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DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC: ASSESSING THE GAP BETWEEN DEMOCRATIC IDEALS AND PRACTICE

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Abstract
The paper examined democracy in Nigeria's fourth republic. This was with a view to ascertain the extent of compliance with ideal democratic culture and values in Nigeria. The study adopted qualitative research design. This allowed the use of secondary data information gathered through online materials, academic journals and text books. The findings revealed that Nigeria's democratic experience has vacillated between trials and triumphs. The uninterrupted democracy of more than two decades is an indication of triumph and progress in the democratic development experience. However, democratic values and culture is yet to be entrenched in Nigeria's body polity. The electoral process in Nigeria is still largely compromised. Despite the deployment of technology to curb malpractises, the phenomenon of vote buying has defied all odds which has compromised the integrity of the process. The democratic institutions such as INEC, legislature, judiciary, executive and the police are not measuring up to expectations. the stud further revealed that the rule of law is not allowed to holds sway but the rule of men. There are cases of flagrant disregard to the rule of law in the fourth republic. The study concluded that democracy cannot grow under an environment that does not allow the operationalization of its dictates. Nigeria's democracy must commit to values and ideals of democratic system.
Keywords: Democracy, democratic values, rule of law, democratic institutions, electoral process

Introduction

Democracy has become the most fashionable and enduring form of government in modern times. In the contemporary world, the issue is not which political system is appropriate but rather when will a society become democratized or fully democratic (Efebeh, 2015). In Nigeria, democracy remains the most preferred form of government among Nigerians (Lewis 2006; Mattes 2019). This is apparently so because of the social good democracy promote which include justice, equity, freedom, liberty, accountability, openness and transparency in government. The reason behind this predilection for democracy is corroborated by Fund for Peace (2020) which affirmed that better governed countries are democracies.

Nigeria's democratization march covered several phases since independence. Ojo (2006) succinctly captures it as "(a) era of colonial autocracy and absolutism, that is period of formal colonialism till October 1 1960, when the country gained flag independence (b) emergence of constitutional democracy- (1960-1966) (c) the return of military autocratic and

absolutism- (1966-1979) (d) restoration of constitutional democracy- (1979-1983) (e) the second coming of military autocratism 1983-1989". Between 1989 and 1993, a democratic transition attempt under the military government of General Babangida failed and the military experience subsisted till 1999 when there was a power shift to a democratically elected government.

This trajectory described how much Nigeria is endeared towards the democratic system and the constant push to domicile it in the polity. Since the restoration of democracy in 1999, democracy has lasted over two decades in Nigeria. According to Ashindorbe and Danjibo (2022), democracy has been on trial in Nigeria with varying degree of triumphs and mounting challenges. Ibrahim et al (2024) stated that the rule of democracy is not fully practiced in Nigeria, creating uncertainty about Nigeria's future. The much ado about the yearning for democracy in Nigeria should not only be in the rhetorics of it but in the values of the democratic system which is not observed by practise in Nigeria. This research effort intends to reiterate the significance of imbibing the values of democratic tenets in Nigeria above the mere lip service of craving for democracy.

Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted for this work is the civic republicanism theory. The proponents of this theory include Philip Petit, Michael Sandel, Frank Lovett and others. The theory assumes that a free republic requires active citizen participation, civic virtue (public spiritedness, informed involvement, law abidingness), and a focus on the common good over pure self-interest, arguing that freedom from arbitrary power depends on citizens ruling and being ruled, rather just being protected from the state.

Costa (2014) argued that for a particular regime to be sustained, it is important for the society to participate in politics and cultivate civic virtues. These virtues include having the disposition to be informed about the behavior of public officials, to be vigilant about the behavior of public affairs and to support the rule of law. The rationale behind the adoption of this theory rests on the fact that, in a democratic society, democratic virtues, ideals and culture must be the concern of the citizens and the government. Citizens of a democratic society must embrace the virtues of democracy to be able to reap the dividends of democracy. The theory requires both citizens and the government to submit to the dictates of the democratic system.

