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INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESS AND DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY IN NIGERIA

ALUKO BAYODE (PhD)
Department of Political Science and Public Administration
Adeleke University, Ede
aluko.bayode@adelekeuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

The Contemporary Nigerian State is being challenged by lack of progress and development as a result of pervading institutional weakness hence the fragile status of its democracy. Some reasons have been advanced by scholars for this ugly trend which include pervasive corruption, leadership deficit, weak legislature, inefficient policing, compromised judiciary, and the dependence of Nigeria's political economy on western capitalism. The main objective of this paper was to investigate and interrogate the cause of institutional weakness and democratic fragility in Nigeria. The study employed the dependency theory to anchor its work. This theory attributed the pervasiveness of institutional weakness and democratic fragility in Nigeria to unbridled dependence on the western capitalist system thereby giving room for arrested development of institutions meant to nurture democracy ab initio. The paper engaged desk research methodology and found that indeed, the unmitigated attachment of the Nigerian political economy to the apron strings of western capitalism had gone a long way to hamstring its process of growth and development. The paper therefore concluded that unless something drastic and urgent is done, Nigerian democracy may be heading for the rock. There is therefore the need for the review or outright reconstruction of the Nigerian state so as to allow the emergence of strong institutions that will constrain individuals in governance to confine to the dictates of constitutional provisions. It is only when this is done that Nigeria can be said to be threading the path of a consolidated democracy with strong institutions servicing a strong state. This is the only credible trajectory towards an unhindered and accelerated development.

Keywords: Institutional Weakness, Democracy, Democratic Fragility, Development, Consolidation.

Introduction

The Nigerian state since independence have been contending with myriads of challenges which had contributed in no small measure to its stunted growth and development thus leading to resultant emergence of weak institutions hence the democratic fragility status it had attracted over the years.. Some of the identified challenges include; poverty, unemployment, infrastructural deficit, unpatriotic/visionless leadership, docile and lethargic citizenry, among others. The resultant effect of this gap have been poor governance, weak legislature, compromised judiciary, poor policing system, uncommitted political elite to national ethos, biased constitution that is far from servicing the interest of a typical federal state such as Nigeria, and dependence on western capitalist system.

It is in this regard that that Azoro, et al (2021), identified "poor governance in Nigerian society resulting from leadership problems, pervasive corruption, and existence of multiple centres of loyalty base regime, ethnic and religious interest among others, all indicative of weak,

underperforming or non-performing institutions of government". There is no doubt that there exist a link between governance and weak institutions. Put differently, weak institutions cannot but result into poor governance because when institutions of the state are weak, delivering quality service to its citizens by the managers of such institutions becomes herculean. In Nigeria, for instance, the challenge of leadership, corruption, ethnic chauvinism and religious bigotry, uncommitted political elite and docile citizenry as earlier mentioned can be said to have accounted for why its democracy has continue to wriggle under the yoke of weak institutions. Strong institutions will however produce strong leadership driven by high ethical values which in turn takes care of issues of corruption, ethnicity and lethargic citizenry.

According to Olufunmbi (2019), "the importance of strong institutions in a democracy cannot be overemphasised". As she argued, "institutions are the governmental systems entrusted with making and enforcing the rules of a society, as well as regulating relations with other societies". Elements of strong institutions include, "political competition (free and fair election) which gives legitimacy to rulership, independence of judiciary, separation of power, rule of law, press freedom, accountable and transparent government". Given the aforementioned elements of a strong institution, it is evidently clear that Nigeria is far from being labelled as a strong state with strong institutions. As Olufunmbi (2019) further argued, "strong institutions are cornerstone of stable governments". Given this truism, Nigeria's democracy which an observer described as "pretending democracy" can be labelled as one that came across as fragile and weak hence the instability being witnessed in the management of its political economy.

