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# Democracy and development in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Democracy and development are global phenomena. Every country in the world aspires and claims to be democratic. This is because of the role of the latter in developmental process. This paper examined the linkage between democracy and development in Nigeria, using ethics as the yardstick for democratic adherence. The paper adopted content analysis approach to source its data and concluded that democracy is an ingredient of development. It must therefore be sustained to evolve and ensure sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Democracy, Development, Nigeria

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## 1. Introduction

For the past four decades or so, democracy has been an acceptable platform of intercourse among nations on the international plane. It is also most widely acceptable system of governing the people. The global acceptability of democracy stems from its ideals and ethics that it equips itself with. A major trend since the end of the cold war has been the enabling environment for enhancing the global propagation of the liberal democratic paradigm, incidentally, the democratic movement albeit rudimentarily, was flagged off in the colonial Nigeria with the benevolent introduction of the elective principle by the 1922 Clifford Constitution and invariably, through the introduction of party politics (Ajayi, 1998).

Essentially, the birth of democracy in Nigeria has endured for over a decade. It is therefore expected that democratic ethics and norms ought to have been inculcated and imbibed such that it becomes enduring and sustainable in Nigeria's democratic experiment. The democratic trends in Nigeria are such that seems to reject the ethics of democracy. As Arowolo and Lawal (2009:172) have noted:

*"Present democratisation process in Nigeria suffers from several problems. First, it is being carried out within inefficient and non-viable rules. Second, the process itself allows for manipulation of existing rules. Third, the counteracting agencies charged with policing and enforcement of the laws and those who work in those agencies are not properly constrained by the laws and INEC itself is not divested of this 'pathology' and as such can not be relied upon to play a role expected of an umpire since it is the party in power that appoints its officials and funds its operation".*

The growth and development of democracy depends largely on the practice of its ethics, ideals and norms as they serve as bedrock for democratic consolidation and sustainability. By and large, democracy has principles, which can also be described as rules guiding its practice, these rules or principles are otherwise regarded as democratic ethics or norms. Conformity to the latter manifests in good governance, infrastructural development and consequently national development.

Be that as it may, democracy has been accepted as a model of governance, particularly, in developing societies including Nigeria. Unfortunately, the growth of democracy in Nigeria has remained stunted (Ajayi, 1998). This is as a result of the inability of our leaders to confine themselves to democratic ethics. This invariably manifest in poverty and under development.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Conceptualising democracy

Conceptualizing democracy is a difficult task. This is because democracy has been so subjected to contradictory operationalizations as it has become fashionable for regimes and states to claim to be democratic, even when they are not.

The popular view of democracy is the position of Abraham Lincoln, which sees democracy as government of the people by the people, and for the people. Harvey and Harvey (1989) see democracy as a concept that involves among others, “setting affairs according to known rules of government, toleration towards minority views, regular elections, freedom of speech and above all, observance of rule of law”.

Kolawole (2004) believes democracy is not the absence of military rule nor it is necessarily the presence of civilian administrators, but a situation where political actors and institutions of state are oiled in democratic values, norms and ethos. In this respect, the impact and effects of democracy must permeate all the strata of society and governance. Franceschet defined democracy according to three basic requirements, non violence, political participation and control, and political equality (Franceschet, 2009).

Diamond et al. (1989: 6-7) views democracy as a system of government “that meets three essential conditions meaningful and extensive competition among individual and groups, especially political parties, for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force, a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair election, such that no major (adult) social group is excluded; and a level of civil and political liberties; freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organisations-sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation”. Essentially, democracy is a system that enhances popular participation and fundamental human rights.

## 2.2. The concept of ethics

The word ethics is a victim of definitional pluralism. It has a number of different meanings. But some of these meanings will be explored for the purpose of this paper. Ethics is defined as a code or set of principles by which men live (Popkin, 1992). Leads (1975) sees ethics as individual morality or ideals and rightness, upon which man ought to pattern his behaviour. Ethics is the science of human duty; it is the science of right.

## 2.3. The concept of democratic ethics

Democratic ethics can also be viewed as ethics of democracy. This can be defined as “those considerations of morals and rights upon which democracy must be founded and according to which it must be built to be right and just” (Clancy, n.d.) Democratic ethics are the ideals, principles that guide the practice of democracy in any human society.

