

## Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in the Nigerian Fourth Republic: A Reappraisal

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**Abstract:** The need to institutionalize the culture of good governance in Nigeria informs the position of this study. Thus civil society becomes the available tool for the realization of this all important objective within the framework of any democratic governance. The study therefore attempts do an exposition of civil society organization vis-à-vis its transformatory roles as an arbiter to redeem the Nigerian society from total collapse. The study wades through a framework of analysis, civil society challenges, an historical review of civil society in Nigeria, structures, methods and effectiveness, respectively. The researcher also draws his final analysis by way of suggestion to the effect that civil society must remain an autonomous social entity for the survival of Nigeria's nation state, the essence of which is to boost further research.

**Key words:** Civil society, democratic consolidation, good governance, nascent democracy, structure, effectiveness

### INTRODUCTION

The dire need to institutionalize the culture of good governance within the regime of a democratic governance is the cornerstone of civil society initiatives, especially in emerging democracies such as Nigeria. Thus, civil society which is seen as operating from the public space is a reinforcing mechanism for effective governance in the overall interest of the majority of the people. Civil society therefore becomes fully manifested when it is allowed to blossom bearing in mind its relative autonomy from both state apparatuses and the machinations of selfish end of governmental survival. Thus, consolidating the gains of the ongoing democratic governance in Nigeria has been viewed by Momoh (2003) as a transformational process which emanated from the agitations from the entrenchment of civil liberties in Nigeria during the military regimes of the 1980's, to the agitations for the entrenchment of democratic governance in the 1990's, which culminated in the birth of statist organizations in Nigeria.

However, with the enthronement of democratic governance in Nigeria on May 29, 1999, there is no doubt that civil society in Nigeria has been persistent in the agitation for good governance in Nigeria considering the experience of civil dictatorship in the present dispensation arising from the long years of military dictatorship which has negatively shaped the political culture of Nigerians. Thus, Akindele (2003) stated that:

“ today, civil society faces greater challenges and more onerous responsibility in helping to consolidate democracy and make it sustainable as well as irreversible than it did in the struggle to enthrone it ”.

From the above background and from the conceptions of Ajayi (1993) and Gboyega (1997) which discusses the struggles of civil organizations in enlarging the democratic space in Nigeria, thereby contributing to the consolidation of democracy; the question that therefore comes to mind: is to what extent has the civil society in Nigeria helped in the consolidation of democracy considering its historical antecedents, structure and methods for influencing governmental policies to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people?

To be able to unfold the analyses surrounding the above question, this study is focused at discussing the subject matter as it is relevant to the Nigerian State through an unobtrusive method by unfolding a compatible theoretical framework, looking at the historical perspective of civil society in Nigeria, discussing civil society and democratic consolidation in Nigeria, the way forward in the Nigerian Fourth Republic and stating concluding remarks.

**Theoretical framework:** The civil society organizations as an aspect of social conjuncture presupposes hope,

aspirations, struggles and, if you like, the revolutionary tendencies inherent in the various social formations in the society. Therefore, the perceived result of this form of struggles propels an outcome to the extent that the wishes of the people prevail in place of minority rule. Significantly, this informs the writer's use of the theory of political development as a point of departure, the essence of which is to stimulate further research.

The theory of political development is a transformational as it is a revolutionary mechanism for social change in any democratic society whether big or small (Camus, 1955). Embedded in this theory are all the past revolutions of history and all the standards, ethics and good neighbourliness in the society, which one lives. The tendency here is to say that an average social unit is propelled by a particular goal objective. Therefore, we can as well say that any such goal that is so desperately desired creates political power either to influence the wielders of such powers over to ultimately assume the leadership of such powers. Either ways, it is obvious that there is a clear-cut dichotomy between the need to influence tendencies of arbitrariness while at the same time exhibiting some measures of disinterestedness in the affairs of governance (Chazan and Naomi, 1994).

Whatever direction it may take, the struggle to regenerate our socio-economic front is of utmost interest in this crucial discourse as it goes a long way to test our cherished institutions and our belief system in their relationship with the workings of government. It puts our country in a market place of ideas and ideologies, the essence of which is to propel healthy competition towards national integration, growth, development and sustainability (Obadere and Ebenezer, 2002).

The theory of political development as a compelling force for societal change seeks to ask questions on the activities of institutions in a nation-state and how such activities affects directly or indirectly, the lives of the people. The tendency, therefore, is to link the Nigerian society with various multi-dimensional conflicts ranging from religious, socio-economic and political dimensions. These problems have remained the most threatening factors in the corporate existence of Nigeria in recent times.

