

KARL POPPER'S VISION OF DEMOCRACY AS THE IDEAL FOR NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The practice of democracy in Nigeria to a large extent is devoid of democratic ideals to the point that one can hardly term Nigeria a democratic nation. Karl Popper presents a systematic vision of an ideal democracy which if applied has a way leading Nigeria out of her quagmires. This vision of democracy entails not just free and fair electoral process but it is devoid of bloodshed and gives power to the people to change their leaders: it does not conceive of criticism in an offensive pattern but dwells on it as a problem-solving approach; it strengthens institutions of democracy with pragmatic conditions for effective democratic practice; it creates avenue of respect for individual and diversity; it also paves the way for the avoidance of suffering and violence. The qualities of Popper's vision of democracy is antithetical to what is obtainable in Nigerian's approach to democracy; to this end it is argued in this work that Popper's vision of democracy is a way forward for Nigeria to be delivered from pseudo-democratic practices. Based on the Popperian understanding of criticism as a way of heralding the new. In this research, a dialectical critical realism research method would be utilized. Ultimately, Popper's vision of democracy remains a resource for an ideal democratic direction.

Keywords: Pseudo-democracy, Criticism, Election, Leadership, Institutions, Bloodshed

Introduction

The effort to adopt democracy as the status quo for the Nigerian government have on several occasions been muffled by military intervention, with the emergence of the Fourth Republic democracy has now been practiced for almost two decades. The problems of democratic practice in Nigeria ranges from the obscure electoral process, sedentary democratic institutions, the absence of separation of power and inability of the entire system to with the conditions of democratic practices. Karl Popper's vision of democracy could be a solutions to the problem inherent in Nigeria's current approach to democracy, this is because some of his ideas of democracy captures a lot of loopholes in Nigerian practice of

democracy. For example, elections in Nigeria associated with the militarization of the process, thuggery, violence, and bloodshed to the point that elections are tantamount to war, on the contrary, Popper's vision of democracy entails a process of election without bloodshed. Another example is the predominance of ineffective democratic institutions which is antithetical to systematic and dynamic functioning of democratic institutions embedded in Popper's vision of democracy. The thesis of democratic practice in Nigeria is antithetical to Popper's vision of democracy and as such Popper's vision stand as a possible solution to the problems inherent in Nigeria's approach to democracy. Once the contents of Popper's vision of democracy is made a reality by adherence to its principles, Nigeria would be a better place and tremendous progress and development would be made in different ramifications of governance.

Liberal and democratic ideas among other philosopher may be opted for as ideal for democratic practice in Nigeria but Popper's vision of an ideal democracy has better option for Nigeria once efforts are put in place to practice it. John Locke for example in his *Two Treatise of Government* presents his vision of an ideal government. For him the purpose of government is to form a commonwealth for the protection of natural rights of people. This natural rights include right to life, liberty and property. Government by its laws establish check and balances. "It is only through the law that people are assured of equal, fair and impartial treatment and are protected from arbitrary exercise of power by the government" (Locke, 1960, p. 97). Even though Locke's idea of the ideal government is relevant to Nigeria, it does not capture the reality in Nigerian context directly as Popper's view does.

For Jean Jacque Roussea in his *The Social Contract* the ideal government is that which enact laws that reflect the general will as it represents the true will of each person. This idea is laden with limitations and its application in Nigeria will likely encounter a lot of difficulty because of the multiethnic nature of Nigeria. Rousseau's position in Popper's view is irrational may likely pave way for totalitarian. For Popper the most important thing in any social scenery is the individual and not the body politic. Popper therefore advocates for a political theory that acknowledge the centrality of individuals (and reason), and at the same time one that tries to unite these individuals into an 'open society'. Other philosophers vision of democracy may be preferred but Popper's vision of

democracy is likely to stand a better chance in ameliorating the democracy in Nigeria.

Research Method And Theory

This essay adopts the dialectical method that was developed in the 19th Century by German Philosopher, G.W. F. Hegel. Dialectic in Hegelian philosophy entails triplicity of the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The thesis is often contradicted by an antithesis, while the synthesis synchronizes the thesis and antithesis to establish a much better state. The dialectical method espoused by Hegel was not actually developed as a research method, he did not use the terms thesis-antithesis-synthesis to describe his approach, yet it is this formulation that is popularly used to describe his method (Kaufman, 1988). In using the Hegelian dialectic approach for this essay, we shall use the philosophical realism theory. Philosophical realism, in general, is “the view that entities exist independently of being perceived, or independently of our theories about them” (Phillips, 1987, p. 205). According to Bryman (2012, p. 29), there are two major forms of realism; the Empirical realism which states that there is a perfect or very close correspondence between reality and the term used to describe it. While Critical realism on the other hand recognizes the reality of the natural order and events discourses of the social world by holding that “we will only be able to understand – and so change – the world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events and discourses” (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 2).

