Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in democratic consolidation in Nigeria is an indisputable fact, if the nation’s quest for sustained democracy, good governance and development must be actualized. Democratic governance was established in Nigeria on the most part, due to civil society activities. Nevertheless, there has been genuine concern as to the continued effectiveness of civil society in consolidating democracy in Nigeria. Against the pessimism about the capacity of these organizations to fulfill their democratic potentials, this paper examined some operations of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Nigeria, from the 1990s to date. Utilizing some indicators such as: ensuring credible elections, influencing public policy, responding to social interests/empowering citizens etc, it was noted that, though CSOs have achieved some success, these are as small as a drops of water in an ocean. The concepts of civil society and democracy as well as some problems militating against the performance of CSOs were discussed. It was suggested that for the CSOs to consolidate democracy in Nigeria, they must among others suggestions, expand their structure to accommodate the rural areas, seek a more reliable/independent source of funding, develop more internal democracy and capacity, while the state must recognize the CSOs as partners in sustaining the nascent democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: civil society, democracy, consolidation, state, citizens, good governance

INTRODUCTION

The concept of civil society in Nigeria and the struggle for political independence dated back to the colonial era, though repeated attempts to sustain and consolidate democratic government faltered. However, the 1980s witnessed the activation of their operations in the quest for democratic governance. Governments, hitherto unaccountable and despotic, became even more authoritarian as they embarked upon unpopular, belt-tightening programs. The abuse of office, executive lawlessness and reckless political decisions became the order of the day, as the state became the property of the ruling class. This activated a civil society, determined to check the erosion of rights, freedom and civic values. The conjecture was characterized by intense restlessness among citizens and civic groups, which demanded for democracy, participation and justice.

According to Ojo (2011), many of these groups like the Campaign for Democracy (CD), Civil Liberties Organizations, (CLO), Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDHR), Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), etc, were instrumental in the restoration of civil rule. It would be recalled that between 1993 and 1999, in collaboration with the Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC), these groups fought the Nigerian military to a standstill. They mobilized students and workers for civil disobedience, strikes and protest marches across the country. Many in their ranks were killed and maimed, while some lucky few were able to make good their escape into exile. In recent times in Nigeria, CSOs executed diverse programs such as voter education, election observation, campaign finance monitoring, election tribunal monitoring, electoral reform advocacy, conflict mitigation, access to justice, public interest litigation, budget tracking, constituency outreaches as well as research and documentation in thematic areas of democracy and governance. These initiatives have made some impact on Nigeria’s nascent democracy, as reports of activities carried out by CSOs have become the barometer through which international organizations and governments assess the democratic temperature of the country. (Ojo,2011) The resurgence of ethnic and religious conflict all over the country has once again fueled pessimism concerning not only the future of democracy in Nigeria, but also the existence of Nigeria as a political entity. The way the Nigerian government resolves these challenges will determine whether Nigeria’s fledgling democracy is transient or sustainable and, more importantly, whether Nigeria disintegrates or reconfigures itself as a nation-state. In the light of these concerns, it has become imperative to reconsider the concept of civil society as a possible catalyst to Nigeria’s democratic consolidation. This paper set out to discuss how this theorem can hold in the Nigerian state, bedeviled by corruption, poverty, ethno-religious crisis and other socio-political impediments, which is different from the West, the citadel of democracy.

Theoretical Discuss on Civil Society

There is no general consensus on the definition of civil society. However, according to Imade (2007), Aristotle defined civil society as a “public ethical community of free and equal citizens, under a legally
defined system of rule”. In this definition, it was hard for Aristotle to separate civil society from the state. For Aristotle, the state and civil society are intertwined. John Keane, drawing on the works of Adam Ferguson and Thomas Paine, delivered a polemic against viewing the state and civil society as one entity. His contentions were essentially centered on the premise that civil society plays a vital role in aggregating private interest and concomitantly attenuating state authority. As such, it is different from the state in its roles, composition, shapes, and contours. This approach found an intellectual ally in Alexis de Tocqueville’s writings on democracy in 19th century North America, which emphasized the importance of civil associations for the creation and maintenance of democracy. (Imade 2007)

Imade (2007) further viewed Civil society as a source of counter-hegemonic social movements, concerned with political and societal actors, playing by the rules of the political game and thus seeking to legitimize the state, but not to win control over the state. On the contrary, Hegel was extraordinarily critical of the supposed contribution of civil society to the success of democracy. Hegel viewed civil society as a source of conflict that can spill over into the larger society. His argument is supported by the premise that not every organization in civil society works for the success of democracy; some actually work to undermine democracy. The Oduduwa People’s Congress (OPC), and The Arewa People’s Congress (APC) in Nigeria, are great examples of Hegel’s view.

