

## DEMOCRACY AND NON- VIOLENCE ISSUES IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*Democracy is a system of government which depends on the will of the people (coe.int). It establishes sovereignty in the people. This singular fact makes democracy a popular system of government around the world because it derives its moral strength and popular appeal from two key principles of individual autonomy, and equality. However, many democracies in the world have failed for not upholding the above stated twin principles that make for non –violence. From France to Cameroon, Great Britain to Nigeria, Israel and the Middle East, America to Russia, infractions trail the practice everywhere, notwithstanding the variant of democracy practiced. This sees the freedoms, peace, development and human rights propagated by the practice as elusive, and in many instances the news waves becoming replete with tales of violence, death, and woes as seen in Nigeria which had practiced parliamentary democracy (British style), before it changed to presidential democracy (American style) from 1979 till date. The practice seems somewhat to precipitate political violence, and this gets worse during every electioneering period as can be buttressed by the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Thus this paper on Nigeria’s democracy and non - violence issues, will rely on secondary data, participant observation, and elitist theoretical perspectives to attempt to analyze non - violence issues in Nigeria and success of democracy.*

**Keywords: Democracy, non-violence, elites, satyagraha, ahimsa, tenure elongation.**

## INTRODUCTION

The practice of government has reverberated in academic literature from earliest of times when humans began to live in society and maintain relationships amongst themselves. Some of these can be found in the works of early and modern philosophers, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Jean etc who wrote on governments across civilizations, beginning from the Greek city states (crf-usa.org). Humans have experimented with different systems of governments with a view to finding what works for each society and makes for the greater good of the citizens; thus we have, Totalitarianism, Aristocracy, Absolutism, Monarchy, Imperialism, Feudalism, Kingship, Capitalism, Socialism, Communalism, Communism, Theocracy, Democracy and all others (study.com).

Democracy was practiced in city states of ancient Greece (Britannica.com), and gradually gained acceptance in most countries of Europe. These European colonizers transported and imposed democracy on every conquered peoples including Africans, who originally had their own systems of governments at rudimentary and more sophisticated forms like chiefdoms, empires (Shillington, 2005) etc. Democratic practice in Nigeria presupposes a system which is alien to the people, enthrone capitalism, experiment on the elitist theory, and breed violence. However, a proper attention to democracy and nonviolence issues in Nigeria such as equality, autonomy, inclusivity, democratic participation, respect for human rights, rule of law etc. will promote national integration, unity and social cohesiveness (coe.int.)

### Conceptual Framework

**Origin of Democracy** –The term appeared in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC in Greek city states, notably Classical Athens to mean “rule of the people”, in contrast to aristocracy, which means “rule of an elite” (Wilson, 2006). Western democracy, as distinct from that which existed in antiquity, is generally considered to have originated in city-states such as those in Classical Athens and the Roman Republic, where various schemes and degrees of enfranchisement of the free male population were observed before the form disappeared in the beginning of late antiquity.

To (Morris, 2013), democracy is generally associated with the efforts of the ancient Greeks, whom 18<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals considered the founders of Western civilization. These individuals attempted to leverage these early democratic experiments into a new template for post-monarchical political organization. These 18<sup>th</sup>-century democratic revivalists extensively succeeded in turning the democratic ideals of the ancient Greeks into the dominant political institution of the next 300 years.

Modern representative democracies attempt to bridge the gap between Rousseau’s depiction of the state of nature and Hobbes’s depiction of society as inevitably authoritarian through ‘social contract’ that enshrine the rights of the citizens, curtail the power of the state, and grant agency through the right to vote (Olson, 1993). While they engage populations with some level of decision-making, they are defined by the premise of distrust in the ability of human populations to make a direct judgement about candidates or decisions on issues.

