



DEMOCRATIZING THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM AS A BASIS FOR THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Local governments exert tremendous impact and influence on the general life pattern of people in Nigeria particularly, in the rural areas where no less than 75-80% of the Nigerian population resides. More than a passing interest in the effective and efficient operation of the machinery of local government in the country is therefore demanded of whoever is concerned about the general welfare and progress of the Nigerian people and society. It is on this consideration that the paper examines the democratization of the local government system as a basis for the socio-economic and political development of the country. The paper relied on secondary sources of data collection and adopted Democratic-Participatory theory as its framework of analysis. The study found that the democratization of the local government system would guarantee local government autonomy as well as people's participation in their own development. These are critical factors that would ensure that people's standards of living are qualitatively enhanced through the institutionalization of democratic culture and good governance at the grassroots level. Accordingly, the paper recommended the immediate and urgent democratization of the local government system in Nigeria to foster rapid socio-economic and political development of the country.

Keywords: Local government, Democratization, Development, Autonomy, participation

Introduction

The history of Nigeria's democratization began at independence with the adoption of democratic institutions modeled on the British Westminster parliamentary system. This was later jettisoned in favor of the American presidential system, which Nigeria adopted in 1979 (Odo, 2019). Democracy is viewed as government by the people with full and direct participation of the people in making decisions, which affect them. Democracy has come to command such popular appeal in the world today due to its associated good governance. Indeed, democracy and good governance are the most successful political ideas of the 21st century. However, democracy in Nigeria is going through difficult times as viable democratic institutions such as credible electoral system; independent judiciary; rule of law; popular participation; among others are yet to take root in the country in the face of such flaws like massive corruption in every facet of the country's public life, impunity, gross indiscipline, general insecurity, etc. (Odo, 2019).

These flaws in the system have become worryingly visible giving rise to disillusion with politics. The ability of the democratic system to transform the lives of the people is dependent on its provision of adequate mechanism for the smooth conduct of elections that culminate in the transfer of power from one regime to another. This is an area, which Nigeria is still not performing to expectations. The lack of credible elections has resulted in the erosion of political legitimacy on the part of public office holders. For instance; the 2003, 2007 and 2015 as well as the most recent 2019 general elections in Nigeria were all marred by brazen electoral frauds. Where democracy is devoid of credible elections, good governance is negated and the sovereignty of the people is relegated to the background if not completely denied.

Majority of the people then become subservient to the whims and caprices of the political actors who are shielded from any litigation by the obnoxious immunity clause. Thus, the people are not only disenchanted and disillusioned with the way and manner the government is toying with the public affairs but also lost hope in the leadership of the country at all levels of government. Achebe (2004) decried the situation thus: "I am disappointed with Nigeria... Nigeria is a country that doesn't work". In a true democracy, the will of the people is the basis of the authority of government. Nigeria operates a nominal democracy in which it maintained the outward appearance of democracy through periodic elections but without the rights and institutions that are equally important aspects of a functional democratic system. Democracy begets good governance and the duo forms the bases for legitimacy, social mobilization and development because of their responsiveness to the yearnings and aspirations of the people. Good governance translates into the provision of basic infrastructures, access to medical and health-care services, educational, industrial and agricultural development of the society; and above all the institutionalization of the rule of law.

The quest for democracy and good governance particularly, the democratization of the Nigerian local government system has been a major pre-occupation of the Nigerian state since independence. This underscored the series of reforms in the local government system starting with the native authority system through local authority down to the present system occasioned by the 1976 local government reforms. The 1976 local government reform has been described as the watershed of all efforts towards the democratization of the local government system in Nigeria. However, this noble objective has remained elusive due to many challenges, which have continued to undermine the democratization process in the country. These challenges include failure of leadership, corruption, insurgency and terrorism, banditry, lack of political will, impunity, lack of proper vision, lack of transparency and accountability in governance amongst others.

Conceptual Clarifications

Local Government

The history of local government in Nigeria has been one episode of trial and error, of attempts to reconcile participation of people in their own administration with the needs for an efficient delivery of essential services. Deriving from the initial effort at indirect rule, local government in Nigeria began its long series of reforms from the end of the Second World War in 1945 when the colonial government attempted to democratize the system as a basis for the socio-economic and political development of the country (Udoji, 1974). With the shift of rationale from being primarily a law and order agency to one engaged in local socio-economic and political development, the objectives of local government came to be defined as comprising bringing government closer to the people. Scholars have often adopted a number of approaches or schools of thought to explain the concept of local government. These include the structural school of thought, the service delivery school, the political school, and lately the 1976 local government reforms' definition. According to the structural school, there exist local governments in Nigeria to the extent that these collectively constitute a third-tier of government. Such a structural definition of local government is usually associated with the analysis of post-1976 territorial politics in Nigeria. This is represented by such scholars as Adamolekun (1983). They argued that following the 1976 local government reforms, there was the formal and unequivocal recognition of local governments as constituting a distinct level of government; with defined boundaries; clearly stated functions; and provisions for ensuring adequate human and financial resources. The assumption by the structural school is that sub-regional (local) political institutions exist, which aggregate local interests and demands; react to a number of these and present others for necessary action at the state or federal level. The process of government is therefore three-tiered and the configuration of inter-governmental relations triadic.

