

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NIGERIA DEMOCRACY VIS-A-VIS KARL POPPER'S CONCEPT OF OPEN SOCIETY

¹JohnMary Uche Odinigwe

²Charles C. Nweke

Abstract

Democracy suggests that government is actually the 'will of the people,' since all those who occupy the positions of State authority are freely chosen by the people periodically through free and fair elections. Democracy can, however, become an albatross leading to bad governance if elected political actors renege and disregard the consent and interests of the citizens. In such abusive cases, democracy becomes undemocratic and tyrannical. What is the sociopolitical atmosphere required in the society for democracy to succeed? What should be the response of citizens when democratically elected persons become totalitarian? Is violent response permitted in such a situation? What is Karl Popper's standpoint on this issue? Put simply, therefore, the problem studied in this article is the tendency in democracy for elected leaders to become undemocratic and totalitarian; what are the conditions that predispose this possibility? Karl Popper tackled this problem by proposing the notion of open society in his work *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. This article exposes Popper's notion of open society. The research applies Popper's claims to exposing and tackling the myriad of challenges besetting the practice of democracy in Nigeria. The method of analysis is employed. The research finds out that Nigeria society is more closed than open due to the effects of ethno-religious chauvinism which has led to identity politics, weak institutions and political corruption. It suggests that despite this challenges democracy should not be sidelined in Nigeria. Popper's idea of 'Piecemeal social engineering' is thus posited as panacea for the challenges of democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democracy, Freedom, Justice, Governance, Rights, Society.

Introduction

The essentialist definition of democracy as "governance by the people for the people" has endeared the system to many nations in the postmodern era. Nowadays, some even consider democratisation as a necessary paradigm for national growth and development. It is however a seeming contemporary contradiction that the same democracy that has worked for many nations, and have led them to economic paradise; is yet the system that have arguably enabled political corruption, poverty and underdevelopment in some other countries. These two-tales of democracy is strikingly represented in the conditions of the United States of America on one side, and Nigeria by the other. Nigeria gained independence from Britain on 1st October 1960. Shortly after independence, Nigeria became the first British colony to abandon its colonial constitutional heritage (Ogbonna and Ogbonna 232-243). The country rejected the British parliamentary system of democracy and instead embraced the American (United States) model of democracy.

The question becomes: why is democracy thriving in America, while failing almost completely in Nigeria. What is the cultural, social and political dispositions of the

American people that makes democracy successful over there? Is there something peculiar with the American people (the society and political culture) amiss in Nigeria that makes democracy failing in Nigeria? Are there specific societal dispositions necessary for democracy to thrive within a society? What should be the outlook of a democratic society? These questions capture the problems tackled in this article. Effort is made to examine the Nigerian society and the political culture in place in the light of Popper's postulations about an open society. For Karl Popper, democracy is possible only in an open society where critical rationalism is the prevalent ideological orientation. Nigeria is evidently lacking in these aspects; hence, the challenges bedeviling the practice of democracy in Nigeria.

The Challenge of Democracy in Nigeria

Nigeria's attempted effort towards democratic governance has been slow, tedious, intriguing, and disappointing. Despite the fact that democratic practice in Nigeria is patterned along the Western liberal democracy which allows for competitive parties, popular sovereignty, majority rule, rule of law, separation of powers, among others, the reverse has been the case in the country. Ajayi rightly affirms that "One therefore expects that democratic norms ought to have become part of the enduring characters of Nigeria's political tradition. Ironically, such traditions are yet to evolve. The growth of democracy in the country has therefore remained stunted" (37). Thus, from the Westminster parliamentary model of the First Republic to the American democratic model based on the presidential system of government currently in practice, the tale has been that of authoritarianism, nepotism and violence. And so, with tribal consciousness fully established and embraced in the polity instead of national consciousness, and with the aggressive and ambitious military always in the waiting to strike, democratic practices in Nigeria has been an unfortunate experience. Azeez thus observes that in the years of Nigeria's existence as an independent nation, her history is replete with failed and truncated attempts at democracy and democratisation (216). It appears that either democracy is yet to be fully entrenched in the Nigerian body politics or the values that go with a democratic society is yet to be fully internalized in the people's way of life. Reflecting on this issue, Awa suggests that "The Nigerian society and political system are not democratic in the modern sense of the term.... Democracy in Nigeria can best be described as the government of the people by the elites essentially in the interest of the elites" (6). Thus, the citizen in Nigeria's democratic experience rather than being central to the act of governance, is relegated to the background; their rights trampled upon and left in the state of helplessness. From the foregoing, therefore, democracy faces too many grave challenges in Nigeria; however, the following three considered fundamental shall be further highlighted:

1. Weak political institutions:

Democracy is good only if it is founded on strong uncompromising political institutions; else, it becomes a recipe for inequality, abuse of political power, political corruption, poverty and underdevelopment. Francis Fukuyama notes that "poor countries are poor not because they lack resources but because they lack effective political institutions" (14). According to him, "A market economy and high levels of wealth don't magically appear when you 'get governed out of the way'; they rest on a

hidden institutional foundation of property rights, rule of law, and basic political order” (Fukuyama 13). Fukuyama insists that political institutions are necessary and cannot be taken for granted. Hence, he sees a critical nexus between effective political institutions and development. Nzereogu notes that “When a country fails to meet up with the basic requirements of good governance it normally leads to mismanagement of resources, economic hardship, widespread systemic corruption and high level insecurity of lives and properties which are all signs of bad governance” (78). Political institutions are the engines of government. Governance is carried out by government through its agencies and institutions. Thus, “the kind of governance any country has is a direct reflection of how strong or weak their institutions are. Weak institutions would lead to poor governance while strong institution would lead to good governance” (Nzereogu 78). The problem of poor governance in Nigeria is arguably totally due to weak institutions. Usman, Romle and Bashir highlight that a weak institution depicts a state of decline or powerlessness of government agencies to effectively discharge some of the fundamental responsibilities of the state (1-7).

2. Political corruption:

The abundant natural and human resources bestowed on the Nigerian state, if effectively utilized, would have sufficiently catered for and transform the lives of her citizens and also launch the nation into the community of developed nations. Unfortunately, this is not the case due to the massive corruption among the political elites in Nigeria. Corruption, has since, almost been totally accepted as a norm in Nigeria. Maduagwa posits that:

No Nigerian official would be ashamed, let alone condemned by his people because he or she is accused of being corrupt. The same applies to outright stealing of government or public money or property. On the contrary, the official will be hailed as being smart. He would be adored as having ‘made it,’ he is a ‘successful man’. And any government official or politician who is in a position to enrich himself corruptly but failed to do so will, in fact, be ostracized by his people upon leaving office. He would be regarded as a fool, or selfish, or both (1).

This is the sad existential reality Nigeria has come to be; a tale of a nation so blessed, yet criminally underdeveloped decades after independence due to enormous corruption among the ruling class and the unholy support the majority citizens give to this practice, implicitly or explicitly.

3. Ethnic chauvinism and identity politics:

In most underdeveloped multiethnic Nation-states, the high level of ethnic diversity has been shown to contribute enormously to their very slow pace of development owing to the fact that governance is undermined by a daredevil kind of ethnic politics. Easterly & Levine explained that in a comprehensive cross-section of African states, for instance (Nigeria inclusive) ethnic assortment was associated with bad economic policies on the part of political leaders, slow economic growth and low levels of per capita income coupled with internal disharmony and instability that underpin the

pluralistic framework of African society (1210). Osaghae notes that in Nigeria, there are four closely related and visible levels of ethnic politics; inter-group, intragroup, ethnic-state and individual (63). These levels operate in the same political realm; yet they present different socio-political and economic dynamics and issues. At the individual level, for example, individual actors invoke the ethnic card at every slightest opportunity while pursuing in actual fact personal and private goals and most importantly ethnic goals. Ethnic politics can thus be described as a philosophy which individuals employ to resolve the uncertainties arising from the power structure within which they are located. A change in the ethnic group in power, therefore, translates to a change in sociopolitical and economic policies across the groups as well as a change in the distribution of political goods; hence, the low accountability of political leaders. The Buhari led administration for example, is said to have strayed into ethno-regional sentiments and hence his hard-line opposition to any form of restructuring, to please his support base. Critics suggest that his elevation of sectionalism to a near state policy compromised national security to the extent that marauding Fulani killer herdsmen are given the leverage to destroy lives and property across Nigeria. Hashmi and Majeed affirm that “the failure of states to engage a pluralistic framework that includes constitutional designs where the protection of ethnic identity is guaranteed leads towards a conflictual situation in which one ethnic group feel insecure against the dominance of others thus driving the feelings of antipathy which in the long run force ethnic groups to pursue their demands” (Hashmi and Majeed 225). The present Tinubu administration is not free of the same accusation of ethnic politics as the key political appointees within the executive cabinet are mostly from the Yoruba ethnicity of the South-West region.

The Notion of Open Society

Karl Popper emphasized openness of society. He argues that a fundamental problem confronting humanity is that of moving from a closed, tribal way of life to an open society. He distinguished two kinds of societies- Open and Closed Societies. The open society is based on critical discussion about such human pursuits as achievements, decisions, goals, and authority, whereas the closed society does not allow for social criticism, and may even exterminate individuals, their ideas, and properties (Popper, *Open Society*, 110). Popper believed that “it [open society] introduces a new and practical view of social methodology” (*Open Society*, 115), which resists closed thoughts, structures and actions. Whereas, a closed society is characterized by abstract, repressive, non-contextualised, and disconnected truths, all of which lead to passivity, stagnation, misery, and monotony. The open society, by contrast, tolerates diversity of views, values and ways of life. In the open society learning through criticism is possible just because diverse views and values are tolerated.

