

The Democratic Philosophy, Law and the Politics of Identity in Nigeria*

Abstract:

Defined as ‘government of the people, for the people, by the people,’ democracy has been accepted as the global ideal of leadership and a system to be aspired to by every modern society, despite its flaws. Nigeria, like many other African nations has embraced democracy in the bid to arrive at democracy’s human developmental promises. However, Nigeria’s nascent democracy remains shackled by the vestiges of the ancient cultural, traditional and autochthonous leadership models coupled with an adamant attachment to primordial identity motivated cleavages within the Nigerian socio-political milieu. With over 250 ethnic groups and multiple religions, how to create a harmonious and peaceful nation out of these many identities remains an unanswered national question. This paper explored the origin and philosophy of the democratic system of government, the relationship between democracy, identity politics and the role of the judiciary in the quandary that is Nigeria’s democracy today. It argued for a principled democracy, national orientation and re-orientation, a more robust democratic/voter education, refocusing of religious zeal, elimination of biases and called for unity in diversity as a path to true democracy and as conduits for producing leaders with clear and qualified vision for the liberation of Nigeria and Africa.

Keywords: *Democratic Philosophy; Democracy; politics; ethnicity; religion; identity.*

1. Introduction:

Democracy is renowned as the ‘government of the people, for the people, by the people’¹ This means that democracy is not the rule of a few, but a communitarian and majoritarian affair. Despite its flaws, like its susceptibility to mob rule, democracy has been accepted as the global ideal of leadership and a system to be aspired to by every modern society. In the bid to arrive at the human developmental promises of democracy, multiple nations have since embraced democracy, including African nations to whom the idea was in large part, alien. Obviously, the idea of democracy is still an ambivalent phenomenon within the African socio-cultural milieu.² Whereas African nations aspire to develop most aspects of their nations’ leadership along democratic lines, democracy remains an ideal yet to be firmly grasped, interiorized and or incarnated within the African socio-cultural consciousness. The reasons are not far-fetched; the feudal, monarchical and often despotic leaderships known to Africa from prehistoric times whose vestiges continue to fester to date and other socio-cultural inhibitions. The United Kingdom and the United States of America are prime examples of longstanding democracies.³ Despite the United Kingdom’s monarchical system, the democratic ideal has found a way to subsist alongside the monarchy. Most often, the monarchy carefully maintains a neutrality that steadies the democratic ship rather than tilt it one way or another. This reveals that the monarchy is a stabilizing factor rather than a destabilizing institution. Thus, there is a healthy blend and balance between the monarchical and the democratic systems of government which African states are yet to find. Nigeria as a nation embraced democracy immediately after her independence in 1960. However, the unfortunate incidences of coups d’état and counter-coups

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¹ Abraham Lincoln, Hattiesburg Address 1863.

² Most African societies oscillate between a crude model of democracy marked by impunity, autocracy and fraud, and a feudal-like democracy that purports to support a quasi-divine right of elected officials who live like kings.

³ The history of American democracy dates far back to the 1730s in the New England colonies where legislatures were initially governed by popular assemblies.

truncated the stream of democracy and retarded its growth within the borders of the newly independent nation.⁴ A sustained effort by the citizenry led by civil society groups and leaders of thought in the respective regions of the country orchestrated the return of democracy in 1999. At twenty-four years old, Nigeria's democracy can still at best, be described as nascent. Assessing the pros and cons of the country's democratic experience remains an ambivalent exercise, let alone evaluating the unfolding democratic culture, its maturity and its gains. This ambivalence is hinged on a major identifiable factor: the lack of democratic consciousness amongst the masses. This is further compounded by a lack of democracy education that serves to separate the ancient African idea of 'monarchy' from the modern ideal of democracy. Unfortunately, the same quagmire scenario plays out in most of Africa.⁵ This paper explores the democratic philosophy in Nigeria and how the persistent question of national identity has remained an Achilles' heel on the foot of Nigeria's democratic evolution. It proceeds by exploring the general idea of democracy and its ideal before zeroing into the idea of democracy as currently practiced in Nigeria. Of note is the fact that Nigeria's democracy is greatly impacted by the lack of a common identity as citizens.⁶ The lack of a common identity has the negative effect of producing ethnic and regional champions rather than national leaders. It fosters the idea that the leadership must be from my 'neck of the woods,' and more importantly, by someone who speaks the same language as me and perhaps shares a similar faith orientation. In the end, such undemocratic thought processes and slants produce ethnic jingoists and nation-dividers rather than nation-builders.

2. The idea of democracy and its African bent

The nature of democracy can be understood from the root of the term which lies in two Greek words "*demos*" and "*kratos*" meaning people and power respectively.⁷ This immediately suggests a form of government whose power lies in the will of the people. However, the dynamics of power remain unclear in reality, even in democratic societies. When speaking of power as belonging to the people or reflected in their will, it refers to the liberty to exercise such will and power. The restriction of such a liberty raises the question of to whom does power really belong? Though Abraham Lincoln summed up the meaning of democracy as "*government of the people, by the people, for the people*,"⁸ the Greeks retain the reputation for being the first to formally enact a democratic system of government, though there is evidence pointing to the existence of democratic principles in a few other societies around the world before the Greeks formalized it.⁹ The Greek democracy was a more direct democracy in which people gathered and discussed policies and implemented them¹⁰ rather than the more prevalent and contemporary system of representative democracy in which people are elected to represent others in law and policy-making. Despite its common usage and ubiquitous presence in the global social space and time, and it being commonplace on the lips of politicians, practitioners

⁴ Nigeria recorded two coup d'états in 1966, one in 1975, 1983, 1985, and 1993.

⁵ Kenya, Cameroun and Central African Republic are just a few cases in point.

⁶ According to the Wilson Center, Nigeria has more than 300 ethnic groups and over 500 languages with many distinct religious and regional differences that far too often command the loyalties of citizens much more than their common identity as Nigerians. See www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/. Last accessed, May 10, 2023.

