

ELECTION AND THE INSTITUTION OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA: THE NIGERIAN DILEMMA

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Abstract

The contagious wave of multi-party and plural politics that greeted Africa in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War in the 1990s heightened the quest for democracy and political liberalization. Many nations of Africa found novelty in organizing elections for political succession. As a *vehicle* for smooth political transition, holding elections on a regular basis is adjudged to be the basic qualification for democratic rule – ‘elections leads to democracy and regularity of elections results to democratisation of the political space’. Nigeria, apart from the aborted transition to democratic rule in 1992, has had uninterrupted democratic transitions through electoral process since 1999. However, after two decades of sustained plural politics through regular multi-party elections, the ideals of democracy and democratic rule are still to be seen in the country. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine why several rounds of elections in Nigeria, like most other nations of Africa, have not succeeded to ensure true democracy and democratisation of the country’s politics. It interrogates the character of the Nigerian ruling regimes, the conduct of elections in Nigeria, and the problem of democracy in post-colonial Nigerian state. The paper concludes that the way elections are organised in Nigeria runs foul to the ideals of democracy; thus, making democratic rule in the country a shadow of itself and a mirage. The argument is not that elections is not and cannot be a normative path to democracy but only contends elections and electoral process in Africa are largely flawed that they do not give room for democracy. What is regarded as democratic rule in many nations of Africa is nothing but ‘elected autocracies’; hence, there is utmost need for a serious reorientation of the African political class as well as mass political mobilisation of the citizenry for democratic governance. The paper is historical and uses qualitative method in its analysis.

Keywords: Africa, Nigeria, Election, Politics, Democracy, Democratisation

Introduction

The aftermath of the Cold War predicated important changes in Africa. Most remarkable amongst the changes happened in the political space: many African nations transited from one party state to multi-party democracy. This new pursuit for democracy and political liberalism in Africa was what Huntington (1991) refers to as ‘third wave of democratisation’. One important feature that defines such political pluralism has remained the regularity of elections. A number of periodic national elections have been held in many countries across the continent ostensibly to usher in and stabilise democracy. Elections are not only seen as a veritable vehicle for political transitions in Africa but a critical and enduring institution for democratic rule and state building. One can hardly count any country in Africa today that have not organised elections for democratic transition. In other words, regularity of elections constitutes a key feature and often seen as the basic route to democratic rule. It is therefore on the strength of this interconnection that Lindberg (2006) puts up the argument that ‘elections produce democracy and regularity of the elections leads to democracy consolidation and democratisation of the political space’. What it means is that elections form the basic foundation of democracy, and overtime leads to democratisation of the society and its institutions.

However, the realities that are produced by the African political society after about three decades of democratic experiment have hugely come to challenge the Lindberg thesis. The question is, ‘has repeated and regularity of elections resulted to democracy and democratisation of the political space across the continent?’ To properly dissect key issues to this question, Nigeria’s electoral journey to democracy, an important African political power house, aptly comes into analysis. The Nigerian experience to a very large extent mirrors what is truly obtained in the African political space. Though

Nigeria has had two democratic dispensations in the First Republic (1960-1966) and Second Republic (1979-1983) ushered in by national elections before the failed political transition to democratic rule in 1992, the uninterrupted democratic rule through elections began in 1999 (Saliu, 2013:69). The point is that the country's democratic experiment initially stuttered but since the 1999 general elections to date it has endured more than two decades experience that calls for important review in the light of African situation. Therefore, this paper examines how regularity of elections in Nigeria addresses the question of democracy and democratisation of the country as an important African reference point. In doing this aim, the paper first explains the concepts of election and democracy; then focuses on the problem of elections and democracy in Nigeria; and articulates some important findings about elections and pursuit of democracy in Africa.

