

Review Article

An Assessment of the Gains and Pains of Western Democracy in Nigeria Since 1999

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Abstract: Since the return to democratic governance in Nigeria in 1999, the country has witnessed several upheavals and topsy-turvy attempts toward improving people-centered democratic governance and leadership management in Nigeria. The challenges revolve around violation of the rule of law, abuse of fundamental human rights, electoral malpractices, injustice and impunity, corruption, terrorism, political instability, budgetary distortions, poor provision of infrastructural social amenities, unemployment and grinding abject poverty. Due to these numerous challenges, most scholars are skeptical about the success of democracy in Nigeria. Therefore, to understand whether or not the practice of Western democracy is a success story in Nigeria, this paper is structured into the meaning and principles or features of democracy, the success of Western democracy and its failures, and the way forward. The methodologies for data collection were library research and reviews. Qualitative primary data were accessed and used. The findings revealed that while there are gains in democracy, the pains and or failure outweigh the success.

Keywords: Gains, Pains, Democracy, Governance, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria like other African states had legacies of colonial experiences that have created an entirely transformed political setting characterized by sectarian divides, political thoughts, and traditional orientations. Nigeria has been an enclave prone to conflicts as a result of the ethnic and religious composition of its societies characterized by communal skirmishes, boundary disputes, Corruption, nepotism to client-patron relations, civil wars, and contests over power and resources (Tar 2010). Since the Fourth Republic the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria has had both success and painful impact. While some scholars think that the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria was a failure since 1999, others opined that the practice of Western democracy has recorded several marginal successes. In between these schools of thought are those who posited that the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria was neither a success nor a failure. They argued that there are areas in which Western democracy recorded successes; while on the other hand, there are areas in which the practice was a complete failure. This moderate school created a kind of balance between the pessimist and the optimist scholars concerning the subject of discourse. In this essay, the paper shall attempt a critical analysis of the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria, citing relevant examples to ascertain whether the practice is a success story or not.

Conceptual Clarifications and Definition of Terms

The concept of democracy is derived from two Greek words 'Demos' meaning "the people" and 'Kratia' meaning "the rule". Put together 'demokratia' which means "the rule of the people". Therefore democracy can be seen as a political system based on the interest of the majority in a country (Adejumobi & Agbaje, 2006). It is a type of governance in which citizens exercise their power and civic responsibility, directly or through their freely elected representatives (Mbachu & Eze, 2009). A true democracy is a system where all citizens meet periodically to elect state officials and personally enact laws. This type of democracy is rarely practiced in modern days, except in ancient Athens,

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New England town meetings, Swiss Landsgemeinde, and Igbo villages (Ohaeracies) (Mbachu & Eze, 2009). In ideal democracies, absolute powers are exercised by representatives, elected through a free and fair electoral process. The representatives may be supplanted by the electorates according to the legal procedures of recall and referendum, and they are at least periodically to elect state officials and possibly enact a law that is extremely difficult and unachievable.

Rule of Law

The rule of Law can be seen as respect for constitutionalism through total compliance with the rule of law and equality of all citizens before the law. It is also a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the state itself, are accountable to the laws of the Federation of Nigeria (Bello & Garba, 2022).

Democratic Values

Democratic values refer to those norms that portray a society's democratic way of life. Examples are; respect, equality, fairness, freedom, liberty, constitutionalism, etc.

Dividends of Democracy

The dividend of democracy has been applied to mean the benefits of democratic governance and is measured in terms of improved life standards, Zero tolerance for corruption, sound education, improved working conditions, rule of law, economic stability and inflation control, development of basic infrastructures, etc. (Ezukanma 2023)¹ further added the dividend is attained when politicians cannot rig elections and become responsive to the needs and aspirations of the common man (voters) or the benefits enjoyed by the electorate who voted a particular Government into power.

Failed State

This refers to a nation that has lost its credibility to govern its people. Such a state maintains legal sovereignty but manages weak institutions (Chukwubikem, Azoro, Chinedu, *et al.*, 2021), weak political power, poor enforcement of the law, and disorganized civil society that may lead to a state of near-anarchy.