⁷ <https://www.moadoph.gov.au/democracy/defining-democracy/>. Last accessed, May 10, 2023.

⁸ President Abraham Lincoln's Hattiesburg Address, November 9, 1863, <https://www.wdam.com/story/27425996/on-this-day-in-history-november-19th-1863/>. Last accessed, May 8, 2023.

⁹ <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-greece/ancient-greece-democracy>. Last accessed, May 25, 2023.

¹⁰ <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-greece/ancient-greece-democracy/>. Last accessed, May 10, 2023.

and others, democracy defies a single explanation, definition and meaning. No nation is democratic by nature notwithstanding the claims to aboriginal republicanism that is based on communitarianism as commonly alluded to by the Igbos for example.¹¹ The democratic system of government rather evolved as societies continued in their quest for the best form of government; one that would be fair, inclusive and representative. Perhaps, this evolution of the democratic process is traceable to and synonymous with people's innate yearning for a voice in how they are governed, in contradistinction to the archaic feudal monarchical systems in which citizens were but serfs, mere subjects and passive observers in how they were governed. They were, at best, passive observers, workers, and payers of taxes, and never to be heard. Since Democracy is not a monolithic reality, it is hard to speak of some sort of uniformity in its practice as different nations over time have evolved what is oftentimes their unique kind of democracy. Thus, direct democracy, representative democracy and other kinds of democracy that subsist in the world today raise questions about the nature and character of democracy as a system of government. What a democratic form of government represents to a mature democracy like the United States of America, or the United Kingdom is different from what democracy represents for an emerging market democracy or a developing economy like Nigeria, or to former communist Russia, and the Asian tigers like China, Indonesia or countries emerging from dictatorial systems like Singapore.

A more advanced thought may tend to view democracy from a wider political worldview; one that sees politics as a 'relative' reality. For instance, in the face of a national crisis, a democratic system may become more socialist, perhaps in the bid to attend to the needs of each individual (victims) impacted by the crisis. In a time of war, such a system may as well become more nationalist, as is visible in Ukraine¹². In a moment of stable peace, it may become more liberal as evidenced by the American democratic culture.¹³ A studious look at western democracies may suggest that the soothing tides of peace and stability tend to drive liberal tendencies too far. In this view, gradualism plays a huge role in the drive towards a more liberal worldview such that society begins to teeter around an ideological slippery slope. Where to draw the lines becomes a major question as the powerful elements within a democratic system advance forceful agenda towards blurring the lines between that which is considered morally right or morally reprehensible, legal or dictatorial. When the force of liberal agenda becomes too great and too overbearing, it becomes what Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVII) called "*the dictatorship of relativism*."¹⁴ The dictatorship of relativism is a romanticization of liberal ideologies to the exclusion of dissent to where any such dissent is tagged as bigotry or outmodedness. Such agenda also serve to obscure and complicate people's view and understanding to the detriment of democracy – a negative twist because in a democracy, the well-being of humans and nature should be paramount. Historically, the process of democratization took the western countries that are bastions of modern-day democracy a long time to develop and to integrate. Sartori notes that it has taken 2,000 years for democracy in the

¹¹ <https://www.sgojahds.com/index.php/SGOJAHDS/article/view/76>. Last accessed, May 8, 2023.

¹² Russia began its military offensive against Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022. The Ukrainian people and their army stood their ground in an incredible show of nationalism and resilience, fending off Russian invasion and launching deadly offensive themselves, albeit with the help of American and other European powers.

¹³ Many Americans, for example, are more concerned with liberal social issues like abortion rights, gay rights, immigration, etc., rather than the more pressing issues of life and death that a warring nation like Ukraine would be concerned with in the circumstance.

¹⁴ In a 2005 homily before he was elected Pope, Joseph Ratzinger describes a world ruled by the "dictatorship of relativism" characterized by the view of reality as non-definitive. Its goal is only to satisfy humans' ego.

western countries to advance to its current state. Most of it has been through a process of experimentation (trial and error) and a learning process of the ideas of power, freedom, and egalitarianism.¹⁵ According to Austin, “*the process of democratization was long, over a period of slow enfranchisement, at a time of increasing prosperity.*”¹⁶ Effectively, therefore, most European democracies, going by contemporary standards are less than 200 years old. Thus, as a result of its nascency, many developing nations like Nigeria and other African and south Asian countries lack the political culture and the historical experience necessary to cultivate strong democratic institutions, making it difficult to build and maintain a democratic system or count the gains of democratic culture. Democracy in newly democratized nations (Nigeria for example), often appears to be marred by a trajectory of one step forward and two steps backwards where every new election cycle produces political attitudes and electioneering maneuvers that reveal the nadirs of political immaturity and the echelons of primordial anti-democratic tendencies like ethnicity, region and religion. There is, however, an intellectual cautious optimism that the dream of full democratization can be realised via a learning process. Kusterer in his 1992 study, introduced the concept of “can do” as a school of thought. This school sees democracy from the lens of teachability and learnability, meaning, something that can be taught and learned.¹⁷ Thus viewed, democratization becomes a process that creates the enabling environment for democracy, and in fact, creates a call for it (by the citizens), rather than something that evolves slowly. Similarly, Diamond *et al* believe that “*once democracy is created, its sustainability would now depend on a complex set of factors such as regime legitimacy and performance, political leadership, social structure, socio-economic development, associational life, state-society relationship, political institutions, ethnic relations, intra-country regional relations, the military and international factors.*”¹⁸ Similar factors which consistently play out in Nigeria’s bid to find a sustainable democratic system also constitute cogs in the country’s democratic wheel. Specifically, democratic advancement is being hampered by centrifugal, tribal and secessionist tendencies, religious fundamentalism, the dearth of economic advancement largely due to retrogressive and unproductive fiscal policies by inept successive governments and their ineffective economic management skills. The “can do” school, however, is a reminder that democracy can be established by clever institutional design and more competent leadership.

