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Little Democracy, More Oligarchy: The Bane of Nigeria's Political System

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Abstract

Nigeria's quest for democracy encounters oligarchic assaults that develop into political and economic dominance. Democratization fails often to gain a progressive inroad into a secured scheme of rule of law. This paper uses oligarchic influences on political parties, public officials and, policymaking machinery as indicators to argue that the Nigerian political system is dominated by oligarchs. The situation leaves a tight political space for democratization. It constitutes a major challenge to the progress and peace of the Federal Republic. The paper is qualitative as well as descriptive. It employs the Marxist theory of economic determinism and Pareto, Mosca and Michel's elite theory of state power. The theories explain the relationship between oligarchs and the majority of the Nigerian population, the way the situation dwarfs democracy and constitutes a major bane of the political system. Findings show that the elitist monopoly of resources in Nigeria results in the political empowerment of a few and the domination of the majority. This leads to difficult socio-economic and political conditions and the resultant agitations for a redress. It creates dual political systems (oligarchy and democracy) of unequal powers and means. Oligarchy dominates and leaves little space for democracy. The situation breeds uncertainty and tension in the politics and general spheres of people life. Constructive resistance by the dominated class will be a good lesson to the oligarchs for a better democratic society to emerge.

Keywords: Democracy, Oligarchy, Small Democracy, Big Oligarchy, Political System

INTRODUCTION

Experiences across historical eras and places have always observed societies of two unequal classes opposed to each other with unending conflicts over the control of resources and powers. Except for the communal mode of production, the slave era presented slaves and slave masters. In the feudalist period,

landlords presided over the serfs and in Marxist terms *bourgeoisie* exploited the *proletariat* in the capitalist epoch (Marx and Engels, 1996). Thus, oligarchy is, phenomenally not a new "cog in the wheels" of democratic progress. What is worrisome is the way and manner by which monopoly ignores and neglects the need and welfare of the majority of the



population and their freedom for decision making and exercise of basic rights as bonafide members of society. Their choice for a democratic rule is one of such rights.

Democracy is traceable to the classical Greek city-states as in Athens, where assemblies of ordinary citizens decided policies and legislations. Though ancient Greek democracies might have similar principles with liberal democracy currently in practice across the world, major differences are identifiable. Democracy in Athens (a city-state in Greece) excluded women and slaves in voting at the city assembly. Presently, every adult is included in voting in most democratic states across the world. The Athens process was more democratic because of the high level of rigging and other electoral malpractices that corrupt liberal democracy. This present order particularly as it presents itself in Nigeria is oligarchic and bleeds turbulent conditions in democratization. The historical fiction between democracy and oligarchy can be reasoned with Socrates as in *Plato's Republic*. He criticized democracy as nearly the worse form of rule because he believed that voting should be done by people who have relevant knowledge of politics and not every adult (Plato, 1997). His trial and conviction in 399BC, to some extent, was due to his anti-democratic philosophies and association with people regarded as active opponents of Athenian

government. Athenian juries accused Socrates of impiety and subversion of young men of the Athenian city, an atheist, the guru of a weird sect and an elitist who surrounded himself with politically undesirable characters (Waterfield, 2009).

In Western Europe, political pluralism was not permissible until the late 19th century when the socialist party extended franchise mostly to propertied elites. The duty of electing Members of Parliament (MP) rested on few influential men, and there was, therefore, no practical need for extra-parliamentary activities. Selected few were needed for an MP to achieve election (Weber 1990). Oligarchy is, therefore, such a potent and subtle force in human society that it has remained relevant throughout the different stages of democratic development. Huntington (1991) referred to this as the "wave of democratization." Oligarchs partner with budding democrats and monarchs and authoritarians rarely rule without a 'kitchen cabinet.'