Popper highlights the magicality and irrationality of closed societies, the leaning towards a tribal structure of social life. He notes, “It is one of the characteristics of the magical attitude of a primitive tribal or a ‘closed’ society that it lives in a charmed circle of unchanging taboos, of laws and customs which are felt to be as inevitable as the rising of the sun or the cycle of the seasons, or similar obvious regularities of nature” (Balcerczyk 93). Closed society is, therefore, a magical, collective, tribal

society. It can be described in terms of a biological or an organic theory of the state. Popper compares it to a living organism, thus, “A closed society resembles a herd or a tribe in being a semi-organic unit whose members are held together by semi-biological ties – kinship, living together, sharing common efforts, common dangers, common joys and common distress” (*Open Society* 250). Thus, the closed society is primitive and civilized while open society is civilized; it is one in which individual freedom and responsibility, justice, democracy, human values, reason and science can flourish. As such, an open society cherishes creativity and participation of all individuals.

Popper views historicism as an anti-Open Society tendency; a poor method which is also dangerous to society. He notes:

This is a brief description of an attitude which I call *historicism*. It is an old idea, or rather, a loosely connected set of ideas which have become, unfortunately, so much of our spiritual atmosphere that they are usually taken for granted, and hardly ever questioned. I have tried elsewhere to show that the historicist approach to the social sciences gives poor results. I have also tried to outline a method which, I believe, would yield better results (*Open Society* 7).

Popper’s preoccupation was to reveal the connection between utopianism and historicism by exposing its essential danger and showing the inadequacies in the historicist ideology. He identifies those who are enemies of individual freedom and the open society as all champions of historicism, who reduce the task of social sciences to prophesying the events of social development.

In summary, Popper extensively discusses the internal characteristics of polities with regard to tendencies towards totalitarian social orders. These tendencies are only possible in a Closed Society. However, it is important to point out that Popper referred to them as a *pattern of thinking* that precedes, underlies, and fosters tendencies towards totalitarianism, rather than as ‘features’ of communities. He argues that this closed pattern of thinking is characterized by a value-positive attitude towards collectivism as opposed to individualism; certainty of knowledge as opposed to continuous learning; all-encompassing planning as opposed to stepwise changes/improvements; and substance of content as opposed to procedures for change. These are evidently qualities that are uncharacteristic of democracy.

The State in an Open Society

Popper sees the State as a “necessary evil”. As such, its powers are not to be multiplied beyond what is necessary (*Conjectures* 350). This Popperian position as a principle is referred to as a “Liberal Razor” analogous to Ockham’s Razor, i.e. the famous principle that entities or essences must not be multiplied beyond what is necessary. It is obvious that Popper acknowledges the necessity of the existence of the State, and sees the essence of the State as the protection of lives, rights and property. He avers:

What I demand from the state is protection; not only for myself, but for others too. I demand protection for my own freedom and for others too. I demand protection for my freedom and for other

people's. I do not wish to live at the mercy of anybody who has the larger fists or the bigger guns. In other words, I wish to be protected against aggression from other men. I want the difference between aggression and defence to be recognized, and defence to be supported by the organized power of the state (*Open Society* 104-105).

Popper's view is free from any elements of historicism and essentialism, and it places the fundamental task of the State as simply preventing crime and protecting the weak from being bullied by the strong, as against the "natural" rights of the stronger. As such, he makes a case for the model of governance which will ensure the fulfillment of the protectionist mandate of the State - democracy.

Popper provided his own account of the values and institutions needed to sustain an open society in the contemporary world. He viewed modern Western liberal democracies as open societies and defended them as "the best of all political worlds of whose existence we have any historical knowledge" (Popper, *Problem Solving* 90). He identifies two main types of government. First is a government which the masses can get rid of without bloodshed; that is, by way of general elections, the social institutions provide means by which the rulers may be dismissed by the ruled, and the social traditions ensure that these institutions will not easily be destroyed by those who are in power. Second is a government which the ruled cannot get rid of except by way of a successful revolution (Popper, *Open Society* 108). He elaborates, thus:

The theory of democracy is not based upon the principles that majority should rule; rather, the various equalitarian methods of democratic controls, such as general elections and representative government, are to be considered as no more than well-tried and, in the presence of a widespread traditional distrust of tyranny, reasonably effective institutional safeguards against tyranny, always open to improvement (*Open Society* 119).

Thus, the value of a government resides principally in the individual freedom that they permit and their ability to self-correct peacefully over time. As such, the first type of government is referred to as democracy, and tyranny for the second type. It follows that the central demarcation criterion for differentiating the two main types of political regimes – democracies and tyrannies – is that the former offers the institutional possibility to dismiss a government without resorting to violence as a mode of conflict resolution.