3. Theories and Philosophies of Democracy

Holmes writing on ‘*Tocqueville and Democracy*’ sees democracy from the Tocquevillian perspective as “*a social arrangement on the one hand, and a political system on the other hand. It sometimes refers to the social levelling or the collapse of legally maintained class hierarches*”¹⁹ Alternatively, “*it alludes to structures of self-governance that ensure that leaders are answerable to elected majorities. Democracy is this social sense therefore becomes a*

¹⁵ Sartori, Giovanni, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited: Part One - The Contemporary Debate*. (Chatham House Publishers 1987).

¹⁶ Dennis Austin, *Democracy in Non-Western States: Therapeutic or Forlorn* (U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington D.C 1990) pp.1-16 (unpublished manuscript).

¹⁷ Ken Kusterer, *On Democratization: What is it, how is it encouraged, and how is its progress measured?* (International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Kandy, Sri Lanka 1992) (unpublished manuscript).

¹⁸ Diamond, Larry *et al.*, *Introduction: Comparing Experiences with Democracy* in Diamond, L., Linz, J. J., Lipset, S. M. eds. *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy* (Lynne Rienner Publishers 1990) p.1-35.

¹⁹ See Copp *et al*, *The Idea of Democracy* (University of Cambridge 1993) pp. 23-64.

necessary and unavoidable aspect of the modern world."²⁰ For Tocqueville, there is a difference between democracy and a social structure in which there are no 'legally perpetuated class hierarchies,' that is, a democratic political system or a set of institutions that hold leaders accountable to election majorities.²¹ Unfortunately, the building of social, economic and political hierarchies has been a major fallout of the democratic experiment within Africa and particularly the country under review, Nigeria. Rather than resulting in an egalitarian society where equity and the rule of law reign supreme, the political class leverage on the advantages of democratic political opportunity as a means to personal and familial ascendancy. Again, the effects of lack of democratic education, large scale ignorance, poverty and an upended rational thought processes have not afforded the electorate the courage, and the cognitive tools for insisting on political accountability. FereJohn is concerned that maintaining the necessary control and accountability of elected officials over their actions is a persistent challenge for democracies. In his view, as long as this question remains unanswered, "*there is reason to be skeptical about the efficacy and purpose of public intervention in preference formation.*"²² On a different scale, there is a relationship between political democracy and commerce as drawn by Tocqueville. He contends that "*there must be a balance in the symbiotic relationship between commerce and political democracy. In this sense, a burgeoning economy is fundamental to democratic stability, since politicians who lose elections are more likely to stomach defeat if they have a business within the economy to return to, rather than maintaining an illegitimate clinch on power.*"²³ This is one reason the new philosophy that is being canvassed in the Nigerian political space is that elections should produce individuals who have professions, trades or businesses to return to post-election or post political office. These not only bring their entrepreneurial know-how and industry but are also more likely to focus on the business of governance since they are conversant with financial management rather than on looting the treasury. This is the vital relationship between political democracy and commerce that is often underemphasized. The foregoing proposition correlates with the idea that "*Greed for prosperity hands over privatized citizens to the first master who offers himself when citizens focus exclusively on their private advantages, these private advantages, too, may be lost.*"²⁴ This is because as Tocqueville himself believed, "*if citizens become wholly absorbed in private life, particularly in economic affairs, they will leave the stage free to be taken over by an ambitious strongman*"²⁵ - a phenomenon which has played out since Nigeria's second attempt at democratization in 1999.

At its inception, most people, especially easterners had no interest in the evolving politics because they are mostly businesspeople focusing on their private enterprise. This was coupled with a general skepticism in the potency of the ensuing political dispensation. This skepticism meant that the field was left to men and women of little character while the rest focused on building and consolidating their private business empires. The general disbelief in the prospects of the new democratic dispensation was largely as result of years of brutal military dictatorships and failed promises of a transition to civilian rule. The question was: would the new democracy survive and for how long? So good men of character looked the other way while the political wheel of the nation was hijacked by those who would convert the national

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. pp 231-241.

²³ See David Copp et al, *The Idea of Democracy* pp. 23-64.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

treasury into a private estate for themselves and their cronies. Today, however, the struggle to wrest the soul of a politically battered nation from the hands of rent-seekers and political profiteers is gaining momentum and the tide may soon be turning. Hardship occasioned by abject poverty has ushered in a wave of political consciousness that is fast turning the nation's political tide and the people's will against their erstwhile landlords. Tocqueville's social levelling and the possible weakening of legally maintained class hierarches may very well be the resultant effects of the current democratic awakening in oppressed groups.

4. Democracy and Development:

There is today a global assumption that democracy and good governance are essential requirements for development. Also, a widely accepted theory is that democracy is a result of socioeconomic growth (modernization).²⁶ This makes democracy a resultant effect of socio-economic advancement. In this view, it has been argued for instance, by Cassinelli that "*a modern democratic state can exist only in a society that has solved the problems of material well-being.*"²⁷ For Dahl, "*for democracy to occur, there must be sufficient institutions and a people, particularly a middle class, open to democratic ideas.*"²⁸ These ideas crystallize into what is called the "Lipset thesis" which holds that "*not only does economic development promote democracy, but it also makes democracy possible.*"²⁹ In his modernization theory, Lipset was of the view that economic advancement creates democracy by engendering urbanization, education and the attendant upgrading of fiscal standards. He opined that "*without a strong middle class, the ruling classes fear the power democracy would give to the poor and the workers; hence they oppose democracy. But with development, economic inequality diminishes.*"³⁰ This is an interesting dynamic, but unfortunately, a direct antithesis of current experience of the democratic experiment in much of Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Economic growth, no doubt, enhances democracy. Democracy should, therefore, build and secure economic growth for all. This is an ideal to which every nation must aspire as a system of government which secures economic prosperity for all. And whereas a burgeoning middle class in Lipset's view, provides a safeguard to the ruling class against the potential democratically inspired power of the poor, the reverse seems to be case in less literate societies. The opposition to literacy by Nigeria's ruling class evidences their fear for what kind of citizens literacy would produce. The ruling class covets the power which democracy gives them and indeed covertly opposes literacy, because as Lipset rightly noted, education which is an offshoot of economic development aids the preliterate in making wiser and more informed political decisions.³¹ By stifling education and advancing poverty, poverty becomes a weapon for the continued subjugation of the masses - the "weaponization of poverty." The weaponization of poverty inevitably plays to the advantage of the ruling class who can afford to remain unaccountable to the electorate while keeping them impoverished only to return with financial incentives equivalent to crumbs to buy the people's votes every election cycle. And because

²⁶ This theory suggests that democracy becomes the yearning of the people once they realise that they are now economically self-reliant.