From the purely structural definition of local government emanates other more organizationally oriented and management centered definitions. Accordingly, the belief that local government exists finds expression in the admission that there is an identifiable process of mobilizing and husbanding local energies through locally based structures of government for the production of local services. There is thus a service delivery function for which a body of local politico-administrative actors reacts. According to this school of thought, the service delivery factor is perhaps the most salient characteristic of local government. Indeed, local governments owed their existence to the need to administer basic community services. This is true with respect to the Nigerian experience both before and after independence.

But perhaps, the most important group for whom local governments exist are those who offer a political definition of local government otherwise known as the political school of thought. Local government is said to exist because it forms the foundation stone for nation-building, for political education, for political training, and for political participation. The local governments provide the avenue where local people discuss, argue, and debate about local issues so as to arrive at solutions

to collectively identified problems. Local governments therefore, provide a channel in which local people internalize the values of democracy. The 1976 local government reforms on other hand, defined local government as government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas (FRN, 1976). However, the local government as so defined has been elusive in Nigeria since independence specifically because of the absence of the basic raw materials needed in translating these into visible realities.

Local government is also conceptualized by Hill (1974) as a system of territorial units with defined boundaries, legal identity and institutional structure, and power and duties laid down in general and special statutes and a degree of financial autonomy. Appadori (1975), on the other hand, defined local government as government by the popularly elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular place or district. According to Golding (1975), local government is a system of government at the local level exercised through locally elected representative councils with substantial autonomy in the exercise of specific powers over a given locality in the performance of a range of functions and responsibilities allotted to it by law. The United Nations Office for Public Administration defines local government as a political sub-division of a nation or (in a federal system) state which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or exact labor for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected (UNO, 1975). Indeed, as Oyediran (1998) noted, you cannot have local government without a body, which represents the people and must be chosen by the people themselves rather than external body to the locality.

In summary, local government is a specific political intuition, which derives from local choice and which is legally empowered to authoritatively react to local demands. Thus, for local governments to exist, there needs to obtain locally derived institution, which is empowered to make decisions over devolved local affairs. As Egwurube (1990) noted, the test of any system of local government should be whether it provides a stable structure capable of discharging efficiently the functions entrusted to it, while at the same time maintaining its democratic character. This is very suggestive of the centrality of structures of local governments.

Theoretical framework

There are no actual theories of local government. What is rather available in the extant literature are essentially broad theoretical viewpoints represented by scholars like Adamolekun (1983); Ola (1984); Ibodje (2007) amongst others, which sought to provide justification for the institution of local government. Broadly, these are democratic-participatory school of thought; efficiency-services; developmental; and holistic integrationist school of thought. For the purpose of this study, the paper adopted the Democratic-Participatory school as its theoretical framework.

The democratic-Participatory school of thought posits that local governments exist to ensure citizens' participation in the management of their local affairs. Local governments also exist to promote democracy and create opportunities for political participation to citizens at the local level. By bringing government closer to the people, local governments help to enhance democratic values and skills at the grassroots level of the society. As Arthur Maas (1959) noted, the values of local government are to be found in liberty, equality and welfare. Liberty entails protecting citizens from the excessive control and arbitrariness of the central government by allowing local governments significant degrees of autonomy thereby giving the local people a free hand to initiate and implement ideas that enhance their own development. Also, local governments provide equality through opportunities offered citizens to participate in their own governance. The welfare justification for the existence of the institution of local government is premised on its ability to provide increased and efficient administration of resources, which facilitates increased production of public goods and services. As Laski (1982) noted:

...we cannot realize the full benefits of democratic government unless we begin by the admission that all problems not central in their incidence require decisions at the place, and by the persons, where and by whom the incidence is most deeply felt.

Wunsch (2004) argued that democracy must be noted in functioning local participatory self-governance institutions as democracy has certainly shown itself to be the best system for controlling governments and engaging people in their own governance. The legitimacy of local government institution lies in its claim to represent the interests or wishes of the local inhabitants and to administer to their needs. It should therefore, be founded on democratic ideals, which required that the local populace be given the opportunity to control their own affairs especially since this is the point at which their interests and welfare are most likely to be directly affected. Mills (1975) asserts that local government in a democratic polity is justified by its ability to promote political participation, political education, and political accountability. The first reason is that every community has unique features, which are common to the locality, hence only those that have this community interest should administer the community.

