

# Popular struggles for democracy: civil society and democratisation in nigeria ass...



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Proposal TITLE OF PROPOSAL Popular struggles for Democracy: Civil Society  
and Democratisation in Nigeria CANDIDATE NAME Usman Alhaji Tar  
DEPARTMENT Peace Studies SUPERVISOR Dr Janet Bujra DECLARATION I  
certify that this essay is my own work and that it respects the ethical  
conventions of research and the due acknowledgement of the ideas and  
writings of others.

The essay is written in my own words except for direct quotations that are  
acknowledged in the References.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

GENESIS OF  
THE RESEARCH The oscillation between military authoritarianism and  
democratic rule has been one of the dominant features of many post-colonial  
states (Dare, 1989). In the context of Nigeria, years of military dictatorship  
have led to the struggle for its disengagement from the political domain  
leading to variety of transition-to-civil-rule programmes (Ihonvbere, 1996).  
The study of democratic transition in Nigeria became of particular interest  
since 1983 when numerous attempts at military disengagement could not  
yield the desired result (Mustapha, 1999: 227). One of the interesting topics  
of research that emerged from Nigeria's recent experience in military rule,  
especially after the cold war, is the role of domestic forces seeking to unseat  
dictatorship and install democratic rule (Ikelegbe, 2001a, 2001b,).

This research proposal owes its influence to two broad factors. The first  
factor has bearing with the theoretic incentive for further enquiry borne by  
my previous research and reading of the literature on the topic. I did my  
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masters degree research on democratisation and military disengagement in West Africa which revealed, among other things, that two causal factors - namely: internal and external- underpin the process of recent democratic transition in the region.

The former involve the rise of domestic forces seeking to establish democracy while the latter involve external input from the West seeking to “roll back the state”, that is, de-emphasise the central and counterproductive role of the state (Beckman, 1993) and strengthen domestic groups and non-governmental organisations all in an effort to facilitate “good governance” itself a means of meeting goals of development (Hearn, 1999).

Beyond identifying these causal factors in sweeping terms and subordinating the former to the latter, my earlier research could not explore in detail their causal dynamics. My subsequent reading of the literature underscores the fact that internal pressure for political and economic reform spearheaded by organised associational entities representing civil society in Africa constitute a major formidable force complementary to, if not independent from, the western agenda for democratisation (Beckman and Jega, 1995; Harrison, 2001; Barchiessi, 1996).

Conversely however, the literature often makes loose generalisations and there are a host of ideological and institutional values that surround the history and role of civil society in recent times (Howell and Pearce, 2000, 2001). These assumptions from the literature regarding the democratising potentials of the civil society are a research challenge that needs to be further explored. The second factor influencing the choice of this research is

associated with my experience in political and associational life in Nigeria, which constitutes the unit of analysis of this proposed study.

I have been involved as a participant observer over the years in Nigeria's transition to civil rule programmes while serving on electoral and related bodies. In 1987 and 1990, I served as a polling clerk and presiding officer for Local Government and Gubernatorial elections respectively and, in the controversial 1993 presidential election, I served as a volunteer for the then Nigerian Election Monitoring Group, a national election observer group founded by the government (not pro-democracy groups) to ensure "free and fair" elections.

What I observed from these experience between late 1980s and early 90s was that the political reform process in the country then involved little or no organised and purposive participation of domestic forces in charting the course of political change, which was part of the reason why after years of attempts at democratisation the military and its political allies could not manage the transition to successful conclusion.

As a participant observer, I was witness to the turn of events after the annulment of the June 12 1993 Presidential election by the then regime of General Babangida when a number of pro-democracy organisations emerged to upheld the verdicts of the elections calling for the withdrawal of the military from the political scene. Since then civil society has become not only a new arrival in the political space but also a force to reckon with in the nation's fragile transition (Ihonvbere, 1996).

My experience in political “ service” was matched by a no less eventful associational life initially as a Student Union member and leader (1991-1999) and eventually as a member of the Nigerian Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) when I took a teaching appointment at one of the Universities (2000- date). Both the Students’ and Academic Staff Unions were, and still are, at the forefront in the defence of democracy in the country (Beckman and Jega, 1995; Barchiesi, 1995; Mustapha, 1999).