²⁷ Cassinelli, C. W., *The Politics of Freedom: An Analysis of the Modern State* (University of Washington Press 1961).

²⁸ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (Yale University Press 1971).

²⁹ See Lipset, S. M., *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy* (Lynne Rienner Publishers 1990) p.1-35.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

hunger is often averse to rational and moral thinking, it is easy to lure people into accepting the crumbs, no matter how petty and offer their votes to the “buyer.”

Haggard notes that “*there is a long-term, unmistakable correlation between economic development and democracy.*”³² Rich developed nations typically have democratic structure and freedoms. On the other hand, democracy remains deficient in impoverished environments. This plays into the weaponization of poverty where seekers of political power weaken the electorate via the denial of basic amenities, including food but readily provide same as handouts during election cycles to alter the people’s choices. Whereas if the people were not hungry, were educated and could provide for themselves, choosing for themselves would be far easier and their propensity to inducements would be greatly reduced. Thus, one cannot but agree with Marks and Diamond that “Human development is the most effective predictor of the possibility of democracy.”³³ It is also argued that democracy thrives on the rule of law, enhances civil and political rights, property rights, free flow of information, all prerequisites for social and economic progress. The argument of development, however, meets with pessimism amongst those who believe that democracy fosters ethnic and other divides and generates instability that threatens development. Nigeria’s democratic experience in the last twenty-four years all but lays credence to such views. Furthermore, political leaders in a democracy react to interest groups that instigate distortions in wealth distribution. They are also being forced to redistribute even before growth is achieved, whereas what is needed for development is investing more and consuming less – something that authoritarian regimes have shown can be more easily achieved leveraging on their power of unilateral decisions, regardless of how unpopular such decisions are.

Hadenius made a study of the relationship between democracy and development using statistical models with democracy as the dependent variable. Such findings along with historical evidence point to the idea that development promotes democracy.³⁴ Huber *et al* have argued that historically, capitalist development has helped to establish and sustain democracy by weakening the landlord class and strengthening the middle class and working class.³⁵ These postulations, however, may explain the democratic origin and trajectory of some older democracies or the besmirched dynamics of democracy in a country like Nigeria and other developing nations.

In some other countries of Central and Eastern Europe however, economic failures conversely have been catalysts to seeking democratic change. This is also driven by the belief that democracy presents the best possibility of economic advancement. As Henderson notes, “*the rule of law and democracy are crucial to capital markets. A free market balanced by a democratically elected, transparent and capable government, and a strong civil society yield stable growth rates and greater social welfare.*”³⁶ Similarly, in some countries (for example, Taiwan and South Korea) economic success has served as a stimulus for democracy. Despite these general arguments, the evidence is weak to support the view that development always brings about democracy or that democracy brings about development. Sirowy and Inkeles’

³² Stephen Haggard, *Democracy and Economic Growth* (United States Agency for International Development 1990) (unpublished manuscript).

³³ Gary Marks and Larry Diamond (eds) *Reexamining Democracy* (Sage Publications 1992).

³⁴ Hadenius Hadenius A, “Frontmatter,” *Democracy and Development* (Cambridge University Press 1992)

³⁵ Evelyne Huber *et al.*, ‘The Impact of Economic Development on Democracy’ (1993) 7 *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 71-85.

³⁶ Rebecca Henderson “Reimagining Capitalism,” *Management and Business Review*, (Winter 2021), <https://mbrjournal.com/2020/12/23/reimagining-capitalism/>. Last accessed, May 23, 2023.

survey of available literature concluded that “*democracy does not widely and directly facilitate more rapid economic growth.*”³⁷ The World Bank came to a similar conclusion in its 1991 World Development Report.³⁸ It continues to raise questions about the variance of democracy from nation to nation, continent to continent, and region to region in the democratic quest and in its practical manifestation. No doubt, a people’s historical, socio-cultural and economic factors play significant roles in what kind of democracy evolves.

