

# Democracy in nigeria challenges



## NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY TODAY: THE EXPECTED DIVIDENDS AND CHALLENGES

BY

FRANKLINS A . SANUBI, Ph. D

### Abstract

*After a long period of military interregnum, the anxiety and high expectations which characterized the disposition of the local Nigerian polity shortly before 1999 had almost waned in barely a decade of the country's democratic experiment due to bad and corrupt governance resulting in some fresh pessimism about the workability of democratic governmentt in the country These expectations which have been encapsulated into a new paradigm in Nigerian politics known as " dividends of democracy" have aroused some academic and policy concern about the claims of those who professed to have secured some " dividends" for their people and those who believed that such acclaimed dividends are a ruse. Using a structural-functional analytical framework in a descriptive research design, this paper presents some of the relevant arguments for and against the claim to the dividends of democracy in Nigeria , pointing out some of its key challenges. It observes among others, that while the claim to attaining dividend of democracy may be arguable under the platform that the adoption of democratic governance in Nigeria may have secured some favourable external image for the nation in recent years, there are ample evidence that much of the claims by political actors to dividends of democracy are not supported by tangible functional structures of an enduring democracy The*

*paper recommends among other things, a vigorous pursuit of the institutional fight against corruption and an expedited reform of the country's electoral system.*

## Introduction

The peculiarities of a nation's practice of democracy distinguish it from another's. As a social process, democracy should naturally be expected to respond to the dictates of its immediate milieu while as much as possible it aspires to some universal principles or standards in its practice. From its definitions as 'a government of popular sovereignty' democracy permits the majority of the governed to have its "will" enthroned in governance at least in deciding who should direct its own affairs in political authority at elections. In Nigeria's barely half-a-century of political independence, some attempts at democratic governance may have totalled up only to nineteen years of its nationhood. Of this however, much will be desired of any one to identify the boundaries of a 'true democracy' as defined above if any, that is existing in the Nigerian experience.

Typically, a democracy is characterized among others, by a regular general election, a highly defined electoral procedure, a high degree of the *rule of law* (with an independent and transparent judicial structure) and a people whose human rights is optimally guaranteed by existing executive, legislative and judicial institutions. While it may be argued at some academic forum that no ideal (true) democracy can be found in any nation today, there is however much compelling impulse to associate some current western democracies with a high degree of ideal democratic phenomenon. The

Nigerian democracy would, comparatively rank very low in such continuum in terms of both practice and dividends.

### Democratic Dividends: A Definition

Our discomfort with the use of the term “ dividend” in the analysis of political performance, and especially in Nigeria where self-interest seems to vehemently override nationalistic aspiration, lies not in its auspiciousness but in its origin. The term “ dividends” is a business one, particularly in the area of investment. To expect a dividend in future is to invest today.

Investment is seen from the point of view of economics as “ part of present income spent on goods or services in order to generate a high future income”. Such goods however are *investment* goods as distinguished from *consumer* goods. This view of investment sees the process as a “ risk taking” endeavour. To assure a risk-taker of a dividend is to minimize his risks elements while investing. Higher risks bring higher dividends. The most successful investors therefore belong to the class of high risk takers. By importing this process into politics, Nigerian politicians may be described as political investors who see their attainment of political office as a management of political investment rather than a call to service for one’s fatherland. Hence, when you hear an average political office holder talk of dividends of democracy, he is implicitly referring to the size of the national cake he is able to cut for himself, albeit his people. Democratic dividends in Nigeria may therefore not be seen merely as yielding a desired purpose of attaining national good governance for the benefit of the entire polity but particularly as an expression of a competitive struggle for natural economic resources to the satisfaction of competing individuals or groups often defined

in ethnocentric terms. Yet this term “dividend” of democracy has been a household one in the language registers of political actors in Nigeria.

### Structural-Functionalism and Democracy: A theoretical framework

An auspicious social theory under which the analysis of the “dividends of democracy in Nigeria” may be comfortably made is the theory of structural-functionalism. The functionalist school believes that the understanding of a given system (under this circumstance, the Nigerian political system in the democratic dispensation) must necessarily comprise not only the understanding of the institutions (or structures) which make up the system but also their respective functions<sup>1</sup>. The adherents of structural-functionalism insist that these institutions must be placed within a meaningful and

