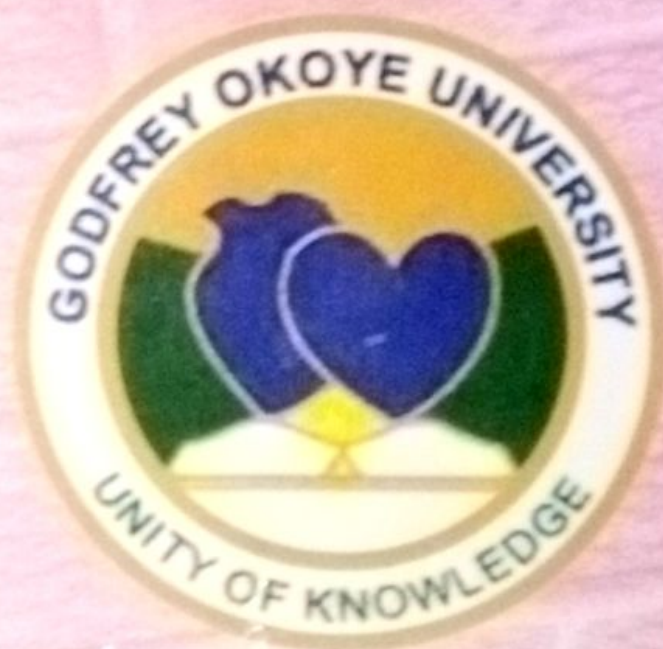


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NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY IN POST COVID 19: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This paper is an appraisal of the practice of democracy in Nigeria with specific reference to post covid-19 situation. Democracy today, is a universal phenomenon following contemporary globalization agenda. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) did not hesitate to emphasize the universal acceptance of democracy as a form of government. Nigeria embraced this global quest in 1999. By December 2019, the world was engulfed by the outbreak of a pandemic known as covid-19. The emergence of the virus logically set aside old ways of doing things and recommended new measures for human adaptability. For the fact that the practice of democracy is akin to human existence today, it becomes imperative to re-examine its practice in Nigeria amidst the post covid-19. To executive the study therefore, the data were generated mainly from the secondly sources. The study was guided by Diamond's Democratic theory that emphasizes the fundamentals of democracy. From the findings, it was observed that the practice of democracy in the post covid-19 requires a

relatively new dimension aside the existing norms. The paper therefore, recommended the institutionalization of electronic voting so as to match the covid-19 rules.

Keywords: Democracy; Covid-19; Globalization; Millennium Development Goals;

Introduction

Democracy which was invented as back as 422 BC by Cleon (Mahajan, 1988), has become a contemporary global phenomenon. In the impulse of the ancient philosopher, democracy is seen thus: "that shall be democratic which shall be of the people, by the people". This assertion was developed and expanded by a onetime president of United States - Abraham Lincoln. According to him, democracy is government of the people, by the people and for the people (Ifedi, 2020).

The above thought would take us to consider the categorization of democracy into the "ideal and actual". The ideal democracy fundamentally, rests on the model of modern representative democracies, hence, the features of ideal democracy to the extent that they exist, are realized through a variety of political institutions. The institutions which are broadly similar in different nation-states despite their significant differences in constitutional provision, were entirely new in human history at the time of their first emergence in Europe and the United States in the 18th century. Among the leading institutions is the representative system. Through this, all major government decisions and policies are made by popularly elected officials (representatives) who are

accountable to the electorate for their actions.

The actual democracies on the other hand, attempt to reflect critically those features that appear to address sufficiently a relatively high level of democracy, though, such features are almost certainly not adequate to achieve anything like perfect or ideal democracy. This is in tandem with the idea of ancient philosophers since the era of Aristotle that no actual political system merits to attain to the fullest extent possible all the features of its corresponding ideal. However, such institutions may produce a satisfactory approximation of the ideal "as obtained in Athens in the 5th century BC, when the term democracy was coined, and in the United States in the early 19th century, when Tocqueville, like most others in America and elsewhere, unhesitatingly called the country a democratic state" (Dahl, 1967).