In virtually all democratic governments throughout ancient and modern history, democratic citizenship was initially restricted to an elite class, which was later extended to all adult

citizens. In most modern democracies, this was achieved through the suffrage movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**Definition of Democracy** –According to the Oxford University Press, a democracy is a political system, or a system of decision-making within an institution, organization, or state, in which all members have an equal share of power (OED).

Democracy is a form of government in which the people have the authority to deliberate and decide legislation (“direct democracy”) or to choose governing officials to do so (“representative democracy”).

The notion of democracy has evolved over time considerably. Throughout history, one can find evidence of direct democracy, in which communities make decisions through popular assembly. Today, the dominant form of democracy is representative democracy, where citizens elect government officials to govern on their behalf such as in a parliamentary or presidential democracy (Tangian, 2020).

**Principles of Democracy** –In varying degrees, basic principles of democratic government are identified around the world, which have also become a part of the constitution of democratic societies. Some of these principles are:

**Citizen participation:** It is the key role of citizens in democracy. It is not only their right, but it is their duty. It may take many forms including standing for election, voting in elections, becoming informed, debating issues, attending community or civic meetings, being members of private voluntary organizations, paying taxes, and even protesting. Participation builds a better democracy.

**Equality:** The principle that all people are equal. Equality means that all individuals are valued equally, have equal opportunities, and may not be discriminated against because of their race, religion, ethnic group, gender or sexual orientation.

**Human Rights:** All democracies strive to respect and protect the human rights of citizens. Human rights mean those values that reflect respect for human life and human dignity. Democracy emphasizes the value of every human being. Examples of human rights include freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, the right to equality and the right to education.

**The Rule of Law:** In a democracy no one is above the law, not even a king or an elected or elected President. This is called the rule of law. It means that everyone must obey the law and be held accountable if they violate it. Democracy also insists that the law be equally, fairly and consistently enforced. This is sometimes referred to as “due process of law,” (Street Law, Inc.).

**Regular, Free and Fair Elections:** One way citizens of a country express their will is by electing officials to represent them in government. Democracy insists that these elected officials are chosen and peacefully removed from office in a free and fair manner. Intimidation, corruption and threats to citizens during or before an election are against the principles of democracy. In

a democracy, elections are held regularly every so many years. Participation in elections should not be based on a citizen's wealth. For free and fair elections to occur, most adult citizens should have the right to stand for government office. Additionally, obstacles should not exist which make it difficult for people to vote.

**Control of the Abuse of Power:** Democratic societies try to prevent any elected official or group of people from misusing or abusing their power. One of the most common abuses of power is corruption. Corruption occurs when government officials use public funds for their own benefit or exercise power in an illegal manner. Various methods have been used in different countries to protect against these abuses. Frequently the government is structured to limit the powers of the branches of government: to have independent courts and agencies with power to act against any illegal action by an elected official or branch of government; to allow for citizen participation and elections; and to check for police abuse of power.

### **Types of Democracy**

Types of democracy refer to pluralism of governing structures such as governments and other constructs. It can cluster around values. For example, some like direct, electronic, participatory, real, and deliberative democracy strive to allow people to participate equally and directly in protest, discussion, decision –making, or other acts of politics. Representative strives for indirect participation as this procedural approach to collective self-governance is still widely considered the only means for the more or less stable functioning of mass societies (Diamond and Plattner, 2006).

### **Direct Democracy**

A direct democracy or pure democracy is a type of democracy where the people govern directly. It requires wide participation of citizens in politics (Christians, 2009). A popular democracy is a type of direct democracy based on referendums and other devices of empowerment and concretization of popular will.

### **Representative Democracies**

A representative democracy is an indirect democracy where sovereignty is held by the people's representatives.

- A liberal democracy is a representative democracy with protection for individual liberty and property by rule of law.
- An illiberal democracy has weak or no limits on the power of the elected representatives to rule as they please.