Conceptual Clarifications

Democracy

The concept of democracy is fluid, thus, warrants contestations in definition. What democracy is, to a large extent, varies in context and environment yet, there are 'irreducible' that are standard which if not taken into account would de-value it. There are varying peculiarities as well as core element that come into play in the task of conceptualising democracy and its essence. Scholars and theorists with interest have attempted definitions of democracy from different perspectives. When it comes to context, democracy can be a means to an ends or the ends itself. This can be gleaned from two different texts of definitions offered by Dahl (1994:24) and Sartori (1987:49). The former defines democracy as a 'process' that gives sovereignty to the citizens and seeks for freedom, human rights, opportunity, equality, popular participation, accountability, and constitutional justice in a society while the latter sees democracy as a 'state' or 'condition' in a society where these itemised qualities are normatively institutionalised and interact harmoniously and unhindered. The first definition emphasizes 'a means to an ends' while the second emphasizes 'ends in itself'. In terms of environment or say geopolitical configuration, variants of democracy exist: there is 'liberal democracy' and 'controlled or guided democracy' but not façade of it, depending largely on the side of the world a society in question finds itself; hence, we make reference to Western democracy, socialist democracy, Third World democracy or democracy in the developing countries. The point, however, is that irrespective of context or environment there are non-negotiable basics that qualify a democracy and democratic regime. According to Mahama (2019), 'democracy is the antithesis of dictatorship, autocracy, authoritarianism, tyranny or despotism'. Democracy, therefore, is a system that fairly and equitably promotes the participation of the citizens in how they are governed. It reposes sovereignty in the people on whose behalf leadership is exercised. It is based on pluralism and openness, the rule of law, and respect for the rights and freedoms of citizens.

Election

Conceptualising election is not easy as it commonly appears. It is relative to the political context as well as the environment under which it takes place. Diamond (2002:21-35) tries to leave a common definition when he states that election is 'a process, vehicle, platform, or institution through which qualified citizens of a country or nation as a people freely choose who governs them and when'. The major highpoint is that it gives people the opportunity to extend their mandate to some individuals amongst them to lead for orderliness and progress of their community, nation or country and reserves the right to withdraw such mandate when necessary. In other words, election connotes a process and an institution through which the people make and unmake their political leaders and leadership institution. Lyons (2005) posits that election is all about a people, free exercise of political choice, decision to confer mandate to leadership, and withdrawal same mandate within a period of time defined by law. Going further the line, Lindberg (2009) notes that elections are conducted by democratic regimes as well as autocratic regimes, and produces varying outcomes. The implication is that there are democratic and authoritarian kinds of election. Nevertheless, the idea behind election is to make the people own the real political power, though in practice it may not follow the theoretical letters but the irreducible is that people behind will always make a choice in the process of deciding who leads or governs them and should be freely allowed without fear or favour to express that choice

and feel the satisfaction that they did so. Choice here also suggests plural alternatives to choose from – multiparty politics. According to Powell (2000:21-22), ‘holding multiparty regular elections in Africa can create an institution that enhances political participation of majority of the citizens in the governance and general public affairs of their nation’. It implies that the goal of popular participation brought by pluralistic elections was to improve a free system of governance. However, there is no certain guarantee that it will always aid the system anytime anywhere.

Elections and Democratic Experiment in Nigeria Prior to 1999

The journey to electoral democracy in Nigeria goes way back to political developments in the country after independence. The first general elections took place in 1964. The elections trumped-up widespread violence, arson, economic and social destructions, and political antiparty due to gross manipulation of the process and unbridled show of power by the dominant parties to achieve favourable results and claim victory. It is commonly noted that the build up to the elections was ridden by crises. A fragile background survived from the tension orchestrated by the 1962 national census controversy and the Western Regional election crisis of 1962 where scores of lives and property were lost, and many more injured leading to imposition of ‘state of emergency’ by the Federal Government and the subsequent creation of the Mid-Western Region in 1963 (Adekson 1990:1-14; Dare 1989; Oyewole 1987:20; Oyovbaire 1987:4; Dudley 1973:37; and, Osaghae 1998). The three major political parties in the elections were formed and operated along ethnic lines rather than reflecting a genuine national ideology: Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) dominant in the North; National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) with its base in the East; and Action Group (AG) controlling the West (Nnoli 1978:36-38). It suggests that the elections was largely flawed and suffered credibility problem as it did not reflect true national character but ethnic divisions and parasitic clientelism. In fact, the ugly outcome(s) raised the bar of political corruption in the country and was the main reason for the military takeover of the government in January 1966. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that though the country’s political and governance stage was taken over by the military there were attempts to return the country on the path of democratic dispensation.