Popper advanced a paradigm shift on citizens' attitudes to politics. For him, the fundamental obligation as citizens is, "How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?" (*Open Society* 115). Thus, he made a case for institutionalisation of the political system which creates room for a regular medium of getting rid of bad rulers without violence and bloodshed, by voting them out of office. Also for him, it is not enough to establish democratic institutions, "for if there are no ones who use them as democrats, there will

remain the appearance of democracy or nothing of that” (*Open Society* 115). Institutionalisation, according to Popper, can only be achieved through democracy. Popper suggests that “Democracy provides the institutional framework for the reform of political institutions. It makes possible the reform of institutions without using violence, and thereby the use of reason in the designing of new institutions and the adjusting of old ones” (*Open Society* 115).

He argued against the essentialists’ notion of democracy as “the rule by the people.” For him, “although the people may influence the actions of their rulers by threats of dismissal, they never rule themselves in any concrete practical sense” (*Open Society* 118). Yet, he situates the political power in the citizenry. As such, he insists that, it is quite wrong to blame democracy for the political shortcomings of a democratic state. The people should rather blame ourselves, that is to say, the citizens of the democratic State (*Open Society* 120). This is premised on the fact that democratic institutions cannot improve themselves, and the challenge of improving them is a problem for persons rather than for institutions. Invariably, this explains who and what is responsible for the successes or failure of democratic State – the citizens. Also, the basic role of the citizens is simply to strengthen institutional control of power by providing a regular and nonviolent way to get rid of incompetent, corrupt or abusive leaders.

Popper emphasized the importance of instituting checks and balances within the political system of the State. He posits that democracies must seek “institutional control of the rulers by balancing their power against other powers” (*Open Society* 116). Yet, if the State is to fulfill its function, it must have more power at any rate than any single private citizen or public corporation; and although the State might design institutions to minimize the danger that these powers will be misused, Popper observed that people can never eliminate the danger completely. Thus, checks and balances will ensure fairness, equity and accountability, and will further ensure the avoidance of absolute power and unrestrained political power which are characteristics of tyrannical government. Stressing on the importance of traditions as mediation between institutions, on the one hand, and the intentions and valuations expressed by the individual on the other, Popper reiterates that although democracy is certainly not infallible, it’s “traditions are the least evil ones of which we know” (Popper, *Conjectures* 351). Popper cautions that, “if democracy is destroyed, all rights are destroyed” (Popper, *Problem Solving* 352). For him, democracy creates effective mechanisms for peaceful deposal of leaders, peaceful changes, solving conflicts, and persuading the opponents. Thus, the culture of critical reasoning and incremental but non-violence change are indispensable components of democracy.

Nigeria “Democratic” Society: A Closed Society

It is very obvious Nigeria society is more ad rem to Popper’s description of the closed society. In other words, in the light of Popper’s postulations, Nigeria society is very much closed than open. This is why democracy has not functioned well in Nigeria. The country is a highly populated society made up of largely diversified groups of peoples. This diversity is seen in the fact that Nigeria is heterogeneous both in

ethnicity and religion. This diversity is not the reason Nigeria is considered here as a closed society; it is also not the reason democracy has not prospered in Nigeria. After all, there are other heterogeneous nations in the world where democracy has worked superlatively; example United States of America. The difference between those societies and Nigeria is that while those societies are open in spite of their diversity; Nigeria society is closed in spite of its massive diversity. While open societies like America appreciate freedom of thought, resist closed thinking, structures and actions; the Nigerian society is against freedom of thought and action and does everything to impose structures that undermine such freedoms. The consequence of this “closedness” of the Nigeria society is the advancement of abstract, repressive, non-contextualised, and disconnected truths, all of which lead to passivity, stagnation, misery, and monotony. This is why Nigeria, till date, has refused to address the errors of her past- a past laden with a lot of dark history and unresolved questions searching for ‘national answers’ and redress. Rather than face and resolve the challenges with her history and sue for national healing and reconciliation; the country prefers to pretend that all is well while the ethnicities in Nigeria continue to wallow in disunity and spiteful distrust for one another. This is why History as a discipline is not taught in most basic institutions of learning in Nigeria; and where it is taught, it is not given the necessary focus and attention needed. The scheme is occupied with obsolete contents. A society that lies about its own history and pretends all is well with its foundation when the reverse is obviously the case is repressive and actually lives by “disconnected truths”. Such is definitely a closed society and the consequence is inescapable passivity, stagnation, misery, and division.

If Nigeria society is not closed and repressive, undemocratic in approach and outlook, and very resistant to change (which is the hallmark of an open society), why has nothing been done about the findings or conclusions of the Confab organized by the Goodluck Jonathan administration between 2013/2014? Same question applies to the findings of the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) convened by then President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2005. These and many other conferences have been held and lofty ideas put forward to help advance the lot of Nigeria democracy, promote national integration and smoothen the bond among the divisive ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria; yet none of the findings of these conferences have ever been implemented sufficiently. This is a nation existing in self-deceit based on disconnected truths. This can only be possible within a closed system portrayed in Popper’s idea of a closed society.

