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Consolidation of Democracy and Good Governance in Nigeria: The Role of the Civil Society

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Introduction

It is axiomatic that the withdrawal of the military from governance in Nigeria and the subsequent enthronement of an American-style presidential democracy came about largely as a consequence of the agitations and efforts of civil society. Civil society, especially those groups that had an explicitly pro-democracy and pro-human rights focus, were at the forefront of the tortuous struggle for the removal of the military from the helm of state affairs.

It is the position of this chapter that the immediate aftermath, and even beyond, of the transition to democracy, which is commonly referred to as a learning period, is possibly the most crucial period in the whole transition experience. This is for the critical reason that the foundations for a lasting democracy and good governance are established with the process of consolidation which, in itself, is one that should commence in the immediate aftermath of transition from autocratic to democratic governance. With the establishment of political structures and institutions that define pro-forma democracy, the manifest role of pro-democracy civil society groups in Nigeria seemed to recede, although, civil society still has a central role to play in the cultivation of the necessary behavioural underpinnings of democracy and the overall cultivation of a democratic political culture which are pivotal necessities for democratic consolidation.

In undertaking an analysis of the role of civil society in democratic consolidation and good governance in Nigeria, this chapter is divided into six sections, the introduction being the first. The second and third sections will focus

on the defining characteristics of civil society, and an explication of the concept of democratic consolidation and governance. The fourth section will examine the problems and dilemma of Nigeria's young democratic project around which efforts towards consolidation will have to gravitate. The fifth section will focus on the roles of civil society in the process of consolidation which will entail an analysis of their weaknesses and strengths while the final section will be the conclusion.

Civil Society Organisations

As stated earlier, it is virtually impossible to provide any analysis of the struggle for democracy in Nigeria without a commentary about the vanguard role played by civil society. Indeed, the activism it displayed on the Nigerian political terrain came into conspicuous light under the authoritarian era of General Ibrahim Babangida and his convoluted transition programme that culminated in the annulment of the June 12 presidential election. The democratic transition of 1998 has been the outcome of protracted agitations on the part of civil society, which gathered momentum from the political injustice of the June 12 annulment, with pro-democracy and human rights civil society groups playing a leading role.

For the purposes of this chapter, therefore, a very broad definition of civil society has been adopted. This is primarily because a broad range of such organisations with a wide diversity of functions are in operation today. Essentially, civil society groups are not based on government, and the motives for their operation do not include profit making. The defining characteristics of civil society are useful in this respect. Civil society groups are:

i. Non-profit making, voluntary, service-oriented organisations either for the benefit of its members or of members of the society.
ii. Organisations of private individuals who believe in certain basic social principles and who structure their activities to bring about development to communities that they are serving.
iii. Organisations that assist in the empowerment of people (politically, socially and economically).
iv. An organisation or a group of people working independently of any external control with specific objectives and aims to fulfil tasks that are oriented to bring about desirable change in a given community or area or situation.
v. An organisation not affiliated to political parties and engaged in work for aid, development and welfare of the community.
vi. An organisation committed to the root causes of the problems, be they political, social, economic or environmental and trying to better the quality of life for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised.
vii. An organisation that is flexible and democratic and attempts to serve the people without profit for itself (Chalmers 1997:1-4; Maslyukista 1999:6 – 70.

Democratic Consolidation and Governance

A discussion of the role of civil society in the process of consolidating democracy would be lacking in focus without an elucidation of the meaning of democratic consolidation. While some scholars regard it as an illusory concept that fails to offer any new insight into the process of democratisation (O'Donnell 1996:34 – 51), others perceive democratic consolidation as being descriptive of an identifiable phase in the process of transition from authoritarian to democratic systems that is critical to the establishment of a stable, institutionalised and lasting democracy (Clinz and Stepan 1996:14 – 33). This chapter takes the latter position.

Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan argue that democratic consolidation can only be said to take place after a transition to democracy has taken place. They define a consolidated democracy as a political regime in which democracy, as a complex system of institutions, rules and patterned incentives and disincentives, has become, in a phrase, 'the only game in town' (Clinz and Stepan 1996:15).

The idea of perceiving democratic consolidation as being consonant with 'the only game in town' is itself predicated on a trifocal operationalisation comprising behavioural, attitudinal, and constitutional dimensions.

In behavioural terms, a democratic regime can be regarded as consolidated when no significant actor (national, social, political, economic, institutional) will attempt to achieve its objectives either through the creation of a non-democratic regime or by attempting to break off from the existing democratic community. In attitudinal terms, a democracy is consolidated when the overwhelming majority of public opinion is consistently supportive of democratic procedures, processes and institutions as being the only appropriate method of conducting governance and public affairs. In constitutional terms, a democracy can be said to be consolidated when government and non-governmental actors become subject and habituated to the resolution of conflict within the bounds of the specific laws, procedures, and institutions sanctioned by the new democratic process (Clinz and Stepan 1996:16).

Thus, in order to be regarded as being consolidated, a democracy must develop behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional dispositions and qualities that are completely supportive of the democratic way of life. The emphasis on human dispositions in the forms of attitude, behaviour and the willingness to uphold the dictates of the constitution, which is more or less coterminous with upholding the rule of law and the corresponding de-emphasis of the structural and institutional dimensions of democracy, highlights the centrality of the human factor in consolidating democracy. In other words, democratisation and the consolidation of democracy go beyond the elaborate formalities of fashioning constitutions and establishing institutions. As a process, democratic consolidation lays emphasis on the development and cultivation of the critical behavioural and attitudinal underpinnings that are necessary foundations for a viable democratic system.

> refers to that aspect of politics that aims to formulate and manage the rules of the political arena in which state and civil society actors operate and interact to make authoritative decisions. In more operational terms, governance refers to those measures that involve setting the rules for the exercise of power and setting conflicts over such rules. Such rules translate into constitutions, laws, customs, administrative regulations, and international agreements, all of which in one way or the other provide the framework for the formulation and implementation of policy decisions. The actors involved in governance may also be involved in other political arenas, be they in the state or in civil society (Hyden 1999:185).

However, a better grasp and understanding of the concept of democratic consolidation and governance is obtained when consideration is given to possible alternative scenarios. Andreas Schedler argues that the alternatives to the processes of completing transition, as well as deepening and consolidating democracy lie in the possibility of democratic breakdown and democratic erosion (Schedler 1998:95 – 98). The concept of democratic breakdown, one with which Nigerians are all too familiar, denotes dysfunctionality and failure of the democratic system leading to the supplanting of the system through a *coup d'état* or any other anti-democratic process that culminates in the establishment or restoration of an authoritarian system. Seen in this light, therefore, a major goal of democratic consolidation is to avoid a breakdown of democracy. An equally possible scenario is captured by the concept of democratic erosion. As the term suggests, this is a process that involves the slow and gradual decay and disintegration of democracy. Not being as sudden as a complete breakdown of democracy, it involves a gradual relapse to old authoritarian ways characterised by a steady re-emergence of anti-democratic forces, attitudes and behaviour. The danger of democratic erosion lies in the possibility of its growing and developing completely unnoticed and undetected. In their struggle to consolidate, young democracies such as Nigeria's, face this critical impediment. While it can be overcome if detected early, there is also every possibility that democratic erosion can eventually lead to a complete breakdown of democracy.

The Problems and Dilemma of Governance in Nigeria's Democracy

Any discussion about the prospects of democratic consolidation in Nigeria must be predicated on the problems and dilemmas that have arisen with the country's transition to democracy. The introduction of democracy has given vent to a litany of demands and agitations which have led to fears in some quarters that the system could be overwhelmed. Some of the major problems of the current democratic dispensation will be discussed in turn. The first problem area stems from the political institutions that constitute Nigeria's young democracy. The importance of political institutions cannot be overstated because they provide the structural foundations of a democracy and are central to the persistence

and stability of democracy. It is common knowledge that effective and properly functioning institutions structure behaviour in stable and predictable patterns, thereby reducing uncertainty over role functions; tend to perform well even under circumstances of economic adversity; will produce more workable and sound public policies; and as a consequence of the above, will go a long way to limit the likelihood of military incursion into governance.