### **Types of representative democracy include:**

- Electoral democracy – type of representative democracy based on election, on electoral vote, as liberal democracies. Also, electoral democracy can guarantee to protect personal freedoms (Berggen and Gutmann 2020).
- Dominant party system – Democratic Party system where only one political party can realistically become the government, by itself or in a coalition government.
- Parliamentary democracy – democratic system of government where the executive branch of a parliamentary government is typically a cabinet, and headed by a prime minister who is considered the head of government.

- Presidential democracy – democratic system of government where a head of government is also head of state and leads an executive branch that is separate from the legislative branch.

### **Comparative Perspective of Democracy in Developed and Undeveloped Nations (US, UK and African Nations)**

Democracies are functions of institutions because, while it remains true that a country is governed by democratically elected leaders at all levels, the variant of democracy practiced will determine whether democracy is institutionalized or no. This is why there are advanced democracies in the West (United States, United Kingdom), while Africa, the Middle East, some parts of Asia, and East Europe may be said to be not so advanced. Whilst there are no perfect democracies in the world, the United Kingdom and the United States both have fully-functioning democracies.

Crucial to the American system is the idea of checks and balances, meaning that no one part of government is more powerful than the others. The United Kingdom has the idea of parliamentary sovereignty, by which no part of government can challenge the parliament. In fact, even the monarch takes an oath at coronation recognizing that Parliament, not the king or queen, is the source of power in the United Kingdom (study.com).

The 1993 constitution declares Russia a democratic, federative, law-based state with a republican form of government (Politics of Russia). The Government of Russia exercises executive power in the Russian Federation. The members of the government are the prime ministers, the deputy prime ministers, and the federal ministers (Chapter 6). It has its legal basis on the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the federal Constitutional law "On the Government of the Russian Federation" During Putin's first term as President (2000 -2004), Freedom House rated Russia as "partially free" with poor scores of 5 on both political rights and civil liberties (1 being most free, and 7 least free, Rough Justice, 2003). Putin has served continuously as president or prime minister since 1999 (Timeline, 2019).

A critical appraisal of the pace, practice, pattern, priorities, problems and prospects of Nigerian democracy shows that, though Nigeria is governed by democratically elected leaders at the federal and state levels, Nigeria is yet to institutionalize democracy after a century of existence as a political entity. Some of the impediments to the institutionalization of democracy in Nigeria after more than half a century of political independence are: the country's colonial background, deep rooted ethnicity, complacent and spendthrift leadership, military incursions in the electoral process, electoral fraud, wide spread poverty and high illiteracy level, and corruption which has become a way of life in Nigeria (Ajayi and Ojo, 2014). It is difficult to conceptualize Nigeria's democracy; at best one can opine that what Nigeria is practicing is Autocracy (Jato, 2019). Ideally, democracy should be non-violent, majoritarian, and all inclusive. But in Nigeria, democracy is violent as the polity is polluted with primordial sentiments of tribe, ethnicity, religion, oligarchic entitlement, and elitism. There is endemic poverty and illiteracy, wide spread corruption and impunity. There is maladministration of the electoral process severally by a puppet electoral umpire; as observed in systemic electoral fraud and malpractice, violence, criminality, selfishness, huge campaign financing.

Botswana, one of Africa's most stable countries, is the continent's longest continuous multi parity democracy. It is relatively free of corruption and has a good human rights record (BBC News). Ghana, a nearby neighbour of Nigeria, has a robust democracy with high scores in electoral process because electoral administration is fully independent (Aliyu and Ambali, 2021).

Nigeria's electoral process is markedly unconstitutional; it is not seamless neither is it all inclusive. Also tenure elongation through dubious methods of regime change have marred the Nigerian political development which can be traced to 1966, when the military intervened in national politics and Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon promised to restore civil rule by 1974. Both the military and the civilian regimes have distorted what would have been the nation's orderly political evolution due to bad governance. Even when the military political class succeeded in organizing a transition to civil rule in 1999, the civilian government under President Obasanjo had recently made a similar attempt at elongation of tenure of rulership by means of a third term. A lack of inclusivity can be seen where a part of the Nigerian State cannot have a shot at leadership at the highest level, and it is alright. The lack of internal democracy in political party administration has robbed Nigeria of a robust political experience as seen in the recent People's Democratic Party (PDP's) handling of party agreement on consensus candidate and Party Chairmanship position in the 2023 election process (Emordi and Audu, 2006).