The issue of getting rid of military dictatorship as a pre-condition for peaceful academic life has been one of the key item in the agenda of these two groups for a long period of time. In spite of intimidations and humiliations by successive military regimes, these associations stood firmly by the democratic cause alongside with other pro-democracy organisations like Campaign for Democracy (CD), National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), Constitutional Rights Project (CRP) and the Joint Action Committee for the Defence of Democracy (JACON) among others (Ihonvbere, 1995, 1996).

The enthronement of democracy since May 1999 in Nigeria is most importantly a manifestation of what Harrison (2001: 387) may term “ political struggles” from the part of these civil groups. The foregoing experience no doubt set the snowball to start a research project on the role of the civil society in Nigeria’s democratic reform. KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS This study seek to raise three key questions: Given the rise of domestic civic associations in protest for political change in many countries of the South in the Post-cold War era, what are the historical antecedents, causes and manifestations of this trend in the context of Nigeria? ??? In view of the general assumptions that tend to tie the rise and or strengthening of <https://assignbuster.com/popular-struggles-for-democracy-civil-society-and-democratisation-in-nigeria-assignment/>

civil society to western-inspired development issues, what, if any, are the specific domestic factors, independent from external influence, that may inform the rise of civil society as an emerging participants in Nigeria's recent experience in democratisation? What are the structures, functions, achievements, visions and limitations of civil society in Nigeria's search for democracy? EXISTING WORKS IN THE FIELD Replete body of literature abound on the meaning, evolution, and conceptual relevance of civil society generally and in the context of specific issues and cultures (Hearn 1999: 3; Howell and Pearce 2000, 2001). Generally, the problematic of civil society starts with the substance of its meaning and history (Hearn, 2001).

A reading of the literature may reveal such assumptions of the concept as the formation of associational life of citizens derived by common interest and identities, civil and public purposes, and collective and autonomous actions (Griddle 1996 in Ikelegbe, 2001b) or " that domain of voluntary, popular, public and social action of non-state actors that utilises social, cultural, political and ethnic networks and non-state activities, in pursuance of objectives which are usually of a public nature... [and which] includes the organisation of the professions, labour, youth, women, peasants, communal, social cultural, neighbourhood, development, environmental and civil right groups that build identities and platforms in respect of collective claims, civic actions and solutions" (Ikelegbe, 2001b: 439) or that space of organised groups pursuing diverse collective interests, existing outside of the state domain but within its territory, and acting as the bridge between the formal state and the household (Barkan et al, 1991).

These conceptualisations underpin a tip of the iceberg on the raging academic and policy debate and contradictions about the evolution of civil society (Howell and Pearce, 2000, 2001). This is why Riddell and Bebbington (1995: 23) rightly call civil society a “notoriously slippery concept”. Most perceptions of civil society emphasise urban based, formal, professional, advocacy and social engineering groups (Hearn, 1999: 4).

Attempts have been made to bridge the gap between a “narrow” and a functional and all-embracing category that is informed by culture-specific realities (Hearn 1999, 2001) especially, albeit not limited to, contexts like Africa (Bazara 1998, Oloka-Onyango and Barya, 1997 in Hearn 1999: 4; Osaghae, 1998) and Nigeria in particular (Abdullah, 1993; Barkan et al 1991; Beckman and Jega, 1995; Beckman, 1993; Ikelegbe, 2001a, 2001b).

Most of the foregoing studies are however heavily influenced by secondary data and their conclusions based on loose generalisation and assumptions that are not reinforced by concrete data from the field, especially those generated from “below”. As a phenomenon whose unit of analysis bothers on lower and middle strata of the societal hierarchy, the need to “go down” to generate primary data on studies about civil society cannot be over-emphasised.