Mutfang (2003) views civil society as a wide range of association and other organized collectives, capable of articulating the interest of their members, molding and constraining state power. According to him, their demands provide inputs for the democratic political process, which at times are aggregated by political parties. Their approval or disapproval of what goes on in government contributes to its accountability. He further postulates that a country which is well endowed in this respect is well positioned to democratize and ensure good governance. It is in this same vein that a weak civil society is often used to explain the failure of democratization.

Gold (1990), on his part, defines civil society as a whole range of social groups that seeks to operate independently of the state, such as private business enterprises, labor unions, trade unions, professional associations, religious bodies, student organizations etc. His inference is that civil societies are not only independent of the state, but as interest groups, they push forward their demands which might contradict that of the government and could be either specific or general. Diamond (1999) views civil society as that realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, largely self-supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order and a set of shared rules. He further stated that it is distinct from society in general and that it involves citizens acting together and collectively in the public sphere, to express their interest, passion and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state and hold local state officials accountable. Diamond thus distinguished civil society from the society in general. Basically “interest” remains the defining factor, because it is the defined interest that constrains members to act collectively in actualizing their objectives. These interest in some cases runs contrary to state policies.

Diamond (1999), further ascribes certain functions to civil society in a democratic set-up. These include providing the basis for the limitation of state power. It is supposed to supplement the role of political parties by stimulating political participation, promote the development of political attribute and creating channels other than political parties to articulate, aggregate and represent their interests.

Uchendu, (2000) however stressed that civil society is rooted in the notion of “natural law”. The central hypothesis being that man is not by nature ordered towards society, rather he orders himself towards society and promoted by self interest. These could be seen from the view expressed by the social contract theorists as Thomas Hobbes, John Locks and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Strauss, (1972), pressing further, stated that the “desire for self-preservation is a powerful passion that makes itself the basis of civil society”. In other words, Strauss makes natural law a sufficient basis for all rights and duties in society and derives man’s civil duties from the right of self-preservation. Thus, the state advances politically, economically, socially and otherwise only when there is a strong civil society or it can boast of one.

Helin, (1996), in the light of the above, sees civil society as a concept used to describe a dynamic process of constructing and reconstructing political space normatively in order to accommodate new patterns of political participation outside the formal state structure and institutions. The idea of political space suggests that the polity is one of the many spheres of society and of political action. The empirical validity of civil society therefore, rests on the fact that society is a bundle of capacities, which functions best when it permits or admits other sectors into the arena of political and social action.

Civil society is therefore an indispensible tool in the consolidation of democracy due to the fact that citizens can actualize their goals through their operations in the state. It has been able to show too, that the law of natural right is the precursor to the
development of civil society, though in Nigeria and other third world nations, they came up as a result of dissatisfaction with the state.

THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

According to Drèze and Sen (2002), democracy, in Ancient Greek means ‘rule by the people’. It is now universally accepted that democracy requires more than elections and majority rule. In addition to the exercise of basic political rights, like the right to vote and holding of free and fair elections, democracy involves
- Respect for legal entitlements;
- Respect for the right to free expression (and uncensored media);
- The right to associate freely and hold public discussions;
- The right to organize political movements of protests.

According to Edigheji (2005), a classical definition of democracy was offered by Huntington who conceives a political system as being democratic:

“to the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections, in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote”.

This became the dominant way in which democracy was conceived. Despite the fact that scholars might have emphasized different aspects of it, there is a general consensus that liberal democracy has some basic principles, namely; citizen participation, equality, political tolerance, accountability, transparency, regular free and fair elections, economic freedom, control of the abuse of power, a bill of rights, the separation of the powers of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, accepting the result of elections, human rights, a multiparty system and the rule of law.