The second rationale for the institution of local government is that such an institution allows for political education as the local governments provide a training ground for politicians aspiring to higher political offices. Another reason is that local government provides for accountability as popular control over local officials can be assured through a separate organ such as the appointment of officials, watching and checking them, granting or withholding resources for their operation, amongst others, which should be vested in local citizens. In examining the nexus between local government and democracy, Bello-Imam (1996) averred that one of the basic reasons for the establishment of local government is to develop grassroots democracy. It is at the local government level that people's aspirations and hopes are discernible in their most relevant and specific form. It is also at the grassroots level that their will and creative energies can be most

effectively organized and usefully mobilized. Accordingly, the structure and quality of public administration at this level become a key factor in determining the capacity of the system to achieve democratic development. The foregoing exposition has informed the adoption of Democratic-Participatory theory as the study's framework of analysis.

Local Government in Nigeria

The institution of local governance, whether as local administrative body or local government, exists in all political systems across the world. This is so because all political systems strive to attain effective and efficient service delivery at the grassroots level through the instrumentality of local government institution. There is a general consensus among scholars of Nigeria's political development that local governments in the country have ceased to exist as autonomous politico-administrative entities designed to authoritatively react to local needs and local demands (Egwurube, 1990). There exists a wide gap between the practice of local government and the theories and assumptions, which form the basis for their existence. These assumptions include the bridging of major communication gaps between government and the governed by the proximity of structures of government to beneficiaries of government policies. Other assumptions include the simplification of government's ability to choose objectives that would transform rural lives by the existence of structures which are better tailored to identify rural problems. This tie with the adaptive capability of local governments since they are better placed to identify and react to community needs.

It has been argued that local government has never really existed in Nigeria let alone being democratized since her independence (Egwurube, 1990). The only exception here was in the pre-colonial days when local authorities personified by traditional rulers performed extractive, regulative, and to some extent distributive functions at the local level. Also, in the immediate post-independence era, some strong native authorities in the North and elected councils in the East and West through locally derived actors and/or political institutions reacted to local problems. On the whole, local government institutions have gradually become weakened as important actors in the allocation of resources at the grassroots level. The evolution of local government in post-independence Nigeria has been situated between the conflicting needs of political participation and political control. The redistribution of powers to lower levels of government has the propensity to minimize the possibilities of functional overload at the center.

However, principal national political actors have overtime attempted to concretize their dominance over regional (state) and sub-regional (local) political forces. Most national and state political actors have reacted first to the demand of control rather than those of structural and institutional differentiations. The implication of this is that local governments rather than exist as autonomous self-sufficient entities, tend to serve purely instrumental roles for dominant political elites at the state and national levels.

The structures of local government in Nigeria have remained undeveloped and replaced by De- concentrated extension and agencies of the state. The Sole Administrator or even the local government Secretary is a state government appointee or nominee who has executive powers and latitudes at the local level on behalf of the state government rather than on behalf of the local people. Accordingly, Nigeria does not have local government as per our conceptualization of the term in the paper. Instead, local governments have existed in the country since independence as instruments at the disposal of dominant infra-local political actors to penetrate and control sub-national and sub-regional political forces.

Democratizing the Local Government System in Nigeria

Local government in Nigeria represents a critical and important area where a lot of contributions to the solution of the country's problems could be located and addressed. Local governments as operated globally are authorities vested with the power to address issues that are considered local to the immediate community that constitute them. Thus, local governments are established to facilitate the development of an area and manage the resources of such area. The task of democratizing the system requires the participation of all patriots especially the civil society organizations, labor unions, and pro-democracy groups who must collaborate to make leaders account for their actions or non-actions. The local government democratic project is far too important to be left to the political class who has individually or collectively constituted the greatest obstacle to democracy in Nigeria. The failure or wobbling democratic experiments in Nigeria has been due to the mercenary character of the ruling class (Mohammed, 2011). The labor unions, democracy and human right groups must wake up to their responsibilities. Also, professionals like lawyers, academics, journalists, as well as students must network to fight anti-democratic tendencies that frustrate the democratization process at the local level in Nigeria in order to enthrone a just and humane democratic order in the country.

To further strengthen the capacities of local government councils to perform more efficiently and effectively, the Dasuki's Committee Report introduced the presidential system of government, grassroots democracy, direct funding of councils among other changes in order to increase the capacities of local governments to promote development (Zoaka, 2011). The local government reforms particularly, the 1976 and 1988 reforms have impacted positively on the development of local government administration in Nigeria. The reforms tend to put local governments on the same pedestal throughout the country as they share uniform structures, functions, and sources of funding. This ensures even development throughout the country in the provision of infrastructural amenities such as roads, potable water, electricity, clinics, education, markets, motor parks, recreational facilities, etc. The number of local governments listed in the fifth schedule of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) is 774 councils. Beyond the increase in the number of local government councils, there is a general dissatisfaction by the people on the type, quality and quantity of services being provided by the local government councils.