The interplay of democracy and oligarchy is progressive at one time and in another retrogressive. It is, democratically retrogressive when the oligarchs overpower democrats or the people's will and tilt the balance of power more to their end of the scale. Huntington adequately explained this through his theory on the first, second and third waves of democratization. The 'first



wave' of democratization was from 1828 to 1926, while the *second wave* occurred in 1943-1964. In the '*third wave*,' the first and second waves ultimately became '*reversed waves*' in 1922-1942 and 1961-1975 respectively. Democratic relations with oligarchy, particularly in Africa, became progressive when democratic forces tilt towards achieving the people's will. The implication was that many democracies degenerated when many of the states could not hold on to democratic progress and this resulted in oligarchic advancement.

Though the failure of the first wave was pinned to the expansion of fascism and the second to the Cold War, regional conflicts and civil wars, oligarchy and some other variants of these forces were still at play. Thus, democracies failed because of a shift in the delicate balance between oligarchy and democracy. A good explanation in this light is the military-industrial complex, built, sustained, run and profited from by national and international oligarchs. The *third wave* of global democratization occurred in the post-1974 period, starting in the mid-1970s in Southern Europe and South America in the late 1970s to early 1980s. This *third wave* of global democratization was said to have ultimately spread to Asia and Africa in the 1990s (Huntington, 1991).

No doubt, the underlying motive for European colonies in Africa was

economic with political conquest serving as a viable tool. (Cammack, Pool, and Tordoff). This was clear from the way Africa was raped of its resources even before the European scramble for Africa started with the Berlin Conference of 1885. Oligarchy indeed predates post-independent democracy in Africa. Africa's colonial years could thus, be described as an oligarchic rule, where the colonial masters ruled with the rich and powerful locals. Even in the post-colonial era, from the late 1950s, Western colonial masters still protect their economic interest through proxy-oligarchies. This explains advocacy for developmental dictatorship as the best model for Africa in its first post-independence decade. This argument was put forward against the more sensible and ideal developmental democracy, which is a complete dialectical anti-thesis ideology to developmental-dictatorship. For example, to find a "whole cloth democracy" in developing countries would be a mistake, democracy should rather come in fragments and pieces (Sklar, 1987).

The foregoing is evidence that oligarchy is such a potent force in many political systems. It, therefore, becomes necessary to interrogate Nigerian political adventure from the oligarchical-democratic perspective to gain better insights into the progress and failures of democratic development of the Federal Republic.



METHOD

The study is qualitative as well as descriptive in nature. It relied on published online and hardcopy literature as a method of data collection and dwelled on the Marxist theory of economic determinism and Pareto, Mosca and Michel's elite theory of state power to explain how the interplay of democratic and oligarchic forces caused a major problem to Nigerian political system. Karl Marx, in his *Das Capital*, x-rayed the history of economic development and identified the existence of different modes of production: the communal, slave, feudal and capitalist modes. Based on the premise, he opined that capitalism will develop into socialism, a transitory system that would usher in communism. For Marx and Engels, "the history of all societies hitherto in existence is a history of class struggle." (Marx and Engels, 1973). For these intellectual collaborators, the struggle was between opposed classes, the owners of means of production (the bourgeois class) and owners of labour (the proletariat) with the former exploiting the latter by appropriating *surplus value*. Economic interests of the bourgeois class propel their influences on politics and public policymaking machinery. The instrumentalities of their economic resources are brought to bear on politics and as a result, the government became an executive committee of the bourgeois class (Wolfram, 1976). It was

based on the above premise that Marx argued that the economic structure of society is the *base* while other structures became the superstructure. The implication is that what transpired in the economic sector informed what transpired in politics, culture, and social relations. This condition is known in Marxist parlance as *economic determinism*. This situation explains the democratic conditions and challenges of the Nigerian political system. Major Captains of industry (the bourgeoisie) in Nigeria use their wealth to influence Nigerian politics and public policymaking machinery in favour of their economic interests and leave small space for democracy to avoid overthrow by the masses. This is the existence of small democracy and big oligarchy constituting major problem to the polity.