As far as democracy is concerned, there is no one-size-fits-all. In most countries, democracy is by competition (in Nigeria for instance). In some countries, it is by power sharing (for example in Malaysia), and in some others, democracy is heavily influenced by religious and cultural orientations in which rights – private and group, may play a greater role (for instance in the United States). A discussion of democracy must take cognizance of these existential realities.³⁹ In the face of differing and often conflicting social, religious and moral orientations, democracy has as one of its challenges, the duty to rise to the demand of being a unifying and stabilizing force by instilling tolerance. This is apropos because often, democracy can become the tyranny of the majority. In certain contexts, it is the tyranny of a small group of people who can rig or buy votes, especially by those who are already enjoying the privileges of power and can use the instruments of the state to their advantage. This can also make democracy look like control by interest groups. Such tyrannies of the majority or of a small interest group may play out for instance, in the majority choosing Brexit in England, or a group desiring sharia law like in Indonesia and northern Nigeria. Though democracy is not necessarily to be blamed in such situations, but that the ignorant and undemocratic have equal access to the ballot boxes and so can make decisions that can negatively affect the lives of the critical thinkers, who may be in the minority, is certainly a challenge. It is therefore, imperative that democracy provides a legal framework for the protection of individual rights and freedoms – religious rights, property rights, the free market and protection against government overreach. This position takes into consideration that truth is not always measured by mass appeal, neither should morality be a matter of democratic appeal, legislative or judicial fiat as is mostly the case in some western countries. The passage of laws by Congress, court rulings and issues being decided through the ballot against the will of a majority or minority who strongly believe such measures antagonize their strongly held, moral, social, or religious convictions is problematic in a democracy. To assume that moral truths are to be determined by mass acquiescence or a majoritarian appeal can be seen as tyranny. Individuals who challenge the new social order engineered through the legislature, courts, or ballot boxes, feel justified to oppose such democratically engineered paradigms. Those too, have rights to be citizens in their own right, and must they be forced to conform to the new democratically reengineered order which they feel compelled to oppose? For such pressured individuals or groups, democracy is hardly serving their ultimate goals and not helping them realise their supernatural moral aspirations. Thus, democracy can be corrupted by its hegemonic approach to certain moral issues of the day as enunciated by many countries’ legislature and their counterparts in the judiciary. It is not only corrupted by the pseudo-dictators in government who isolate aspects of democratic legitimacy which serve their self-serving aspirations but also by groups within the system who

³⁷ Larry Sirowy and Alex Inkeles, ‘The Effects of Democracy on Economic Growth and Inequality: A Review,’ *Studies in Comparative International Development* (1990) 25:126-157.

³⁸ See World Development Report (1991) pp. 132-134.

³⁹ See Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl, ‘What Democracy is... and Is Not’ (1991) 2 3 *Journal of Democracy* pp. 75-88.

use same to realise their ambitions. This is the much-derided ideological corruption of democracy.

The biggest flaw of democracy, however, is the underlying assumption that everyone is rational, and thus, thinks rationally. Reality indicates the contrary. Incidentally, the vote of an irrational citizen is the same as the vote of a genius – one vote, and those with capacity to reason are often in the minority. So, it appears the irrational of the society always win. This is why politicians seldom “waste” their time on intellectuals. They know what to do. Thus, democracy doesn’t always yield the best governmental decisions. And because key decisions of government are often unpopular and do not attract wide admiration, the confidence on which the democratic social contract is based is gradually eroded. For instance, redesigning Nigeria’s currency (the naira) in the midst a severe economic crunch, high inflation, rising food and fuel prices in the middle of an election season was widely condemned as an ill-advised political move. In contradistinction to democratic government, a major pro of autocratic power is that it is absolute: that things can get done without the delay brought on by endless debates and necessary compromises associated with the democratic system.⁴⁰ But is the tradeoff which is its ability to stymie freedom to be preferred? Besides, democracy today can easily be dismissed on the heels of its obvious bottlenecks and snag as something that doesn’t really work. But as Walsh agrees, “*it is slow and encourages ego and half-measures. It keeps changing its mind and wasting endless resources while stumbling for the solution. But it provides space for dissent and, more importantly, other, competing ideas.*”⁴¹ I concur!

5. Democracy from the African prism:

Long before the evolution of the deficient African democracies of the 21st century, African societies were accustomed to the rule of sovereigns in the mode of monarchs, Sheiks or Emirs. Thus, African democracy appears to remain shackled by the feudalistic tendencies. Evidently, Africa’s historical serfdom and servitude to sovereigns, has not allowed democracy to authentically flourish. Thus, African democracy still labours under the burdens of the vestiges of authoritarian chiefdoms such that elected officials do not view themselves as representatives of the people, but as powerful overlords accountable to none. A thoroughgoing reorientation is needed if this must change; a reorientation that is based on a proper understanding of power, human rights and equity. The Igbos of Nigeria for instance, pride themselves as being republicans. The notion of republicanism is predicated on the democratic ideal which welcomes communitarianism of thoughts and ideas from the generality of the people regarding how they are governed. It extends to their approach to policymaking and its implication for the common good reflecting the notion of power as belonging to the people together and the liberty to exercise such power. It implies that democracy, even in its primordial nature was not the exclusive preserve of any given society. According to Tocqueville, finding a democratic cure to a democratic disease was America’s way of justifying democracy which is in effect, a system of self-rule (See Toqueville’s *Democratie en Americque* 2000). Democracy in Nigeria is of a different stock; rather than aspiring to classical democracy, Nigeria currently practices a pseudo-feudalism sprinkled with little drops of the elements of democracy. In this system, the stooge syndrome and a spineless hero-worship hold sway. Feudalism which thrives on

⁴⁰ Nick Walsh, “Democracy has its flaws, but it has emerged from the pandemic in much ruder health than the alternative, <<https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/23/world/autocracies-democracy-pandemic-analysis-intl-cmd/index.html>> Last accessed, May 23, 2023.

⁴¹ Ibid.

the divine right of kings, hides behind a pseudo-democracy where everyone bows before the sovereign as in the days of old; an ideology which is in stark contrast to real democracy. Furthermore, whereas democracy elsewhere has created an impetus for growth, Nigerian democracy has created ethnic, religious and social cleavages of all sorts. Thus, it may seem genius in ‘finding a democratic cure to a democratic disease’ for the founders of our democracy to come up with the idea of “zoning” for example, borne out of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria encompassing all the respective ethnic groups in the country. But for the purpose of electoral expediency, the north and south are regarded as representative of the entire country. Thus, under an unwritten gentleman’s agreement, the presidency of the federal republic is meant to be rotated between the north and the south after each electoral cycle. But even that well intended arrangement is currently threatened by over-ambitious elements within the political class. In an ideal situation, the idea of zoning should never arise in a democratic system. Zoning the presidency may aid national integration but it makes a mockery of the democratic order which is meant to produce the most competent regardless of what part of the country he/she is from. However, with a prevalent belief that zoning is the only way to political equity, the concept isn’t all together flawed. However, it is dogged by allegations of adamant nepotism and unrepentant cronyism. It is a system that creates two classes of citizens: one living at the mercy of political chance and another arrogating to itself the powers to rule believing that the social odds play in their favour and the tools of electoral manipulation at their disposal. How does a nation like Nigeria mitigate and eschew marginalization in a pluralistic society? Perhaps, this is what makes zoning a key component of the country’s democratic arrangement.