The second form of realism is more relevant to our approach in this essay, it is worth noting that critical realism was developed by Roy Bhaskar and has advanced into a philosophic research method within the social sciences, its use of ‘dialectical critical realism’ accords the structures that are often researched to have real, ontological basis that is independent on the researchers. The combination of Hegelian dialectic and Bhaskar’s critical realism equals ‘dialectical critical realism’, this combination defines the research method for this essay. Bhaskar presented this approach by adopting the Hegelian model of dialectical debate composed of the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, but goes beyond this model by establishing a fourth level in the dialectical procedure that leads to action for, or advocacy for change (Bagley, Sawyerr, & Abubaker, 2016).

In focusing on the dialectical critical realism, we shall expose the situations of democracy in Nigeria by identifying certain thesis that defines its structure.

These thesis shall be paired with Karl Popper's vision of democracy as the antithesis while synthesis shall be identified as the contextualization of Popper's vision of democracy in Nigeria. This is because accurate practice of Popper's vision of democracy demands contextualization for it to be effective in a country like Nigeria. Embedded within the contextualization of the Popperian vision of democracy are advocacy for change and pragmatic action. By this process, this essay meets the prerequisite for dialectical critical realism.

Thesis Of Democracy In Nigeria

It is worth noting that several thesis can be identified with the practice of democracy in Nigeria as a means of simplifying and understanding it, but we shall present only three as follows:

Religious And Ethnic Origin Determines Who Should Rule:

One of the principles that determine who should rule in Nigeria is the principle of zoning which focuses on the religious, regional and ethnic background of the candidate. This principle was enshrined in Nigeria political system as far back as 1979 during the Second Republic, it was termed a rotational system. The zoning principle as it is practiced in Nigeria determines political leadership position not based on merit or ideology but on ethnicity, religion or region. One of the reasons for opting for such archaic principle is to avoid marginalization, in a country like the United States of America where Barrak of the minority group became the president is not because of zoning. The argument that present zoning as a principle is meant to ensure equity. This argument does not hold water because zoning is the altar where competence and professionalism are sacrificed for religion, region and ethnicity. Audu(2010) is of the view that zoning is undemocratic but remains the tenable option for Nigeria. He further held that:

Rotational presidency or zoning are not constitutional requirements and to a large extent not even democratic. However, it remains about the best option due to Nigeria's large ethnic formation, primordial tendencies, and complexity. It takes away fears that arise out of marginalization and gives everyone or group a sense of belonging. It is against this backdrop that most Nigerians would rather support the zoning arrangement as it stands today remains (p. 21).

Since it is evident that zoning is unconstitutional and undemocratic, it remains an unwritten law that is often appealed to whenever competence and merit are about to be sacrificed for zoning in the name of protecting the minority, yet the minority is not protected either are due attention given to all ethnic minority groups because of the unwritten law and principle of zoning. The emphasis of zoning which is an undemocratic principle can pave way for the democratic claim of Nigeria to be termed a pseudo-democracy.

In sacrificing competence and merit on the altar of zoning, some of the zoned positions are the President, Vice President, Senate President, Deputy Senate President, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives. At the state level, several positions are also zoned, the local government is not excluded from this fiasco.

Bloodshed Heralds The Emergence Of Leaders Via Election

It may sound so obscure to present this as a thesis of democracy in Nigeria even though the reality is undeniable. Elections in Nigeria have become a synonym for war both in the approach of the Federal Government and that of the citizens. On the part of the Federal Government, the current administration deployed the Inspector General of Police, eight Commissioners of Police, forty personnel including two helicopters, thirty armoured personnel carriers and three hundred patrol vehicles for the Osun governorship election that took place on September 22, 2018 (Adepegba, 2018). These number of security personnel is only required in a case of war. Paradoxically a such number of security personnel were never sent to Benue state or Plateau state during the frequent attack of the terrorist group under the nomenclature of herdsmen. On the part of the citizens, election time is period to search for haven because of violence associated with the election. Politicians have sustained a perpetual worst form of an electoral process characterized by ugly incidents of political thuggery and violence, electoral malpractices both at political party level and general elections.