## 2.4. The Concept of democracy

As a social process, development is complex and multi-dimensional. It entails process in the social, economic, cultural and other facets of life. Throughout history, people have sought to increase their ability to conquer the environment with a view to improving their standard of living (Olufemi, 1998). Development entails qualitative and quantitative increase in the capacity, skills, creativity and general material well-being of individuals.

## 2.5. Basic for democracy in human society

Post (1905:3) declared;

*“We hold these truths to self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by the creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, government are instituted among men, deriving just powers from the consent of governed”.*

The above statement captures vividly, the correct basis for democracy in any human society. It demonstrates the essence of democracy and the *raison detre* for the establishment of democracy. The thrust of this assertion is that any claim to democracy by any regime or state must essentially embrace popular participation, competitive choice, the enjoyment of civil and political liberties by the citizenry in real terms, and the accountability of the leadership. Clancy (n.d.) believes that “the equality of all people is the tap-root of democracy. Not equality in size, strength, intellect or will, but that all are endowed with equal rights, with inalienable rights among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. ... People do not exist for government, governments exist for people, people are prior to government, and whatever right they have inhere in them by reason of their very existence”.

The touchstone of democracy is the people, it is people oriented, it is to make life easier and more secure that people form themselves into communities, and government in merely the orderly conduct of community affairs.

Democracy offers participatory opportunity for the citizenry in the choice and selection through periodic elections of credible representatives. This confers in estimable avenue for psychological self satisfaction and self-fulfilment. This is so as the electorates who participate in the electoral process that eventually leads to the enthronement of a government and the political leadership can therefore lay claim to the government as theirs rather than being an imposition. Consequently, the mandate to govern emanates from them, while at the same time, they act as legitimizers of the governmental system. The government is seen as legitimate and therefore, not illegal (Ajayi, 1998).

Archibugi and Marchetti (2009) opine that the fundamental democratic principle requires that public decisions have to be taken after consultation with all individuals who would enjoy or suffer the public consequences of those decisions. The best political tool to guarantee the possibility of influencing public decisions in any sphere of action is political participation. Democracy basically is about the people and their participation in governance.

## 3. Democratic ethics in nigeria: a critical assessment

The literature on democratic ethics primarily focuses upon key components such as universal suffrage, free speech, legal equality, constitutional checks, political equality in practice, freedom of representation and enhanced participation (Wiener, 2008).

Clancy (n.d.) states that “the democratic idea as applied to government demands that equality of fundamental rights be recognized as a natural endowment to be protected as a public duty. ...The Brotherhood of man is the ethical touchstone of democracy”.

Benne (n.d) identified five democratic norms as follows; make change through collaboration; require active participation by all members; change must be experimental in attitudes; convert principles from dogmas to hypotheses; seek collective not individual solutions. Franceschet (2009) also identified legality, transparency and enhanced participation as democratic ethics and principles. He believes law remains the key democratic mechanism to implement a non-violent order, even when it is violated. According to him, the relationship between democracy and law extends further; with democracy as the dominant regime type globally today, the hypocrisy of democratic states disregarding the global rule of law should become more difficult to sustain. Citizens will ask why they must respect the rule of law if their government fail to do the same. Also, the democratic principle of political control requires transparent public authorities to account by rewarding or punishing governments at elections. Adherence to all these principles enables democracy and development to thrive.

But, unfortunately and regrettably, the way and manner democracy is practiced in Nigeria is a far cry from these principles. There is virtually no democratic ethos in Nigeria. Democracy dividends are far below expectation of the generality of the people.

In Nigeria, patronage and rent-seeking are way of life; “those who are in government are desperate to hold on to power at all cost. While those who want to come on board are going about it in a do or die manner. Hence, Nigeria’s political temperature is always at a boiling point, the essence of service is largely misunderstood. Those who seek public office do so for selfish reasons ranging from stealing to personal aggrandizement” (Ayobolu, n.d). As a matter of fact, there seems to be no fundamental difference between the so called democratic rule in Nigeria and the hitherto practiced military rule. In this ugly situation, it is difficult if not impossible to talk about democratic ethics in Nigeria.