Mayor (2025) stated that the central point of emphasis for the theory is that the state belongs to the people and the state is founded on justice and a concern for common good. This further implies that the state founded on civic republican ideals is the type that the political constitution is aimed at securing the common good for all its citizens. For this to be, all hands must be on deck. The concern for the citizenry and the government is to promote key ideals of democracy such as civic virtue, patriotism, free and fair electoral process, rule of law and separation of powers.

In relating this framework to the Nigerian context, the theory proposes that the citizens must embrace the ideals of democracy as enshrined in the constitution. The theorist emphasized that the pursuit of the common good can be undermined when citizens are corrupted by luxury ambition, excessive self-interest and factionalism. This necessarily implies that the democratic dividends can only be delivered in Nigerian on the condition that there is respect for its ideals and values. Civic republicanism defends the value of political participation and civic virtues by appealing to their fundamental contribution to the establishment and maintenance of a free society.

These ideals of democracy which are the respect for the rule of law, free, fair and credible electoral process, justice equity and fairness must be the concern and priority of all citizens and government. It is only by submitting to these ideals that democracy can deliver on its expected dividends. Civic republicanism responds to the practice of the ideals of

democratic constitutionalism by securing the common good for all citizens. On the contrary, failure to live by the dictates of civic republicanism creates a society of free for all and potential anarchy and distortions.

Methodology

The paper adopted qualitative research design. This work relies on data from journals, relevant books, magazines, the internet and newspapers to provide more insights on the practice of democracy in Nigeria. This method affords the opportunity of eliciting in-depth knowledge of how democratic values have been observed in Nigeria since its restoration in 1999. The study specifically collated data from academic literature and other relevant materials that focused on democracy in Nigeria.

Democracy in Nigeria

Since the present democratic dispensation in 1999, the trajectory of the democratic experience has vacillated between consolidation and regression. This section will be discussed under three different sub-headings, namely the 1999-2007, 2007 to 2015 and 2015 to present day.

The 1999-2007 Era

The current democratic experience that has continued unabated is a product of activism of pro-democratic forces. These forces constituted themselves into different groups and political associations which eventually formed the dominant parties such as the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Alliance for Democracy (AD) and the All Peoples Party (APP) (Anifowoshe 2004; Agbaje, Akande & Ojo 2018). The PDP won the federal elections with President Olusegun emerging as the Commander in Chief. The period between 1999 and 2007 witnessed a lot of milestones which include reforms, debt relief and anti-corruption measures. However democracy faced challenges and drawbacks under the Obasanjo administration.

The democratic era between 1999 and 2007 was suffused with practices that were not in harmony with the dictates of democratic values. Efebeh (2015) maintained that the practice of democracy in Nigeria has been observed more in the lip than in actual practice of respect for the rule of democracy. Evidences abound in support of the claim such as disregard and outright disobedience to court orders and judgment. This contradicts the practise in other climes where democracy has advanced in ethos.

The 2007 to 2015 Era

The election that produced the government of President Yar Adua was fraught with widespread malpractises which undermined the strength of the fledgling democracy. The history of electoral contests in Nigeria appears to have been fierce, riddled with tensions, violence, mass rigging, thuggery and intimidation continued into the Fourth Republic, where candidates are routinely imposed on party members and the electorate by ‘godfathers’, while rigging and the falsification of votes remain pervasive (Akinboye 2004; Olaniyan 2020).

In the wake of the criticism that trailed the parody of election, the President undertook an obligation to improve on the electoral system, which included introducing electoral reforms. The death of President YarAdua in 2010 truncated his reign in power. Nevertheless, the administration of President Jonathan who continued the Yar Adua tenure, toed the visionary line of the late President by consolidating on the electoral reform programme of his predecessor.

Apparently, the period of the reigns of President Jonathan produced some gains for the democratic development in Nigeria. Ashindorbe and Danjibo (2022) stated that some reforms brought about incremental improvements in the management of elections, starting

with the 2011 general election. These reforms were deepened in 2015, leading to the defeat of an incumbent president and a well-entrenched political party.