On the other hand, elitism is a theory of state power that examined power relations between the elite (a powerful few) and the masses (a weak majority) of the population of society. Pareto, Mosca and Michels believed that elites control state power and resources in societies due to their intelligence, skill, occupation of public positions and influences on corporate and public policy making and implantation machinery.

Importantly, internal conflict can cause a change in the membership of the elite class and a non-elite can upgrade to elitism through association with members of the elite or accumulation of wealth or



power. In one of the first detailed study of this phenomenon, Miches (1949) introduced “the iron law of oligarchy.” In that thesis, he noted that:

It is indisputable that the oligarchical and bureaucratic tendencies of party organisation are a matter of technical and practical necessity. It is the inevitable product of the very principle of an organisation (Michels, 1949: 35). Party and elected leaders have openly converted themselves into an oligarchy, leaving the masses who provide the funds no more than a duty of accepting the decisions of that oligarchy’ (Michels 1949: 145).

The situation in Nigeria presented a scenario where the rich used their wealth to finance and influence elections, appointments and recruitments into executive and legislative positions to work for their group interests. The situation led to suffocating and tight economic and political spaces for Nigerians outside the elitist class. Ake (1996) argued that indigenous political elites in Africa inherited absolute and arbitrary use of state power for wealth accumulation without development in their agenda. Politics and democracy cannot be extricated from the socio-economic development of a country. The development of any country is tied to the business and overall economic

functioning of the state. This in turn is controlled by a few oligarchs. We must look towards colonialism for any valid conceptualization of the unique nature of African politics. Indeed, the democracy of any political system that takes root from colonial arrangement certainly has an oligarchy embedded in its system of government (Ekeh, 1975). He further explained that the political class accepted “the principles implicit in colonialism but rejected foreign personnel that ruled Africa.

Ake ultimately contended that the issue is not that development accruable from democracy has failed in Nigerian and indeed Africa, the point is that development was never really on the agenda because the political condition was a major impediment. The key factor is oligarchy. However, Ake opined that democracy is a journey that must be undertaken. According to him, “Africa cannot deal with the crisis of underdevelopment without embracing democracy, at any rate, abandoning the legacy of authoritarianism” (Ake, 1996:82).

The People’s Democracy

Demo means ‘people’ and *cratos* means ‘to rule.’ The two terms combined refer to the people’s leadership. The leadership can be direct or through the people’s representatives. Democracy connotes a set of principles, a process and a system of governance. As a set of



principles, democracy represents rule of law, periodic elections, equality, justice, popular participation, fairness and other people-oriented values. As a process democracy connotes a transition from a one-man rule, oligarchy, aristocracy, dictatorship and other anti-people systems of governance to a government of the people in which the people determine their socio-economic and political destinies. As a system of governance, democracy entrenches a governmental order in which the majority of the population have the final decision on public issues without neglect to minority rights. The conception of *democracy*, like many such great terms, is subject to great contestation and dispute. As Bratton and Mattes (2000) aptly put it, “democracy is a disputed term.” Democracy requires greater emphasis on citizen capacities: the habits, skills, confidence, power, and authority (Boyte (2004). Such values are what oligarchy essentially tries to undermine. “Democracy involves having in place institutions, values and, more importantly, patterns of behaviour conforming to human rights, acknowledgement of the rule of law, enhanced transparency and accountability (Gordon (1997). Democracy is a system “for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide using a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Schumpeter (1947:269). The

democratic principle requires public decisions taken after due consultation with those to be affected by it (Archibugi and Marchetti, 2009).

Liberal Democracy

Democracy in Nigeria is an offshoot of neo-colonial politics of capitalist internationalism propagated by the United States and allies across the world. It is referred to as liberal democracy due to its liberal content of international capitalism which forbids all forms of hindrances to international production, distribution of wealth; movement of investment capital, information and communication and ‘peoples of all nations across the world. Liberal democracy became an international order to create neo-liberal states that would make national environments conducive for the establishment, expansion and consolidation of capitalism. It spread after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of that era’s phases of the Cold War between the Socialist East and Capitalist West international blocs. The system is a political branch of capitalism saddled with the responsibility to provide political protection to the capitalist system.