<sup>1</sup> Igwe, O. (2007) *Politics and globe dictionary*, New ed., Aba: Eagle Publishers

dynamic historical context if they are to be properly understood – an idea that stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing approaches in the field of comparative politics such as the *state-society theory* and the *dependency theory*. The structural-functional approach is based on the view that a political system is made up of several key components including interest groups, political groups and branches of government. According to Almond & Powell, a political system performs some key functions such as political socialization, recruitment and communication<sup>2</sup>. Socialization may be seen as a process by which a society passes along its values and beliefs to

succeeding generations while from a point of view of politics, socialization (and hence *political socialization*) may be described as a process by which a society inculcates civic virtues, or the habit of effective citizenship. Political *recruitment* on the other hand may be seen as a process by which a political system generates interest, engagement and participation from citizens while *communication* describes a process by which a system promulgates its values and information. A variant of structural-functionalism based on the analysis of Gabriel Almond sees all political systems as comprising four major characteristics namely: that all political systems including the simplest ones have political structures; that the same functions are performed in “all political systems even if they may be performed with different frequencies and different structures; that both the political structures of the primitive and the modern societies are multifunctional no matter how specialized they are and; that all political systems are mixed in the cultural sense”<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup>. Almond, G. A. & Powell Jnr. B. G.(1966) *Comparative politics: A development approach*, Boston: Little Brown..

<sup>3</sup> Offiong, O. J. (1996) Systems theory and structural functionalism in political analysis. In A. O. Oronsaye, (Ed.) *Nigerian government and politics*, Benin City: United City Press.

As a political system in transition (as Nigeria,) moves from one state of equilibrium to another, the various political institutions or structures should be expected to bring about a required social change in their performance of the socialization, recruitment and communication functions. A social change according to Talcott Parsons occurs through four distinct and inevitable

processes namely: *differentiation* ( that is, the increase in the complexity of social organizations); *adaptive upgrading* (that is, social institutions becoming more specialized in their processes) *inclusion* ( where groups previously excluded from a society because of such factors as race, gender, social class etc are now accepted) and; *value generalization* (that is, the development of new values that tolerate and legitimate a greater range of activities) <sup>4</sup> . The application of democratic governance in Nigeria should therefore be seen from a structural-functional perspective as a desire to effect a required social change in our political development by the various democratic institutions performing their required functions in that respect. The Nigerian democracy therefore will be not meaningful, that is, not structurally functional, if it is not performing its required social functions (or yielding the expected dividends).

#### The Dividends of Nigerian Democracy and the Challenges

If any thing else, Nigerian democracy should be directed at fulfilling the nation's philosophical goals as expressed in the official document of its Second National Development Plan (1970-1974) namely: “ the creation of a free and democratic society; a just and egalitarian society; a united, strong and self reliant nation; a great and dynamic

<sup>4</sup> Kuper, A. (1988) *The invention of primitive society: Transformation of an illusion* , London: Routledge

economy and, a land of full and bright opportunities for all citizens” <sup>5</sup> .

Expectedly, Nigerian democracy should ensure the enthronement of a national consciousness, integrity and service. There should be strong desire to build one's own nation by its citizen rather than a plunge-it-down syndrome typical of much of our current dispensation. Democracy should provide equal opportunities to genuine service-minded individuals to express themselves in seeking political office through elections. Democracy should be a platform for the provision of political enlightenment for the teeming apathetic and economically-emasculated people of the countryside and metropolises. Democracy is expected to guarantee an un-biased allocation and application of naturally determined national economic resources for the benefit of the entire polity while providing relevant opportunities for component region or states to harness local potentials for healthy competitive development initiatives. Democracy should provide relevant safeguards against corruption and unauthorized acquisitions of national resources by individuals and groups who see themselves high above the corporate goals of the nation. Judicial safeguards in terms of regular prosecution and punishment should especially be adequately entrenched into such a political system. Democracy should provide relevant and adequate checks and balances between the three organs of government and as much as possible a freer press as *the fourth estate in the realm*. The phenomenon of wanton arrest, detention of journalists and the forceful closure of media-houses whenever they purvey any information acclaimed by political authorities

<sup>5</sup> Federal Republic of Nigeria, (1970) *Second National Development Plan 1970-1974*, Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information,, p. 32



as inimical to their existence (albeit the corporate existence of the nation) typical of our current democratic experiment will therefore require some policy refinement and for policymakers to demonstrate subtlety. Democracy should be expected to yield the above ascribed “dividends” to Nigeria through its practice over the years.

Alternatively, the Nigerian democracy has yielded few, if any, of the ascribed dividends to its citizens. The typical dividends however has remained the propagation of ethnic dominance in the appropriation of national resources through what Deutsch<sup>6</sup> describes as a *zero-sum game* approach in form of appointments to vital national and state positions, regional self determination through the *core vs. peripheral* perception of resource allocation<sup>7</sup>, , thus engendering a clamour for regional economic independence popularly called “resource control” by the oil bearing peoples of the Niger Delta.

