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DEMOCRACY AND SOCIOECONOMIC IMPROVEMENTS IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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Abstract
Following Nigeria's transition from authoritarian rule to democracy on May 29 1999, optimism that democratic governance would usher in political stability, socioeconomic progress, and improved living standards for citizens surged. This paper, relying on policy reports, secondary sources, and scholarly literature, critically interrogate the extent to which the restoration of democracy has delivered improvements in Nigeria. It deploys a qualitative approach based on modernization theory and democratic theory to assess democratic dividends along various dimensions of civil liberties, institutional growth, political participation, quality of governance, human capital development, socioeconomic progress, and national security. The findings indicate that democracy has expanded spaces for political pluralism, freedom of expression, and institutional reforms in the electoral system. Notwithstanding the seeming successes, recurring challenges like endemic corruption, rising poverty, insecurity, weak institutions, and elite capture have constrained democracy's transformative capabilities. The paper concludes that though democracy has offered considerable opportunities for governance and development, democratic dividends remain elusive, uneven and hampered. It recommends the strengthening of democratic institutions, promoting inclusive governance, and tackling socio-economic imbalances headlong to guarantee that democracy translates into sustainable improvements for the Nigerian citizenry.

Keywords: democracy, political participation, improvements, institutional development, weak institutions

Introduction
Since the end of the second World War in 1945 and the subsequent ascendancy of the United States as a global hegemon, there have been a sustained efforts to promote liberal democracy as the most suitable organizing framework for the comity of sovereign nations. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s was to further cement the pre-eminence of democracy worldwide (Diamond, 2019). Therefore, with the third democratisation wave spreading in many parts of the developing world, military regimes across the continent came under intense international pressure to democratise.
Democracy is characterized by the tenets of popular sovereignty, transparency, rule of law, accountability, and respect for human dignity and fundamental human rights (Baba, 2019).

In the Nigerian context, a country with a chequered history of British colonial occupation, post-independence stalemates and entrenched military interregnums, the restoration to democracy in 1999 marked a defining watershed in its political trajectory. Given the dehumanising and horrendous atrocities supervised by the military, Nigerians expected that democracy would not only mark a new dawn of economic prosperity, but that it would serve as a veritable platform for national progress, economic development, and the enthronement of unity and peace.

Unfortunately, 26 years since the Fourth Republic got underway, the optimism that permeated in 1999 has been a mixed grill of few achievements and litany of disappointments. Unlike under the draconian military reign that stifle participation in the political process, civil liberties have significantly expanded, with greater participation culminating in the opening of the political space. In spite the new wave of freedom, insecurity, poverty, corruption, and deleterious effects of bad governance still reign supreme, on a scale never seen before (Musa, Ibietan and Deinde-Adedeji, 2020). This paradox inspires a fundamental research question: To what extent has democracy usher socioeconomic improvements in Nigeria?

The paper has the under listed objectives:

1. To interrogate the democratic gains realised in Nigeria.

2. To evaluate the challenges hobbling democracy's efficiency in improving governance

3. To suggest policy recommendations for providing democratic dividends in Nigeria.

Two theoretical frameworks undergird this intervention. First is the democratic theory, grounded in the works of Robert Dahl and Larry Diamond. The theory postulates that democracy guarantees accountability, transparency, protection of rights, and representation. The theory also contends that democracy promotes institutional checks and balances, legitimacy, electoral participation, culminating in good governance and sustainable development.

In the same vein, modernization theory as propounded by Seymour Martin Lipset, aver that democracy and sustainable development are mutually reinforcing. The theory postulates that while democratic governance has the innate capabilities to foster conditions necessary for socioeconomic development, increasing levels of education, commensurate income, and social mobilization strengthen democracy. Without a doubt, Nigeria is a treasure trove of test case for aforementioned theoretical assumptions.

Literature Review

Democracy and Development in Africa

A preponderance of scholarly works posited that democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa has significantly expanded since the democratisation wave resurged in the 1990s, nevertheless outcomes vary. In the contention of Abdulrasheed (2021) and Gyimah-Boadi (2015), many African democracies are permeated with weak governing institutions, official corruption, and strangulating multidimensional poverty, which stifle democratic consolidation.