The ethos of Public dialogue in public policy is lacking as seen in General Babangida's (Military President), Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of 1986, and the current Naira Redesign Policy by President Buhari. By and large, these unrepresentative policies breed anarchy in Nigeria's body polity. The democratic practice of lobbying is also not very well practiced as majority of bills are either executive or legislative sponsored bills, or almost none are private or group sponsored bills. In the 2023 general elections empirical evidence of data reveal the state of Nigeria's democracy. The question resounds: WHICH WAY NIGERIA?

### **The Concept of Non – Violence by Gandhi (SATYAGRAHA)**

The philosophy of MAHATMA GANDHI who lived in 1869-1948, (Nanda, 2019) is popularly defined as seeking TRUTH through love and non-violence. The evolution of Satyagraha by Mahatma Gandhi has made him the most significant figure in the world. Non-violence in social life is not peculiar to the Indian people. History is replete with leaders who have advocated nonviolence. However, India is unique in having a tradition of nonviolence. There is in India the belief that "all life is one". If all life is one then there can be no violent action against it and it is India's greatest contribution to the world thought.

Notably, non-violence is not new, but Gandhi brings a change to the age-old philosophy of Ahimsa. He brought forth the view that nonviolence should affect man in all walks of life. Satyagraha, Gandhi believed is the way to solve the problems of mankind. The aim of Gandhi was to seek after Truth. In seeking after Truth he wanted to see how he could be of the greatest use to humanity. He pointed out several times that the "greatest good of all" and not the "good of the majority" is to be sought. To Gandhi the means and the ends must be pure. Satyagraha is based on the fact that Truth alone is or can be victorious, For Gandhi, there is

no religion higher than Truth. Truth means truth in action, speech and thought. Truth abhors prejudice, evasion, secrecy, deception, exaggeration, suppression or modification of reality.

### **AHIMSA**

Another aspect of Satyagraha is “Ahimsa” or “non-violence”. This means positive non-violence or comprehensive love. Ahimsa means larger love, love even for evil-doer. To use violence against any being is to deny spiritual unity with him. Violence is the mark of bestiality while non-violence is the law of love. Those who are non-violent do not resort to that position out of cowardice, as Gandhi points out that nonviolence does not arise out of cowardice, hatred or expediency.

Two important offshoots of Satyagraha are non-co-operation and civil disobedience. It is different from passive resistance because it is not a weapon for the weak. It is a force that may be used by individuals as well as communities. “It may be used as well as in political as in domestic affairs. Its universal application is a demonstration of its permanence and inviolability.”

There must be non-violence in the private life, group (leader), organization (mass movement). Every Satyagrahi should use the instruments or tools of persuasion, negotiation and discussion (Quartey).

The Gandhian non-violence is a social instrument in the struggle for justice and freedom. The faith in non-violence stems from the feeling of solidarity of the whole mankind against conflict and injustice. Today injustice has assumed various forms and non-violent action is to be directed against it.

### **Forms of Non-Violence Actions**

**Dialogue** – its importance is in understanding the motivations of opponents. The willingness to listen to another’s point of view is largely dependent on reciprocity. In order to be heard by one’s opponents, one must also be prepared to listen.

**Sit-ins** – tactics of nonviolence in which protesters sit down at the site of an injustice and refuse to move for a specified period of time or until goals are achieved.

**Boycott** – a campaign of withdrawal of support from a company or institution which is committing an injustice such as racial discrimination.