According to the civil society situation room (2025), Goodluck Jonathan, oversaw the 2011 elections, which were considered an improvement but still faced security threats, particularly from the Boko Haram insurgency. Jonathan's tenure saw increased political participation but also heightened ethnic and religious tensions. The 2015 elections marked a historic moment as Muhammadu Buhari defeated the incumbent, marking Nigeria's first peaceful transfer of power between political parties.

The 2015- Present Era

Following the emergence of President Buhari at the election of 2015, the All Progressive Congress took over the control of governance at the centre. The ousted Peoples Democratic Party was criticized for anti-democratic practices and failure to deliver on the dividends of democracy. Since the assumption of office by the All Progressive Congress, the narrative has remained the same. The APC is guiltier of governance failure than the ousted PDP.

Ashindorbe and Najid (2022) argued that despite apparent dysfunction that has permeated the performance of the two main parties since the inception of the fourth republic, "it is undeniable that the two dominant parties have shapened the role of parties as a strategic institution for the survival of Nigeria's democratic aspirations". They argued further that the PDP and the APC have become pillars for the nurture and sustenance of the country's collective optimism in democracy and good governance, and have acquired a historic mission and importance that transcends their present faults.

The first four years of the APC was a mix bag of intraparty rivalry, tension and attempt to stabilize the party. Ashindorbe et. al, (2022) maintained that at the incipient stage of the APC as the governing party, there was controversy over the choice of which of the factions that formed the party should produce the leadership and principal officers in the legislature. This depicts the APC as undisciplined and as a party of convenience whose members are only concerned with sharing the spoils of electoral conquest.

Ogbonna and Ogbonna (2021) emphasized that in Nigeria, the culture of democracy is evidently deficient. The scholars averred that politics is practiced not based on ideology, but personal interest. The foundation was not laid for ideology to take foremost interest in politics, but rather personal gain. A perspective from the African Programme at the Chatham House summarise the essence and origin of the APC. They argued that the party is an "uneasy alliance of autonomous elite networks bound together by little more than incumbency and a collective desire to stay in power through 2023 and beyond" (Page & Tayo 2018).

Democratic Values and Democratic Practice in Nigeria

Democracy in Nigeria has continued unabated in the last 25 years without disruption. Some prominent Nigerians have touted this uninterrupted experience as the basis to conclude that democracy has come to stay in Nigeria and also that Nigeria has come of age with democratic principle, culture and values. The Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Sen. George Akume, in 2023, made a declarative statement about democracy in Nigeria (The Sun, 2023). The SGF maintained that Nigerians have fully embraced democracy with its core values and practices as the best form of government despite political tremors and waves of coup in some parts of Ecowas sub-region.

This statement can be considered to be more politically correct than more empirically true. The reality with Nigeria's democracy since the inception of the fourth republic has created a huge gulf between the affirmation of the SGF and the democratic culture in Nigeria. This section attempts to explore the extant democratic practice and culture in Nigeria since the beginning of the fourth republic in 1999 and juxtapose this with the claims aforesaid.

Scholars claimed that since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has successfully organised several national elections beginning with the first test case in the fourth republic which is the 1999 general elections (Ashindorbe & Najid, 2022). Many of the elections have been characterised by widespread malpractices, riggings, ballot box stuffing, vote buying, maiming and fatalities" (Egwu, Leonard & Matlosa 2009; Bekoe 2011; Shehu 2019). Such observation in elections cannot possibly justify ideal democratic values and culture in such a body polity.

The 2007 general election was a dark cloud in the progress of our democratic development experience. There were reported cases of widespread rigging and manipulation of results of election. Following several appeal to challenge the integrity of the election, the appeal court sacked many Governors from office who had hijacked mandate through the shoddy elections of 2007. The states affected states included Ondo, Osun, Oyo, Edo, Ekiti and Anambra (Efebeh, 2015).