In 1975, when General Yakubu Gowon had appeared reluctant to return the country to a democratic rule, his regime was toppled in counter-coup by General Murtala Mohammed who promised to do that quickly. Though, Mohammed could not live to realise this goal General Olusegun Obasanjo completed the political transition process and returned power to a democratically elected government in 1979. But, the outcome of the election was not without problems. There was a prolonged litigation challenging the outcome of the presidential election. Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) who was the closest rival of Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and some other opposition candidates claimed that the election was fraudulent, and that Shagari and his NPN did not get the percentage of the total votes constitutionally required to be president (Kirk-Greene, 1981; Ojiakor, 2007:249-265). Thus, one major political problem that faced democratic experiment in ‘the second republic’ was the credibility of the process that produced it. The 1983 elections, also, presented a litmus test for President Shagari and his ruling NPN: the question was ‘would the elections be free, fair and credible?’ Without much surprise, the elections took a similar pattern with that of the ‘first republic’ in 1964. It produced another tale of monumental fraud, violence, ethnic-cum-religious divisions, and unbridled corruption of the political class. The election results were widely believed to have been manipulated to favour the ruling NPN and Shagari across the country, even in some strongholds of the opposition parties. Violence broke out in some parts of the country and resulted to loss of lives and destructions of property (Diamond, 1988:67-83; Okanya, 1995:60; Falola, and Ihonvbere, 1985). The post-election violence in Kano, Ondo, Bendel, Imo, and Plateau States were cases in point. In fact, the basis for a second cycle of military incursion into the country’s politics was partly explained within the context of 1983 general elections and its outcome(s). Again, democracy was raped through fraudulent elections. The degree of crisis and corruption that trailed these elections and their aftermaths often had to question the concept and utility of democracy as an ideal system of governance. The point is that each of these elections was largely

characterised by violence, rigging and intolerance, ethnic strife and divisions, compromised electoral institution, police brutality, and emasculation of the media.

No serious effort was in the offing to return the country again to a democratic rule until General Ibrahim Babangida's regime rolled out his political transition programme. Before the run in of 1992 elections into different political offices in their levels of governance except the office of the president have been conducted under a controlled two-party system: the Social Democratic Party and the National Republican Convention. The disappointing end came in 1993 when the presidential election which was widely adjudged to have been won by Chief Mushood Abiola of the SDP and freely reflected the will of the Nigerian people was unjustly annulled by the Babangida regime. Violence and civil disobedience took centre stage in different parts of the country especially in the densely populated metropolitan urban of Lagos and Kano. The whole transition programme turned out a monumental failure and, in the main, erased any further signs of democratic experiment in the country (Akinterinwa, 1997:287; and William, 1995:65-67). The hope for democracy, thus, further faded with military take-over of government by General Sani Abacha. It was not until in 1999 when General Abdulsalami Abubakar returned the country to the path of democratic journey again as the military made its 'final' exit from national politics and governance process. Lindberg (2006) posits that the vices elections in Africa often trump up largely undermined the very electoral process and put the essence of democracy under siege where 'democracy is substituted for electoral authoritarianism'. Aliagan (2008:79-99) posits that the faulty democratic experiment in the country was caused by faulty colonial legacy, tribal political formations, lack of political maturity of the elites, and unprofessionalism of the election management bodies; all sustained by long intervening periods of military rule.