For communities that are small in population and area (nations), the political institution of direct democracy seem best to approximate the ideal of a "government by the people" whether in the ideal or actual democracies. In such a democracy, all matters of importance to the people as a whole can be decided by the citizens. They can meet at a convenient place like the Pnyx in Athens, the Forum in Rome, the Palazzo Ducale in Venice, or the Town Hall in a New England village, to discuss the policies and programmes of the government. Such practice is most of the time subjected to voting where the view of the majority holds sway.

The present status of democracy became popularized by the globalization agenda, hence, it became one of the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Nigeria embraced this global quest in 1999. By December 2019, the entire world was engulfed with a virus called Corona. This virus is characterized by severe acute respiratory syndrome 2 (SARS-COV-2). The virus causes Corona Virus disease 19 (Covid-19). The new Corona Virus has spread rapidly across the globe. By March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic (a pandemic occurs when a disease that people are not immune to spread across large region with its attendant consequences). These consequences brought to stand still all socio-economic activities that aid human existence.

To cope with the situation, certain rules and guidelines have been laid down for man to observe, with a view to surviving the Covid-19 experience. The practice of democracy as a universal phenomenon today, amidst the Covid-19 situation demands extra-conventional approach. The question then is: how would democracy be practiced in Nigeria in the face of the contemporary pandemic – Covid-19? Thus, paper set out to explore the better ways to practice democracy in Nigeria in the face of the pandemic.

Extant Literature

In a study of this nature, the examination of relevant literature is imperative. The essence is to ascertain the extent to which the question has been addressed with a view to justifying the exercise. Providing an insight into the spread of democracy, Diamond (1997) surveyed the development of modern democracy across the globe. For instance, the scholar demonstrated that in the middle of 1970s, there were only some forty (40) democracies in the world and these were mainly the rich industrialized states of the

west. Buttressing further, he argued that in the 1980s, the trend began to change especially, in Central and South America as democracy was restored in such countries like Turkey in 1983 and Philippines in 1986. Insightful as the work appears, Nigeria was excluded from the survey because of military government in the country at time of the publication.

Writing on democracy in Nigeria especially, in the Second Republic, Joseph (1991) a celebrated democratic theorist attributed the fall of the republic to what he described as "prebendalism" or the "spoils system". Notable among the elements are: issues of the patronage system and high-level corruption. Relevant as the work is to Nigeria democracy, facts about the fourth Republic especially in post covid-19 were not captured.

Describing the Nigerian nascent democracy of 1999, Joseph (2000, P.106) referred to it as "a post-authoritarian system". His inspiration emanated from the work of Professor Lucian Pye of MIT. According to Joseph, the former predicted in his address to American Political Science Association that most of the political systems emerging from the transitions from authoritarian rule, with the ending of the Cold War, were likely to be hybrid entities: Part-free and part-unfree. Commenting on the development, Joseph noted that, most students of democratization consider the overwhelming majority of African states today to be semi-democratic or semi-authoritarian in nature. A useful notion, he noted, is that many of them are liberalized autocracies. Joseph's analysis is apposite as far as the current wave of democracy in Nigeria and Africa in general is concerned but he never envisaged an outbreak of the pandemic like Covid-19 and its effects on democracy.

In his popular work on "the Concept of Constitutional Democracy", Nwabueze(2001) demonstrated extensively the distinction between constitutional democracy and democratic government. According to him, with the exception of countries which at independence became socialist states (Algeria, Angola and Mozambique) or adopted socialist oriented constitutions (Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and Sao Tome and Principe), all African countries previously under colonial rule attained independent statehood under a system of constitutional democracy of one type or another. On the distinction, the scholar observed that:

democratic government is a separate concept, and is not a necessary constituent element of constitutional government. It is, after all, a development of the 19th and 20th centuries (that is democratic government of the representative type, as distinct from the direct democracy of the ancient Greek City-state and Rome), whereas constitutional government had its origins in antiquity, more specifically in the republican era in Rome (508-27 BC) (Nwabueze, 2001 P.12).