Oligarchy

Man’s quest to be more important than his fellow man resulted in the emergence of a few powerful individuals as rulers and dominants of social



formations. It intertwines with politics defending individual liberty, profiteering, and manipulation of superstructures to consolidate the existing economic order for the interest of the few who control and benefit from it. Oligarchy is basically the political processes and arrangements associated with a small number of wealthy individuals who are not only uniquely empowered by their material resources but set apart in a manner that necessarily places them in conflict with large segments of the community (often including each other) ...The oligarchies that have existed since the dawn of settled human history and that continue to exist today differ according to how those political challenges have been met (Winters, 2011: 39).

In other words, oligarchs interfere in politics and influence a country's political leadership to protect their wealth and the socio-economic and political orders that place them above the majority population. Otherwise, they may have their wealth diminished by the political lordship of the masses and effectively redistributed. Even in contemporary times, one single government policy can change the fortunes of an oligarch.

In summarizing this section, we must conceptually compare democracy and oligarchy. The two concepts are:

defined by distributions of radically different kinds of power. Democracy refers to dispersed formal political power based on rights, procedures, and levels of popular participation. By contrast, oligarchy is defined by concentrated material power based on enforced claims or rights to property or wealth. (Winters: 2013: 5).

Scholars have interrogated democracy in Nigeria and its failure to better the lots of the Nigerian people who are supposed to be the subject and owners of the democracy. Most of these studies are however based on the simplistic ideology and notion that the country's democracy is ideally a "government of the people and by the people." This has resulted in proffering recommendations from findings that do not address the root of the issues. Some other studies looked at the problem from the party perspective and attempt to link democratic development to party development. Ijere (2015), for instance, examined democracy and development in Nigeria using the sixteen-year rule of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) as a benchmark. The study argues that the lack of strong and inclusive institutions and adherence to the rule of law is the major factor that has hindered the maximization of Nigeria's full potential for economic growth, poverty reduction and human development.



A study by Ajayi and Ojo (2014) observed factors such as Nigerian's colonial background, ethnicity, leadership, electoral fraud, poverty and illiteracy as challenges of democracy in Nigeria. The paper also contended that all the above factors were pivoted around corruption in the electoral processes. Like many other such studies, the role of oligarchs in undermining electoral processes through all the factors the paper identified was not understood nor articulated. Many other studies on democracy in Nigeria take the conventional angle of electoral processes which again leaves out the root causes of such electoral failures. An example is Odusote (2014), a study on Nigerian democracy and the electoral process since amalgamation which drew lessons from the turbulent past. The study opines that Nigerian democratic and electoral history has been characterized by banditry, rigging, ballot stuffing, candidate imposition and other vices without adequately tracing the oligarchic root.

Democracy and Oligarchy

It is of paramount importance to specify that democracy has variances depending on culture and the underlying principles for establishing such a brand. For our purpose here, the people and liberal democracies are presented to elucidate the relationship between democracy and oligarchy. While the people's democracy

is opposed to oligarchy, liberal democracy, the way it is presented in the present capitalist states, is diluted to blend with oligarchic manipulations of the political structure to achieve capitalist intents. Winter and Page (2009) argued that democracy and oligarchy co-exist in the United States. Ordinarily, democracy should be people-oriented emerging from the people's culture to suit their life and is controlled by the people. This seems to be the original intent of people who call for democracy. However, an attempt to protect and expand economic empires sets oligarchs against the common political interests of the people and led to manipulation and corrupt practices of the political processes. Liberal democracy opens up the economy for a more powerful corporation to participate/dominate production and distribution of wealth in a way most developing states is unable to control. Some of the corporations use their finances to achieve control of the subsector where they operate by undermining the supreme rulership of the people. We can, therefore, argue that oligarchy perverts the people's democracy into the Liberal status to achieve oligarchic control of the political system. Through the instrumentality of the National Congress of British West Africa, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast (Ghana) and Nigeria elite demanded democracy from the British government to enable them to participate



in the governance of their countries (Obaro, 1977). It was an elitist affair and when they achieved political leadership, Ake (1996) observed that development was not on their agenda.