Scholars have argued that strong institution makes democracy stable and consolidated. According to Babalola (2021), "a nation's political institutions are the bedrock of its sustainable governance". This attribute has worked in favour of advanced democracies such as USA, Britain, France, among others. Some of the attributes of strong institutions include viable and innovative legislature, honest police force, independent judiciary, independent press, vibrant private sector, and strong civil society which give life to democracy. According to Olufunmbi (2019), "if Africa, by implication, Nigeria has leaders that can build strong institutions, the democratic system will be strengthened and improved in spite of the weakness or the strength of the person in authority". However, a crucial point to add to this is that the constitution should be the grand norm designed to produce strong institutions which will compel individuals in governance to be subservient to provisions of the constitution. When institutions are strong, as it is obtained in developed nations, individuals are forced to obey the dictates of their offices as enshrined in the constitution. For instance, Babalola (2021) observed that "the strong independent judiciary of the United States stood its ground in denying or dismissing several of the President's electoral cases wherein he alleged massive fraud in the presidential elections without being able to prove a single instance of such". This indeed, typifies a classical example of a state with strong institutions. The Nigerian state could borrow a leaf from this if it truly wants to experience sustainable democracy.

Democratic fragility can be conceived as democratic weakness rooted in a dysfunctional state. Menkhaus (2010) in Aluko (2022) conceived of fragility as weakness which corroborates earlier submission on democratic fragility as democratic weakness. Vallings and Morreno-Torres (2005) in Aluko (2022) conceived of fragility as "ineffective states, those that cannot

and will not fulfil minimum functions of government". Democratic fragility therefore portends a democracy that is being threatened as a result of weak state and by extension, weak institutions, deficiency in provision of adequate security for its democracy and citizens in general, welfare services and rule of law, among others.

It is therefore noteworthy to emphasize the need for the protection of Nigeria's democracy through the sanctity of its institutions so as to arrest the current trend of the nation drifting towards the brink of democratic fragility.

Statement of the Problem

The challenges of institutional weakness confronting Nigeria's democracy are daunting and dates back to the period of colonialism. In the colonial situation, institutions that were imported and engrafted into the Nigerian state were the weak version of the original social structures at the metropolis. Institutions of state in the metropolis are strong hence the reason why democracy in these climes had witnessed stability over the years. However, in Nigeria, institutions of state such as the legislature, the police, Electoral Management Bodies (EMB), and the judiciary have been so compromised to the extent that democracy has been finding it herculean to consolidate. As a result, deficient leadership, pervasive corruption, unpatriotic political elite, docile and lethargic citizenry, among others, have become the order of the day. These challenges have become so endemic to the extent that weak institutional outlay in the Nigerian political space daily drags its democracy towards the praecipe of democratic fragility. The contemporary Nigerian state which had been bogged down by negative colonial legacies must be rescued and encouraged to rise in order to confront the challenge of institutional inertia so as to secure its democracy from the web of fragility in which it is presently being arrested.

Literature Review

Scholars have variously discussed the subject of institutional weakness in the literature as a major causal factor of democratic fragility. For instance, in their review of Andre Gunder Frank's (1967) landmark statement that "poverty in the developing countries is caused by the development of underdevelopment", Uchechukwu, et al (2019) observed that the scholar only limited the cause of poverty in developing countries to "external forces arising from imperialism". As they argued, it has failed to take into account, the internal dynamics of developing countries where political leaders employed the opportunity of existing weak institutions to entrench corruption and miss-governance.

Abbo, et al (2015) identified those indices that make for strong institutions as follows; "strong representative government; sound judicial system; and effective law enforcement". The opposite of these attributes becomes ideal for a weak state with weak institutions lacking in representative government, weak judicial system and ineffective law enforcement. These best describe the Nigerian state where rulers govern with impunity laced with underperforming legislature, ineffective law enforcement and a compromised judiciary.

Bull (2014) argued that "a common conclusion of studies on Central America's Democracies and political economy is that the weakness of institutions and the strength of elites are a main reason for the region's problems". This argument can be placed side by side with Nigeria's democratic experience where individuals hold sway in governance to the detriment of

institutions which are meant to control the 'powers' of these individuals. Azoro, et al (2021) identified "poor governance in Nigerian society resulting from leadership problems, pervasive corruption, ethnic and religious interests, among others, all indicative of weak underperforming and non-performing institutions of government".