Democratic Experiment in Nigeria

From the beginning of the 1990s, the winds of democracy started to blow rapidly across all the regions of Africa. The long struggle for democracy in Africa has begun to produce results in some quotas. "The question of the possibility of an African theory of democracy has been greeted with apathy in African philosophical discourse" (Appadorai, 1968). For many African political scholars and politicians, it is absurd to think of such a possibility, because their existing orientations have been tailored towards aping alien theoretical models and practices of democracy for a very long time. Similarly, significant numbers of scholars have in recent times seen the need for the incorporation of Africa's indigenous/traditional values to produce a democratic heritage and values, rooted in her traditional past, in resolving its problems. The triggers of democracy in Africa were domestic and external factors. Internally, it was pushed by the failures of many African states in the 1980s to deliver good governance and in particular the economic hardships under different economic stabilization programs like the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) in Nigeria as a case study. "This demand for improved governance led to the rise of pro-democracy movements in African states, which resulted in concerted popular agitation for change" (Wali, 2002).

Features of Western Democracy

Representative democracy has several essential features or characteristics such as accountability, political competition, alternation in power, popular representation, majority decision, political equality and popular consultation, right of dissent and disobedience, and free press (Mbachu & Eze, 2009). However, Heater (1964) suggested five basic elements without which no community can call itself truly Democrat. These elements are equality, sovereignty of the individual, respect for human life, the rule of law, and liberty of the individual. (Akinyemi, 2008), identified four major features of democracy viz: Individual freedom, equality before the law, universal suffrage, and education (Okot 2006). In the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, fundamental democratic human rights are enshrined. These include the Right to life, the Right to dignity of the human person, the right to personal liberty, the right to fair hearing, the right to private and family life, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, the right to freedom of expression and the press, right to peaceful assembly, right to freedom of movement, right to freedom from

¹Nigerians will earn the dividend of democracy when the power elite become completely subject to the powers of the electorate, and consequently, act only in accordance to their will. Then, it will be impossible for them to rig elections, steal public funds, or engage in any act that is contrary to the legitimate aspirations of the people. And Nigerian citizens will rise from pawns and stooges in the elite power game to become the focus of the interest, concern and actions of their elected and government officials and every institution of government. And these officials will be reduced from haughty, crooked, selfishness, superciliousness, and money-stealing panjandrums to public servants.

discrimination, right to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria and right to vote and be voted for (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 Constitution). Thus using these essentials or features of democracy, the paper discussed the practice of Democracy in Nigeria. Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as the government of the people, by the people, and for the people (Wamakko, 2014). This definition explains the sovereignty of the people in a democratic setting.

The Gains and Pains of Western Democracy

Aspects of good governance include stability and development, transparency and accountability, human rights, and justice, room for a vibrant opposition, the rule of the law, individual growth and national security, harmony and pluralism, democratic inclusion and integration, combating poverty, disease and illiteracy and, a rising consensus (Kukah, 1998).⁹ The optimist on the success of Western democracy in Nigeria argued that the various attempts made by the various regimes to hand over power to democratically elected representatives are, in itself, a measure of success. They pointed out that the various democratic administrations so acclaimed delivered democratic dividends to Nigerians during the periods in office. However, a critical assessment of the various administrations since 1999 has shown that the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria is a huge failure. This is because of the life of poverty, corruption, and deprivation that characterized the life of Nigerians. Unemployment is on the increase, violation of human rights, lack of accountability and transparency, prevalence of epidemics, ethno-religious crises, civil strife, terrorism, injustice, and electoral malpractices to mention but a few. With these huge democratic abnormalities, it is difficult and impossible to convince the people that the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria is a success. However before, it is imperative to discuss the various areas where the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria is a failure (Obilor, O., Keneth, I., *et al.*, 2018). The practice of Western democracy in Nigeria to a large extent has not been a successful enterprise, despite the billions of naira expended for the financing of the system. This is because the various aspects of good democratic governance as enumerated above are either limited or non-existence in Nigeria. Thus, we cannot say that Nigeria has succeeded. Let's consider some of the challenges or areas of failure of Western democracy in Nigeria.