Witful as Nwabueze's posture is, the scenario of Nigerian modern democracy from 1999 till date and the experience of covid-19 were not addressed. In view of the above hiatus, this paper sets out to remedy the lacuna.

Modern Theory of Democracy

The internationalization of the practice of democracy today is guided by the emergence of modern postulations. Suck

work finds favour with the writings of democratic purists like Larry Diamond. In his popular work – “The Spirit of Democracy”, Diamond engaged a diachronic and synchronic comparism to justify his passion for the universalization of democracy as the best form of government needed in modern world. In the process, he took up the task of studying America’s bungled effort to bring democracy to Iraq. “The Spirit of Democracy” takes on the world, with Diamond leaping from Malawi and Singapore to Venezuela. He examined countries that broke down after the post - 1974 “third wave” of democracy and are yet to recover, not only obvious examples like corruption-ridden Nigeria, but also Nepal, Thailand and the Solomon Island. He evaluated what he referred to as “the pathology of personal rule” in Africa, along with the role of monarchy, populism and Islam in the Middle East.

By the mid-1990s, the author declared: “it had become clear to me, as it had to many of my colleagues involved in the global struggle for democracy, that if some three-fifths of the world’s states (many of them poor and non-western) could become democracies, there was no intrinsic reason why the rest of the world could not do as well” (Diamond, 2008 P.103).

He proceeded to underscore the struggle for democracy when he exposed the various waves that demand democratization across the globe. For instance, there were Marxist and Nationalist insurgencies in Asia and Africa. The then Haile Selassie was soon to fall in Ethiopia, which, Diamond notes would leave almost all of Sub-Saharan Africa under military or one-party rule. There was repressive military rule in Latin America, including Chile, where the military had over thrown the democratically elected

Allende government. Totalitarianism had the Soviet Union and the Eastern European satellite states in a vise-like grip. Elsewhere, havoc prevailed. The Khmer Rouge, says Diamond, would soon take over in Cambodia and ultimately be responsible for the death of an estimated one to two million people (out of a total population of seven million). In the Arab world, only Lebanon was a democracy.

Drawing inference from the survey, the scholar asserted that the fate of democracy was not driven by historical events or even structural forces but by the passion and zeal of individual people built on struggle, strategy, ingenuity, vision and courage. In his impulse: “places where democracy worked took genuine commitment, talent, nerve and the obvious passion for freedom - politics in the best sense of the word” (Diamond, 2008 P.116). Democracy in its entirety may be said to be a luxury, but it is not a question of wealth. Rather, it all comes down to the energy and commitment of people, hence, Diamond dedicated the famous book to the three icons of modern democracy -- Gandhi of India, Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar (Burma).

The relevance of the theory to the Study is that the nascent Nigeria democracy of 1999 was induced by the spirit of democracy that sets up its waves across the globe. Going by the development of democracy and the outbreak of Covid-19, it can be deduced that the pandemic impacts on the conduct of democracy in Nigeria.

Methodology

The data were generated mainly from secondary sources. Secondary sources are particularly useful where information is already documented in official records.

These include: books, journals, articles, conference /seminar papers, magazines/newspapers, printed materials from the existing policy documents of international organizations and non-government organizations as well as internet sources. Ex-post-facto research design was adopted. To analyses the data generated, qualitative descriptive analysis was engaged.

NIGERIA DEMOCRACY IN PRE-COVID-19 ERA

Following the demand of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) that emphasized the democratization of every nation-state, Nigeria in response joined the global trend in May 29, 1999. This marked her third outing in the democratic experience. The country's first experience was her attainment of sovereignty in 1960 by way of political independence. The second experience was in 1979-1983, after 13 years of military rule. These democratic experiences were tagged first, second and third republics.