Nigeria's Democratic Experience

Obriki (2022) and Agbaje and Adejumobi (2006) posited that democratic practice in Nigeria has been predominantly elite-driven, hampering popular participation. Clearly, the Nigeria political elites are the fundamental problem of Nigeria's nascent democracy. While they leave in unbelievable affluence, the vast majority are left to wallow. However, Adenuga (2024) and Akinboye (2016) identified gains of democracy as freedom of expression, right to protest, media pluralism, and enhanced political participation. Still, Ibrahim and Egwu (2015) sounded a tone of caution that electoral misdemeanors, corruption, and general insecurity have hobbled the delivery of Nigeria's democratic dividends.

Numerous empirical studies also report mixed outcomes (Demarest, 2020, Murana, 2021, Mohammed, 2019 and Emeribe, Adaranijo and Ibileye, 2025). For example, while Nigeria democracy has witnessed periods of significant economic growth during the years of oil boom in the aftermath of democratic restoration, still poverty and social and economic inequality surged. In the same vein, while democratic pillars like the judiciary and the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) have seen significant growth, quality of governance have declined to the extent that electorate are losing confidence in the democratic process.

Methodology

This paper relied on a qualitative and conceptual approach. It relies on secondary data sourced from government publications, policy reports, news magazines, scholarly journals, and global development agencies namely, the Freedom House reports, Mo Ibrahim Governance Indicators, World Bank Indicators, and Transparency International rankings. The analysis spanned the following four dimensions vital to democratic dividends: political participation and civil liberties, institutional development and quality of governance, socioeconomic progress and human capital development, and national security.

Findings and Discussion

1. Political Participation and Civil Liberties

As adumbrated earlier, the increasing expansion of political participation and civil liberties have been a visible and enduring dividend of democracy in Nigeria (Emeribe, Adaranijo and Ibileye, 2025). Under military despotism, the rights of Nigeria to participate was completely obliterated. Hounding, state-sponsored terrorism, assassination, and all manners of repressive acts loomed large on the horizon while the military held sway. In that dispensation, many prominent Nigerians fled into forced exile to continue the onslaught against the military. Many that had the courage to stay back and confront the excesses of the military establishment came under relentless assault. In addition, media outfits that had the audacity to publish news items considered subversive were shut down, and had their newsprints confiscated. However, with the advent of democratic rule, Nigerians now bask in the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Today, the proliferation of new media sparked by the digital revolution and civil society groups has further expanded democratic discourse. Besides, democratic consolidation has been enhanced as the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) in May 2015, the first time in the political annals of Nigeria, defeated President Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), thus putting an end to the sixteen-year grip at the commanding height of state power. The historic defeat of PDP by the opposition party and historic transfer of state power not only cemented Nigeria's nascent democracy, it attracted global applause from western countries that had stereotyped Nigeria as incapable of achieving such democratic feat.

Nevertheless, Nigeria's democracy remains imperfect as political participation is stifled by the widespread phenomena of voter suppression, vote-buying, voter apathy, electoral violence, and other antidemocratic malpractices. Unsurprisingly, voter participation has worsened as turnouts have plummeted from 69 percent in the 2003 Presidential election to under 35 percent in the 2019 electoral confrontation (Adenuga, 2020; INEC, 2020; Umukoro, 2012). Exacerbating the phenomena is the glaring failures of the ruling elites to deliver on good governance. Rather than promoting good governance anchored on openness, accountability, transparency and consensus building, the ruling class has weaponised poverty, ethnicity, religion and other shenanigans to maintain their vice grip on state power.

2. Institutional Development and Quality of Governance

There is no gainsaying it that Nigeria has come a long way since democracy returned in 1999. One area where the democratic tentacles can be noticed is in the area of institutional development. Nigeria's democracy was plagued by an array of teething challenges at the formative stages in 1999.However, the enthronement of democracy has ensured the strengthening of some critical state institutions. For instance, the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), the body saddled with the responsibility of registering political parties and conducting elections introduced the smart card readers and Biometric Voter Registration (BVAS) in the quest to improve the credibility of electoral outcomes. That is not to say that Nigeria's electoral process is devoid of flaws, but coming from a background of past elections constrained by blatant rigging, ballot box stuffing and ballot snatching, the introduction of BVAS led to a reduction in such shameful practices, anathema to democratic principles.

In the same vein, the democratic dispensation has witnessed the growing independence and supremacy of the judiciary in electoral matters. Unlike under the military where use of decrees, fiats and ouster clauses were the in-thing, democracy has ensured that the judiciary play its constitutional laws interpreting role. Regardless, speculations are rife that the judiciary have been hijacked by the powerful and the plutocrats, in what many called state capture. To the critics of the judiciary, the justices only serve judgments and not justice.

