



## Democratic Governance and the Poverty Question in Nigeria

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### Abstract

It is indeed hard denying the fact that African states, including Nigeria are deeply fraught with the challenge of democratic governance on the one hand, and economic backwardness which manifests in low real incomes, poor health prospects, infrastructure breakdown, and widespread poverty on the other.

Democratic governance in Nigeria particularly in terms of style is not too different from military authoritarianism. The desire for power is ferocious and total and particularly lacking in genuine and purposeful leadership that can impact meaningfully on the lives of the citizens. The result is the unbridle accumulation of capital by the ruling elites, and the consequent grinding poverty in the land. The objective of the study is to interrogate how to entrench quality governance as a means of reducing poverty. The work relies heavily on secondary source of information gathering.

### Introduction

Nigeria is one of the most blessed countries in the world. The human and material resources available in terms of potentialities can be said to be unparallel in Africa. There is vast and fertile land, massive deposit of mineral, abundant water resources.

It is trite to mention that, albeit, the country has witnessed a prolonged military dictatorship which had alienated the citizenry from popular participation, yet the return to democratic governance for well over a decade has not substantially improve the living conditions of the people. Of course, Nigeria is considered as one of the twenty poorest countries in the world (Okonjo-Iweala, 2003:9).

Successive governments in Nigeria have voted enormous percentage of the yearly budgets to government agencies with the aim of impacting meaningfully on the wellbeing of the people. The macroeconomic indicators might be in the positive. In actual fact, there is rising unemployment, under-employment, economic stagnation, inflation, high cost of living, and widespread poverty.

The fundamental challenge in this study is that the Nigerians state is yet to come to terms with how democratic governance can create the necessary environment for the people to realize their potentials.

The objective of this study is to examine the forces that undermine quality governance in Nigeria and how these have affected the quality of lives of the people. To accomplish this, the study is organized into five parts; part one provides conceptual ad clarification of governance, democratic governance and poverty. Part two discusses background to the Nigeria's economic crisis; part three delineates the forces inhibiting quality governance. Part four interrogates the imperative of democratic governance for poverty reduction. The final part is the conclusion.

### Conceptual Clarifications

#### The Concept of Governance

The concept of governance is not in any way new. It is commonly used in contemporary political and academic discourse. It is a generic concept. In some analysis, governance is no more than a loosely conceived intuitive and tangible idea (Jerome, 2004: 206). The World Bank (1992) defines governance as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development. This definition merely focuses attention on the economic and social perspective, thus making it restrictive. It is the use of political authority and exercise of control over a society and the management of its resources for social and economic development (Landell-Mills and Seregeldin, 1991). This is far more embracing as it represents many dimensions in terms of authority, decision making and other institutional arrangements that are involved.

#### The Meaning of Democratic Governance

Democracy according to Dahl (1989) describes three essential conditions for democracy to function. These include:

- i. High level of civil liberties;
- ii. political pluralism (extensive competition by contestants, including individuals, groups or parties for government) and,
- iii. political participation that provides the choice for the electorate to select candidates in free and fair elections.

It goes to say that this definition places premium on competition and political participation capable of engendering the choice of candidates among alternatives.

Democratic governance implies the art of governing people in line with the tenets of democracy. This concept has also been popularized as "good governance" by International Financial Institutes, the World Bank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF) by which they refer to the exercise of political power to the exercise of political power to promote the public good or the welfare of the people (Quoted in Babawale, 2007:47).

It is trite to state that democratic governance is the exercise of political power in accordance with democratic norms, values, and tenets to improve the living conditions and the general well being of the people.

## Poverty

Poverty is a living condition in which an entity is faced with economic, social, political, cultural, and environment deprivation (Ajakaye, and Olamola, 1999:13). It refers to the inability to cater adequately for the basic needs of life like food, clothing, and shelter.

## Background to the Nigeria's Economic Crisis

Prior to the discovery of oil, agriculture was the main stay of Nigeria's economy. Export earnings relied heavily on agriculture- cocoa, coffee, groundnut, cotton etc. however, the discovery of oil gave rise to expansion in economic activities. This ultimately created the impression of a virile, buoyant, and solid economic foundation for Nigeria. This impression was dashed in the early 1980<sup>s</sup> following the sudden collapse of the world market price of oil. For instance, the fall in the country's oil earnings from a peak of about 10 billion dollars in 1979 to about 5 billion dollars in 1982 at a time when Nigeria's monthly inputs averaged one billion dollars, led to a major crisis in the economy (Babawale, 2007:19). The result was the mass retrenchment both in the public and in private sectors of the economy. The lack of transparency and accountability by public officials as is evident in corruption further aggravates the comatose economy. Undoubtedly, corruption has become the norm and to a large extent permeated all levels of government. Inflation of government contracts, management, and misappropriation has become the order of the day. The worrisome increase in the conduct of government businesses was clearly captured by Caccia (1993:82) as he poignantly remarks that:

*Not only does theft go on in the state apparatus, but the state is itself the main apparatus of theft. In Nigeria, not only do officials steal, but stealing is official. It is the very principle of Nigerian class rule and subservience to the west.*

In truth, Nigeria belongs to the category of countries endowed with vast mineral deposits. However the absence of quality governance and corruption explains the rising squalor, penury, and grinding poverty that tirades the land. Many observers see Nigeria once the 'giant of Africa' now economically bankrupt as a result of the way the leadership had mishandled the economy. The way forward is breaking bondage trauma of bad governance and mismanagement, anti-social attitudes, endemic corruption (Ajibewa, 2006:261). The widespread corruption and abysmal failure of public officials to use state resources to improve the well-being of the citizenry among others, earned Nigeria a visible space among poor countries of the World.

## Forces inhibiting Good Governance in Nigeria

The nature and character of the Nigerian state has continued to undermine quality governance. Politics is no longer about compromise and negotiation. It is not about resolution of conflicts. Rather, the political class perceives politics as the shortest and unrestricted access to wealth and all the good things of life. According to Ake (2001:6):

*Political power was everything; it was not only the access to wealth but also the means to security and the only guarantor of general well being. For anyone outside the hegemonic faction of the political elite, it was generally futile to harbour any illusions of becoming wealthy by entrepreneurial activity or to even take personal safety for granted. For anyone who was part of the ruling faction, entrepreneurial activity was unnecessary, for one could appropriate surplus with less risk and less trouble by means of state power.*

Relatedly, politics in Nigeria has turned out to be a means of mindlessly appropriating the resources of the state to serve one's interest. This explains Nigerian leadership ferocious pursuit of political domination and their engrossment with survival as against development (Oni, 2006:75). Consequently, competition for power is not only fierce but deadly. The result is that, personal aggrandizement, greed, selfishness, and obsession with wealth is visible in the style of governance of the elites while the realization of the objectives of national goal and meeting the people is secondary.

In spite of the claim to good governance by successive governments in Nigeria, the situation on ground is a far cry from this. Of course there is a nexus between quality governance and improved wellbeing of the people. Paradoxically, inspite of the abundant human and maternal resources Nigeria is blessed with, there is wide spread grinding poverty as well as decrepit infrastructural facilities. Deriving from this is the nature of the environment of governance in the country. The ecology of governance in the country is driven by what has been generally referred to as the Nigerian factor (Agagu, 10:43). This factor has a debilitating effect on national ethics and national goals. Little surprise is the general feelings among the people that Nigeria is a country where anything goes. Without mincing words, some of the fundamental principles and indices of good governance which include; transparency, accountability etc. The dire unfavourable political environment in Nigeria cannot engender transparency. This is often more so because of the desire of the leadership to utilize state power and resources to promote primordial interest.

Undoubtedly, the Nigerian state has indeed fallen deeply into the corruption trap. It has infested the private sector, weakens existing public institutions, and permeated every segment of the Nigerian society. The lack of the political will and zeal to fight corruption by successive governments make corruption to persist and thrive in Nigeria. With corruption, the dividend of democracy such as good roads, portable water, steady electricity supply and improved condition of living cannot be delivered. The penchant corruption in the society promotes a base of rights, undue manipulation of public data and figures, pilfering which to a large extent impacts negatively on the people.

The zeal with which politicians in Nigeria seek for public offices is not translated to service and goal attainment. Be that as it may, there is the urgent need to redefine politics and leadership. This is because of the non-commitment to efficient and effective implementation of government policies and programmes. The poverty of ideology and the unguided ambition of the ruling class are some of the myriad of factors that debilitate quality governance in Nigeria.

## Imperative of Democratic Governance for Poverty reduction in Nigeria

This aspect of the study attempts an elucidation of the necessity of democratic governance in the realization of poverty reduction. It is important to note that democratic governance, good governance, and poverty reduction are mutually reinforcing. This is because the goal of poverty reduction cannot be adequately realized when there is bad governance or when quality governance is lacking.

Engendering democratic governance for poverty reduction can only be feasible when democracy is enriched in such a manner that people must be able to make a choice through voting. In other words, the votes of the people must necessarily count. Beyond this, the imperative of democratic governance is the cultivation of people's awareness and participation in the constitution and operation of government (Aminu, 1992:22). Democracy demands that all citizens should be aware of and participate actively in the way they are being governed. However, the common man on the street in Nigeria is only involved only when election is around the corner. This is to create the impression that he is 'involved' in the process and to provide legitimacy. As soon as elections are over, no one cares again. Little wonder that there is always the general lack of commitment by public officials in introducing programmes and policies that would have direct impact on the lives of the citizens.