Theoretically however, a student of political science should be compelled to question the meaning of concepts like zoning, catchment area, educationally (dis)advantaged areas, federal character, or quota system in the Nigerian socio-political order. At face value, these terminologies appear innocuous and patriotic, but they soon become terminologies for social and political manipulation in a democracy where ethnic, regional and religious interests hold sway. They have become ‘weaponized’ terminologies on the path to achieving set parochial objectives. On the contrary, democracy should produce altruistic national leaders who pursue programmes and objectives that fulfil the general aspirations of citizens, regardless of where geography or the pursuit of their livelihoods has placed them within the national map. Apart from the much-touted corruption, the ethnicization, regionalization (and worse-still, the religionization) of democracy, are perhaps, the greatest tragedies of Nigerian democracy and its greatest undoing. They are purveyors of crises of confidence, wars and divisions rather than growth, cohesion and national development. What is so needed is a nation-state built on a solid theoretical understanding of the idea of a common citizenship fostered by a national identity that is devoid of ethnic and regional allegiances that breed prejudice, rancour and conflict. With religion thrown into this already problematic matrix what you have is a nation in crises, a civilization turned against itself on whose perimeter the Nigerian state currently teeters. The panacea to the current malaise in Nigeria is that Competence, Character and Capacity should be the determining indices for who emerges as leader and who occupies what positions at the leadership table, rather than the nepotistic considerations currently holding sway.

6. The Concept of Identity

Identity, simply put, is who we are. Identity is inextricably linked to one’s sense of self and one’s view of oneself in relation to others. This view of the self is often informed by one’s location, region, religion, country, culture, language and circumstances of birth. Identity has

been identified as one of the bases of conflict within the African continent and other parts of the world.⁴² Nigeria falls under two loose groupings: the Muslim north and the Christian south. These, however, are not strict categorizations because as Otite notes, in many parts of the north are found significant numbers of non-Muslim groups who are in fact, “*the majority in some local government areas and which have always fought and resisted Hausa-Fulani domination and Islamization.*”⁴³ These groups are found for example in the southern part of Kaduna State, and in Zuru, Kebbi State. These groups constitute a substantial Christian population together with residents from the more southern part of Nigeria to whom the Nigerian constitution (1999 as amended, Sections 33 - 38) guarantees amongst other rights, freedom of abode, liberty and freedom of thought, conscience and religion.⁴⁴ Consequently, five of the nineteen northern states have a majority Christian population: Plateau, Adamawa, Nassarawa, Taraba and Benue.⁴⁵ In the south, while Christianity has a very strong followership, Islam is clearly visible and adhered to by a good number of the Yorubas in the southwest with a few adherents in the southeast. The Middle Belt is the confluence point between the north and the south. This area of the country has gradually acquired a Christian identity since after the Nigerian civil war owing to the influx of Muslim migrants from further north, making it the fault lines of a frequent Christian-Muslim conflict. This broad view of identities in Nigeria forms the basis for an understanding of Nigerian democracy marked by “identity politics” and a pattern of “us” versus “them.” Given the multiplicity of ethnic groups and the two dominant religions, ethnicity and religion are the two most critical identities in the country.⁴⁶ According to Lewis, “*an analysis of the politics of ethnicity in Nigeria must take into cognizance the general assumptions that ethnic identity is the most consistent index of social and political identity for most Nigerians.*”⁴⁷ This ethnicity becomes the vehicle of collective social and political action and unfortunately, a destabilizing factor that has undermined democracy. These assumptions are based on the reality that both past autocratic regimes and current democratic ones have had ethnic characterizations. Against the general assumption that ethnic affinity is the most significant base of social identity,⁴⁸ a research by Pew Religious Forum challenges this assumption to the effect that religion was found to be the most significant identity index than ethnicity in Nigeria. A 2003 Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey put the population of Muslims in Nigeria at 50.5% and Christians at 48.2% with 1.4% belonging to other religions.⁴⁹ Thus, Nigeria may very well be the largest nation in the world with an evenly split population of Muslims and Christians, representing both an anecdotal and real class of civilizations.⁵⁰ - a phenomenon which has consistently tested the citizens’ mutual faith, the nation’s resilience and her political balance.

⁴² See ‘*Resolving Identity-Based Conflict: In Nations, Organizations, and Communities.*’

<https://www.beyondintractability.org/bksum/rothman-resolving#:~:text=Identity%2Dbased%20conflicts%20are%20based,more%20abstract%2C%20ambiguous%20and%20intangible>. Last accessed, May 28, 2023.

⁴³ Onigu Otite, *Ethnic Pluralism and Ethnicity in Nigeria* (Shaneson 1990) pp. 52-53.

⁴⁴ Mark Amaza, ‘Reintroducing Northern Nigeria: Not as You Know It (2011),’ <https://markamaza.com/2011/09/09/re-introducing-northern-nigeria-not-as-you-know-it/>. Last accessed May 23, 2023.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Eghosa E. Osaghae and Rotimi T Suberu, *A History of Identities, Violence and Stability in Nigeria*, (University of Oxford 2005).

⁴⁷ Peter Lewis, ‘Identity, Institutions and Democracy in Nigeria’, *Afrobarometer*, 2007 Working Paper No. 68

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See PEW Forum on Religious and Public Affairs, 2006.

⁵⁰ John Paden, ‘Muslim Civic Cultures and Conflict Resolution: The Challenge of Democratic Federalism in Nigeria’ (Brookings Institution Press 2005).