Edigheji (2005) further posits that electoral democracy advances social and political rights. However, this concept tends to give greater premium to the professionalization of public policy, with a strong emphasis on political parties and civil society. This approach loses sight of the fact that citizens make democracy.

Boye (2004) aptly captured the adverse implications for citizens. According to him:

“When politics become the property of professional elites, bureaucrats and consultants, most people are marginalized in the serious work of public affairs. Citizens are reduced to secondary roles as demanding consumers or altruistic volunteers. Moreover, with the transformation of mediating institutions..., such as civil society think-tanks ... [this] became technical service providers - citizens lost all stake and standing in the public world.”

Consequently, the question of democracy has largely neglected issues of economic justice - basic needs, such as access to food, shelter, medical care and housing. In the absence of equal opportunity for all citizens to these essentials for human existence, the equality being stressed in liberal democracy is defeated.

Gordon (1998) poignantly captured that danger for democracy:

“Democratic citizenship is undermined if there is too great a contradiction between the egalitarian norms of a democratic polity and the inequalities of individuals and groups in civil society. Glaring inequalities undermine democracy in two basic ways: first, by fuelling social discontent and political instability and, second, through the persistence of poverty, by excluding more or less extensive sections of the population from access to the political process and its fruits.”

Awa (1991) argued that democracy must be made to deliver some economic empowerment and a higher state of living for the people. A democracy that cannot deliver on the basic needs of the people will be short-lived. Thus in the view of some scholars, socio-economic justice is at the heart of democracy.

To maximize results, however, citizens will have to organize themselves to be able to participate in networks of consultative decision-making. The CSOs have a task of not just ensuring that liberal democracy thrives. They must ensure that it also encompasses improving the citizens’ socio-economic conditions in a way that will lead to a qualitative improvement in their material conditions. This is the heartbeat of all developing nations like Nigeria and the focus of this paper.

Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

In assessing the role of civil society in consolidating Democracy in Nigeria, certain indicators were utilized. These include:

A. Ensuring credible Elections
B. Guarding against democratic threats.
C. Influencing public policy
D. Responding to Social Interests/ Empowering citizens

Ensuring credible Elections

Igbuzo (2011) noted that the 1999 and 2003 elections saw CSOs conducting voters’ education programs. Citizens were mobilized to come out to vote for candidates of their choice. Unfortunately, citizens came out but were disappointed when they realized that in some cases, votes did not count. Despite this, there is a need for CSOs to build more efforts on voters’ education, because, it is basic to engaging
other strategies. Igbeuzo (2011) further stated that CSOs indeed trained some citizens and communities on the protection of mandate in preparation for the 2007 elections. This, according to him, involved a series of tools and strategies that citizens could use to engage political parties, security agents and electoral officers to prevent manipulation of electoral franchise. However, Ojo (2011) revealed that the 2007 elections and bye-elections were characterized by massive rigging, ballot snatching, violence and other corrupt practices. The late President, Musa Yar’Adua, actually admitted that the elections were flawed, despite the inputs of CSOs in the system. Furthermore, during the preparations for the 2011 elections, CSOs embarked on voters’ education. Some other CSOs deployed thousands of observers to follow through and report on the electoral process. Ojo (2011) noted that some members of the civil society also shed the toga of being armchair critics by joining the political fray to contest elections. Examples are; Governors Adams Oshiomole and Kayode Fayemi. Nevertheless, it was observed that there were violent protests in the North, as the Northern political elites claimed that the elections were rigged by the ruling party. Many lives and properties were lost in the carnage. This implies that the CSOs need to step up on voters’ education in Northern Nigeria. The challenge in this regard, however, has been the persistent religious crisis and insecurity in that part, which has made it difficult for CSOs to have the needed results.

Guarding against Democratic Threats.
Ojo (2011) stated that ex-President Obasanjo’s administration had attempted to tinker with the Nigerian constitution in 2005/2006, to insert a tenure elongation clause, but the plot was primarily shot down by the parliamentarians with pressure from the civil rights groups. Thereafter, in 2010, CSOs rose to the occasion to demand for the recognition of the then Vice President G. Jonathan as the Acting President, when late President Musa Yar’Adua was ill disposed abroad. CSOs such as the Save Nigeria Group and Enough is Enough Group actually seized the initiative and demanded for a resolution that will give due recognition to vice president as acting president. This led to the adoption of the now popular ‘Doctrine of Necessity’ by the National Assembly in March 2010. (Igbeuzo, 2011). It should be noted that the CSOs need to cover more grounds in this role. For instance, they have not done much to curb the unprecedented corruption among the ruling class, which has become a great threat to the survival of democracy in Nigeria.