The reality, however, is that after the withdrawal of the military in May 1999, Nigerians have been witnesses to protracted disputes between the executive and the legislature at the federal level and within a number of states. Disputes and quarrels have also become virtually permanent features of political life within the national and state legislatures and within each of the three political parties. Attempts were made on different occasions by federal legislature to impeach President Olusegun Obasanjo, while the twilight of his second term (2003-2007) witnessed a fierce political fight between President Obasanjo and his Vice-President, Atiku Abubakar all of which had deleterious effects on the process of governance. Observers, both local and international, began to question the character of a democracy that seemed to be in perpetual conflict with itself (Maiyaki 2006:3).

A second problem relates to the evolution of a democratic political culture. A democracy introduces freedoms and rights which were suppressed under authoritarian systems, and if the pursuit of these freedoms and rights are not to degenerate into extremism and violence, it is important to cultivate mechanisms to contain such tendencies. One of the most important means of supporting and sustaining the 'democratic way of life' is through the evolution of a democratic political culture. As was alluded to earlier, such a culture involves beliefs, values, behavioural and attitudinal dispositions held by both the elite and the masses that are supportive of democracy. Beliefs and values such as tolerance for opposing views, willingness to compromise and demonstrate moderation in political positions, among others, are critical to the consolidation and development of democracy. In a young democracy like Nigeria, it is all the more important that such values are upheld by the elite primarily because they have a role to play in providing an example for the rest of society to follow. On some critical national issues, however, members of Nigeria's political class still need to exhibit these values that are so critical to the consolidation of democracy and improving the process of governance. Issues such as the introduction of the Islamic legal code of the Sharia in 12 northern Nigerian states and the persisting demands for enhanced autonomy of southern states have fractured the political elite and by extension, polarised the polity (Nzeshi 2010:6; Ibrahim 2007).

The third problem revolves around socio-economic development which is undoubtedly one of the most powerful factors that enhances the prospects for a consolidated democracy and legitimises governance. Evidence has shown

that advancement in socio-economic development tends to strengthen belief in democracy which in turn helps to consolidate it. Socio-economic development leads to greater economic security and more widespread education, a lowering of socio-economic inequality and a reduction in feelings of deprivation and injustice on the part of the lower class as well as groups that may feel marginalised. This in turn will lead to a reduction in the high premium and stakes that politicians attach to the acquisition of government office as well as a movement away from extremist politics.

One of the consequences of prolonged military rule in Nigeria has been the virtual destruction of the Nigerian economy. Nigeria, today, is classified as one of the poorest nations in the world with the vast majority of its citizens living below the poverty level. As a result of this, democracy has been superimposed on a fragile economic base. Although one of the cardinal objectives of the successive administrations of Obasanjo and Yar Adua had been poverty alleviation, the welter of competing demands that the government had to cope with in addition to its obligation to service Nigeria's external debt has made this commitment a very difficult one. This situation was also equally compounded by endemic corruption in the system. These circumstances have not been helped by massive expenditure that have been incurred by legislators and elected government officials on fabulous salaries, unnecessary perquisites and frivolous purchases. Indeed, one of the expected dividends of democracy has been the yearning for an improvement in the socio-economic conditions of the ordinary man which, quite unfortunately, has failed to come about (World Bank 2010).