The Nigerian Situation since 1999

It is earlier noted that Nigeria has had couple of general elections experiences for political transition before the dawn of 1999. Though these elections produced varying outcomes including the 'Third Republic' that was aborted in 1992, no denying the fact that they were all attempts to encourage democracy in the country. It is argued that these pioneer attempts to democratic rule that took place in the first three decades of post-independence period were short-lived due largely to incessant military intervention in the country's political governance process and the resulting long years of military rule (Olagunju, Jinadu and Oyovbaire 1993; Muhammed 2006:102). But the question that challenges us since the restoration of civil rule in 1999 to date is 'has Nigeria transited into a democracy judging from its conduct of regular elections?' Nigeria has had six consecutive and uninterrupted general elections, all meant to ensure and consolidate democracy in the country. How those elections in the new dispensation with regularity have impinged on democracy and democratic culture in the country is important subject of consideration. The preparations, actual conduct and outcome of elections in Nigeria since the return to civil rule no doubt have raised a big question with respect to democracy in the country. The experience evinces pretensions, fragility and tension. Similar to previous military-to-civilian transition experience, the 1999 elections that ushered in 'the fourth republic' was deliberately made less competitive and the outcome pre-determined by the ruling military oligarchy. The political transition process was hijacked by the top military brass. In fact, it was widely believed that Chief Olusegun Obasanjo a retired soldier of the Nigerian army was imposed on the Peoples Democratic Party as its presidential candidate by the ruling military oligarchy, and was not a popular choice of the people. During the elections, the ruling military regime mobilised the state security and financial resources for Obasanjo and PDP against Chief Olu Falae of the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and All Peoples Party (APP) merger – a tactical way of suppressing and intimidating opposition. Ojiakor (2007:256) notes that there were incidences of rigging and other forms of electoral fraud; and though the presence of the military was largely felt there were cases of violence in a number of states across the federation. The point is that though the election returned the country to civil rule it lacked credibility, transparency, and free and fair competition requires by a true democratic experiment.

In the 2003 elections things graduated to worse rather than improving for good. The deterioration of the electoral process was acute. In fact, the level of political desperation, intimidation, militarisation, violence and even assassination of political opponents that characterised the elections was so outrageous that Agbaoye (2016:94) likened it to ‘a theatre of war’. The opposition Parties and their supporters suffered unwarranted repression in the hand of state security outfits. Soldiers were mobilised out of the barracks and access to state run media outlets was restricted against the opposition with frivolous broadcasting regulations (Emerenini, 2003). It is, also, recorded that over 57 politicians were assassinated; about 430 persons died from election related violence; and over 1,000 Nigerians were physically assaulted by security agents (NHRC, December 2015). There were widespread cases of electoral malpractices involving ballot box snatching and stuffing, manipulation of election results by some officials of Electoral Commission, and deliberate disenfranchisement of voters in the opposition strongholds. Even the electoral laws were amended to create loopholes for the ruling PDP and President Obasanjo to exploit to victory. A scenario as this could not permit free, fair and credible elections hence the process was democratically flawed.

The 2007, 2011, and 2015 general elections were not in any way better. The level of fraud that was witnessed in 2007 elections in particular was so huge that even the President Musa Yar’dua of the ruling PDP who a major beneficiary had to admit that the process that produced him was not credible and transparent, and that the country needed some political and electoral reform. In 2011, one ugly factor in Nigeria’s politics resurfaced – ethnic and religious divisions. The country was pitched along President Goodluck Jonathan’s PDP Christian South against General Muhammadu Buhari’s Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) Muslim North. Cases of election rigging relating to over-voting and under-aged voting in the North and general manipulation of election results to increase vote margin were widespread. Violence especially in many states in the North, directed against PDP loyalists and Christian folks alike, was outrageous. The fact is that the aftermath of the election heightened the level of insecurity and ethnic-religious discord in the country. The ugly background further greeted subsequent elections in the country. The Nigerian political elites instead of building bridges of friendship, cooperation and sportsmanship across ethnic and religious divides rather resorted to exploiting such latent lines for their selfish and intra-class political gains. This was more profound in the 2015 presidential elections. Though, the opposition managed to secure state power by winning the presidency after sixteen years of struggles – General Buhari of the All Progressive Congress defeated incumbent President Jonathan of the PDP – the level of violence, rigging and ethnic-religious tension that characterised the exercise was unprecedented. The conduct of the elections and its outcome(s) pitched the country in the lines of North and South-West against South-East and South-South, and further Muslims against Christians and resulted to violence that claimed hundreds of lives and loss of property (CDD, 2015). Thus, the credibility of the elections was raped by a number of undemocratic forces.