Albert (2011) observed another practice contrary to the ideal democratic values in Nigeria's election. The researcher noted the role of violence. Albert (2011) maintained that violence during elections is designed to disable and disrupt the opposing party in order to prevail at the polls, to vitiate the election altogether by undermining the integrity of the results, or to influence voting behaviour through threats and intimidation. The prevalent nature of violence in elections in Nigeria is not a peculiar feature of the contemporary democratic era. This phenomenon is a noticeable trend and feature that dated back in history of Nigeria s political experience. Ashindorbe (2018) stated that the collapse of the first and second republics was partly attributed to disputed electoral outcomes that resulted in the expression of various forms of violence, such as the destruction of properties, maiming and killings, which necessitated military intervention.

Osaghe (2020) captured it in his perspective that democratic elections should in its true and expected sense, serve as mechanisms for peace building, more often than not they trigger violent conflict. The researcher attributed the reasons for this barbaric practice to the zero-sum disposition of key actors and the weaponisation of ethnic and religious differences in Nigeria, every election tends to complicate the process of national cohesion and threatens the very existence of the state.

Another dimension to the culture of electoral malpractice in Nigeria is a pattern identified by Sambo et al (2024), These scholars observed that Nigeria's political culture since democratization has had a negative effect on voting patterns and electoral outcomes. Their argument is that democratic practices in Nigeria have turned into a bazaar for the highest bidder. This is evident in the election results from the Independent Electoral Commission since the return of the civil rule in 1999. The voting pattern has been the north, voting a fellow Northerner than a southerner, then the southerners, have consistently voted for candidates who are indigenous to their regions. This pattern further recalls the primordial sentiments in Nigeria that is considered deep-seated and pervasive.

Osaghe (2020) further corroborate the foregoing perspective by asserting that "the political mobilisation and weaponisation of ethnic and religious identities are also implicated and tend to fuel violent election-related conflict. There is no general election that is not coloured by the ethnic consideration of the candidates, a trend that is even more visible in presidential elections. Interestingly, the presidential elections that feature candidates from similar ethnic groups are contested on the grounds of candidate popularity, their charisma, the spread of their parties and ability of one party to out-rig the other".

One major challenge that appear to defy all the efforts to reduce electoral malpractice is vote buying phenomenon which has become pervasive in Nigeria's election. Despite the deployment of technology and innovation, it appears the phenomenon of vote buying remains insurmountable. Onapajo, Francis, and Okeke-Uzodike (2015) argue that "vote buying is not merely an isolated occurrence but a systemic issue influenced by socioeconomic, cultural,

and institutional factors. While money in politics is not inherently negative, as it facilitates campaign logistics such as mobilization, printing of materials, and organization of rallies, its corrupting influence when used to manipulate voter choices remains a major concern". The pattern in some part of the country is characterized by politicians distributing cash, foodstuffs, and other material goods to electorates, significantly compromising the integrity of the electoral process.

Shehu, et al (2025) stated that one of the plausible advantages of the naira redesign policy was to mitigate the prospect of vote buying in the 2023 general election. On the contrary, rather than checking vote buying, the development led to the emergence of alternative strategies, such as the use of electronic transfers and pre-election inducements. Observers analysed the new trend devised by political actors to include relying on digital payment platforms and promised post-election rewards to secure votes (Vanguard, 2023). During the recently conducted election in Ondo and Edo State, it was observed that political parties perfected vote buying plans by an amount that ranges from ₦5,000 to ₦20,000 per voter. The payments were made in secret to keep the security operatives oblivious of such transactions (Punch, 2024).

Gberevbie (2014) examined the collapse in democratic values from the failure of democratic institutions in Nigeria. The researcher revealed that "the various democratic institutions in Nigeria such as INEC, the Legislature, Executive, Judiciary and the Police, by their actions at one time or the other since the nation's independence, have denied Nigerians the unique opportunity to enjoy the benefits derivable from a democratic system based on popular participation of the citizens in the election of the political leaders of their choice arising from the challenges identified afore". The implication of the foregoing submission prior to the fourth republic as claimed by some scholars was political decay, military takeover of political power, undemocratic behaviour amongst politicians and citizens, underdevelopment and lack of proper democratic ethos in Nigeria (Ikelegbe, 2005; Oloruntimehin, 2005; Soleye, 2005; Okoosi-Simbine, 2007).