The fourth problem area is the persistence of corruption. The monumental heights to which corruption was carried by the military and the corrosive effects that it has had on the polity, economy and society is well known and does not need to be dwelt upon at any length. What is at issue is the persistence of corrupt practices on a large scale under the present democratic dispensation. Despite the professed intention of the Obasanjo administration to combat corruption and its initiation of an anti-corruption bill which was eventually passed into law by the legislature, the formation of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Offences Commission (ICPC), and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the fact that corruption and financial mismanagement still occurs at the apex of government was brought to light by the self-investigation that was undertaken by the Senate. Although the exercise was lauded by the public as an exercise in self-cleansing, a number of questions arose, not least of which was the punishment to be meted out to the erring members of the legislature. The cogency of this question is brought to light by the collective denial made by all the senators even after incriminating evidence against them had been unearthed. The demonstration effect of their actions for the rest of the Nigerian society and the seeming impunity of their escapades even when due consideration is given to

thestringency of the anti-corruption law which the legislators themselves passed was indicative of a gradual erosion of the rule of law which the legislators have sworn to uphold. Furthermore, the potential of the 'probe' to be used as a weapon of political vendetta is a regrettable twist that the exposure of corruption at the highest levels has taken (Ibrahim 2007:2 – 3; Fine 2007). Indeed, the nexus between Nigeria's electoral democracy and its critical corruption, as the impact on governance and development, cannot be overemphasised.

The final major problem area has been the maintenance of security and the management of internal conflicts. Democracy has been described as the best political mechanism for the management of conflicts. This is principally because, unlike authoritarian and centralised systems of government, democracy is broadly inclusive in theory; however the Nigerian experience up to 2007 leaves much to be desired. The principle of majoritarianism, which is upheld by democracy, ensures to a much greater degree than any other political system the involvement and participation of the plurality of individuals and groups in a given society. The equality of citizenship regardless of race, ethnicity, religion or language is upheld and protected by democracy. As a result of this, feelings of marginalisation and deprivation on the part of groups and individuals are expected to be reduced to a minimum.

Paradoxically however, the liberalisation of Nigeria's political space and the freedoms that have attended the establishment of democracy opened a Pandora's Box of conflicts that have provided appropriate cause for serious concern. Such conflicts have been occasioned by factors such as the introduction of Sharia law in parts of northern Nigeria; violent activities perpetrated by ethnic militia in various parts of the country; and vicious clashes occasioned by differences between indigenous and settler communities in the central Nigerian city of Jos, among others. These conflicts have occurred alongside earlier persistent and strident demands for a restructuring of the federation in order to provide greater autonomy for its component states (Oche 2004:74 – 90).

The above constitutes a major problem of governance that Nigeria's current democracy is faced with. They represent the primary impediments to the entrenchment of good governance and cultivation of behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional underpinnings that are required for democratic consolidation. What then can civil society do to help in improving this circumstance?

Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy and Good Governance in Nigeria

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the importance of civil society in the process can be gleaned from the role they played in the ferment that led to the eventual withdrawal of the military in 1999. Civil society engaged in agitations and protests that led to the eventual demise of military rule. A good number of

them had an explicitly pro-democracy and pro-human rights agenda (Schmitter 1991). This was in contrast to other groups, such as professional and religious bodies, that eventually joined the agitation for democracy but ordinarily pursued and advancedalternative interests. With the enthronement of democracy in 1999 and the formation of democratic institutions, pro-democracy groups, and civil society at large, seemed to have lapsed into suspended animation. Members of civil society that are still active seem to advance parochial interests that revolve around ethnic, religious and regional demands. The quest for the economic dividends of democracy and the pursuit of the national welfare seem to have been abandoned.

While the aftermath of the transition should attract concerted efforts towards the consolidation of Nigeria's hard-won democracy, this seems not to be the case as much of civil society is in pursuit of narrow agenda and the consolidation of democracy seems not to be in the consciousness, discourse or agenda of the politically attentive and active public. The dangers and possibility of democratic erosion, which may have already started, and breakdown seem to have been entirely discounted. The avaricious and self-serving disposition of Nigeria's political class has been made apparent within the past ten years. The quest by the various political parties at times of elections is more for the acquisition of political office and power that would facilitate financial accumulation than for the ultimate betterment of the average Nigerian. An observable feature of Nigerian political parties has been the absence of discourse anchored upon ideological leanings. The ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), contested the 2007 elections without a political manifesto that would commit them towards achieving specific objectives. It, therefore, leads to the question of the possible role that civil society can play in promoting good governance and consolidating Nigeria's democracy. In answering this question, a realistic assessment of the weaknesses and strengths of civil society must be made.