Notwithstanding and on the positive side, democracy may have succeeded somewhat in sensitizing the citizens in appreciating the need for good governance among political office holders. There is a growing wave of *civic awareness* among people in Nigeria today than it had ever been. The increasing quest for probity and accountability and the adoption of due process principles (even with its default) may be regarded as a vital recipe for the re-branding of our local democratic culture and practice. But for the seeming inadequacies such as the area of official responsibility and accountability, and electoral malpractice, the Nigerian practice of democratic governance may have helped to

<sup>6</sup> Deutsch, M. (1973), *The resolution of conflicts: Constructive process*, New Haven: Yale,

<sup>7</sup> Noel, C. L. (1969), A theory of ethnic stratification: Social problems. *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 16.(2).

grow the nation's international image as a major regional power in the African sub-region. The United Nations has often called on Nigeria to lead its team in the execution of its major international (especially African regional) economic, social and military initiatives. Nigerian's growing involvement in regional peace keeping and other humanitarian missions and the African continent derives mainly from its recognition not only primarily as an economically-endowed nation, but also as a democratic entity with abundant hope. This perhaps may be adjudged as the most important dividend of the Nigeria's democracy so far. Much however is yet to be desired of this image as its electoral process undergoes reform. The impetus provided by Ghana and South Africa in their respective recent elections have further strengthened the national call for electoral reforms and political transparency. The relevance of such call is underscored by a growing optimism in the national populace about the possible workability of the democratic arrangement as a better alternative in governance after having been overwhelmed by military dictatorship (with it accompanying slow pace of economic development) for over two-thirds of its nationhood.

By a tacit recognition of the “ expected” and “ perceived” dividends of the Nigerian democracy, it becomes a little easier to identify some of the major challenges of the Nigerian democratic experience so far.

At the apex of the challenges is the issue of electoral reforms. The want of a credible independent electoral process has unfortunately created institutional safeguards for political parties (especially incumbents) to exploit the existing political machinery for their electoral advantages. The office of the president has most often exploited its advantage as the appointing institution to impact significantly on the activities of the successive electoral commissions in the country. The result is that electoral rigging have been institutionalized often with threats of arrests on credible opposition. In the 2007 state and federal elections particularly the former, this anomaly was not only typical of but also rampant.

Democratic government are expected to be less prone to corruptive tendencies since there are supposedly more institutional safeguards against them than the military regime. Unfortunately, the Nigerian democracy is yet to vindicate itself as a better alternative in this respect. Phenomenally, what may be regarded as some institutional arrangement created by government against corruption and other economic crimes though looked initially very impressive and praiseworthy during the moribund Obasanjo's civilian regime, were later overrun by the same political structure (particularly the executive and legislative arms) which had seen such an arrangement as an erosion of their political and economic ambitions. Thus, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practice Commission (ICPC) became after an initial euphoria, figments of their creator's imaginations. Corruption still remains a major challenge to Nigeria's democracy.

The ethnocentric clamour for economic self determinism, especially by the people of the Niger Delta has aroused a new awareness about the inevitability of good governance in the area of equitable distribution of natural resources especially in a plural society like Nigeria. The hydra-headed problem of the Niger Delta crisis is a logical aftermath of governments' inability to address the special environmental and economic needs of the Niger Delta peoples and symptomatic of the continuing absence of agreement on a workable revenue sharing formula after a trial of several sharing principles over the years. This phenomenon has created additional challenges for the attainment of the expected dividends of democracy.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The claim to the attainment of democratic dividends by political actors in Nigeria will remain as contestable in certain areas as there exist elements of political inadequacies in the three key theoretical areas of political socialization, recruitment, communication. By consolidating on its growing international image as a regional centre of hope, Nigerian policymakers should invest much energy on the institutional fight against corruption by allowing the relevant statutory agencies already created for this purpose to exercise their mandate without unnecessary executive intervention. The pursuit of electoral reform in an attempt to enthrone a great degree of (if not total) internal and external credibility in our public elections should be more vigorous and expeditious so that as early as 2011, fresh and enduring dividends in that aspect can be become visibly clear. Until democratic practice in Nigeria provides more functional evidence in terms of enhanced political participation, equitable and acceptable process of resource

allocation, credible electoral practice and a political culture of national integrity and transparency, it will remain sharply contestable to lay claim to the attainment of a meaningful dividend of democracy in Nigeria.

1