Popper highlights the stupidity and irrationality of closed societies thoroughly manifested in the leaning towards a tribal structure of social life. He notes, “It is one of the characteristics of the magical attitude of a primitive tribal or a ‘closed’ society that it lives in a charmed circle of unchanging taboos, of laws and customs which are felt to be as inevitable as the rising of the sun or the cycle of the seasons, or similar obvious regularities of nature” (Blacerczyk 93). Closed society is, therefore, a magical, collective, tribal society. Thus, the closed society is primitive and civilized while open society is civilized; it is one in which individual freedom and responsibility, justice, democracy, humane values, reason and science can flourish. As such, an open society

cherishes creativity and participation of all individuals. Here again, Popper succinctly captures the way of being in Nigeria. One factor he prominently used to explain the prevalent mentality in the closed society is the emphasis on the tribe- ethnicity, instead of national interests. The closed society retains emphasis on patrimonial and primitive sentiments like tribe and religion. Such societies do everything to retain the primitive status quo even when it is obvious it is no longer of benefit to the generality of the society. This is the problem with Nigeria society. For fear of undermining the core primitive values of certain ethnicities and religion, the Nigeria State has remained averse to certain necessary changes that would put the country on the path of rapid growth and development. Primitive, tribal and patrimonial sentiments are therefore preferred to nationalistic goals. Patriotism and core national values are sacrifices in the petty altar of tribalism and primitive religious norms. This aversion to change due to primitive and patrimonial sentiments is a major reason for the rise of banditry, Boko Haram, Farmer-Herder clashes, militancy, the rise of secessionist movements and many other ills undermining the progress of Nigeria today. It is also the reason democracy have not provided good governance in Nigeria because Nigerians still cast their ballots in order to advance the progress and values of their tribes and religions instead of that of their nation. The prevalent mentality in Nigeria is tribalistic; not nationalistic. This is the ultimate instantiation of closed and repressive thinking; a feature of a closed society. This closed tribal mindset is the reason why the Nigerian society emphasize on pseudo-democratic ideologies like federal character, rotational presidency, state of origin, etc. All these emphasize tribal sentiments and de-emphasize meritocracy, all to the detriment of national growth and development.

‘Piecemeal Social Engineering’ in Nigeria Democracy: A Necessity

Karl Popper was emphatic in rejecting violence as the ultimate or best means of bringing about positive sociopolitical changes in the society. Against such whole-scale changes violence presupposes, Popper advocates for gradual systematic changes enabled by nonviolent methods that would eventually lead to the required positive changes needed. This is what he captured in his idea of “piecemeal social engineering”. This article is of the view that this Popperian doctrine is more in tandem with core African values than the one suggested by violent approaches. For instance, in the traditional African society, leaders who lost the confidence of the followers, voluntarily abdicated the throne and embarked on exile without violence or bloodshed. Also, Nigeria’s independence was not achieved through a violence approach, as the nationalists, rather embraced non-violence strategies that brought about the desired result. Thus, there appears to be a disconnection between the leaders and followers in post-independence Nigeria (especially in contemporary times) which has led to a total loss of confidence in successive Nigerian government, and to a reasonable extent, substantiates the desire for violent revolution by majority of the suffering citizens.

However, Aiwuyor observes that the radical approach to change has not worked in Nigeria and the workability of it today is not assured. He suggests that “...if history remains a good teacher, there is no certainty that any bloody revolution would solve Nigeria’s problems. All the retrogressive military coups that have taken place in Nigeria as well as the country’s three years civil war (1967 – 1970) were executed in

the name of solving the country's problems" (Aiwuyor 21). These revolutions did not achieve any positive change for Nigeria; rather they afflicted more social ills on the country, leading to more disunity, distrust, and disintegration among the ethnic nationalities that make up the country. Apparently, a nonviolence approach is the only option left for Nigeria in her quest for socio-political change, good governance and national integration. Aiwuyor rightly posits that "If the necessary preconditions are fulfilled, Nigeria's impending revolution could be through the ballot boxes at a crossroad... where there would be a convergence between divine force majeure and the determined efforts by Nigerians to break with politics as usual" (21). To "break with politics as usual" suggests voting intentionally and patriotically, not under the influence of tribal and religious sentiments or any other inordinate value that undermines the national interests. Significantly, the non-violence approach remains a viable alternative that will not only ensure peaceful co-existence among Nigerians, but has the prospect of bringing about sustainable development in the African continent as a whole, as it is difficult to achieve any tangible development in times of violence. This nonviolence approach is what Popper underlined in the idea of piecemeal social engineering.