The 2019 elections, rather than improving the process and adding democratic value to the system, further widened the gulf of dangerously ethnic-configured regional politics and took the trajectory of electoral fraud into new dimensions. The undercurrents of the elections pitched the Muslim North against the Christian South-East and South-South while votes were proportionately shared in the South-West. The fragile sense of national unity was further jeopardised in the face of tension created by the elections giving expression to renewed separatist agitations, insecurity and ethnic-cum-religious intolerance which have not been healthy for the country’s democratic journey. Also, manipulations of election results, military and police brutality, violence, intimidation and gagging of the media were rampant. Places as Lagos, Imo, Sokoto, Kaduna, Kano, Rivers and Akwa-Ibom were some of the major flashpoints of tension and violence in the elections. Even ‘vote buying’ – another form of electoral fraud that raised its head since 2003 elections – was very much widespread across parties and politicians. This goes to suggest that the undercurrents of the 2019 elections in Nigeria further de-democratised, rather than making effort to democratise the political and governance institutions in the country.

The bottom-line is that the so called democratic elections in Nigeria only legitimises ‘subtle autocracy’ in a guise of democracy; hence, repeated elections have not led to democratisation of the Nigerian political system. It is, thus, in the light of the above that Agbaoye (2016: 89-105) posits:

Political process and governance in Nigeria are hijacked by desperate oligarchy pretending to be democrats. They see the process as a vehicle to capture political power and the material incentives it offers, not as a transit to service leadership that would make the political, social, and economic institutions work for the good of the Nigerian society. Political power is wrestled away from the people, monopolised and arbitrarily exercised by the oligarchy who continue to retain that very power for themselves. They make almost every institution depend on political patronage to function, and willing politicians out of desperation for power find it more attractive to get co-opted into the corrupt ideology of the ruling regime with less thought about how to build a strong political alternative. Worst still, the judiciary, at least expected to redress some of the excesses, often have turned out a legitimising institution of the obvious monumental political criminality. Laws are continually amended when it is not necessarily expedient to create rooms for electoral fraud and corruption. All is to continue to perpetuate relevance and dominance of the oligarchy even when they had lost popularity and legitimacy. In this process, freedom for and material well-being of Nigerians are scuttled at the altar of greed and political desperation of the ruling elites.

In a similar manner, Saliu and Lipede (2008:120-151) posit that unlike peoples and institutions in advanced democracies, Nigerian political class and institutions have not been properly oriented in line with the principles and ideals of modern democratic practice and governance. The point is that a system as corrupt as Nigeria has hardly given way for competitive electoral politics expected to enhance democracy and democratisation of the country.

Important Findings

From the analysis, it can be deduced that Nigeria like many African countries falls short of democracy and shows no sign of democratisation. It can be best described as electoral authoritarian regime in a guise of democracy. Elections have continued to promote authoritarianism rather than improving and consolidating democracy. They are organised in a way that is inconsistent with democratic ideals. The political culture is so raped that it has hardly allowed for fair and credible elections as a sine qua non for democracy. Ihonvbere (1998) argues that ‘regime controlled democracy is not democracy but a façade of it’ – autocracy veiled as democracy. That is to say despite the regularity of elections in Nigeria the country has not transited to a true democracy. In other words, electoral processes in many African nations are largely compromised to consolidate the political base and power of the ruling regimes. Elections do turn out to be a de-democratising rather than democratising instrument – a disincentive to nation-building. This aptly lends credence to the observation of Bratton and van de Walle (1997) that ‘election outcomes could either lead to consolidation of democracy or autocracy’.

Electoral malpractices in Africa and the way they come in handy evolve and change over time in response to changing times and the kind of electoral threat faced by both the ruling regimes and their opposing forces. Ronceray and Bylers (2006) show that election fraud in Africa has its planning, preparations execution tactics and varying outcomes, all predicated on the sole ambition to grab state power. Hence, Bleck and van de Walle (2019:79-81) posit that political actors in African elections think more about how to grab the material incentives of the state power, and less of how to democratize the process to acquisition of that very power. Thus, material reward of power is a main motivating factor for political transition in Africa and not service leadership, democracy and nation-building. This leads to another common factor: protection and consolidation of power at all cost. The

ruling regimes carefully made their way to survive internal defeat through clientelism and political patronage; hence, unquenchable corruption riddles the state governance apparatuses. They sacrifice credibility and good governance to maintain and reward retinue of loyalists and foot soldiers. Me'dard (1982) posits that clientelism and political corruption are a huge factor in African politics and governance process. Nigeria aptly fits into this description. The country's ruling class, though come in as elected civilian government, do not take the questions of credible elections and democratic reform serious despite the democracy assistance worth of reasonable fortune they have continued to receive from the advanced democracies in the West. This, thus, has made Dodsworth and Cheeseman (2018:301-312) to ponder whether democracy assistance in Africa is meant for stability of regimes or democratisation and political freedom.

