

Dividends of Democracy in Nigeria (1999-2010): The Paradox and Need for a Re-Focus

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Abstract. This paper takes a critical look at the notion in which different programmes, policies and projects being undertaken by government for the welfare of the citizens are being presented under the guise of dividends of democracy. The paper notes that what should actually constitute the basis for determining democracy dividends must be based on the extent to which power is being exercised by the people, through their ability to elect those that will govern them, and their ability to affect the different programmes and policies of government through their active involvement in binding decision making. It argues that democracy and political participation must extend beyond voting rights alone to include other things such as the people's control of their leaders, their actions and the ability to contribute in the process of governance. The paper concludes that the citizens cannot truly enjoy any meaningful dividends of democracy except through popular participation and the consent of the people. It also recommends among other things for the implementation of the Justice Uwais report on electoral reforms and the institution of the referendum to allow the citizens to subject major policies and issues to popular vote and contribution by the citizens.

Keywords: Democracy, Dividends, Majority rule, Programmes, Popular participation.

Introduction

Democracy remains one of the concepts that has continued to elicit widespread controversy in the discuss of politics and in contemporary political science. This is so because students, politicians and scholars have continued to attach different meanings to the term based on their ideological and individual dispositions. In modern times, the connotations of the word democracy are so overwhelmingly favourable that government and regimes which in actual sense should have no claim to it at all have all decided to appropriate the term.

With the advent of a civilian administration which came to usher in Nigeria's present civilian dispensation on the 29th of May, 1999, various administrations and government policies and programmes have been formulated, implemented and delivered to the people under the guise of the "dividend of democracy". Accordingly, these dividends are the benefits that are supposed to accrue to the individual and the entire citizenry since the adoption of a so called popular form of government that is supposed to have been put into place by the people.

A significant part of the problem arises out of the fact that there seems to be lack of proper perception, of the issues in its nature and forms. The basic ingredients which should be used as the criteria for assessing and evaluating the dividends of democracy have largely been mistaken, overlooked and relegated to the background. To establish this thesis will require a proper explication of the concept of democracy. Understanding this properly, one can then analyze and relate the situation as it is obtainable in Nigeria. It will then be easier to establish whether or not the citizens are truly enjoying the dividends of democracy as widely publicized.

Conceptual and Theoretical Clarifications

Democracy was coined from the Greek words *Kratos* (rule) and *Demos* (people). Simply put it means rule of the people. It denotes a system of government which originated in some Greek city states (notably Athens) in the middle of the 5th century in which all adult citizens were free to participate and hold political office on the basis of the lot system (Barber and Watson, 1998:9). In its classical sense, democracy is a system of government by which political sovereignty is retained by the people and therefore exercised directly by them through their active participation. Proponents of classical democracy such as J.J. Rousseau, J.S. Mill and G.D. Cole to mention a few have all advocated for participatory theory of democracy based on genuine rule by the people through their active, direct and constant involvement in governance.

However, other discussions of the theory of participatory democracy have been observed under the "myth of the classical doctrine of democracy"

propagated by authors such as Joseph Schumpeter and Robert Dahl. Schumpeter (1943:269), main criticism of the classical doctrine was that the people rested on empirically unrealistic foundations, in this theory it is the competition by potential decision makers (elites) for the people's vote that is the vital feature. He thus offered the following as a modern realistic definition of the democratic method: as that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people votes. Robert Dahl, in his work, "A Preface to Democratic Theory" observed that classical theory is demonstrably invaded in some respects. He regards classical theories as inadequate for the present day and his theory of democracy as polyarchy – the rule of multiple minorities – is presented as a more adequate replacement as an explanatory modern theory of democracy. Dahl offers a list that defines the characteristics of democracy and flows suit in Schumpeter's arguments that democracy is a political method and also an institutional arrangement that centers on the electoral process. To him, elections are central to the democratic method because they provide the mechanism through which the control of leaders by non leaders can take place (Dahl, 1956:84).