Violence and incidents of war are not just on the day of the election but before and after the election. For example, the Human Right Watch has it on their website that the aftermath of 2011 elections witnessed the death of up to 800 people in Northern Nigeria. In his assessment of the 2003 elections Awopeju (2011, p. 531) held that:

US-based Carter Center concluded that “it is not possible for us to make an accurate judgment about the outcome of the presidential election” It had been tagged by the Human Rights Watch as an “abject failure.” The elections were more pervasively and openly rigged than the flawed 1999 elections. ... “It is doubtful whether [...the] elections can only be considered to be reflective of the will of the people.

The assessment of the electoral process has not changed from the above views. It is getting worse to the point that one can confidently conclude that election is tantamount to war in Nigeria. Beside the war-like atmosphere associated with the election, areas that seem peaceful during the election are often bedeviled by vote buying. The citizens who accept to trade their vote are to blame in the electoral process in Nigeria.

In all, bloodshed, violence, thuggery, militarization of electoral process, vote trading heralds the emergence of political leaders to a large extent in Nigeria. Election based on the aforementioned pattern can hardly produce a competent leader because ‘might is right’ defines the outcome of the election and the competent may not likely be the mightiest.

Muddling Up Of Duties Of Institutions Blur Dividend of Democracy And Enthroned Corruption

Misplacement of priority among political institutions can turn a democratic system to a totalitarian system. The three major institutions of democracy are the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive (these institutions are not peculiar to democracy but), for each of these institutions to work within their limits separation of power is of the essence. The principle of separation of power as initiated by Montesquieu implies none of the legislative, executive and judicial power ought to interfere with the other. For example, the judges should be independent of the executive and legislature.

In Nigeria, the principle of separation of power is at stake. For example, the primary function of the legislature is to make law but as an addendum, the lawmakers are entitled to what is termed constituency project fund which is an avenue for corrupt practices within the legislature. To this end instead of legislatures going into the office with the aim of sponsoring bills that would

affect the lives of the people, they go with the promises of how to use the constituency project fund. Institutions like the police, military, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and the host of other institution aimed at strengthening democracy are not independent to a large extent and as such their operations tend towards totalitarian approach in favour of the executive arm of the government. The executive in Nigeria since the Fourth Republic has arrogated too much power to themselves to the point that they have become the sole proprietor of most democratic administrations in since the emergence of democracy in Nigeria. They are so powerful to the point that even in the face of impeachable offense the legislature cannot act accordingly.

According to Okoosi-Simbine (2007) "if Nigeria is to sustain democratic rule, one of the important institutions to pay attention to at all levels of government is the legislature, the organization through which citizen opinion acquires political significance in a democratic government." Failure to give much attention to the legislature has made the executive so powerful to the point that in the face of outright misrule the legislature is impotent to initiate genuine purpose driven impeachment process. Lack of separation of power among democratic institution and independent democratic institution has enthroned perversion of the process which defines corruption to a large extent.

Karl Popper's Vision Of Democracy

Popper's vision of democracy is embedded in his view of democracy as presented in his book *Open Society and its Enemies* and his political view generally. Below is the summation of his vision of democracy:

Political Leadership

It was Plato who argued in his *Republic* that the ideal political leadership should be determined by the choice of the wisest termed philosopher-king as because an average people cannot lead well, hence rulers of society should philosopher-kings since they can ascertain the truth. Plato's view of philosopher-kings as the best for political leadership is seen as one of the fundamental errors of political leadership. This is because the answer to the question of 'who should rule?' would produce response such as 'the best' or the 'wisest' or the 'virtuous'. These response espouse epistemological problem for Plato and those of his ilk have

always been and will continue to be that of ascertaining who the so-called philosopher kings might be.

For Popper (2013), the question of 'who should rule?' is erroneous due to the epistemological difficulty in ascertaining who. To this end, he advocated a form of government that does not focus so much on the question of 'who should rule?' but "how can we organize political institutions so that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?" (p. 115). With this understanding, Popper laid the edifice of two types of government; that which can be get rid of without bloodshed with established institutions that provide this means and that which cannot be get rid of except by revolution instead of evolution as in the first case. The first type of government, Popper (2013, p. 118) identify as a democracy while the second type is tyranny or dictatorship. In this regard, Popper's vision of democracy does not focus on political leadership as the ultimate but political institutions that ensure the people rule through genuine criticism and election.