A 2006 survey on “Religion and Public Life” by the Pew Forum found that 76% of Christians say they are more closely attached to their religion than their identity as Nigerians, Africans or their tribe. This is even higher amongst Muslims as 91% of Muslims say religion is their most essential factor of their identity. Nigerians, much more than any other country’s citizens in the world, are more likely to identify themselves based on their religion than any other consideration.⁵¹ This exposes the realization that religion is a decisive factor in Nigeria’s social and political existence. Beneath these identifying factors of ethnicity and religion is a deep religious cynicism that clouds both personal and corporate interactions between members of the different ethnicities and religions. Most Nigerians who identify as Christian (62%) think they have little to no confidence in members of other religions. Muslims report having little to no confidence in individuals of other religions at a similar rate (61%).⁵² How to create a harmonious and peaceful nation out of these many identities and ethnicities, with a major incongruity between a populous and largely poor Muslim north, and an a more educated and more affluent Christian south, remains a national question that has defied political answers.

7. The Role of the Judiciary, Literacy and the “Barabbas” Factor:

A quote ascribed to the British Philosopher, Thomas Carlyle, has it that “*civilizations decline, not necessarily through some colossal criminality, but from multitudinous cases of petty betrayal and individual neglect.*”⁵³ In Nigeria’s case, a combination of individual and corporate criminality by both state and non-state actors alike, petty betrayals, individual and corporate neglect of duty and social infrastructure have led to a colossal collapse and mockery of a budding democracy like Nigeria’s. Nigeria’s democracy has declined on the heels of every conceivable affliction and the kleptomaniac pillaging of the nation’s commonwealth by a privileged few. It is often argued that the Nigerian electorate has failed to hold the kleptomaniac few to account. However, it must be interrogated whether they have the tools for such an exercise. The judiciary which is the last hope of the common man and the last line of defense in the democratic order, has not been seen to live above board either. In fact, it has often been a victim itself or complicit in the executive crimes that disfigure and derail the democratic train. This is noticeable in the recent decisions of the Supreme Court of Nigeria. For example, in the case of APC v. Ekpoudom⁵⁴ and APC v. Machina⁵⁵ in which the apex court ruled that Mr. Godswill Akpabio and Ahmed Lawan who unsuccessfully contested the presidential election primaries of the All Progressives Congress (APC) were the legitimate senatorial candidates for their senatorial zones, against the provisions of the Electoral Act 2022 which forbids a candidate who unsuccessfully contests one election primaries from participating in the primaries of any other elective position in the same electoral cycle.⁵⁶ Similarly, the Supreme Court of Nigeria granted an ex-parte order prohibiting the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) from implementing

⁵¹ Paden John N. 2008. *Faith and Politics in Nigeria: Nigeria as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World.* (United States Institute of Peace Press 2008).

⁵² R. Ruby and T. Shah 2007. ‘Nigeria’s Presidential Election: The Christian-Muslim Divide.’ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2007/03/21/nigerias-presidential-election-the-christian-muslim-divide/>. Last accessed May 23, 2023.

⁵³ Thomas Carlyle was a British essayist, historian, and philosopher from the Scottish Lowlands. A leading writer of the Victorian era who exerted a profound influence on 19th-century art, literature, and philosophy.

⁵⁴ APC v. Ekpoudom (2022 unreported Supreme Court case).

⁵⁵ APC v. Machina (2022 unreported Supreme Court Case). Also, see I. O. Idowu, ‘The Supreme Court of Nigeria and the Stains of Justice by Technicalities: Why APC v Machina is Wrong’ (2005) Redeemer’s University Journal of Jurisprudence and International Law 3 (1).

⁵⁶ See Sections 29(1), 33, 35, and 84(1)(2) of the Electoral Act 2022.

the currency swap policy of December 2022. Three governors of the ruling (APC) government had approached the Supreme Court to obtain such an order exploiting the constitutional provision of the 1999 Constitution as (amended) which allows the supreme court to hear cases between a state and the federal government as a court of first and final instance. It remains a curious point of law if the CBN, an organ of the federal government but not mentioned as party in the suit is under obligation to obey the said order, when the policy was perhaps, in the best interest of the nation. These and similar judicial abracadabra raise questions about the integrity of the judiciary and what is left of its dimmed clout. However, expert legal opinion may suggest that an order is an order and must be obeyed once given. The above judicial pronouncements also echo the nagging decision of the Supreme court in the case of *Uzodinma v. Ihedioha*⁵⁷ of Imo State in which Hope Uzodinma with the fourth position was declared winner of the 2019 governorship election. These scenarios justify the words of Kamarck & Galston that “*one of the hallmarks of failing democracies is weak judicial system under heavy political control.*”⁵⁸ That the masses have not been able to hold the privileged few to account has all but enabled political malfeasance and the culture of unaccountability which is now fully entrenched.

This leads us to interrogate the role of literacy or lack thereof in the Nigerian political space. According to Socrates, Democracy is for an educated society. With its critical mass of illiterate people, democracy may, after all, remain an ambivalent exercise in political expediency. Just as a small group of elite, including lawyers who populate the judiciary use literacy to mesmerize the more illiterate masses, illiteracy makes the electorate a ticking political time bomb and easy pawns in the hands of the politicians, susceptible to all kinds of manipulation, including acting as agents of electoral ruckus and chaos. Illiteracy denies people the critical tools for cognitive and intelligent decision-making about life and its exigencies, including very important political decisions. Often, the unlettered become so enslaved to their political masters that they are willing to go on rampage even if in their mistaken belief that an opponent has been too critical of their master. Opponents, therefore, are forced to be wary of speaking truths that could help the electorate make better decisions. Such a dynamic becomes a disincentive for politicians to encourage mass literacy and voter education since that would be inimical to their political and economic interests. The 2023 ANAP presidential election polls showed that people with little to no educational qualifications preferred candidates with little to no verifiable educational backgrounds, regardless of their parties. That a presidential candidate had known ties to crime and corruption, or questionable moral characters did not matter, especially when such candidates are from similar geopolitical zone or speak the same language or share similar religious affiliation with the supporter. Conversely, voters with a minimum of school leaving certificate and higher preferred the more educated candidate with no known ties to corruption. Barabbas was a thief and a revolutionary who was arrested alongside Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The governor at the time, Pontius Pilate, asked the people who he should release to them as was customary during the festive season. At the urging of the chief priests and the elders, the people chorused “*give us Barabbas.*” Thus, a thief was released to them rather than an innocent Jesus. This is what is meant by the “Barabbas factor.” Two millennia after, it is curious to see that in many countries, under the guise of democratic freedom, people are still choosing “Barabbas” over responsible leaders. It cannot but be asked; what it is about the morally depraved that makes them attractive to the critical mass of the

⁵⁷ See *Uzodinma & Anor v. Ihedioha & Ors* (2020) 1cn/4905(sc).