Eventually, the prevailing trends in the Nigerian political climate is the prevailing interests of socio-cultural groups viz: The botched Oodua people's congress, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSSOP), the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), to mention but a few. It can be argued that the activities of the civil society groupings have rather threatened the survival of Nigeria's nascent democracy in no small ways in recent times (Maxine, 1994). Ultimately, the experiences we have in Nigeria today is a range of accommodated grievances

within the political system, which is a direct consequence of weak governance. Such a system requires both sympathy and understanding. In a nutshell, the dynamic aspect of political development theory can best be captured when one appreciates the complexities in human affairs within which the polity acts. This is why several political problems are generated either at the level of the rulers and the ruled, respectively. Politics in a nation state therefore becomes the business of coping with role differentiation, ideas, notions and perceptions of the people as an integral part of the society in order to create an enabling environment for sustainable democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic and beyond.

#### **THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN NIGERIA: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The conception of this writer on the foregoing analysis on civil society and democratic consolidation in Nigeria presupposes that civil society itself does not exist in a vacuum. Hence, the genealogy or evolution of civil society organizations in Africa could be traced to the colonial era where most African nationalists resisted or attempted to scuttle the stronghold of colonial domination and subjugation in the various colonial territories around the continent.

Hopkins (1973), Ikime (1977), Jordan (1978) and Thompson (1977) all agree that various Nigerian nationalists namely, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Awolowo, Herbert Macaulay etc, contributed immensely towards the blatant resistance of the shackles of colonialism in Nigeria. Thus these erudite nationalists per excellence demonstrated clearly Nigeria's love for freedom and sovereignty by the ways they reacted to British attempts to gain economic and political control of Nigeria. This onerous attempt to obstruct colonial domination was further boosted by the formation of socio-cultural formation such as Egbe Omo Oduduwa, the Jamiyar Mutanin Arewa etc, as an inbuilt mechanism to checkmate the excesses of external misrule in Nigeria. It is interesting to note though, that most of these cultural groupings and hegemonic configurations were later transformed into political institutions as a means of sectional agitations. For example, while the Pan-Yoruba cultural organization, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, metamorphosed into Action Group, the Jamiyar Mutanin Arewa transformed into the erstwhile Northern Peoples Congress (Hidgkins, 1971).

Taking a cue from the foregoing commentaries, we can rightly ascertain that civil society formations in Nigeria have a very long history of existence in this part of the world. Consequently, the present status of Nigerian civil society conglomerates could be said to be an appendage of historical development of vibrant social

structures in the polity in order to guide against the subversion of the will of the people. The tendency here is to link up our modern day democratic tenets to a society characterized by checks and balances to forestall arbitrariness in the society relative to governance issues. We may at the same time attest to the fact that civil society organizations thrive only in free democratic and liberal society where the leadership has the general interest of people at heart. The notion in this thinking is to say that military regimes in Nigeria have been found to be inimical to civil society formation and so, could only attempt to suppress the wishes and aspirations of the people. On the contrary, democracy and democratization is open to criticism and allows inputs from the public space, which is an aspect of democratic consolidation as it relates to a wide spectrum of opinion polls. By implication, therefore, the various interests are largely articulated in the scheme of the nation's policy making processes for an enhanced socio-economic and political development in Nigeria.

#### **THE CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION: STRUCTURE, METHODS AND EFFECTIVENESS**

The existence and prevalence of civil society organizations in Nigeria beginning from the first generation to the present third generation is of utmost interest to this researcher.

In the first place, the first category comprises trade unions, student's bodies, medical associations, the bench and traders associations, to mention but a few. In between this include other pro-democracy groups in the early 1980's to contend with the excesses of the military junta of the Babangida Regime and includes the Civil Liberties Organizations (CLO), the Legal Aids Council of Nigeria (LAC), the Human Rights Law Service (HURI-LAWS) etc. all these civil society organizations thrived with the support from international donor agencies to persist in their quest for virile democratic space in Nigeria (Greene, 1987). Obviously, the third generation of civil society organization in Nigeria takes the form of Non-Governmental Organization (NGO's), which has literally taken over the various social functions of government. Such functions include the provisions of health facilities, economic security and enhancement of legal rights, education, political mobilization, employment generation and other consensus. Although the need to carry out these tasks must be done in alliance with other forces in order to help combat all forms of oppression and inequality in Nigeria (Bratton, 1989).

Essentially, however, the civil society has a role to play in the consolidation and sustenance of democratic culture in Nigeria. This is done by way of managing conflicts arising from societal fracas and clash of interests. The original methods employed by civil society's organizations are typically reflected in some form of workshop or what is called the "joint problem-solving" models which is a rather done in collaboration with other transformative school of thought in conflict resolution field (Dew, 2002). By extension, the expansion of civil society's "toolbox" for conflict resolution in the Nigerian nation state also involves the use of skills acquisition and trainings as well as the adoption of traditional approaches such as the use of village elders or hybrid models of Nigerian and western techniques. Basically, civil society organizations as a way of consolidating democracy and democratization in Nigeria adopts the following principles for effective accomplishment of goals: Organizing training workshops to develop cadres of individuals in fundamental conflict areas capable of employing these methods; producing comprehensive reports on imminent tension underway or resolve as well as providing broader public education through the media (Bingel, 1987).