Linz and Stepan (1996) in Aluko (2022) identified the three arenas of democracy in which a state must operate to qualify as a consolidated democracy and by implication, a democracy with strong institutions. These are, "existence of a state to coordinate institutions of democracy, completion of democratic transition process, and democratic governance by rulers who controls the apparatuses of government". In all of these indices of democratic consolidation, Nigeria has fulfilled the aspect that has to do with the completion of its democratic transition process which took place in 1999. Nigeria is however deficient in its ability to coordinate institutions of democracy as a result of its weakness hence the existence of ineffective/inefficient institutions in a fragile democracy.

Also, the style of governance the ruling elite who controls the apparatuses of government in Nigeria can be said to be far from being democratic. This is because, since the advent of democratic rule in 1999, the rule of law has been made to take the back seat thus allowing impunity to become the order of the day. Individuals in position of authority have become more powerful and stronger than the constitution (the source of weak, lame and impotent institution). These negative attributes have gone a long way to hamstring the growth process of democratic institutions in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars have anchored institutional weakness and democratic fragility status of developing countries on the theory of dependency. Farry (2016), argued that following Dos Santos (1970), one of the founders of dependency theory describes dependence as "a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected". The dependence theory have been utilised to criticise the modernization thesis which tries to justify the incursion of western capitalism into the peripheral colonial territory. According to the theory of modernization, it traces the trajectory of societal development from the agrarian rural set up through traditional to industrial and urban form of development. Modernization theorists therefore tend to justify the incursion of capitalism into hitherto rural and agrarian societies as a form of 'civilising mission' aimed at development.

On the other hand however, dependency theory tends to link the underdevelopment of developing countries to the dependence on the metropolis of imperial western capitalist nations which result into emergence of weak institutions hence a fragile democracy. Andre Gunder Frank (1967), one of the earliest protagonists of dependency theory, according to Kay (2011), "coined some memorable expressions such as the development of underdevelopment of the developing nations". In this regard, Gunder Frank in line with Samir Amin, Walter Rodney and Immanuel Wallenstein, argued that "western capitalism have contributed immensely to stifling the growth process of the developing countries thus paving the way for legacies of weak state and institutions that attracts the label of fragile democracies.

This paper therefore anchors its argument on the dependency theory to explain the cause of weak institutions in a weak Nigerian state hence the experience of a fragile democratic status.

Methodology

The paper employed qualitative method of data collection. In this regard, desk research method which involved the use of library, online articles and journals, and periodicals were engaged.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper interrogated institutional weakness and democratic fragility in Nigeria. In the course of its excursion of literature, the paper found the following as being majorly responsible for institutional weakness and democratic fragility in Nigeria. These include: poor governance as a result of leadership deficit, pervasive corruption, weak legislature, compromised policing system, weak judiciary and uncommitted political elite to national interest. Also, it found that the dependency of the developing nations on the developed western capitalist countries has gone a long way to negatively influence and arrest the development of peripheral nations thus allowing its institutions to become inertia in a fragile democratic setting.

The paper therefore conclude that unless something urgent and drastic is done to arrest the current trend, the Nigerian state may be heading for the rock where its democracy become a laughing stock among comity of nations. There is therefore the need for all hands to be on deck to review the Nigerian constitution so as to shift focus away from individuals in governance to institutions of government. It is when institutions are stronger than individuals that the process of development can be said to be set in motion.

Furthermore, Nigeria and other developing nations must set in motion the process of delinking from apron – strings of western capitalism to pave way for genuine home grown development strategy. The challenges of corruption and the non-commitment of the political elite to national interest must be dealt with frontally. One way of doing this will be through inculcation of anti-corruption ethos in the conscience of Nigerian citizens and getting the political elite to be more committed and patriotic towards the Nigerian state.

It is only when these are placed in the front burner that Nigeria can be said to be threading the trajectory of a consolidated democracy with strong institutions servicing a strong state. This is the way to go so as to attain an unhindered and accelerated progress, growth and development.

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