Influencing Public Policy.
Five key policy areas will be examined;

i. Human Rights-Child Labor and Human Trafficking- Here, children are exploited and forced to work to supplement family incomes. The consequence is that the child is unable to access education, which hinders his or her development. CSOs working on human rights and children’s rights issues partnered with the state for the enactment of the Child Rights Law. The legislation has been passed in 11 states of the Federation. (CSI,2007) The CSOs need to work towards success in the remaining states. Secondly, People involved in the human trafficking, export young people across for purposes of prostitution and related forms of exploitation. According to a study conducted by CSI (2007), CSOs responded to this through advocacy campaigns. The establishment of the National Agency for the Prohibition in Trafficking of Persons (NAPTIP) indicates some success by CSOs. This notwithstanding, it is strongly expressed that state actors need to recognize CSOs as partners for meaningful impact in other spheres of human right abuses such as the boom in the sale of new born babies in parts of the country.

ii. Right to Life and Properties; Reacting to the spate of bomb blasts by the Boko Haram Islamic sect and the wanton destruction of lives and properties in northern Nigeria in recent times, Nigerian CSO, the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), said the federal government’s failure to prevent the continuing violence and unnecessary loss of lives was a serious breach of its international obligations to protect citizens’ rights to life (PANA,2011). The organization’s agitation has received international attention. However, it has been observed that the CSOs were unable to embark on aggressive street protests, which could have drawn more support in the fight against terrorism, which is now the greatest threat, not only to democracy, but the corporate existence of the Nigerian state.

iii. Monitoring the National Budgeting Process- According to CSI (2007), CSOs have established the Budget Law and the fiscal responsibility initiative to help monitor the process. They are also working with the legislature to develop inclusive budget laws at national and regional levels. Despite these initiatives, it is still early to evaluate the effectiveness of CSOs in the national budgeting process, since they have only been active in this area since 2003.

iv. Campaign for Legal Reforms in the National Assembly-; The recently passed Freedom of Information Act would have been a mirage but for a CSO called Media Rights Agenda, which alongside others, sponsored a private member bill on the issue at the National Assembly. (Ojo,2011) An ongoing struggle of CSOs is the campaign for a new constitution for the country through the convocation of a sovereign national conference (SNG). This has not been achieved because the issue has been given an ethnic coloration among the CSOs. (Ikubaje,2011)

v. Guarding Against Unpopular Policies; Kunle (2012) observed that when the federal government unilaterally removed subsidy on petrol or Premium...
Motor Spirit (PMS), with its attendant increase in fuel prices and hardships on the citizens in January 2012, CSOs, led by the NLC, mobilized Nigerians from all walks of life for what they described as the “mother of all protests”. The government reversed the policy to N97.00 /litre, in favor of the citizens, thereby forestalling unnecessary pressures that could jeopardize the democratic process. However, nothing has been done on the issue of gross mismanagement and corruption in the oil sector, which prompted the fuel crisis in the first place.

Responding to Social Interests/ Empowering Citizens

According to a study conducted by CSI (2007), CSOs have been involved with issues related to poverty, illiteracy, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, environmental degradation. For instance, 89% of respondents in the study show that CSOs were involved in the provision of micro-credit programs for women, building networks and coalitions of women at local level, to encourage participation in governance, provision of home care and support for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). However, this success is mainly in the southern part of the country, as the north has to contend with numerous religious and socio-political unrests, which hinders these initiatives there. CSI (2007) also stated that the activities of CSOs have led to increased awareness among widows’ rights and the elimination of traditional laws relating to widows in the South-East region. More efforts geared at ensuring better gender related legislation would ensure more sustained positive outcome.

Problems of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) In Nigeria

In spite of the roles of the CSOs have played, these organizations are faced with problems and challenges that limit their operational efficiency.