In the first republic, Nigeria adopted the British prototype known as Westminster model. Here, the parliamentary system of government was in vogue. In the model, the members of the parliament equally constitute the executive arm of the government, headed of course by a Prime Minister who must come from the political party that controls the majority in the parliament (the legislative body).

In the second and third republics, Nigeria embraced the United States model known as the presidential democracy. In this model, the executive arm of government quite distinct from the legislative arm of government. The executive is headed by an elected president who in turn appoints the

members of his cabinet known as the ministers. The ministers before their conferment must get the approval of the legislative arm. The legislative body on the other hand reflects the democratic principle of representative model resembling therefore, modern representative democracy. The Nigerian legislative body especially, in 1999 dispensation till date is known as the National Assembly and just as the first and second republics, it is composed of two chambers – the upper chambers known as the Senate and the lower chambers known as the House of Representatives. In the senate, each state is represented by three senators while the federal capital territory is represented by one senator. This implies that the membership composition of Nigerian senate is 109 senators. In the House of Representatives, Nigeria is divided into 360 federal constituencies where each federal constituency elects one member of House of Representatives. This stands to show that the total number of members of the House of Representatives is 360.

The implication is that the National Assembly is made up of 469 members. For the fact that in representative democracy as obtained in ancient Athens, Rome, Venice and New England village where their representatives meet to discuss the policies and programmes of the government as it affects the people, in Pnyx, the Forum, Palazzo Ducale and the Town Hall, the 469 Nigerian legislators meet in the Red and Green Chambers representing the senate and the House of Representatives respectively, to discuss the affairs of over 2 million Nigerians.

Nigeria's Democracy in Post Covid-19 Era

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Nigeria's Democracy in Post Covid-19 Era

killed some three thousand people, mainly in New York City and Washington, DC" (Dahl 2006: P.41). In response to such attack, democratic government adopted various measures to enhance the ability of the police and other law enforcement agencies to protect their countries against terrorism. Some of the initiatives entail new restrictions on the citizens' civil and political liberties. Such restrictions are essentially inconsistent with the tenets of democracy.

3. International Systems: the emergence of international organizations like United Nations after the Second World War has increasingly posed challenges to democracy through the shifting of ultimate control of a country's policies in certain areas to the international level. They reduce to a corresponding extent the influence that citizens could exert on such policies through democratic means. Secondly, all international organizations, even those that were formally accountable to national governments, lacked the political institutions of representative democracy. For instance, the membership composition of the Security Council of the UNO which is the apex organ of the body does not in any way reflect democratic aspiration as the five permanent members of the Council has remained unchanged with veto power since its inception in 1945. This is incongruent to the democratic aspiration paraded by the United Nations today.

Covid-19 and Nigeria's Socio-economic and Political Challenges

The Corona Virus pandemic struck the world and spread like wild fire across the length and breadth of the globe. The virus originated from Wuhan, China at the end of 2019. By February 27, 2020, Nigeria recorded her first case. The index case was

confirmed by the Virology Laboratory of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital. No sooner the index case was confirmed than the spread of the disease across Nigeria, with Lagos state as the epicentre of the pandemic.

Following the horrific and deadly nature of the disease, the Nigerian government and its different agencies, especially the Presidential Task Force (PTF) and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), put several health, economic, security and social responses on ground to contain the disease and its impact on the society. One major response was the "government funded ₦500 billion covid-19 crises intervention fund and enhanced support to states for critical health care expense" (Nigeria Health watch, June 2, 2020).

The NCDC on the prescription of the World Health Organization (WHO) came up with certain policy guidelines for the management and control of the disease. Among the guidelines are: social/physical distancing; wearing of face masks; regular washing of hands; use of hand sanitizers; and restriction of public gathering. Subsequently, "most African states like Nigeria have implemented measures to encourage social distancing, focusing on boarder and travel restrictions, school closures and bans on large gathering" (OECD, 2020 P.2).