One of the cardinal tenets of participatory democracy is an organized and constitutional change of government through credible elections. Since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999 to date, the system had witnessed several elections captured with irregularities and malpractice of great magnitude increases in every election. Institutions of the state such as the Police, the Military, and even the electoral body i.e. the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) colluded to manipulate the electoral process in favour of certain candidates. A clear example is situations where individuals won election from prison custody as was the case with Senate Omisore of Osun State and Governor Ahamafuna Orijji of Abia state which is contrary to the Electoral Act. In the case of Governor Peter Obi against Andy Uba of Anambra state in 2007, INEC conducted elections when the tenure of the sitting governor was fully subsisting (Omodia, 2009). It is also reported that the 1999 and 2013 general elections witnessed widespread inconsistency. The Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) described the 2003 election as a situation where the electorates wanted their votes to count; but unfortunately, the political class wanted to corrupt the process and rig their way into elective offices. Therefore, with this kind of election racketeering, we cannot say that the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria is a success. Thus it became clear that the practice have woefully failed. However, sequel to the 2015 general elections, one may admit that the practice of Western democracy is becoming of Age in light of some improvements in a situation where a sitting President will accept defeat even before the election results were formally announced. Thus President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan has set an example that subsequent leaders should follow the electoral process will be reformed and refined and this will further polish the democratic process through the promotion of the spirit of sportsmanship.

Another index for the failure of Western democracy is inter and intra-ethnic conflicts. Civilian regimes in Nigeria had witnessed a series of civil conflicts, insurgency and counter-insurgency, Inter and intra-ethnic rivalries and religious crisis which has undermined regional integration, trade, peace, and tranquillity among its various federating units (Usman 2005). This to a larger extent has constituted a serious challenge to the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria. These inter and intra-ethnic and religious rivalries have resulted in the cost of many lives and property and have grossly undermined economic growth and integration and Foreign Direct Investment in Nigeria. The major aim or goal of any nation is to secure the lives and properties of its citizenry as enshrined in the laws of the Federation. An example is the various ethnic religious conflicts for example in Kaduna state, Plateau state, Benue, and several terrorist activities such as Boko Haram, kidnapping, and cattle rustling which plagues the nation in recent times (Bello & Garba 2022). The failure of the government to address and redress this situation informed the evaluation and conclusion that the practice of Western democracy has not excelled but rather had created chains of unresolved problems that have retarded the progress and development of the nation (Usman 2020), (Krashman 2003)

Corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian nation. Thus with these massive corrupt practices, it can also be asserted that the practice of Western democracy has failed to address this cancer in the Nigerian systems. It appears all the anti-Graft agencies have been influenced by politics and personal interests in the discharge of their formal responsibilities. Even though there is hardly a corruption-free nation in the world, alleged cases of corruption must be

sincerely investigated without fear or favour, but the magnitude of corruption in Nigeria is an indication of democratic failure (Oseghale 2020), (UNODC 2019). The factor of poverty has been a key factor that a very serious challenge to democratic governance in Nigeria. Unarguably, Nigeria is blessed with abundant human and mineral resources, this, notwithstanding, the nation rank among the world's poorest economies. The life expectancy of Nigerians compared with other nations of the world is low. Between 1962 and 2012, India lifted 400 million people out of poverty, just as democracy also flourished in that country. Statistically, about 10 million Nigerians are in absolute poverty, which means they cannot afford the necessities of life (Igwe, 2010). Basic infrastructures are all around lacking, high rate of un-enrolled children into basic education and school dropouts. Poverty again has demoralized Nigerians across all ages, this is because morality has been eroded by life challenges in both formal and informal sectors of the Nigerian economy. Society has lost conscience and regards for ethical values. The average thinking of most Nigerians is how to meet up end means for survival. The citizenry devices any means to survive, legal or illegal. Except few individuals most Nigerians have lost hope in the political will of the Government to fight corrupt practices and ensure the rule of law.