Weakness of the Civil Society

One of the main weaknesses of civil society lies in urban-rural dichotomy to the extent that most, if not all, pro-democracy civil society groups are based in urban areas. Even the urban areas that are home to pro-democracy civil society are situated largely in the southern parts of the country. Cities like Lagos, Ibadan and Port Harcourt were hotbeds of pro-democracy agitation in the years that led to the withdrawal of the military. The argument here is that for purposes of governance and democratic consolidation in a country with a predominantly rural population, the spread of the activities of civil society, in terms of a watchdog role and engendering active rural involvement in governance is circumscribed and limited to urban areas. The impact and effectiveness of representative institutions at the local government level, for instance, is not an issue that should be ignored by civil society. While issues

regarding corruption at the state and federal levels are given publicity, corruption at the local level goes unheralded and uninvestigated to a very large extent. Thus, the prospects of illegal financial accumulation provide a powerful incentive for corrupt politicians to seek office at the local government level.

The second weakness lies in the divisions that have occurred among the ranks of civil society immediately after the withdrawal of the military. The coalitions of human rights and pro-democracy civil society such as the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) and the Joint Action Committee on Nigeria (JACON) have shown that they are not immune to the ethnic, religious, social divisions and biases that affect the wider society. The latter group, JACON, split up almost immediately after the transition. However, what one cannot be sure of is the overall impact of this split on their subsequent objectives. The undemocratic organisational structures, which a number of civil society groups possess, is the third problem. Severely afflicted by funding and other resource constraints, a number of civil society organisations became simply a 'one-man show' or 'Portfolio NGOs' with authoritarian decision-making processes revolving around one individual, and expenditure of funds also restricted to individual diktat. These factors restrict the growth and structural differentiation of these groups as well as their ultimate ability to become institutionalised, entrenched and effectively contribute to the consolidation of democracy and good governance.

A fourth problem area is the inadequacy of funding for most civil society groups. In fact, most civil society organisations have serious financial problems. Many of them lack the financial capacity to give life to their fervent organisational objectives. Some are constrained by lack of decent office abodes as well as equipment for their work. The ability to monitor the country's politics or even play an effective monitoring role during elections is seriously limited unless they are supported by external funding. The donor community in a country like Nigeria is quite small and efforts by civil society to raise funds locally are usually met with limited success. The result has been an ever increasing dependence on foreign donor agencies by CSOs, leaving them vulnerable and restricted to the implementation of agenda established by the donors.[15] The problem of dependence on foreign donors is itself tied to the broader and more fundamental problem of economic development, if any at all, and a weak private sector that is still ultimately dependent upon government for contracts and business. If civil society is to remain autonomous of government, then their resource base within the country, severely circumscribed by a weak private sector, which compels civil society to continue depending on foreign donors, must be expanded.

Lastly, a major weakness of civil society derives from the gender-imbalance displayed by a number of civil society groups. There is a dearth of women in professional positions in pro-democracy and human rights organisations as well as those that are specifically focused upon women's issues. If good governance and

democratic consolidation are all about cultivating the attitudinal and behavioural dispositions that are supportive of democracy, then the exclusion of women from civil society activities would really amount to losing focus from the very beginning.