It can be argued that for the civil society to carry out its functions effectively, then its working structure must as much as possible remain centralized. It is worthy of mention however, that for example, Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) central concern over government infiltration is an important motivation for choosing authoritarian political structures. In addition the pervasiveness of these structures among Nigeria NGO's can be attributed to several factors, but by far the most important appears to be simple professional expediency. The NGO's generally have a functional service or activity that they seek to pursue and a central political structure offers a streamlined and efficient framework for leaders to implement their vision.

However, the argument in favour of authoritarian status of civil society organizations remains persuasive. However, they seem rather problematic especially for those groups involved in the promotion and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. In any case, however, not all civil society organizations are active or possess the much-needed political cultures for the sustainability of democracy and democratization in Nigeria. In the Table 1, the vibrancy of any civil society organization depends to a large extent, on the persuasion and philosophy behind it. Thus, while most civil society groups are pro-government, others are pro-people, which by implication determines its activeness or a corresponding passivism, on the part of the organization.

Table 1: A tabular representation of political culture and democratic promotion of civil society organizations in Nigeria.

Civil society group	Level of democratic political culture	Level of commitment in democratic promotion
Civil liberties organization	High	Active, sustained
Constitutional rights projects	High	Active
Association for a better Nigeria	Low	None
Niger delta wetlands center	High	None
Center for advanced social studies	High	Passive
National council of women's society	Moderate	None
Gender and development action	High	Passive
Center for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN)	High	Active

Source: Dew (2002)

From the Table 1, it is obvious that the commitment of any civil society group in the promotion of democracy is a function of factors such as government control measures, the workings of the constitution, the possibilities of allowing for opposition to mention a few. These no doubt are essential indices for democratic consolidation in Nigeria (Imam, 1993).

Thus, we can infer from the table that for example, those civil society groups namely; the Civil Liberties Organization, Constitutional Rights Projects, Center for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN) etc, are those civil groups whose structures are essentially immune to political control. On the other hand civil society groups such as the erstwhile Association for Better Nigeria, Center for Advanced Social Studies and Gender for Development Action etc. are directly the prerogative of government in either ways, the researchers contend that while the former exemplifies an open and centralized structure of administration, the latter represents a closed or controlled social structure, respectively. As a matter of fact, the two administrative structures therefore become two opposition forces for the collapse or sustainability of Nigeria's fledging democracy. The effectiveness of such institutions in democratic consolidation therefore, in the researchers' submission is to remove the direct control of government interference and all manner of infiltration from any quarters in order to guarantee a viable democratic institution in Nigeria's Fourth Republic and beyond.

### THE WAY FORWARD

The intentions of all informed mind in Nigeria's political landscape is the survival, consolidation and sustainability of our young democracy. Any contrary initiative outside this scheme of work would mean negotiating for collapse of our national political, economic and socio-cultural structures. Incidentally, there is the dire need to propel the nation forward in order for Nigeria to meet the standards of civilized democracy (ies) of Europe and America, or an equation of democratic cultures in

Nigeria similar to those of other genuine democracies in the sub-Sahara Africa within the shores of the black race.

Eventually, ensuring democratic survival and consolidating Nigeria's Fourth Republic entails the institutionalization of horizontal and vertical linkages between the structure of government and other civil groups to guarantee value consensus in the affairs of running the state structures. This will no doubt enhance political stability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Besides, civil society organizations in Nigeria deserve a fair share of autonomy in order to enhance its subsistence. Excessive government intervention in the affairs of civil society enclaves is inimical to its development and progress. Government, as matter of necessity must allow room for opposition as input-output model of policy formulation and implementation processes. This will ensure that all forms of arbitrariness in policy executions are strictly kept in constant check in the overall interest of the nation.

Finally, the insulation of civil society's functions from those of government circles ensures that government is held accountable to the aspirations of the people. This is in line with Nigeria's quest for accountability, probity and responsibility to the wishes of the people in the society. It is therefore important to stress that this scenario must be maintained for the purpose of ensuring good governance and democratic survival in Nigeria's nascent democracy.

### CONCLUSION

The foregoing thesis is a pointer to the utmost personal conviction that no democracy can survive without the harmonious working relationship between government and the people. Afterall, the aphorism that democracy and the principles of democratic sovereignty reside in the people is true to tell. Hence, the people who constitute the cream of civil society organizations are supposed to be fully integrated into the political system by way of contributing their own quotas to nation-building without necessarily being engulfed in State politicking. This is essential ingredient for the corporate existence, survival, consolidation and sustainability of our nation's democracy in all its ramifications.

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