Though Diamond (1997) argued that African societies need time to learn democratic habits for democratic consolidation, insisting that this process must be gradual, that is only for alien democracy, otherwise, when the people fashion out their political system, they have nothing to learn but to implement and improve on the masterplan.

Indicators of Oligarchic Dominance over Democracy in Nigeria

Manipulation of Political Parties and Electoral Process

Major challenges facing political parties and the electoral process in Nigeria are the handiworks of Nigerian oligarchs. Their quest to influence public policies to favour their economic interests led instigate them to finance their ways into party machinery and the electoral process of the country. They finance political parties by providing the fund for their establishment throughout the country. They finance their conventions and continue to pay their bills until such party become big and self-financing. The financial contributions to the parties place them in the vantage position to dictate for the parties particularly when it decides who becomes the parties' candidates for election. Party official is

easily powerless when they indicate their interests otherwise they finance the removal of such official through courts cases or mobilization of party members to work against the official.

Similarly, when their candidates are chosen for election, they finance their campaigns, induce the electoral official to their favour and bankroll all court expenses on post-election suits. Such cases are on the increase in Nigeria due to an increase in the rate of oligarchic influence and domination of the political process. The situation leaves a small space for democracy and connotes a case of small democracy big oligarchy.

Influence on Public Officials

At the commencement of office by an official so financed, his hand is tie to the whims and caprices of such oligarch. Such an officer may be a supposedly representative of a constituency but in reality, he represents he who finances his election. The situation is similar to those recommended for appointment by the so-called political godfather/oligarchs. They never let officials face their official responsibilities without directives and demand from them. Some are meant to pay multiple folds of the money spent on the election. Disagreement with the godfathers usually leads to efforts to unseat the candidate. This is most times successful because they usually obtain implicating records against the candidate particularly when the system was being



manipulated in his favour. Such official is handicapped and works at the mercy of the godfathers leading to poor performance and failure to achieve public goals. Such a situation undermines his fundamental human rights and incapacitates him and give places democracy in a tight corner.

Policy Making and Implementation in Nigeria

Policymaking machinery suffers a great deal in the hand of such oligarchs. A different sector of the Nigerian economy and government is controlled by powerful oligarchs who see them as their birthright to be in charge of such sector. They influence recruitments and promotions and favour those who are ready to do their bids. With full control of the decision-making mechanism of the state system, the masses are powerless when it comes to public policies and implementations. Legislative machinery is designed in such a way that only the rich can finance a bill at the National Assembly. This places legislative bills at the hand of wealthy individual and groups leaving the masses at the mercy of their creator.

Little Democracy

In truth, there is no ideal democracy anywhere in the world. Even the classical Athenian democracy had its flaws and running with oligarchy. In the US and other more advanced democracies, the

people's choices and will are constantly influenced by oligarchs. One of the most contested issues in the presidential elections that brought President Donald Trump to power was the extent of the influence Russia had during that process. The dissatisfaction with the theory and practice of classical democracy within contemporary Western society is indeed manifest. There have been attempts to make democracy more participatory by involving the generality of the masses in the public policy decision-making process to increase the awareness of citizens to their moral and social responsibilities (Walker, 1966). However, this was not achieved due to the dissatisfaction of the dominant class and the helplessness of the dominated. It can therefore be seen that Western democracy had to also undergo stages of development and is still on the long journey of political development.

The case in Nigeria is worse than what obtained in the West. This is because western oligarchs and governments pay more attention to people's welfare and to that extent provide means for good living, even when they deprive the people of the ultimate decision of their lives.