Popper describes "piecemeal engineering" as the redressing of agreed social problems by a trial-and-error or bits-and-pieces approach. He notes:

The characteristic approach of the piecemeal engineer is this. Even though he may perhaps cherish some ideals which concern society 'as a whole'... he does not believe in the method of redesigning it as a whole. Whatever his ends, he tries to achieve them by small adjustments and readjustments which can be continually improved upon ... The piecemeal engineer knows, like Socrates, how little he knows. He knows that we can learn from our mistakes. Accordingly, he will make his way, step by step, carefully comparing the results achieved, and always on the lookout for the unavoidable unwanted consequences of any reform; and he will avoid undertaking reforms of a complexity and scope which make it impossible for him to disentangle causes and effects, and to know what he is really doing (*Poverty of Historicism* 152).

Thus, the specific end of a piecemeal approach must be to ameliorate a condition that reasonable people agree is a problem. The means to that end must be tentative: the social engineer must be fallibilist concerning any aspect of the approach that is taken. Popper envisages that from epistemic modesty of this kind will also flow a disposition to respect individual rights and to protect against any injustice. Also, the piecemeal social engineering does not imply solely 'one-piece-at-a-time,' but 'many-pieces-at once,' and seeks to avoid undertaking reforms of too great or complex in order to know the effect of the changes that have been introduced in social reform. This is precisely what Nigeria needs at this critical point in her existence as a nation; as against the clamors for an uprising, a revolt, and even a bloody revolution by some Nigerians. This approach to changes and development involves small scale intervention to deal with social issues, and to see whether they are producing their

intended effects, and to find ways of mitigating any unintended consequences. It is therefore a trial-and-error approach to learning that seeks to refine interventions based on that learning. With this piecemeal approach, it is expected that Nigerian leaders would “begin to look out for their own mistakes instead of trying to explain them away and to prove that they have always been right” (Popper, *Open Society* 152). This is because the approach requires constant self-examination/criticism due to its emphasis on epistemic humility. Moreover, piecemeal social engineering is a method in which everyone in a liberal democracy (from individual citizen to head of state) who is thinking about how to bring about positive social change is engaged.

Regrettably, most Nigerians are desperate for an overnight turnaround of the precarious state of the nation; a political miracle. As such, they strongly have faith in a violence revolution, rather than changing their ways and manner of doing things in order to bring about the necessary and expected reforms. To this class of Nigerians, Popper asks, “...are we to believe that politics, or the framework of legal institutions, are intrinsically impotent to remedy such a situation, and that only a complete social revolution, a complete change of the ‘social system’ can help?” (*Open Society* 152). He cautions thus:

Accordingly, it is not reasonable to assume that a complete reconstruction of our world would lead to a workable system. Rather we should expect that, owing to lack of experience, many mistakes would be made which could be eliminated only by a long and laborious process of small adjustments; in other words, by that rational method of piecemeal engineering whose application we advocate. But those who dislike this method as insufficiently radical would have again to wipe out their freshly constructed society, in order to start anew with a clean canvas; and since the new start, for the same reasons, would not lead to perfection either, they would have to repeat this process without ever getting anywhere. Those who admit this and are prepared to adopt our more modest method of piecemeal improvements, but only after the first radical canvas cleaning, can hardly escape the criticism that their first sweeping and violent measures were quite unnecessary (*Open Society* 152).

In the above, extract Popper raises significant arguments in support of his advocacy for piecemeal social engineering as against violent procedure that could bring radical and wholesome changes. His logic is considerate and practical based on the fact that the world is always going to remain imperfect no matter how much humans crave perfection. Therefore, instead of destroying what already exists simply because of some imperfections evident in the system, it is more reasonable to make efforts to overcome the perceived imperfection. A total destruction of the system does not give any assurance that a new system would not suffer from some other imperfections that could be worse. The logic applies directly to the situation in Nigeria. Piecemeal reform is what is needed, not landslide revolution because total destruction and rebuild may not bring about the better society Nigerians needed. What is needed is the necessary democratic spirit, epistemic humility and critical rationalism to admit their failings

collectively as a nation and individually as citizens. This would immediately lead to the formation of the right patriotic spirit that would enable Nigerians believe in the Nigerian dream and begin to make the needed attitudinal and civic changes necessary to detect and correct the apparent 'little' loopholes in the Nigerian State that have obliterated good governance and the fruits of democracy.

Democratic Safeguards: Strong Institutions or Civil Violence?