In spite of the fact that local government was seen as a third-tier of government, some provisions of the constitution put the fate of local government councils in the hands of the states (Zoaka, 2011). Consequently, local governments have suffered several onslaughts on their powers, their existence, and their functions. They are frequently starved of funds and they themselves lack the capacity to generate internal revenues. This crippled their ability to perform and deliver essential services to the people. The reforms were aimed at bringing the government closer to the people as captured in the forward to the reform guidelines thus:

...local governments have over the years suffered from whittling down of their powers. The state governments have continued to encroach upon what would normally have been the exclusive preserve of local governments. Lack of adequate funds and appropriate institutions had continued to make local governments ineffective and ineffectual. Moreover, the staffing arrangements to ensure a virile local government system had been inadequate. Consequently, there has been a divorce between the people and the government institutions at their most basic level... The Federal Military Government has therefore, decided to recognize local government as the third-tier of government activity in the nation (Zoaka, 2011).

This statement underscored the extent of breakdown in contact and relevance of the previous local government system. As far as bridging the gap of communication was concerned between the people and the government, this was a landmark achievement. However, in practice, local governments have continued to remain irrelevant in the lives of the people in several areas where they are located especially in the provision of essential services. The provision of potable water, drainages, street lights, electricity, clinics and dispensaries, libraries, markets and motor parks are in most local government councils very poorly developed. These problems are closely linked with the poor quality of manpower, which is critical in the discharge of assigned functions and responsibilities of the local governments. The existing trend in the local governments across Nigeria is that the quality of manpower is below standard while quantity even though apparently adequate is not in the right mix to meet the challenges of the local governance.

The 1976 local government reforms as noted earlier brought into the local government system uniform structures, functions, compositions, funding, etc. By the mid-1991, the presidential system of government was introduced. This gave the local government system a very clear and purposeful structure that defined the population range of local governments separated the powers of the executive arm from the legislative arm as well as separated the local government from the traditional council. The reforms were aimed at promoting not only economic growth but democracy hence, the establishment of the council, which was to take charge of bye-law making. The tenure of the councils was fixed for two and three years respectively while six departments were created. The reality is that local governments exist today in Nigeria as provinces of the state government, which is itself dependent on the federal government. This reflects a perfect case of

unitary federalism. It is this that explains why it is the federal government that determines the modalities of local government reorganization and not the state as one would expect under a more flexible and decentralized federal system.

Conclusion

Local government in whatever form of government is meant to provide effective and efficient goods and services required at the local level to sustain lives and indicate that the government is responsive to the needs of the people at the grassroots level of the society. The local government being the nearest level of government to the people required the people to get involved thereof. The enthronement of democracy at the local government level in Nigeria is therefore, necessary for the socio-economic and political transformation of the country. The people demand good governance, justice, equity, fairness and real development and progress of Nigeria in order to encourage confidence and trust in the polity.

The way forward

If the local governments are made truly democratic with fully devolved powers, they have the potentials of fostering a process of sustainable development of the country. To this end, the paper suggested the following measures to fast-track the process of deepening democracy and the enthronement of good governance in the local government and by extension the country at large:

- a) The critical institutions of democracy such as political parties, National Assembly, Judiciary, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Civil Society, Anti-graft agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices and other related offences Commission (ICPC), etc. must be strengthened and allowed to operate freely and effectively. This will ensure the growth and sustenance of democracy and good governance;
- b) The fight against corruption must be carried out with total commitment by the political leadership backed by strong political will devoid of mere lip-service and rhetoric. Also, there should be a serious drive towards poverty reduction and inequality through people-oriented policies and programs at the local level, which would address the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, health-care services, safe drinking water, electricity, education, employment, amongst others;
- c) The political leadership at all levels of government must imbibe the culture of leadership by example anchored on selfless service to the people. Political office does not translate to avenues for self-enrichment and personal aggrandizement;
- d) There is serious and urgent need for attitudinal change on the part of the Nigerian people through a re-branding of the country's value systems to promote tolerance, accommodation, hard work, integrity, justice, fairness and equity as well as zero-tolerance for corruption in all facets of public life most especially in governance. Also,

- people should be enlightened to demand for report of stewardship from their elected representatives;
- e) Political offices should be made less attractive not to entice money conscious and corrupt politicians; and allow only those who are genuinely concerned about rendering service into seeking public offices;
 - f) Election is one of the hall-marks of democracy. Elections should thus be conducted in the most free, fair and credible manner such that people's votes count in the decision of who becomes their leader; and
 - g) Impunity clause for certain categories of political leaders should be expunged to make them accountable to the electorate while in office.

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