The foregoing align with Ikelegbe (1988), where he submitted that "the inability of the democratic institutions in the country to carry out their constitutionally-assigned roles in the political process in the past resulted in frequent military takeover of political power from civilian and military administrations alike in Nigeria".

Sakpere (2018) submitted that Nigeria has continued to struggle with her democracy due to a number of challenges confronting it. The researchers finding from a study revealed that there is interference in the work of the judiciary and legislature by the executive. This interference is indicative of executive overreach. The forms and nature of interference include blackmail, offering bribe to distort justice, intimidating the judiciary and depriving the judiciary of the needed infrastructure, facilities and security. Nnadozie (2007) points out the challenges militating against the success of democratic institutions in Nigeria to include what he termed 'ethnic stigma', which, according to him, occurs when ethnic consideration plays prominent role in the appointments of people into the headship of these democratic institutions making the future and survival of democracy and democratic institutions to be in danger.

Dudley (1973) also stressed the failure of democratic institutions in advancing the course of democracy. He identified the reason for the failure of democratic institutions in Nigeria to include the phenomenon called 'tribalism' as basis for the appointment of leaders into these democratic institutions. In his perspective, the consequence of such appointment is that people that lack the capacity to adequately manage these institutions for enhanced performance are appointed to the detriment of merit. These people so appointed on the basis of tribalism are seen to be loyal to their tribes rather than the nation as a whole in the implementation of policies and programmes for democratic sustainability.

Abubakar (2011) argued that democratic institutions in Nigeria do not have the capacity to perform well because of the prevailing circumstances of the environment in which

they are situated. The nature of the environment is characterized by weakened moral threshold and poor ethical values. Ingraham (2005) identified one of the major problems responsible for the failure of democratic institutions as "the lack of capacity on the part of the structure, system and operators of these institutions to achieve set goals".

Another issue which portrayed the low level of democratic value and culture is the disrespect to the rule of law. Ali (2007) stated emphatically that the rule of law was observed in abeyance in Nigeria. The notion of equality before the law does not apply to every Nigerian in the same measure. According to Efebeh (2015) those who are accused of stealing billions of naira as governors or public office holders are more equal than any other person in the country. The Obasanjo regime depicted the case of rule of men and not the rule of law in Nigeria.

A prominent case in the fourth republic was the judgment of the Supreme Court on local government allocation in Lagos State. The case of the Federal Government disobeying the Supreme Court of Nigeria on the Lagos State local government allocation. The Supreme Court dispensed justice in favour of the local government in Lagos state. However the federal government acted in violation of the law by taking stance contrary to the judgement. Efebeh (2015) noted, the federal government under Chief Obasanjo refused to release the accumulated fund, on the ground that the creation of the additional 37 Local Government Areas in the state by the state assembly was illegal even when the same Supreme Court had earlier ruled in favour of Lagos State.

Furthermore, the rule of law witnessed disdain with several cases of impeachment of state Governor between 1999 and 2007. Due process of the law was practically suspended when Governors Rashidi Ladoja, of Oyo State, Joshua C. Dariye, Plateau State and Ayo Fayose of Ekiti State were removed illegally through impeachment. Two of these former Governors Ladoja and Dariye were later reinstated by the Courts of law, (Odaudu, 2007). A similar case related to impeachment was the demeaning treatment of the former Governor of Anambra state, Dr. Ngige, where he was abducted as a result of withdrawal of his security details. The offences of the former Governor was because he failed to allow his Godfather, Andy Ubah, an ally of the then President, take control of the state treasury (Ezeibilo, 2005).