Therefore, there is the need to use the resource provided by the lively debate about the concept of civil society, not in joining the bandwagon of debates, but in further building on country-specific case study. A study of civil society in Nigeria shall no doubt enable us unravel its meaning, history, mobilisation for democratic revolution as manifested by recent history of the

country. This is in line with the wise position of Harrison (2001: 397) that “ it is important that academics research forms of political struggle as they emerge with close eye on changing political conomy...[a] single country research will repay in this vein” Civil society and, by extension, its role in democratisation and development is relatively a new (or perhaps reviewed) phenomenon. It started attracting the interest of scholars and policy makers following the nascent place it has come to occupy in contemporary development discourse (Howell and Pearce, 2000, 2001). In their account of how the concept became one of the most fashionable “ buzzwords” that ebb and flow in the development discourse, Howell and Pearce (2001: 4? observe that: Since the late 1980s, multinational development agencies, international financial institutions and nongovernmental organisations, environmentalists, feminists, neoliberals, social democrats, and radical grassroots activists, have all, in their own and diverse ways, appropriated the language of civil society. Its appeals to such a wide institutional and political spectrum lies not least in the intellectual and political space it open up within a context where longstanding dualistic debates about state and market paths to economic development, reform or revolution have reached an impasse

In Africa the recent “ re-invention” of civil society cannot be divorced from the challenges and constraints that characterise “ state-centric” development models that dominate most part of the post-independence era. Following independence, especially in the 1970s and 80s, an unqualified trust in the capacity of the state in managing development and social change created a “ top-down approach” to political and economic life



expected to produce major changes in the living conditions of ordinary people by a “trickle down effect” (Marcussen, 1996: 405).

This prototypical “top-down” model derived its policy doctrine and value system from the institutional and ideological visions of foreign “development partners” especially the World Bank and international Monetary Fund. The post-independence political class acting “domestic managers” of this model used all means at their disposal, including authoritarianism and lack of domestic participation, in implementing it, a fact that was facilitated by the ideological politics of the cold war.

According to Landell-Mills (1992) After independence, both donors and many western educated African leaders acted as though they were convinced that development could be achieved by a systematic application of a rational modern techniques and concepts...little serious attention was given to the possible enhanced role of the indigenous institutions. The participation of the ordinary people in development was conceived as unidirectional top-down process: the leaders lead and the people were supposed to follow (Landell-Mills, 1992: 543).

The crisis of development in most part of Africa following the adoption of structural adjustment policies in the 1980s upward (Chazan et al, 1992) was to expose states to domestic protest and even its “witch-hunting” by donor agencies. On the one hand, there emerged the need by western donors to strengthen civil society as a means to open up the political space for greater participation, provide more checks to the state and nurture accountability, good governance and democracy.

On the other hand the state became a subject of what Beckman (1993) calls “roll-back” to create more space for participation as a result of the rise of domestic actors seeking participation in what used be exclusive domain of the few autocratic actors. The foregoing trends have unveiled, more than ever before, the need to closely review existing views on development, political change, political struggle etc in Africa. Kunz (1995: 181) is of the view that many academic and policy alternatives have emerged to address these issues. However the “springboard” influence of western ideas in this sphere cannot be doubted (Seligman, 1992: 5).

Indeed western ideas of civil society, like most other conventional concepts, serve as the basis to explore alternative understanding of its meaning, roles and scope as depicted by specific culture in Africa. Osaghae (1998), for instance, examine civil society as it applies to structural adjustment and national cohesion. Basing his study on a critique common western conceptions, especially as represented by the World Bank, Osaghae (1998) posit that the re-birth of civil society offers useful means to review the issues of economic development, conflict and political change.

Allen (1997) addresses the concept as a popular concept in both the analysis of the social basis of recent political change in Africa and external policy support for the process of liberal democratic political reform. Allen (1997) observe that civil society is treated as synonymous with a set of formal organisations and NGOs, mostly urban with working links to the west, as force per excellence for democratisation and antistatism. Allen (1997) stresses the need to apply the concept to capture class and gender

dimension, which is scarcely addressed in the western literature on civil society.

Monga (1995) offers a broad understanding of the contribution of civil society to political change in Francophone Africa. To him the statist approach focus attention on institutions and structures that tend to obscure the groundswell of new and yet barely understood social changes. Monga (1995) is of the view that existing domestic forces should be strengthened to expand the political space for wider participation that reinforces political change such as Africa is undergoing. Monga (1995) offers such suggestions as direct representation of civil society organisations in the parliament.