⁵⁸ Elaine C. Kamarck & William A. Galston, <<https://www.brookings.edu/research/is-democracy-failing-and-putting-our-economic-system-at-risk/>> Last Accessed, May 23, 2023.

people (especially the uneducated of Nigeria). And what is it about men of character that makes them often unpopular choices in democratic dispensations?

8. An Epistemic Realization:

In recognizing the uniqueness of races and nations, it may be a plausible argument to posit that the possibility of the world being governed by one system of government is unattainable. A wise exploration of other systems of government which correspond to a people's understanding of the concept of power is advisable. Countries would need to pursue whatever system that works for them rather than simply aspiring to a perceived "political panacea" as democracy seen from the west. For reasons of social, cultural and ideological differences of these parts of the world, what generally works in Europe or north America may not necessarily work in Africa or Asia. Democracy, therefore, is not a one-size-fits-all system; cultures, values and belief systems differ. Arguments for democracy must therefore, underscore and respect heterogenic disparities. A state like Singapore practices democracy. But many would argue that it is not a pure democracy. With its autocratic past and enduring vestiges of dictatorship, Singapore's development and social progress seem to have been predicated on that past such that arguably, the country would not have been developed to the degree it has today if it had followed the traditional western style democracy. Thus, it needs to be agreed that nations need to be creative in their pursuit of democracy so as to formulate a brand of democracy that works for them. Western style democracy was a chosen system of government, formulated by a group of people, adopted by some and "imposed" on some. Nothing within the democratic system of government says it must work for every country because it has worked for some. Much as it seems fashionable to make ideological arguments for democracy, its effectiveness and adaptability remain challenges for societies that are yet to fully integrate the democratic culture. China represents this democratic ambivalence. Arguably, the Chinese hybrid system suits their culture and vast population. Though the people's "freedom" may be in question, but the assured provision of fundamental needs often leads citizens to assume that they are getting a fair deal. Former Yugoslavia under Tito had a hybrid system – democracy and authoritarianism, and certain freedoms were not readily accessible. However, with the provision of housing, healthcare, education, employment by the government, people didn't think too much about freedom and believed the tradeoff was worthwhile.

We must arrive at David Estlund's "*epistemic conception of democracy*," meaning a conception of democratic institutions as being justified by their capacity to ascertain political truth about what society should do in order to address social problems.⁵⁹ He is aware however, that the long-standing criticism that most voters are ignorant of political realities threatens this idea.⁶⁰ Thus, the wider question is: Are there political truths? And if there are, what are they? To attempt an answer, one must look at campaigns. Campaigns have a notorious knack for revealing a scandalizing romance with social untruths and a deliberate skewing of facts, and sometimes, outright falsehoods by those seeking elective offices. Often, these falsehoods are meant to present the candidates as sterling elements worthy of political trust or meant to hoodwink the electorate, especially the unlearned who lack either the cognitive tools or the material wherewithal to find the truth. These and many such unwholesome practices found within democracy expose democracy to the recurrent question of its relevance, authenticity and

⁵⁹ David Estlund, 'Beyond Fairness and Deliberation: The Epistemic Dimension of Democratic Authority' in *Essays on Reason and Politics*, James Bohman & William Rehg (eds.), (MIT Press Cambridge 1997).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

indispensability. How to find political truth, if any, and how to decipher truth from falsehood remain the prerogative of the electorate who are often ill-equipped to arrive at such truths. This underscores the indispensable role of both literacy and voter education in the political liberation of the masses. Electoral fraud, voter influencing, vote buying and outright elections rigging put question marks on claims of democracy as the best forms of government. As against the general assumption that democracy leads to (economic) development, there does not seem to be a correlation between democracy and economic development going by the (African) Nigerian experience. Rather, both democracy and dictatorships seem to have yielded the same fruits of corruption, embezzlement, impunity and kleptomaniac rent seeking. Each election cycle sees the poor, the uneducated and the educated dubious often choosing the least qualified candidates. While the uneducated perhaps, lack the cognitive tools of making informed and honest decisions, the educated dubious choose for ulterior motives. Thus, while education is a *conditio sine qua non* for driving economic growth, what to do with the learned who deliberately make bad leadership choices remains a big question. However, educational development and economic growth create freedom for the masses and release them from the shackles of mental and material poverty which attaches them to the man with the deeper pocket rather than the man with the better idea. This phenomenon largely provides an explanation for the electoral behavior of many people in Nigeria.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that politics in Nigerian is not all about good policies or who has the better ideas. For a privileged few, alliances are with the party that has prospects of winning because it is all about a structure of sharing and plundering the people's commonwealth through the allocation of offices and inflated contracts to cronies. For Nigeria's nascent democratic structure to endure, there is need for principled democracy, national orientation and re-orientation, democratic education, education in cohesion, refocusing our religious zeal and eliminating biases. Unity in diversity within the democratic dispensation is highly advocated. The country must apply itself to a more robust democratic education and the elimination of regional and religious biases which will coalesce into the choice of leaders with clear and qualified vision for the liberation of Nigeria and of Africa.