These infractions against the law of the land were not only observed under the Obasanjo regime, it transcended the administration. The federal government under the former President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan was accused of infringing on the sacrosanct dictates of the rule law. The suspension of the President of appeal court Justice Mustafa Salami before the expiration of his tenure of office. Report of investigation later revealed that the action of the President had a strong correlation with political vindictiveness. The then ruling People's Democratic Party had held Salami responsible for the reversal, to PDP's disfavour, of some election results, conducted in 2007, hence, the unpalatable payback (Azania & Nnodim, 2015).

In addition, Obichie (2019) cited a political incident in 2014 where the former President Goodluck Jonathan failed to uphold rule of law in the discharge of his official responsibilities. The former President Jonathan had debasingly hounded the office of the then Speaker of the House of Representatives, Hon. Aminu Tambuwal by illegally instructing the withdrawal of the security details of Tambuwal, on account of the latter's defection from the then ruling PDP to the then main opposition, the APC. In a similar vein, President Jonathan in another exhibition of disregard of democratic principles and practice and disrespect to the rule of law, ordered the Police to deny the former Speaker and his supporters, access to their offices at the National Assembly Complex.

The tenure of the late President Buhari is not spared from the violatons of the dictates of the law. Aribisala (2019) posits thus:

> In Buhari's Nigeria, the rule of fear is fast replacing the rule of law. The government summarily violates the right of self-assembly of

> pro-Biafran activists by sending soldiers to shoot them. It locks up people like, Shiite leader, Ibrahim Zakzaky, without trial. Fulani Herdsmen, wielding Ak47 rifles, continue to kill innocent farmers; while the government responds by withdrawing the licence of legal gun owners. The judiciary is assaulted by the illegality of the President, summarily suspending the Chief Justice and replacing him with another judge. (Aribisalla, 2019 p: 4)

Another case of flagrant disregard to the rule of law is the continued detention of Dasuiki, the former National Security Adviser. The Northern Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN) protested the continued detention of the former National Security Adviser, Sambo Dasuki against court ruling stated thus: "Finally, we must state that the statement by Justice Minister that the government has a right to detain a citizen against court order is not only disgusting, myopic and insensitive but portrays the Abubakar Malami as incapable of discharging his duties as the adviser to both Mr. President and the nation. It is even unbecoming of a person labeled as a Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN) to engage in activities seen to be against the rule of law as courts of competent jurisdiction have granted Dasuki bail 6 times" (Nweke and Nwoko, 2018).

In 2018, it was believed that the Presidency was responsible for the constitutional breach by the DSS demonstrated through the reckless of lawlessness when the DSS laid siege on the National Assembly complex. The alleged culpability of the Presidency in the entire acts of executive lawlessness was further affirmed based on the claim by the operatives of the outfit that their action was informed by 'order from above' (Bassey, 2018). The development revealed such gross violation of the rule of law by the Buhari-led Federal Government. The foregoing are evidences of the prevailing culture of democracy in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The foregoing evidences suggest that the culture of democracy that is currently prevalent in Nigeria does not align with the democratic ideals synonymous with advance democratic societies. The Nigerian political environment is yet to fully submit to the dictates of the democratic system. Despite operating a democratic constitution, there is little evidence of absolute respect for the law as enshrined in the constitution. There is impunity by the governed. Democracy cannot work where there is no respect for the rule of law. Democracy only thrives where the citizens of such society develop the culture of respect of the rule of law, and there is free, fair and credible election.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations proffered by the study;

1. It is important that both governed and the governmental authorities at all levels embrace the ideals of democracy. The electoral process must be free, fair and credible to produce popular candidates during elections. There cannot be democracy when the people cannot determine those who govern them through platforms created for such purpose. All effort must be mustered to discourage interferences in the electoral system that compromise its integrity.
2. The rule of law is an integral part of the democratic system which must be respected by those in authorities. It is regarded as the last hope of the common man.
3. Finally, democratic institutions must rise up to responsibility in the interest of democracy. It is not enough for Nigeria to desire democracy, the country must go beyond merely observing democracy in lip service but in the actual practice of respect and submitting to the dictates of the democratic system as enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

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