From the foregoing, it can be asserted that life generally in Nigeria is threatened by absolute and abject poverty which is one of the fundamental indicators of the failure of western democracy in Nigeria. Nigerians are yet to feel the impact of Western democracy in their lives. Similarly, another basic area where the practice of Western democracy has failed in Nigeria is the existence of weak democratic institutions. By democratic institutions, the paper refers to the Executive, the Judiciary, the Legislature, and electoral agencies such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), security Agencies, etc. Democratically, each of these institutions is constitutionally empowered to maintain a certain degree of independence and autonomy while serving as checks on the other. One of the strategies adopted by the executive to influence and dominate the overall business of governance has been the control of budgetary allocations and this has remained a formidable reality in Nigeria. In assessing the independence and autonomy of INEC and the Judiciary in the fourth Republic, it has been observed that events in this democratic dispensation have shown that the electoral body is not independent of the party in power. This is due to how the electoral body has conducted elections in a way that advantaged the party in power while the judiciary has served as a tool for creating political topsy-turvy that undermined the democratic process (Nwauwa, 2005), particularly in judging litigations at petition tribunals. The Judiciary also has been unable to sustain the democratic process in Nigeria by failing to convict anybody through the judicial process for the several cases of arson and killing that have characterized inter and intra-ethnic clashes while the legislative institution has proven incapable of interfering decisively in the management of ethno-religious and sovereignty crisis in Nigeria (Gambari, 2008). With these weaknesses and incompetence, therefore, it is appropriate to admit that the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria is a failure because the institutions are not playing the basic functions they were created to perform.

Another major area that can explain the failure of Western democracy in Nigeria is human right violation and abuses. The 1999 Nigerian Constitution, chapter IV, sections 33 to 43 outlined the fundamental rights of Nigerian citizens which include the right to life, the right to dignity of human person, the right to personal liberty, the right to free hearing, the right to family life, right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, right to freedom of expression and the press, right to peaceful assembly and right to freedom of movements, etc. (Laws of the Federation: The 199 Federal Constitution) etc. Most of the time these basic human rights are violated with impurities; this also is an indication that the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria has not been a success story in Nigeria (Bello & Garba 2022). Besides the violation of human rights and abuses, there is equal injustice and inequality in Nigeria in the distribution of democratic dividends to Nigerians. There tends to be a lopsided concentration on one side and or some ethnic groups to the detriment of minority groups in Nigeria. With this kind of injustice and unequal distribution of the dividends of democracy which is the core value of democracy, one cannot but argue that the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria is a huge failure. Another illustration of the poverty of democratic principles and practice in Nigeria is the citizens' perception of and expectations from political office holders, attitude towards public facilities and services, and waning societal value systems. The general perception of the citizenry towards political office holders is that it is an avenue for personal aggrandizement. This perception alone shows the failure of Western democracy in Nigeria. With perception, the citizens expect their elected officials and political office representatives to steal public funds and share them with the masses rather than provide public infrastructures (Duruji, 2010). And in most cases, when and where these public social amenities are provided, they are mismanaged and misused by the citizens because of the neglect and retrogressive attitudes towards public utilities. But in a true democratic society, the citizens are patriotic and responsible in maintaining the public amenities, because the citizens looked up to their political leaders as role models, this therefore shows the extent to which the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria is a failure.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In reality and practice, a true democracy should be a model in which accountability is secured primarily through free, fair, and competitive elections, in which virtually all adult men and women have the right to vote and be voted for without prejudice. The system should also have the potential capacity to produce morally upright leaders who conceived themselves and are seen to be servants of the electorate (Bello & Garba 2022). Moreover, democratic leadership provides

for the needs of the people through the provision of basic social amenities, employment, and poverty eradication. Some of the elements of democracy include equality, the sovereignty of people, respect for human life, the rule of law, and individual liberty. Accountability, transparency, political competition, alternation in power, popular representation, majority decision, political equality and popular consultation, right of descent, disobedience, and the press are all features of a democratic setting. From 1999, up to 2015, the practice of Western democracy in Nigeria to a large extent has been a failure. This is because, as argued above, issues regarding electoral malpractice, poverty, corruption, absence of the rule of law, human right violation and abuses, injustice, inequality, weak democratic institutions, etc. have been the challenges and with these enormous challenges confronting Nigeria's nascent democracy logical and appropriate to assert that the practice of western democracy in Nigeria is not a success story. However, the paper also noted that there is a prospect of a better tomorrow and made recommendations that the rule must be paramount, the cost of campaigns and governance must be rationalized and be made prudent, there must be transparency and accountability in governance, political education like voter awareness, review of the electoral process of recall and reforms in the administration of criminal justice in Nigeria.

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