Though the opposition party defeated the ruling party in Nigeria in the 2015 general elections and has since then won re-election and retained power, it does not in any way suggest that the Nigeria is moving closer to true democracy particularly with the experience of the 2019 general elections. Proliferation of political parties and regularity of elections in Nigeria does not translate to democracy if the ideals of it are suppressed. The evidence seems to agree with the observation that 'authoritarian regimes that hold elections remain in power longer than those who fail to hold them' (*CMI Brief*, 2010:4). Again, ethnicity and ethnic politics can hardly be isolated from African politics. The Nigeria ruling class exploits and feeds on ethnic and religious jealousies for electoral gains. Onuegbu and Nnajofofor (2014:267-289) note that ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria are pitched against one another by the ruling class to achieve huge political advantage for themselves in the elections. In other words, ethnicity and ethnic politics play a divisive role in Nigeria elections and, in extension, hampers the path to true democracy.

The findings point to the fact that despite the multi-party and plural outlook of most elections in Africa as the Nigerian case has shown they do not guarantee free, open, fair and competitive contests that qualify democracies around the world. Ruling regimes in Africa employ common strategies to rape the credibility and competitiveness of elections and swing the outcome(s) to their favour; hence, they hardly lose grip on power. Oftentimes, the tactics they employ to execute these strategies differ in relation to time as well as political and societal realities before them. Bratton (1998) notes that elections in Africa are characterised by high degree of fraud and corruption, undue state patronage and clientelism, naked show of power and violence, intimidation and harassment of opposition, ethnic and sectarian divisions, monopolisation of the electoral institutions and its co-optation to the interest and ideology of the ruling regime or party in power. Elections with a combination of these anti-democratic elements always produce disputed election results, protracted litigations in courts, post-election violence and general insecurity, economic destruction and wastage as outcomes as is the case with Nigeria. The point is that regularity of elections and shadow plural politics in Nigeria representative of what is obtained in Africa have not translated into a democracy, let alone consolidating that very democracy in the country as it was expected to do so. It rather keeps on producing elected autocracies in the name of democracies.

Conclusion

Elections-for-democracy in Nigeria is clogged with debilitating contradictions that involved internal and external, as well as institutional and environmental factors. Such contradictions do raise serious problems that challenge the very idea and ideals of democracy in Africa. Elections instead of acting as a galvanising force for democracy and democratization of the political space have become an albatross to that very process. Flawed and fraudulent elections in Africa often produce façade of democracy where pretenders to power continue to usurp the political process and impose themselves on the citizenry. The state institutions are monopolized and used by the ruling regimes tactical instrument to legitimate their continued stay in power and victimize those opposed to their rule. The argument is that elections tend to produce subtle forms of authoritarianism – elected autocracies – in Africa rather than democratic regimes, the regularity of the exercise and its pluralistic outlook notwithstanding. In other words, a critical aspect of democratic process - fair, transparent and credible

elections - is largely compromised and sacrificed at the altar of corruption and greed, clientelism, ethnicity, power lust, and political criminality. It goes to show that after about three decades of new wave of multiparty democracy in Africa, political elites are yet to show serious and genuine willingness and commitment to pursue such a noble ideal.

Though much has gone the wrong way, Nigeria and Africa's hope for credible elections and true democracy is not lost yet. Every society is in constant transitions, and Nigeria may not be different. For the country to build a virile, dynamic and democratically viable nation responsive to changes in the course of twenty-first century the followings policy actions are a desideratum: (a.) mass mobilisation of the citizenry for political education and action; (b.) democratic ideals and practices must be domesticated and replicated in the grassroots; (c.) a strong commitment to fight against corruption and ethnic bigotry; (d.) there must be shift in the philosophy of governance – a demonetisation of elections and the entire political process; and (e.) serious and committed improvement of in the economic conditions and livelihood of the peoples. If action(s) is/are taken on these recommendations, it can go a long way to put not just Nigeria but Africa on the right track to achieving democracy and the resulting democratisation of African body-politic.

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