this process of exploitation. Nigeria was colonized by Britain for a period of 99 years (1861-1960), during which her economy was bastardized and systematically linked to the international capitalist economic system in an unequal relations that made Nigeria the disadvantaged partner. The British colonial government in the name of international comparative advantage deceived Nigeria to focus on the production of primary agricultural products and import her finished products from Europe. The British colonial government in turn made no conscious attempt to develop Nigeria industrially and technologically. Consequently, at independence. Nigeria was technologically backward and nurtured capitalist economy that hardly produced. Even when Nigeria discovered crude oil in commercial quantity, she still needed foreign technological assistance to effectively extract her God given resources. The influx of multi-national Oil Companies in Nigeria confirms this, while their activities further entrenched dependent capitalist economy in Nigeria. Nigeria needs to be less dependent on foreign assistance if her economy must grow to sustain democratic stability. In this regard, Mimiko (1994:233) note that:

Unless and until international economic system is completely overhauled to facilitate the economic development of African countries and thus create the socio-economic conditions for the sustainability of democracy all the on-going democratic attempt will come to a grief.

The culture of impunity especially with reference to corruption is an endemic challenge to democratic stability in Nigeria. Although, this attitudinal disposition is not limited to the economic realm, it also subsists at the political sphere, we are however concerned with the former. The negative impacts of corruption on democratic stability in Nigeria are diversified. Corruption entrenches deep rooted poverty which in turn discourages active participation of the down trodden masses in politics. Consequently, the legitimacy and popularity of the ruling government is always questionable. Due to the fact that corruption seems to be legalized in Nigeria, elective offices are seen as the quickest means of wealth accumulation. It was therefore, not surprising that winning election is considered a matter of do-or-die, where every candidate and their political godfathers employ illegal strategies including, rigging, falsification, blackmail and even

killing of opponents in order to clinch power. The above scenario has been described by Larry Diamond (1991) thus:

State power has become the main vehicle for personal enrichment and upward class mobility in Nigeria. Consequently, the premium on acquiring political office has become high enough to justify any degree of rigging, bribery, thuggery, or political chicanery. Democracy in Nigeria is threatened by perverse and deeply embedded incentive structure, which offers easy riches through state office, and difficult, risky, and relatively scarce opportunity for accumulation through dishonest enterprise. Until this changes- which will only happen when the risk and costs of corruption increase sharply Nigerian politics will continue to be riddled with violence and fraud...The problem of corruption constitutes, in my view, the central threat to the future of democracy in Nigeria.

Corruption by extension has also manifested in several unholy relationship in governance especially, between elected officials and their sponsors, euphemistically referred to as godfatherism or patron-client relationship. This relationship in Nigerian parlance is a political investment which, within a short period of time must yield impressive profit. The situation in most states in Nigeria was largely responsible for the colossal siphoning and channelling of state resources to unproductive ventures, prevalence of mediocre into appointive offices and prolonged political instability as experienced in Anambra and Oyo States. Obviously, democracy can hardly be consolidated under this political atmosphere.

Summary and Conclusion

We have approached this paper from both theoretical and practical perspectives and with special reference to Nigeria's experience of democracy since independence. Thus, the two concepts—democracy and democratization, have been elaborately discussed and applied to Nigeria. We have equally linked democratic stability which is the very essence of democratization, to the state of economic development both theoretically and to Nigeria's experience. Our findings reveal that democratization efforts based on strong economic foundation or development will easily ensure democratic stability and vice versa. However, data shows that Nigeria's economy is far from being developed because of her historical specificity against the background of colonialism and culture of impunity, as well as corrupt practices. Besides, Nigeria's democracy is still relatively young when compared with older democracies.

Our position in this paper however, is that democratization efforts in Nigeria will only produce stable democracy with visionary leaders who are willing to fight and stamp out corruption in the Nigerian society with the determination to initiate development oriented policies, the number of years of our democracy notwithstanding.

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