Today, the most common form of democracy is representative in which citizens elect officials to make political decisions, formulate laws and administer programs ostensibly for the public good. Election is therefore regarded as a very important stage of the democratic process. It can be viewed as a device or means for filling or choosing candidates for an office or post through choices made by a designated body of people herein referred to as the electorate (Heywood, 2007:253). The primary means which the people exercise their sovereignty is the vote, therefore those who are qualified by the laws of the state to elect the members of the executive or legislature form the electorate.

However, it has been argued that voting in elections involves only minimal participation in politics for members of a democracy. Classical pluralists are of the view that as many people as possible should participate as actively as possible in politics. They do not believe that in Britain, for instance, voting once every five years is an adequate level of participation. They believe that interest

groups provide opportunity for many individuals who may not be members of political parties (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004:545).

Political participation must therefore move beyond voting rights alone, and encompass a large number or range of things including all forms of people's control of its leaders and their actions. Although the exigencies of contemporary politics and governance demands representation and participation in election, nevertheless, fundamental politics and rules must be subjected to the people decisions. Therefore whether a democracy is practiced directly or indirectly through representatives, it must be built on the principles, that all members of the society must have equal access to power and that all members enjoy universally recognized freedoms and liberties as enshrined in the constitution.

Framework of Analysis

In choosing a suitable theoretical framework for this analysis, "the Marxist theory of democracy" was adopted which argues that under the spell of the bourgeois ideology and influence, the masses are made to believe that they are governed with their consent. They are being compelled to follow the dictates of the bourgeois class against their own interest.

According to Lenin (1917), in capitalist societies, democracy has always been defined by the narrow limits set by capitalist exploitation and consequently always remains a democracy only for the propertied classes as the workers are crushed by want and poverty. The majority of the population is debarred from participation in public and political life. The essence of the capitalist democracy is that the oppressed citizens are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class shall represent and repress them in the executive and parliament.

The basis of the bourgeois democracy is the capitalist economic system in which the means of production are owned by the capitalist class. The society is divided into two classes, the capitalist and the workers, the exploiters and the exploited. The important features of the bourgeois democracy are elections, mostly on a multi party basis. On a critical examination, it can be said that the elections are merely shams so far as the working class is concerned. Money plays

a very important role in elections and the working class which consists of poor people cannot capture political power through elections. After winning elections, the policies of the government serve the interest of the rich and the poor are appeased merely with slogans and speeches (Mahajan, 2006:829).

This kind of democracy creates ideological misconceptions by setting representative institutions which though pretending to work for all are actually working for the dominant class. The poorly educated masses are susceptible to distorted facts and capitalist propaganda through the government controlled press. It pays lip-service to the sovereignty of the people to make itself legitimate thus maintaining and serving the bourgeois social order; but since every one regards such order as natural and proper and thus accepts their place within it, everyone then see the state, in working this way as representing the people and acting on their behalf.

Moreover, public choices are meant to serve the interest of the elites. The elites being rational and self interested, use the resources of the state at their disposal to maintain order in the society by managing a consensus that represents their interest which is aimed at maintaining the status quo. The elites in government try to structure the debate to quash any problem that would threaten their hold on power (Cochran and Malone, 1999:101). This they achieve through elite repression of forced indoctrination in “political correctness”, limitations on dissent, speech and assembly in the name of law and order; and the subversion of democratic values in a paradoxical effort to preserve the system (Dye and Zeigler, 2003:22).

The Basic Principles and Essential Features of a Democratic Government

Today, the word democracy means different thing to so many people in different parts of the world to the extent that even regimes with little or no rule by the people are tagged democratic in order to associate themselves with the positive image associated with democracy. Although the term democracy varies between scholars and the countries where it is being practical, it denotes a kind of government which is being practiced based on the following features:

1. **Popular sovereignty:** The doctrine that sovereign power is vested in the people and that those that are chosen to govern, are trustees of such power, which must be exercised in conformity with the general will. It is a political term that simply means that the people are the rulers. This term is generally used in reference to political issues that are settled by popular vote or to government based on the concept of democracy. It is a notion that no law or rule is legitimate unless it rests directly or indirectly on the consent of the individuals concerned.
2. **Citizen's participation:** According to Sargent (2009), the most fundamental characteristics of any democracy is the idea that citizens should take part and be actively involved in making political decisions, either directly or through representatives of their choice. Other forms of citizen involvement include active participation in a political party or interest group, attending and participating in political meetings or public hearings, discussing politics with friends or colleagues or lobbying a public official about an issue. A growing area of involvement is for citizens to work for or against issues that will be voted on during election or by bringing issues directly to the electorate through initiative petitions or referenda.
3. **The Rule of Law:** The Rule of law denote the principle that the law should 'rule' in the sense that it establishes a framework to which all conduct and behavior conform, applying equally to all the members of society, be they private citizens or government official. The rule of law is that a core liberal democratic principle, embodying ideas such as constitutionalism and limited government (Heywood, 2007:326). Thus, in a democracy, elected representatives participate in making laws but are still bound. Once passed, the law is supreme, not those who made it. Representatives can participate in changing a law, but until it is changed, they, along with everyone else, must obey it. The principle involved is that a society should be able to bind itself by the rules it has chosen, and no individual or institution should be outside those rules (Sargent, 2009:69).

- 4. An Electoral System based on majority rule:** The electoral system refers to a set of rules by which the electorates determine the selection of their representatives based on the distribution of votes cast. Electoral systems may be categorized in several ways. The most useful being a three way division into; plurality, majoritarian and proportional systems. Most electoral systems in a democracy are organized based on the principle of majority rule. This is the rule that the will of the majority or the numerically strongest overrides the will of the minority. According to Heywood (2007), this can nevertheless mean that democracy degenerates into “the tyranny of the majority.”
- 5. Some degree of equality among the citizens:** Equality is the principle of uniform apportionment, but does not necessarily imply identity or sameness (Heywood, 2007:440). For some people the attainment of some form of equality is absolutely essential; for others any form of equality is impossible; for still others even if some form of equality were possible, it would not be desirable (Sargent, 2009:74). Equality as a general concept includes five separate types of equality: political equality; equality before the law; equality of opportunity and economic equality.
- (i) Political equality translates into that of one man one vote. It asserts that even though no two citizens are biologically equal, all have equal authority to vote on every law and policy of the society and also stand for election.
 - (ii) Equality before the law: This means that all people will be treated in the same way by the legal system. Although this is undermined by the socio-economic inequalities that exist in all societies, equality before the law is one of democracy clearest goals (Sargent, 2009:72).
 - (iii) Equality of opportunity refers to a situation in which all the inhabitants have had access to the same social opportunities or conditions without recourse to race, tribes, gender, skill or wealth considerations.
 - (iv) Economic equality: According to Sargent (2009), the usual argument for economic equality is that every individual within a society must be guaranteed a minimum level of economic security. The stress here is on security, not equality. Such security would allow the individual to become

a fully active citizen. The key to this argument, is that without some degree of security, citizens will not be in a position to participate effectively, even in the limited role of voting at election. Extreme levels of poverty can effectively bar an individual from participation in the life of a community and can create continuing inequalities.

- 6. Freedom and Liberty Granted to Citizens:** The right of citizens is an integral aspect of any democratic government. These rights must be guaranteed or protected by the government and include the following; right to life, right to dignity of human person, personal liberty, right to fair hearing, right to private and family life, freedom of thought, conscience and religious, freedom for expression and the press, right to peaceful assembly and association, freedom for movement, freedom from discrimination and the right to acquire and own personal property.
- 7. Popular consultation and accountability:** Refers to the act of consulting or conferring together. This could take the form of deliberation of two or more people on some matter with a view to a decision. A basic ingredient of a democracy is that public officials are accountable and responsive to the preferences of the people. The corollary of this is the general notion that the government should operate in accordance with fixed and publicly known procedures, by allowing public opinion to bear at the appropriate stages of decision making.

The Basis for Determining the Dividends of Democracy

The underlying value of democracy is human dignity and the belief in equality of all the people. Its essence and the basis for determining its dividends can best be captured or explained in Pericles' funeral oration as cited in Thucydides' account of the History of the Peloponnesian War that;

“Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in

positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possess. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other” (p. 145).

In essence, democracy therefore means that power resides in the people and the people therefore exercise authority and rule themselves. Thus the traditional democratic theory values popular participation as an avenue for individual self development. The society achieves proper participation through majority rule and respect for the right of the individual and the right of the minorities. Self development presumes self government and self government only comes about as a result of encouraging each individual to contribute to the development of public policy and resolving conflicts over public policy through debates and popular consultations (Dye and Zeigler, 2003:5).