Popper reiterates the need to design a 'legal framework' of protecting institutions, such that they are robust enough to prevent even bad rulers from doing too much damage. Obviously, the reason behind the perils of Nigeria more than 60 years after independence is a consequence of bad leadership; and bad leadership itself is a result of irresponsible citizenship. It is simply the case of not being able to subject leaders to scrutiny as a result of weak and ineffective institutions. Rather than build strong institutions, the nation has produced strong leaders who, one way or the other, have contributed grossly to the unenviable state of Nigeria. Unfortunately, the citizens look on in 'stupid helplessness' while the selfish leaders disregard the institutions of the state and plunder the country's massive resources. This is why tyranny and bad governance prevail in the midst of 'democracy' in Nigeria. The unholy silence of the citizens and their lack of strength to hold the elected leaders accountable is the reason for the failure of governance, and of democracy in Nigeria. The institutions derive their strength from the citizens; the Nigerian people are the actual institutions of the State. It is therefore their responsibility to protect the political institutions of the state when they are abused by elected political leaders. Even Popper, with his advocacy of piecemeal social engineering and emphasis on nonviolent approach, permitted the use of force and violence by the citizens only if it is for the preservation and restoration of democracy and its institutions. Popper posited that if the state is not democratic or is in danger of losing its democratic character, the application of force by the citizens might be legitimate or even morally obliging. He explains:

I am not in all cases and under all circumstances against a violent revolution. I believe with some medieval and Renaissance Christian thinkers who taught the admissibility of tyrannicide that there may indeed, under a tyranny, be no other possibility, and that a violent revolution may be justified. But I also believe that any such revolution should have as its only aim the establishment of a democracy; and by a democracy I do not mean something vague as 'the rule of the people' or 'the rule of the majority,' but a set of institutions (among them especially general elections, i.e. the right of the people to dismiss their government) which permit public control of the rulers and their dismissal by the ruled, and which make it possible for the ruled to obtain reforms without using violence, even against the will of the rulers (*Open Society* 360).

Here, the justification of the use of violence is premised on upturning a tyrannical regime; that is, a regime which makes reform without violence impossible. Also, the

aim must be that of instituting and sustaining a state of affairs which makes reforms without violence possible. Popper cautions that attempting to achieve more than the establishment of a state that embraces critical rationalism rather than violence is self-destructive and counter-productive, since “such an attempt involve the risk of destroying all prospects of reasonable reform” (*Open Society* 160). More so, excessive and prolonged use of violence may subsequently lead to loss of freedom, abuse of reason and the enthronement of another tyranny. Popper further justifies the use of violence (sometimes) in the state thus, “I mean the resistance, once democracy has been attained, to any attack (whether from within or without the state) against the democratic constitution and the use of democratic methods. Any such attack, especially if it comes from the government in power, or if it is tolerated by it, should be resisted by all loyal citizens, even to the use of violence” (*Open Society* 360). This ‘controlled violence’ by the citizens for the sake of democracy is what is needed to strengthen the very weak political institutions in Nigeria. The citizens must safeguard the State from the perceived enemies of the State who use the power of the state to destroy the state and subject the citizens to perpetual hardship.

For instance, the legitimacy and independence of the nation’s judiciary is being threatened by the growing culture of lobbying, favouritism and godfatherism (*Nation News* 2018). Thus, the judiciary that was the last hope of the common man is now dispensing justice to the highest bidder, and according to the dictates and caprices of the unlawful members in the executive. Also, competence has since become a secondary consideration for appointment and elevation into the Nigerian judiciary. The legislature in Nigeria is not left out in the usurping of powers and abuse of office. The National Assembly and various State Houses of Assembly rather than focusing on making and amending laws that will be meaningful to the masses are either busy aiding and abating the executives in squandering and looting the commonwealth of all, which is evident in their swift approval of obnoxious annual budgets presented by the executives. Same legislature hardly raises and approves bills that would ameliorate the sufferings of the masses. Even more concerning is the fact that the legislature has made the process of recalling unsatisfactory representatives by their constituents near-impossible. These and more are the myriad of ways the political institutions of the Nigerian State have been bastardized and rendered comatose by elected political persons whose core responsibility is supposed to be the protection of the sanctity and inviolability of these institutions.

The panacea is the strengthening of institutions as proposed by Karl Popper. Since the nonviolence approach allows for self-criticism, tactfulness, self-realisation, and improvements; the prospects of adopting this approach would not only ensure sustainable development in Nigeria, but it would equally restore the damaged image of Nigerians globally and ensure the place of Nigeria in the comity of nations. On the other hand, the method of incremental reformism (piecemeal social engineering) in Nigeria appears bleak without a conscientious and proactive followership, since the leaders rather than re-engineer the system are feeding fat on it. This is why Popper makes room for the use of violence by the citizens for the preservation and protection of the democratic process. Nigerians must therefore embrace Popper’s piecemeal

social engineering method while also paying close attention to Popper's admonition for the use of 'controlled violence' since the political leaders are defiant to piecemeal engineering and are seen to be consciously disrupting the political institutions of the state that are safeguards of democracy.