Public policy is not the expression of the common good as conceived of by the citizenry after widespread discussion and compromise... In short, a classical



democratic theory is held to be unrealistic (Walker, 1966: 285) Periodic election of political leadership through the secret ballot; popular participation of all adults in the election process; choice of programmes and personalities in the elections; an orderly succession; openness of the society; an independent judiciary; freedom of the press to include freedom of ownership; institutional pluralism; a democratic culture and democratic spirit; and fundamental human rights (Obasanjo: 1989: 34).

Unfortunately, this standard is not in existence in Nigeria, even during the regimes of Olusegun Obasanjo as military Head of State and civilian President.

The foregoing notwithstanding, there is a small measure of democracy in the country. This borders on the democratic process and principles not based on democracy as a system. By a political process, Nigeria has defeated the era of military rule in the country even though military generals constitute a reasonable number of the political-economic oligarchs in the country. On the other hand, the principle of periodic election and adult suffrage is in place no matter the level of flaws that characterized these democratic features. Again, the justice system is on course despite oligarchic interferences. Candidates of the major opposition parties are totally out of the control of the ruling party despite the

incumbent's manipulation of the electoral process. This explains why the People's Democratic Party (PDP) can win many elective positions despite the government's intimidations. These are all praiseworthy development of the process of Nigeria democratic development. The above few achievements and challenges associated with the place the scale of democracy in Nigeria at a low level and oligarchy far above it.

Big Oligarchy

If democracy is little and the domineering system is an oligarchy, oligarchy is, therefore, big. A major part of the national life of the Nigerian republic remains under the control of money bags. Their individual and group interest is paramount in their mind. Man is by nature selfish and since man runs the affairs of the state, the state is also selfish and struggle for power to satisfy her national interest (Machiavelli, 1973). This perspective explains the reason behind the domination of the majority by a few who found chances in affluence and powers. They control a major part of the life of the republic and decide as Winters and Page (2009) observed, major public policies through the agents in government and leave minor ones for the government to use and serve the people. Oligarchy is, therefore, big in Nigeria and democracy small. The situation is a major challenge to the democratic development of the Federal Republic. The Caliphate



and major captains of industries and corporations are the forces dominating the socio-economic and political spheres of the republic.

CONCLUSION

The interplay of democracy and oligarchy created a scenario where oligarchy dominated economic and political environments and left a small and tight space for democracy. The situation is orchestrated by the enormous economic strength and self-centred nature of the Nigerian brand of oligarchy. Political docility and lack of coercion fueled by ethnic, religious and political cleavages kept the masses powerless and victims of the decisions of powerful few individuals. Oligarchy abounds across geographical regions but its negative effect on democracy and people are what make the excruciating effect on the system overt. The way oligarchs treat and regard democracy and people are the factors that differentiate them across the world. While the people's democracy is antithetical to oligarchy, liberal democracy seems to have co-existing character due largely to their common economic origin found in the capitalist system.

Progress to democracy in Nigeria lies with the people's ability to resist suppression because welfarist intents of the ruling class are not guaranteed and their orientation towards popular participation is overclouded by their

quest for wealth. A search for the people's democracy must be home-grown, otherwise, the future of the people in this present liberal order lies with their ability to increase resisting pressure on oligarchy. Oligarchy may be difficult to disappear in post-colonial societies but a good attempt in resistance can bring improvement in democratic and general development. The more the people resist, the more democracy improves. The push for democracy should be people-driven, otherwise, the pull against it dominates.

In summary, there is no perfect democracy. Nigerians, like other people in Africa, need to make concerted efforts to develop democracy because democracy is ultimately linked to socio-economic development. For oligarchy to diminish so that democracy may grow, several socio-economic and political factors must be pursued and attained to a reasonable extent. These include an increase in literacy, general income, strong state institutions and of course, civil society organizations. The importance of education in the entire process cannot be overemphasized. Lipset (1994) and Glaeser *et al* (2004) identified the importance of education in the democratic process.

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