It must be reminded that democracy means peoples rule, from the foregoing; the basis for determining or measuring the dividends of democracy in a polity must be anchored on the extent to which the people are actively involved in binding decision making. According to Pateman (1970), democracy is seen as popular power, a name for a long entrenched tradition of classical republicanism, where in every one participates in binding decision making. Put succinctly, the provenance of the concept of democracy is “people’s rule” and its dividend must therefore be concerned with the source of power and the location of sovereignty, which must be in the people and not necessarily the pattern of the government.

Although the modern exigencies demands for elections and representation as against the Greek method of direct and popular participation for the election truly reflect the wishes of the people. The citizens must be allowed to choose their leaders and representatives through a periodic process which should not just be limited to voting alone at elections. People’s participation must transcend voting rights and embrace all forms of people’s control of their leaders, their

actions and decisions. The fundamental policies and objectives of the government must be subject to popular participation and consultation with the citizens.

One of the advantages a democratic political system is supposed to have over other systems is that the citizens participate in decisions. Since those who participate in decisions will be more satisfied with the decisions they make, and they will be more attached to the system than are those who cannot participate. Accordingly, a mutually beneficial exchange will then occur between the individual and the political system. In response to his influential inputs, the system produces outputs that are in some way more beneficial for the individual than they would be without those inputs. The beneficial outputs, in turn, lead the individual, through his satisfaction with the system, to a higher level of attachment to that system. In this way, if everything is equal, democratic political systems will be from the point of view of the participants, both more effective (participants will be satisfied with the outputs) of the system) and more legitimate (participants will generally consider the political system to be the proper one per se) (Almond and Verba, 1965:191).

The Irony of the Nigerian Situation

In Nigeria, all forms and means of the people exercising power, or becoming active participants in the decision making process have been overtly or covertly manipulated by the politicians and the governing elites. The electoral process right from the voters registration exercise to actual elections are hijacked and rigged. The elections clearly demonstrate the disconnect between the majority of the population since there has been a systematic disenfranchisement of the electorates. The leaders in many cases come into public offices with violent disregards for public will. Elections results announced are in vast contrast to the voters participation witnessed by observers. In most states observers noted either very low levels of participation or no observable voters while results either recorded very high and therefore questionable turn outs (SDN, 2007). The outcomes of the elections cannot be said to truly represent the wishes of the electorate since they are not free and fair.

It is therefore not uncommon for government at various levels in the present civilian dispensation to hand out welfare packages and implementation of programmes and projects such as building of roads, schools, provision of water, hospitals, free education, electricity etc. to its citizens in the name of the dividends of democracy. Since the government was supposed to be responsive by providing for the welfare of its citizens, suffice it to say that the provision of these basic infrastructure cannot in anyway be used as a yard stick to measure the dividends of democracy, as these things merely constitute the provision of welfare and meeting the basic needs of the citizens, an obligation to which the government owe its citizens. It is therefore pertinent to ask if the military governments in one way or the other were not providing these welfare incentives to the citizenry?

Another point to note is that undemocratic governments as the ones that have been sacked by the judiciary such as the case of Prof. O. Osunbor in Edo State, Dr. Chris Ngige in Anambra State, Dr. Olusegun Agagu in Ondo State, Celestine Omehia in Rivers State and most recently Segun Oni in Ekiti State may all have been trying in one way or the other to build roads, schools, hospitals or deliver one project or the other to its citizens on the basis that they are providing them with the dividends of democracy. Another question that should be asked is how could an undemocratic government that rigged itself to power with a stolen mandate be now delivering dividends of democracy to the people?

The underlying paradox here is that the political elites through various processes have succeeded in illegal manipulations of the electoral process through rigging and imposition of candidates, and other unpopular means thereby marginalizing the citizens. Having been denied the right to freely elect those who would govern them in the various elections or selections, certain welfare packages and incentives which are determined by the ruling elites are being handed over to the citizens to placate, pacify and assuage the feelings of the citizens, such packages and policies being implemented by the government might also be seen as avenues to acquire legitimacy and obtain the support of the citizens since the government was not popularly elected by the citizens. In this

case the issue of consent and popular participation of the people have been relegated to the background while the number of projects being executed is brought into the forefront.