Another area where institutional development has been most noticeable is the continued centrality of the National Assembly, as the institution widely regarded as the symbol of democracy provides the needed platform for electoral representation and oversight. Since 1999, the National Assembly comprising of the Senate with a membership strength of 109 and the House of Representatives with 369 membership has been severely plagued by allegations of entrenched corruption, and constituting a drain on the national purse, given the humongous salaries and other perks of office.

Given the stark reality facing Nigeria today, it would not be hyperbolic to conclude that governance quality is abysmally weak. For decades, Nigeria's ranking by reputable global and continental organizations on indicators of perception of corruption, inclusive governance, rule of law, government efficiency and effectiveness has been dismal. It is disturbing that despite the proliferation of democratic institutions and other antigraft agencies, such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), to rein in executive recklessness and the widespread misuse of the resources remain.

Socioeconomic Progress and Human Capital Development

Despite the widespread despondency occasioned by chronic deficit leadership at all levels of the Nigerian society, there are some success stories made possible by democracy. It would therefore amount to intellectual dishonesty not to state the socioeconomic progress experienced since the advent of democratic rule. To this end, let us take a dive into some of the significant progress democracy sparked. First, the liberalization of the Global System for Mobile Telecommunications (GSM) in 2001, emerged as a game-changer as it signalled significant transformation to communication sector. The GSM revolution led to a considerable surge in job opportunities as millions now eke a living in the ever-increasing telecom sector. It is sobering to note that barely 400,000 Nigerians had access to telephone lines prior to the GSM revolution. At the era before GSM, phones were a status symbol that only the nouveau riche can afford. It was because of this perception that a former Communication Minister under the military stated that

telephones were not for the proletariat. However, more than two decades after the GSM revolution made foray into the Nigerian space, more than 70 million Nigerians now have smartphones.

In addition, with the pariah status of Nigeria due to hitherto military occupation set aside, foreign direct investments flowed into the oil and gas, banking and other service sectors. In essence, companies that were not favourably disposed to risking their investments in Nigeria had a change of mind due to the embrace of democracy.

Sadly, from all indications, the human development indicators in Nigeria remains disappointing. In spite her vast resources and arable land to boot, Nigeria is second only to India on the league of impoverished people. Before India overtook us, for a long time, Nigeria was derided as the poverty capital of the planet given that more than 133 million Nigerians are categorized as multidimensionally poor. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in 2022 reported that over 40 percent of Nigerians were below the poverty line. Being a youthful nation with over 60 percent of her population below 30 years, youth unemployment and graduate underemployment remain crucial debilitating scourge. Apparently, democracy is yet to translate into significant socioeconomic improvements for the teeming masses wallowing in abject squalor and deprivations.

National Security and Stability

For many critical observers of the sociopolitical and economic trends in Africa's most populous Black nation, Nigeria is a paradox. In one breath, plenty resources capable of leapfrogging the country into paradise on earth exist in her bowel, yet the vast majority of her people live in poverty. In another curious breath, the state of insecurity in Nigeria.

rose sharply with the advent of democracy. The coincidence in the upsurge of insecurity has been a source of considerable concern. For example, years of marginalisation and neglect of the south south region gave rise to the legitimate demand for resource control. The Niger Delta frontier, the goose that lay the golden egg, given her vast crude oil deposits exploded in militancy with the bombing of oil installations and kidnapping of oil workers. These series of incessant attacks declined to foreign earnings. To stem the tide, a general amnesty programme was launched by the Musa Y'aradua administration to assuage the aggrieved region. Perhaps taken a cue from the unrest in the Niger Delta, the Islamists in the Northeast region took Boko Haram insurgency and banditry into a new height. Unending bloodletting and attacks on symbols of Nigeria statehood came under intense strain. In essence, serial onslaughts on military formations and civilian population became a national pastime. From the middle belt came the frequent farmer-herder conflicts that impacted food security. Following the relentless war against the Nigerian state, state of emergencies was declared in some northern states. Unfortunately, while democracy is imbued with the mechanisms to resolve inevitable conflicts, pervasive faltering governance capability has ensured that the climate of insecurity fester, thus undermining national cohesion.