Harrison (2001) seeks to examine the enduring importance of political struggle, a forgotten concept which African domestic forces have reactivated in the era of democratisation. He therefore attempts to bridge the gap between political struggle as a “ forgotten” concept and its current renaissance in understanding contemporary African politics. Though the word civil society is mentioned once in the work (p. 396) its analytic value in the context civil mobilisation for democratic work cannot be doubted.

Harrison (2001) examine political struggle with emphasis on Mozambique suggesting further that a researchers need to conduct a single country study which to him reveal a great deal of culture-specific detail. One limitation with researches on civil society in Africa is that most of them concentrate on Africa as a whole; yet the “ domestic” nature of the concept demands more specific case studies that focus on individual countries and even specific

regions and groups within countries. Our review of the literature reveal that few studies are interested case studies.

Indeed comparative studies that attempt to lump and compare many countries seem to be more favourable than case studies. The works of Julie Hearn (1999) that focus on South Africa, Ghana and Uganda; Monga (1995) that examine Francophone Africa and Lemarchand (1992) that compares situations in Chad, Niger, Rwanda, and Cote d'Ivoire, among others, are examples of studies that focus on comparative approach. An exception to this trend is perhaps found in Nigeria where we found handful of studies conducted on civil society. Most of these studies deal with specific spheres of the role of civil society in democratic change.

Works in these areas include those of Abdullah (1993) on the gender context of democratic transition; Beckman and Jega (1995) and Jega, (1995) on the role of academics in democratic struggle; Shettima (1993) on students and democratic struggle; Ihonvbere (1996) on the rise of pro-democracy groups and their role in democratisation; Barchiesi (1996) on the labour and democratic struggle as well as Barkan et al (1991) on hometown associations and economic empowerment. It is our hope that these studies, most of which are based on secondary data, shall offer us with the resource for more “integrated” and “downward” original research.

**PROPOSED METHODOLOGY** The importance of making methodological statement in this study and indeed all research projects cannot be over-emphasised (May, 1996). For this study, we propose to use triangulation involving a combination of questionnaire administration, interviewing and

participant observation. Questionnaire shall first be distributed to selected civil society organisations in Lagos, Abuja and Kano. Their addresses are accessible from the country office of major donor agencies. The questionnaire shall be complemented by structured interview with individual members of civil society groups.

Participant observation shall be used as an opportunity tool e. g. participating in Civil society workshops, self-help projects etc Some ethical clarifications are important here (Kent, 2000). The ethnic diversity in Nigeria creates the problem of communication and identity. Being ethnic Hausa from the North conducting a research, it is possible that some “ apprehensive” respondents especially from the Southern part of the country may not give desired response. This possible “ bridge” shall be filled by “ acting as a Roman when one is in Rome”. As a lecturer, I have ome colleagues at Southern universities and former graduates of my Department resident in the region who shall do some public relations and research assistance works. As for Kano and Abuja, the tendency for reservation from prospective respondents is remote as both cities are located in the Northern part and any misfortune on the part of the researcher is not likely. There is also the issue of language and communication. In the Southern part of Nigeria comprising mainly of Yorubas and Igbos, a dialect of broken English called “ Pigin” shall be employed as a research language where conventional English could not yield dividend.

In the North the researcher shall use Hausa Language, which he is fluent in.

In all cases, it is necessary to clarify research mission and seek the consent

of the respondent for any information related to the research without any  
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form of duress (Kent, 2000). The researcher does not intend to use any form of monetary inducement as incentive. This is in line with anti-corruption campaign going on in the country. However all forms of courtesy as demanded by respondent's culture and tradition shall be observed (Kane, 2000). TIME-TABLE FOR RESEARCH

The research shall be divided into five phases. Phase one (October 2001-July 2002) covers the period of formal training in research methods and preliminary literature survey. Phase two (August 2002- January 2003) covers the period for formal transfer from M. Phil to PhD, extensive literature search and preparations for field work. Phase three (February 2003- August 2003) shall be for fieldwork in Nigeria. Phase four (September 2003- December 2003) shall be for data analysis and reflections including paper presentations in the Department and possibly external conferences.

Phase Five (January 2004-September 2004) shall be for writing-up and viva.

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