Democratic governance as a means of achieving poverty reduction must of necessity start with the provision of congenial political environment capable of entrenching the much needed democratic values, ethics, and ideals. For instance, free press, freedom of movement, freedom of association, popular participation, accountability, and transparency, rule of law etc. must prevail. Regrettably, Nigeria's democracy has peculiar character which is characterized by political violence, tension and the use of state power to appropriate state resources. In truth, it is the manifestation of these unique characteristics and the absence of conducive socio-economic conditions that have been hampering the tendering and nurturing of democratic governance on the one hand and the realization of the goals of reducing poverty in Nigeria on the other.

## Public Accountability and Poverty Reduction

It is germane to state that public accountability is one of the basic principles of good governance. Democracy must therefore, serve to guarantee accountability in governance. It therefore goes to say that public will must necessarily override private or self-interests. The thinking of the mass of the people is that public officials must explain their actions or inactions and whatever decision taken must seek to improve the well-being of the people. This conforms with the position of a former Nigerian Minister of Information, Jerry Gana, in the Olusegun Obasanjo civilian administration, as he enthused that:

*You know the mentality of our people. If democracy does not produce clean water, if democracy does not produce good roads, transform agriculture, cultivate industrial development, sanitize society, give us power supply, democracy will love credibility and they may say, 'na democracy we go chop?'* (Quoted in Ojo, 2006: ii)

From the foregoing, democratic processes must necessarily yield economic returns. In other words, democratic governance must seek to reduce poverty, reduce inequality, enhance social justice, and promote quality of lives of the citizens.

Furthermore, good governance requires a high degree of transparency in the conduct of government business. Transparency demands that governments must be open, consult broadly with all strata of the society to ascertain acceptability or otherwise of a given policy. Transparency is about the provision of information, which has to be objective, complete, relevant, easy to find, and easy to understand (Caddy, 2001:2). When government's decision is open to criticism and scrutiny and there is tolerance, then one is talking about transparency. A public debate about public policy gives ample room for accountability in terms of formulating and executing public policies. Such policies are not shrewded in secrecy in order to carry along the citizens. In addition, it allows the people to bear in the short and long run the sacrifices to be made and the price that needs to be paid for meeting the goals of poverty reduction.

It needs to be mentioned that if poverty must reduce through quality governance, there must be effective allocation and utilization of available resources. This must also be reinforced by ensuring consistency in policy formulation and implementation.

The return of democratic governance witnessed the introduction of a number of poverty alleviation programmes. For instance, there was the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) specifically designed to provide job opportunities. In 2001, it was phased out and the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) was established for a wide range of human opportunities. The blue print of NAPEP has the following features:

- i. Adopts participatory bottom up approach in programme implementation and monitoring.
- ii. Provides for rational framework which lays emphasis on appropriate and sustainable institutional arrangement.
- iii. Provides for proactive and affirmative actions deliberately targeted at women, youths, farmers, and the disabled.
- iv. Provides for inter-ministerial and inter-agency cooperation.
- v. Provides for the participation of all registered political parties, traditional rulers, and the communities.
- vi. Provides for technology acquisition and development particularly for agriculture and industry.
- vii. Provides for capacity building for existing skills acquisition and training centres.
- viii. Provides for the provision of agriculture and industrial extension services to rural areas.
- ix. Provides for institutional development for marketing of agricultural and industrial products and
- x. Provides for integrated schemes for youth empowerment, development of infrastructures, provision of social welfare services, and exploitation of natural resources (Quoted in Ijaiya, and Mobolaji, 2004:242).

Albeit, large resources had been invested on the programme, perturbing, limited success was recorded due to inefficient utilization of resources.

## Conclusion

Attempt has been made in this study to highlight the self-reinforcing characteristics of democratic and good governance and the necessity of good governance for reducing poverty. While it is acknowledged that the crave for quality governance as a way of engendering economic prosperity is sacrosanct particularly in the third world countries, the abject penury that is ravaging the country is worrisome.

Concerted efforts at navigating the country out of economic backwardness have yielded little results. The paper therefore delineates the forces stultifying good governance such as the nature of the Nigerian state, corruption, and crass capital accumulation by the ruling elite, as their goal for seeking power.

Finally, the study examines the imperatives of democratic governance such as transparency and openness in governance, accountability as panacea for poverty reduction in Nigeria.

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