Although these weaknesses exist, they really should not forestall these civil society groups from playing an active and effective role in consolidating democracy and promoting the pattern of governance that would be beneficial to the plurality of Nigerians. The fact that they were central to the initial, and presumably more difficult, task of compelling the withdrawal of the military presupposes their value and utility in consolidating the system that has already been established. To this end, human rights and pro-democracy civil society possess a number of strengths and advantages (Mwmakumbe 1998:314 – 316). First, civil society provides an independent means of monitoring the activities of government and ensuring the accountability of elected officials. This is a very important role for civil society in Nigeria to play especially in view of the direction that elected officials are already taking at various levels of government. Side by side with the media, the civil society can play the role of impartial, independent and non-committed watchdogs of the activities of government and help reduce corrupt tendencies which have become characteristic of the post-1999 era.

Second, the activities of civil society help to stimulate the interests of the citizenry at large in politics and also to promote their involvement. To this end, they supplement the functions of political parties. Their activities in this regard can only help to promote proper governance and consolidate democracy if the proper messages are communicated to the public by the civil society. Communications that promote the rule of law and help to build attributes that are supportive of democracy are very important.

Third, a vigorous community of civil society is especially well placed to help in the long-term cultivation of a democratic political culture (Oyebode 2009:3). The importance of such a culture towards consolidating democracy and ensuring proper governance has already been mentioned but cannot be over-emphasised. The culture of authoritarianism that attended years of praetorian rule still pervades the Nigerian society and polity. The overt attempt by Obasanjo at tenure elongation during his second term in office was a carryover of this culture.[17]

Any attempt to strengthen the attitudinal and behavioural bases of democracy must address the problem of the hangover of praetorianism. As an attitudinal disposition that is borne out of a militaristic culture, praetorianism directly militates against the nurture and growth of a democratic political culture.

Fourth, civil society groups, side by side with the academia, are adequately suited for carrying out research into problem areas of Nigeria's nascent democracy. Such research and their findings could be documented and disseminated to members of the public as well as the government. Lastly, an active community of civil

society groups could help to enhance the representative function of democracy by providing outlets for the expression of diverse views, opinions and interests. It is very important however, that such expressed interests should be constructively critical and not subversive of the democratic project as a whole. Indeed, the entire democratic enterprise would be meaningless if the interests and views that are purveyed by civil society eventually result in the destruction of the system which they so arduously fought for.

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing that what Nigeria has experienced so far is nothing more than a transition from military to civil governance in democratic guise. The style of governance being displayed by elected functionaries of the federal and state governments, the persistent face-off between the legislature and the executive, the use of the processes of probes and impeachments, the recrudescence of religious, ethnic and factional conflicts, the pervasiveness of corruption, all denominated by further downturns in the economic fortunes of the country provide very strong suggestions that Nigeria was really not yet on the track of good governance or consolidation of democracy. One explanation for this was that the leading lights and groups that were at the forefront of the struggle are, today, not in power. Most of those in power now are yesterday's military apologists for whom democracy is no more than a strategy of winning and retaining power, and not fundamentally for public service. Indeed, the experiences of Nigeria in the present circumstances may be better captured by the concept of democratic erosion in several areas, denoting the slow and gradual decay of democracy, rather than democratic consolidation and the entrenchment of good governance. This was indeed, the case up to 2007, when the country's democratic process picked up with the fairly satisfactory conduct of the 2011 elections, and the goodwill this brought to the country.

In the face of this perceptibly uninspiring scenario, civil society has an important role to play in consolidating a hard-won democracy. Civil society can play a more pro-active role in propagating what Peter Ekeh refers to as 'the republican principle' which simply means that the state belongs to its citizens (Maslyukivsta 1995:8-10; Diamond, Linz and Seymour 1995:27; Ekeh 1998). The arrogant perception, widely held by elected officials and politicians, that the powers and institutions of state are now theirs to use for purposes of primitive accumulation, rather than held in public trust, should be the focus of unrelenting attack. Civil society should communicate and cultivate values and attitudes that can help to support and consolidate Nigeria's democracy. A major plank in this endeavour should be a focus on upholding the rule of law as the administration of the late President Umaru Yar' Adua emphasised. This will facilitate a movement towards a strong state and a strong civil society.

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