#### **4. The relationship between democratic ethics and national development**

Democracy is development imbued. The more democratic ethics in a society, the higher the dividends of democracy; and the higher the dividends of democracy, the better the level of sustainable development. Development can hardly be felt or achieved when democratic ethics are not imbibed and adhered to by the leaders and administrators. This is because the accommodation of ethics of democracy enhances performance and facilities development.

Democracy and development are inseparable. Components of development such as; discipline, commitment, honesty, transparency, accountability peaceful co-existence, integrity, etc are also embedded in democracy. The success of one leads to the success of the other and vice versa.

#### 4.1. Implication of Ethical Lapses in Democracy for National Development

The problem of development in Nigeria does not result from lack of competent personnel or absence of adequate financial resources. Rather it is more associated with lack of democratic ethics, which is an ethical lapse in democracy.

To start with, our democracy is not people-oriented. Democracy is viewed as “a government of the people, by the people and for the people. However, in the Nigerian context, there seems to be an exception to this definition. The people who are supposed to be the fulcrum of democracy are not only marginalized, but also thoroughly alienated. The democracy in Nigeria is therefore, a government of few families, their friends as well as their business collaborators” (Ayobolu, n.d.), as opposed to the democratic virtue of popular participation.

These few people live in extreme affluence, while the majority of citizens wallow in abject poverty, as opposed to democratic virtue of welfarism. Yet, it is business as usual. According to Ayobolu (n.d.) “there is no clear demarcation between democracy and oligarchy in Nigeria. And, there is always an agreement amongst the colluding business class and the ruling elite on how to share the booty of government or what is commonly referred to as the proverbial national cake. So, while Nigeria’s fortune is depreciating, some few individuals at the corridors of power and their cronies are growing fatter at the expense of Nigerians”.

Another ethical lapse in Nigeria’s democracy is the inability of the electoral body to conduct free and fair election. Free and fair is one of the virtues of democracy. But in Nigeria, the virtue is unattainable. Every contestant is determined to rig the election in his own favour. And, where rigging is made impossible, violence, arson, kidnapping and murder of opponents are introduced into the electoral game (Ajayi, 1998). Electoral competition then becomes “a do or die affair” as witnessed in the elections of 1964, 1979, 1983, 1999, 2003 and 2007. In this regard, electoral process becomes an avenue for manipulations and all sorts of electoral malpractices. Electoral officials are bribed before elections so as to guarantee their partial support. The security agents are also bribed to ensure peaceful atmosphere for stealing of peoples votes. Refusal to accept electoral defeat in good faith is a lapse in our democracy. And absence of rule of law also serves as ethical lapse in Nigeria’s democracy.

It is to be noted that in Nigeria, democracy has not achieved much success in bestowing to the people their basic needs or even the requirement of participation in decision making. Neither has it been providing the peaceful atmosphere that can bring about development and the well being of the people (Agagu, 2004). The democratic experiments we have had in Nigeria are only democratic in name and on paper without ethics by which it can be driven. Neither do they meet the demands of liberal democracy foisted on the country by the western world, let alone of the inclusive nature expected of a developing country under unique circumstances. The type of democracy operating in the country does not concede any aspect of decision making to the masses. Even the common one which is that of electoral choice is often derived through rigging and harassment. It is not surprising that our own form of democracy does not in actual sense grant concrete political, social and economic rights. It is a democracy that heightens conflict, crude use of force, intimidation and discord and the underdevelopment of the state and the citizenry (Agagu, 2004).

## 5. Conclusion

Absence of democratic ethics and norms has really affected national development in Nigeria. The country principally has remained a third world and dependent country in crisis of various kinds which is not making any progress forward or development. The furore over resource control, power shift, revenue allocation, Sharia issue, rotational presidency, creation of more states, terrorism, insecurity etc. are evidences of lack of democratic ethics and norms in Nigerian society. It is therefore the contention of this paper that for development to thrive in Nigeria, the attitude and orientation of its political elites must be changed. Both the leaders and followers must learn the art and discipline of democracy, cultivate the habit and virtue of honesty and imbibe democratic ethos as these remain the only antidote to the crises of national development.

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