In Nigeria, political office seekers who want to win election at all cost continue to perpetuate election rigging unabated. Political leaders, politicians and political office seekers rig election so as to continue stay in power and arrogate power to themselves when they have no legitimate or constitutional right to such power. Between 1999 to 2010, there was a progressive worsening of the credibility of election results. According to Suberu (2007), the 14 and 21 April 2007 general elections which should have been a milestone, saw the electoral process riddled with corruption, malfeasance and raised doubts about the prospects for credibility in the electoral process and democratic stability and consolidation. Though the election petition tribunals had to overturn the election of some governors and ordered re-run elections in Kogi, Adamawa, Sokoto and Bayelsa States. The hopes raised by the judiciary for redress were however, dashed as in all the cases, the governors whose elections were challenged retained their seats in the re-runs and tactically may have secured tenure elongation because, their tenure had to be counted from the date of their swearing-in after the re-run election which for some, came after they had spent one year or more in office.

According to Pateman (1970), it is quite ironical that the idea of participation which should have become so popular, particularly with students, among political theorists and scientists have been the widely accepted theory of democracy (so widely accepted that one might call it the orthodox doctrine of democracy) is one in which the concept of participation has only the most minimal role. Indeed, not only has it a minimal role but a prominent feature of recent theories of democracy is the emphasis placed on the dangers inherent in wide popular participation in politics. These characteristics are derived mainly from two major concerns of recent, particularly bourgeois scholars on democratic theory. First their conviction that the theories of earlier writers on democracy (the so called "classical theorists") which have the idea of at least a greater participation of all the people at the heart, are in need of drastic revision, if not

outright rejection. Secondly, a preoccupation with the stability of the political system, and with the conditions, or prerequisites, necessary to ensure that stability; this preoccupation has its origins in the contrast drawn between democracy and totalitarianism as the only two political alternatives available in the modern world.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Without a transparent and credible electoral process, democracy cannot serve as a vehicle for promoting development and the reason for this is obvious. If the votes of the electorate do not count and government can stay in power irrespective of their performance, then there will be no incentive for elective public officers to deliver on their mandate. After all, they will reason, the opinion of the voter does not count. When the voter is truly king as should be the case in a genuine democracy, a government that fails to meet his/her expectations can be voted out of power and a new government elected to prove its mettle. In such a competitive democracy, parties and governments are sensitive to public opinion and strive to fulfill their part of the social contract in order to remain in power. It is through such a dialectical process that is achieved through the interplay of democratic forms.

The sad truth is that democracy has not delivered the dividends of development to the Nigerian people over the last ten years. But even with a few cases of ongoing transformation, Nigeria remains a vast wasteland of mass poverty characterized by a pauperized citizenry, dilapidated infrastructure, comatose health and education sectors, bad roads, inadequate power supply, de-industrialisation, youth unemployment and chronic insecurity among several other challenges. One reason why this situation has persisted since 1999 is that elections for the most part have not counted during the period.

The main concern expressed here in this paper is for popular consent and participation of the citizens in government, not just the responsiveness of the government to the governed obviously through the provisions of projects and infrastructure. From the standpoint of many political scientists, the right to participate involves the freedom to express preferences, to make claims on

government, and to have them taken equally into account (Joseph, 1991:16). The main purpose of participation was to help people improve themselves by exercising their judgment and by informing themselves of what is going on in the political system (Shively, 2005:238).

To engender participation and ensure the consent of the Nigerian citizens in governance, the government must be urged to accept and implement without delay the Justice Mohammed Uwais Committee reports on electoral reforms as this can be one of the steps towards ensuring a free and fair elections in the Nigerian polity. There should also be a special procedure for referring or subjecting a government policy, a particular bill or constitutional amendment for popular vote by the electorate through the “referendum”. A device known as the initiative should also be put in place, as this enables a special number of people to draft a bill and send it to the legislature for consideration. This device empowers the people to initiate a law to which they desire to be passed.

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