Conclusion

Democracy is generally accepted as a government of the people, by the people and for the people. The people, the people, the people; see the emphasis on 'the people' in this classic definition of democracy given by one of the founding fathers of American democracy- Abraham Lincoln. What this suggests is the sacrosanct fact that democracy cannot thrive in an environment where the people- the citizenry- the actual safeguards of democracy are polarized or compromised. That democratic political institutions are weak is because the people are weak; and the people can only be weak when they are divided among themselves, in the case of Nigeria, by ethno-religious sentiments. Weak political institutions is a consequence of a weak citizenship due to divided citizenry. This is the bane of democracy and bad governance in Nigeria. There is actually no bad democracy, weak political institutions, or even poor political leadership without a corresponding bad citizenship, weak citizenry (masses) and poor followership. Popper thus insists that "it is quite wrong to blame democracy for the political shortcomings of a democratic state. We should rather blame ourselves, the citizen of the democratic state" (*Open Society* 120). In essence, democracy fails only when the people fail in their responsibilities as safeguards of the critical political institutions that oil the wheels of democracy.

This work is not in any way concluding that the leaders are exempt from the problem of bad governance and abuse of democratic precedence in Nigeria. It is rather of the opinion that the citizens (followers) are, as much, a part of the problem. In fact, the leaders themselves were once followers before they become leaders. Therefore, it may not be totally illogical to say that the problem of democracy and bad governance in Nigeria is one of bad followership (unpatriotic citizenship). This bad followership is engendered by the forces of tribe and religion which besets and hinders the freedom of mind of the majority citizens.

There is therefore an urgent need to open up the Nigerian society. Obviously, as it stands now, the society is a closed one; this explains the overemphasis on tribe and religious interests instead of national interests in almost all aspects of the country's life. Popper's postulations on the open society can help the Nigerian State break the primitive stronghold of repressive, uncritical, and subjective thinking that come with tribal and religious fanaticism. Popper's emphasis on critical rationalism is necessary to imbue the spirit of tolerance and open-mindedness among the peoples of Nigeria so that the citizens may learn to appreciate and tolerate each other in spite of differences in tribe and religion. All pseudo-democratic principles and ideologies that enable religious and tribal jingoism should be eschewed; such as federal character principle, state of origin, rotational presidency, all forms of quota system, etc. All these are elements of a closed society because they sacrifice freedom of thought, individual capacity, meritocracy just to accommodate religious and tribal sentiments. No nation

develops by letting the less qualified take up critical positions in the state simply because it is the turn of a certain tribe or religion to occupy the said office. Meritocracy should be the decisive factor to determine who gets what in Nigeria at whatever place or location (whether it is his/her state of origin or not).

¹ JohnMary Uche Odinigwe

² Charles C. Nweke, PhD

Department of Philosophy,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka.

References

- Ajayi, K. "Problems of Democracy and Electoral Politics in Nigeria." Kolawole, D. (ed.), *Issues in Nigeria Government and Politics*. Ibadan: Dekaal Publishers, 1998, pp. 30-45.
- Awa, Eme O. *Emancipation of Africa*. Lagos: Emancipation Consults and Publishers Ltd, 1996, pp. 6- 16.
- Aiwuyor, Wilson Idahosa. "The Impending Democratic Revolution in Nigeria," Louis Achi, "Again, Drumbeats of Revolution," *Leadership Sunday*, November 18, 2012, pp. 21-22.
- Azzez, A. "Democracy and Legitimacy Crisis." Hassan, A.S. et al (eds.), *Democracy and Development in Nigeria: Conceptual Issues and Democratic Practice*, vol. 1 (Lagos: Concept Publications Limited, 2006), pp. 200-216.
- Balcerczyk, Ilona. "Society in the theory of Karl Popper," *Civitas Hominibus*, no. 13, 2018, pp. 99-108. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8758-826X>. Accessed 12/08/2024.
- Easterly, W. and R. Levine, "Africa's Growth Tragedy: Policies and Ethnic Divisions." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 112, no. 4, 1997, pp. 1203-1250.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*. London: Profile Books Ltd., 2011.
- Hashmi, S. R. and G. Majeed, "Politics of Ethnicity: A Theoretical Perspective," *A Research Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, pp. 319-331.
- Maduagwu, E. *Problems of socialism: The Nigerian challenge*. London: Zed books, 1982.
- Nzereogu, Daniel C. "Weak Institutions- A Challenge to Good Governance in Nigeria: A Review of Independence National Electoral Commission (INEC)." *Nnadiabube Journal of Religion, Culture and Society (NJRCS)*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2024, pp. 78-85.
- Ogbonna, Chidiebere C. & Ogbonna, Chigozie R. "Democracy and Development in Nigeria: Understanding the Key Challenges." *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2021, pp. 232-243.
- Osaghae, E. "Explaining the Changing Patterns of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2003, pp. 54-73.
- Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Popper, Karl. *All Life is Problem Solving*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Popper, Karl, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge.*

London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.

Popper, Karl. *The Poverty of Historicism.* London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960.

Usman, A., et al. "Institutional Weakness and Conflict Management in Nigeria: The Need for Collaborative Governance." *Basic & Applied Science*, vol. 1, no. 11, 2015, pp. 1-7.