**Civil Disobedience** – the act of openly disobeying an unjust, immoral or unconstitutional law as a matter of conscience, and accepting the consequences, including submitting to imprisonment if necessary, to protest an injustice

**Demonstrations** – gatherings and protest activities organized to build support for peace, justice or social reform.

**Strikes** – organized withholding of labor to correct injustice.

**Negotiation** – using grace, courage and intelligence, engage the other party with a list of injustices and a plan or addressing and resolving these injustices ([thekingcenter.org/about](http://thekingcenter.org/about)).

### **Democracy and Non-Violence**

There is a fundamental compatibility between democracy and non-violence. Violence has no relevance in a democratic structure which is essentially based on tolerance and understanding. Democracy must have something to do with people. And if the people refuse to solve their problems at all levels without violence, democracy's cause is lost. The Government must live up to the ideals of democracy which the people created. Otherwise the choice of inevitability will be disastrous. Citizenship is possible in an atmosphere that does not smack of tension. The democratic situation is a potently human activity which includes looking at the person's point of view. Nonviolence is a powerful way of diminishing differences between the minority and majority communities for the larger interests of the country, democracy or humanity itself. With the larger canvas of human groups and attainments, non-violence assumes a critical importance "while democracy relies on non-violence for its functioning, progress and fulfillment, non-violence calls upon its advocates to use only democratic methods and rely on the power of love to persuade and convert the opponent" (Dellinger, 1965).

According to Gandhi, democracy means the "art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various sections of the people in the service of the common good of all" (Gandhi, 1961). For the successful functioning of democracy, he laid emphasis on the moral and spiritual character of the people." Gandhi believed that the "Swaraj of the masses" can never come through violent means. Thus without non-violence a democratic government cannot function.

### **Theoretical Perspective - Elitist Theory of Democracy**

Elite theory is postulated by Vilfredo Pareto (1848- 1923), the Italian sociologist and economist. By definition, elites are a group which influences power and re-defines the norms of society (Ajayi&Ojo, 2014). They have pre-eminence over other members of the society by various acts of deference (Hodder, 1978 in Ajayi&Ojo 2014). The definition and deference of the elite may have informed Pareto's conclusion that "history is a graveyard of aristocracies". (Bottomore,1964). What then is the content and context of the egalitarianism vaunted by democracy? The concept of equality espoused by democracy is theoretical hence its dismissal by William Letwin as the 'leading fetish of our time' (Letwin, 1983). Even in a leading democracy like Britain, as Andrew Harding has pointed out, most people only engage in democracy when they vote in general election every four or five years. While admitting that to an extent, voices are lost or misplaced, Andrew argued that "more often than not, they are simply not heard" (Harding, blogs).

In his penetrating study of American political system, John Lees asserted that 'elitist and egalitarian traits have always existed in American society", (Lees, 1969). Indeed, Thomas Patterson made the point more explicit. According to him, despite the lofty claim that all men are created equal, equality has never been American birthright. He cited the 1882 ban which



made it impossible for the Chinese to immigrate into the United States. The suspension and other sundry discrimination against the Chinese and other Asians, which were not ended until 1965, were premised on the assumption that the Chinese were an inferior people (Patterson, 2006). Also, the Rosa Parks incident of 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama is a well-known one (Harris, 1980). However, despite the foregoing, it must be conceded, as Lees rightly argued, that politicians in the United States have always recognized the importance of the common man with a strong commitment to liberty (Lees, 1969). From the analysis, it does appear that while government may be for all, it cannot be by all. As Julius Nyerere has pointed out, in every form of government, as far as the masses are concerned, power is something wielded by others – even if on their behalf (Nyerere, 1974). Indeed, Charles Anderson defines politics simply as ‘making choices on behalf of other people’ (Anderson, 1977).

It is undeniable that representative democracy has replaced direct democracy and since modern democracy is capitalistic, the political state represents nothing but the rule of a propertied oligarchy.