1. Disconnection from Rural Organizations:- CSOs activities are mostly restricted to the federal government level. They lack national spread. Most of these organizations are concentrated in Lagos and a few other state capitals in the country. This anomaly makes it difficult for majority of the Nigerian population, which live in rural areas to appreciate the role they play, imbibe their doctrines and through the process, develop political consciousness and confidence to resist inducement from politicians. (Ikubaje, 2011)

2. Lack of Unity:- Divisions among the Nigerian civil society along the ethnic and regional lines have not helped its democracy advocacy. This has led to disunity and disagreement among the Nigerian CSO practitioners in term of decision making and unity of purpose. The internal contradictions within the membership make it difficult to agree on common positions during the period of engagement with the state. According to Ikubaje (2011), such inherent divisiveness weakens efficiency and makes the associations vulnerable to penetration by government agents.

3. Inadequate Funding:- Most Nigerian pro-democracy CSOs are donor dependent and the focus of foreign donors on democracy in Nigeria have expanded from supporting pro-democracy organizations to include the support for democratic institutions like the legislature, judiciary and other democratic institutions. This fiscal factor has also reduced the activities and impacts of some pro-democracy CSOs in contemporary Nigeria.

4. Government Patronage:- Most often, the Nigerian private media, under the umbrella of the NUJ, rely heavily on government patronage (advertisement) for survival and their independence has been seriously compromised for the above reason. There have also been claims that the NLC leadership was compromised by the government in the recent 2012 strike/mass protests against the withdrawal of subsidy on petroleum products.

5. Lack of internal democracy:- The lack of internal democracy in most of the Nigerian CSOs makes it difficult for members of these organizations to learn democratic values/norms within their organization. (Ikubaje, 2011) Thus, they cannot adequately inculcate this principle to citizens.

6. Lack of Skills for CSOs:- The civil society organizations are also faced with lack of capacity in terms of knowledge, skills and methods of advocacy. It is expected that any organizations that wish to engage the state must be well equipped with superior knowledge and articulation of stronger points. This is still absent in many of the civil society organizations in Nigeria (Ojo, 2011).

7. Corruption and Personal Enrichment:- There have been accusations on corruption, ranging from lack of transparency in the utilization of donor-funds to outright embezzlement/conversion of foreign donations to CSOs to personal use. This tends to weaken the CSOs’ moral right to engage the state. It also hinders people of integrity and value from associating with them. The impact of their advocacy for a change is also limited, because it is stated that he who comes to equity must come with clean hands.

8. Lack of State Support and Partnership:- The relationship between CSOs and the state is largely characterized by suspicion and tension. (CSI, 2007) For the most part, state officials have viewed CSOs as competitors of power, influence, and legitimacy in the public sphere rather than as partners enhancing development in society.

CONCLUSION

It must be realized that a civilian government does not necessarily equate to a democratic government. Thus, the need for CSOs to become more actively involved in the democratic project has become a political demand. It is also pertinent that these CSOs become virile, articulate, cohesive and focused to
engage the state, mobilize the people and provide a credible platform that will aid the quest for the establishment of a durable and dependable democratic order. CSOs in Nigeria need to become more national in their spread and membership in the range of issues that they tackle, taking on broad rural as well as urban concerns across the length and breadth of Nigeria. This will transform the CSOs to credible and popular political force that will be difficult for the politicians to ignore or brush aside.

It is important that the civil society organizations ensure that their internal procedures and organizational structures conform to the highest ethical standards. Probity, accountability, transparency and a culture of binding commitment to good corporate governance should be their watchword.

These organizations must also fine-tune their method of advocacy such that their messages would be well received by the political elites and well appreciated by the populace. Operationally, civil society organizations should seek alternative funding sources outside the state. This way, they will be able to maintain their autonomy. They must include the creation of autonomous programs as opposed to donor-driven programs; cultivating democratic practices and values, intensifying networking and sharing of information within CSOs as well as improving internal governance mechanisms.

Lastly, the revolution in digital technology has transformed both the Nigerian media and civil society groups. Internet analysis of ongoing political events has opened a new channel for public advocacy. Televisions stations have begun to broadcast live, the National Assembly hearings and that has increased public awareness and transparency. Media outlets, which were hitherto hounded by the political actors, have found some protection through the Internet, both for publishing sensitive stories and reprinting Internet-based content for which the government cannot prosecute them.

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