In view of the above policy guidelines and the recommendation of the PTF that is charged with the responsibility of advising the presidency on specific decisions like imposing and easing lockdowns, the Federal Government responded by taking certain actions. These actions range from the shutting of boarder and imposition of lockdowns to banning of inter-state travels

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and the closing of offices, clubs and services considered being non-essential.

The outbreak of the disease and the attendant guidelines for its management and control undoubtedly created some negative socio-economic and political impacts on Nigeria. Aside the looming health shock of the pandemic, Covid-19 has disastrous impacts on the country's already strained systems that are hugely characterized by dilapidated and non-functional institutions. Beyond the health risks, the impacts of Covid-19 could be identified in four dimensions:

1. **Immediate Term:** lower trade and investment from China.
2. **Medium Term:** demand contractions as a result of the global lockdown in European Union and OECD countries.
3. **Acontinental supply shock** affecting domestic and intra-African trade.
4. **Democracy:** The policy guidelines for the Management of Covid-19 as earlier indicated are structurally unconstitutional and therefore, a breach of fundamental human right. So long as Covid-19 persists in the society, the policy guidelines must continue to be applied. The implication is that they will affect the practice of democracy especially, the lock down, social distancing and ban on public gathering. Such challenges will add to other existing problems that have been confronting democracy.

Prospects of Nigeria Democratic Practices in Post Covid-19

The emergence of the deadly virus was a serious embarrassment to human race in the

21st century. However, the consequences of the virus seemingly opened new vistas that if properly galvanized by the Nigerian government would go a long way in improving the society and democratic practices. The area of life that needs urgent attention from the experience of covid-19 could be summarized as follows:

i. The Health Sector: the outbreak of the pandemic exposed clearly the deficiency of the Nigerian health institution. Apart from the fact that the invention of the vaccine has been very difficult not only for the developing countries but also for the giant States of the global society, the Nigerian situation can be said to be worse. On this development, the capacity to test, protect, treat, and cure are essential else, the legitimacy of the government would be questioned.

ii. Socio-Economic Front: Covid-19 demonstrated the urgent need for the adoption of policy measures that would cushion the effect of income and jobs losses for the welfare of the Citizenry. The welfare of the people underscores a major function of the state often times referred to as low politics. Beyond the immediate response, the Nigerian government must strive to see that the recovery strategies reflect a strong structural component to reduce dependency on external financial flows and global market.

iii. Electoral Management: the pandemic has shown that the old socio-political practice not only in Nigeria but across the globe are becoming obsolete because of the approved measures for containing the virus. This implies, that the Nigerian electoral umpire must have to key into the modern technique of electoral management so as to take Nigeria democracy to the minimum

required standard acceptable by the international community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, the extent to which Nigeria democracy can be organized in the post covid-19 era has been demonstrated. It has also been shown here, that the internationalization of democracy was aided by its spirit. The spirit germinated the seed for its global spread. Again, it was observed that the outbreak of corona virus did not only impose threat to human life but also posed fundamental challenges to the practice of democracy. To sustain the practice of this form of government in post covid-19 era, therefore, the following are recommended:

1. The Institutionalization of Electronic Voting: The NCDC rule for the management and control of covid-19 has brought a new order in ways of doing things across the globe. As such, the old system of using ballot paper have been overtaken by events. So, the use of computer system vis-à-vis the electronic voting system has become imperative for democratic practices. The essence is to prevent the spread of the virus and also provide a leeway for Nigeria to key into the modern best practice of democracy accepted globally.

2. Staggered Election: The old fashion of organizing national elections like the presidential and National Assembly in a single day is no longer in vogue. National elections should be scheduled to last at least a month, so as to enable the electorates vote at their convenience and to prevent the lockdown of micro and macroeconomic activities. Nigeria should learn from the advanced clans like United States where national election is staggered. Such arrangement will address the problem of

over-crowding thereby yielding to the demand for social and physical distancing.

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