Challenges Constraining Democracy's Impact

Pervasive corruption and elite capture

There is a near consensus that corruption and elite capture are at the core of the issues undermining democratic institutions in Nigeria (Demarest, 2020; Murana, 2021). There should be no question that the Nigerian elites are the fundamental problem stifling Nigeria's development. They are so adept in manipulating the system for personal gain. Aside cornering the common patrimony to live a life of opulence at the expense of the masses, they have perfected the dispense of patronage to control the masses.

For instance, having deployed poverty to strip the populace of their dignity, they dole out paltry sums and gifts to buy their votes during elections. Beyond that, they have used similar patronage system to compromise critical democratic institutions that they now operate them according to their whims and caprices.

2. Weak Institutions

Closely linked to the institutionalisation of corruption and elite capture is the fact that successive administrations have done much to weaken democratic institutions, and done little to strengthen them, therefore enforcement of probity, transparency and accountability mechanisms remain largely inadequate (Adenuga, 2024; Demarest, 2020;). In the aftermath of the 2003 general elections, the then President, using trusted aides, made covert efforts to tinker with the constitution to enable him have tenure elongation. Huge sacks of funds were displayed by members of the national assembly to accomplish the audacious travesty against the 1999 grundnorm. Another indication of the pervasive weakened institutions is the unprofessional manner the antigraft agencies have been repeatedly deployed by the incumbent against perceived political opponents. Cases abound of the EFCC not going after known supporters of their principal with serious corruption allegations. Unexpectedly, the proclivity of the anti corruption bodies to engage in selective prosecution of corruption bodies have undermined the corruption war in Nigeria. It is for this reason that many Nigerian politicians port to the ruling party in their quest to escape punishments for their infractions.

Economic Inequality

It has been a constant refrain for pundits to lament voter apathy after almost every election cycle in Nigeria. There is no need to look further than to implicate the widening inequality between the rich and the poor as responsible for the growing disinterest in democratic participation. It bears emphasizing that with the weaponisation of poverty, electorate are not motivated to participate in democratic governance. In Nigeria, it is mostly the political elites and their cronies that enjoy the dividends of democracy. Virtually all the institutions of the society have collapsed. From the educational and health institutions where the brain drain syndrome is the new order, to the civil service, many have been reduced to subhumans due to the implementation of a raft of neoliberal policies that has decimated the livelihoods of millions. How the governing elites expect impoverished electorate to participate in democratic governance is no-brainer.

Insecurity

The climate of insecurity in Nigeria is alarming. Spate of killings and bloodletting have been on the rise. Virtually no place is safe in Nigeria as the merchants of violence have been unleashing mayhem in unprecedented manners. Millions have become homeless and many now stay in internally displaced camps. Insecurity have heightened food insecurity as many farmers can no longer go to farm. Besides, it has increased the out-of-school figures. While this unending violence, no doubt, threatens Nigeria's political stability, it also ensures that citizen's confidence in the democratic experiment wanes.

Electoral Malpractices

Another big elephant stultifying Nigeria's democratic trajectory is the prevalence of antidemocratic malpractices such as rigging, falsifying of election figures, and judicial manipulation. It is for this reason that millions appear to lose interest in elections since they believed that their votes will not count. Clearly, the prevalence of antidemocratic practices has undermined electoral legitimacy. It is also for this factor that many have concluded that Nigeria's democracy is in decline, and thus would require a reversal.

Recommendations

Need to strengthen democratic institutions

This can be achieved by enhancing the total autonomy and capacity of the judiciary, INEC and anti-graft bodies. Moreso, the president must be stripped of the constitutional powers to appoint the helmsman at INEC.

2. Inclusive Governance

Promotion of pro-poor policies that mitigate the widening inequality and increase opportunities for disadvantaged communities and groups

3. Electoral Reforms

Institutionalizing electronic voting and meting stiffer sanctions for electoral wrongdoings.

4. Combating Insecurity

Reforming the security architecture to enhance intelligence-gathering, and promotion of community-based policing and conflict resolutions.

5. Promoting Openness and Accountability

Without an accountable and transparent government and corresponding monitoring of governmental policies by the CSOs in place, democratic governance would remain a farce.

Conclusion

While democracy in Nigeria has achieved vital improvements, especially in promoting civil liberties, political participation and institutional growth, the gains have not translated into substantial socioeconomic progress, human capital development, or national security. Democratic dividends remain shackled by weak governance, elite corruption, widening inequality, and widespread insecurity. Therefore, democratic institutions must be strengthened, deepen accountability deepened, and structural socioeconomic problems tackled for Nigeria democracy to usher in sustainable improvements.

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