### **Elitist Theory and Nigerian Democracy**

If the principle of representative democracy is worthwhile and workable in other climes; its practice in Nigeria is faulty and fraudulent. In Nigeria, no one represents or protects the interests of another: individuals, whether in the cabinet or parliament, can hardly be described as the representatives of the people. Indeed, as Suberu has pointed out, a fundamental feature of contemporary Nigerian democracy is the deep and profound distrust of Nigerians for their elected representative (Suberu, 1988). This is not surprising given the endless abortion and frustration of the aspirations and hopes of the people by successive Nigerian governments. It would be recalled that in Nigeria, the main justification for military coups are almost always given as widespread dissatisfaction with the political and economic policies of the ousted regime. The usual claim is that democracy has been stifled, assaulted, malnourished and brutalized while the economy has been recklessly mishandled to the detriment of the masses and to the selfish advantage of a small elite – the representatives of the people! Yet, government by all is neither possible nor practicable because, as Frank Bealey has pointed out, with vast numbers of people in the modern nation state; direct participation in decision making by all is impossible (Bealey, 1988). Ironically, democracy flourishes when and where citizens enjoy basic freedoms, have a voice in how they are governed and understand the workings of their governmental system. Not so in the Nigerian scene and scenario!

### **Findings**

On the whole it might be concluded that, democracy portends an abstract and illusive form of government because the assumptions on which it rest are almost always difficult of fulfillment. The concept has therefore been assailed with criticisms from both adversaries and admirers. The adversaries (e.g. Plato, 328 – 347 B. C.) asserted that while democracy may be possible, it is inherently undesirable. Scholars like Robert Michels, hold the view that while democracy might be desirable if it were possible, it is actually, inherently impossible. (Dahl, 1989) The admirers support democracy but criticize it on some important respects, though the greatest merit of democracy is its recognition of the duties of government and the rights of the governed. Agreed that democracy may not be entire; its strength lies in the possibility of adjustment and re –adjustment of institutions in accordance with prevailing socio-political

and economic conditions and realities. Democracy, like any other concepts or forms of government, has its own limits and possibilities. There is no doubt that democracy has brought untold succor or what Ronald Manzer terms 'political goods' (Manzer, 1984) to humanity particularly in the Western world. Conversely, the pattern and practice of democracy in Nigeria has widened the gap between the rich and the poor, fuelled corruption, exacerbated ethnic and religious unrest, provoked unprecedented agitations by ethnic militias, led to the intervention of the military in the democratic process, strangled the economy and impoverished the masses.

### **Conclusion**

Democracy is supposed to be a non-violent approach to governance, but Nigeria's political issue and complicity makes it violent as seen, in electoral fraud, thuggery, vote buying, rigging through the democratic process. Tenets of democracy refer to good governance which emphasizes on leaders/ followers relationship. Involvement of (traditional leaders), civic and voter education are all part of non-violence approach, and the need to shift from money oriented democracy to people oriented democracy. Though Nigeria's democracy is styled after that of America, the non-observance of the tenets of democracy has typified it as more of Autocracy, this, notwithstanding that, even in pre-colonial times, most communities in present day Nigeria were democratic in ideals of governance. It is concluded that bad governance in a democracy breed criminality, whilst upholding the tenets of democracy is a factor for peaceful coexistence and peaceful.

### **Recommendations**

- Political elites should be re-orientated towards emphasizing things that unite rather than things that separate them.
- Politicians should take the issue of building and integrating the disparate groups in the country very seriously.
- The electoral umpire to be made institutionally independent and autonomous from the executive branch of government; its members are outside the executive. It has and manages its own budget, and is not accountable to a government ministry or department. It may be accountable to the legislature, the judiciary or the head of state.
- There is need for societal re-orientation towards holding public office holders accountable. Nigerian education should incorporate civic and electoral knowledge and content.
- There is need to build the culture of peace among the citizenry as this will tone down the culture of violence that people have already imbibed especially under the military rule.

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