The focus on the question of who should rule presupposes that political power is unchecked or unlimited to the point that the rulers can do whatever they want without interference by the ruled. If the ruler has the right to do whatever he/she wishes to do with his/her subject, then 'who should rule?' would be the appropriate question. Since political leadership is not tantamount to tyranny then Popper has set the pace for the ideal.

The Change Of Leadership Without Bloodshed Defines Democracy

One of the key terms Popper used in defining democracy is the ability of the ruled to remove bad and incompetent leaders without violence and bloodshed. What expresses democracy is the institutional mechanism that enables the rule of the people by their ability to change their leaders and laws. Political leadership or change of leadership process does not demand bloodshed under an ideal democratic system upheld by Popper. Stokes (1998) commented on this Popper's position when he held that:

Democracy is vital because it encourages a free exchange of ideas, which leads to scientific progress and thereby to the growth of knowledge. But democracy is equally important solely in political and moral terms

because it is the most effective way of ensuring effective protection against violence and economic exploitation of individuals (p. 57).

Popper (2013, pp. 368 - 369) outlined certain conditions required for the effectiveness of democracy. Absence of violence and bloodshed is so important that it was listed as the first condition. Below are the conditions:

- i. Bad and incompetent leaders must be dismissible without bloodshed and the institution to safeguard this must be secured.
- ii. It is the existence of an effective institution that determines the existence of democracy
- iii. Changes that would endanger the democratic character of the legal system are to be prohibited.
- iv. Protection of minority does not extend to those out to violate the law or those out to overthrow democracy by violent means.
- v. We must recognize antidemocratic tendencies amongst rule or rulers to safeguard democracy
- vi. Democracy is tantamount to the system of all rights
- vii. Preservation of democracy is of outmost importance in the evaluation and implementation of any proposed reform.

Institutional Mechanism Is The Bedrock Of Democracy

The notion of democracy upheld by Popper may be viewed as a conglomeration of institutions that work simultaneously for the benefit of the people and grant them the power to rule. This is affirmed by the assertion that “democracy provides an institutional framework that permits reform without violence, and so the use of reason in the political matter” (Popper, 2013, p. xlv). It is democracy’s institutional check upon violence and tyranny that matters not its ability to elect the best or the wisest or the most virtuous leaders.

One of the most important attributes of institutional mechanism is the ability to recognize their fallibility which is like the scientific system. In Popper’s view, the progress of science is based on the recognition of her fallibility. The task of piecemeal social engineer corresponds to that of a physical engineer whose task is to design machines, and to remodel and service them; that of piecemeal social engineering is to “design social institutions, and to reconstruct and run those already in existence” (Popper, 2001, p. 65). The designing of social institutions in

this regard is in recognition that the clear majority of social institutions are not consciously designed but grew out of human actions. As an engineer, he views them from a functional or instrumental perspective with the potential of converting them to the services of certain ends as machines and not organism.

Popper's Vision Of Democracy As The Model

The absurdity inherent in the thesis of democracy in Nigeria as formulated above has its solution in the vision of democracy outlined above. To this end, we can regard Popper's vision of democracy as the antithesis of democracy in Nigeria's approach to democracy because of the following reasons below.

Popper's notion does not focus on the question 'who should rule', democracy in Nigeria focuses on religious, tribal and ethnic origin as the determinant of who should rule. The preference of 'who should rule?' as the determinant of political leadership is complicated by the idea of zoning where the division of the country into six geopolitical zones are factors that determine who rules. While Popper's vision demand change of government or removal of political leaders who are bad and incompetent without bloodshed, Nigerian change of government through the election is associated with bloodshed. In addition, while institutions are the mechanism for control of the ruler by the ruled in Popper's view, institutions are often tools for tyranny. For example, the appointment of leaders of important democratic institutions like EFCC, ICPC, INEC and their likes that would have been correctives measures and means of removing bad and incompetent leaders are done by the executive arm of the government. It is evident that whoever has the power to appoint you can fire you at will, instead of these institutions being able to remove or serve as corrective measures, they have ended up being a tool in the hands of the leaders.

Since it is obvious that the contents of Popper's vision of democracy present the solution to most of the problems of democracy in Nigeria, the contextualization of Popper's vision of democracy remain a potent tool in the hands of policy makers, political parties and all who are interested in a better Nigeria. In terms of the determinant of who should rule, the contextualization demands to upgrade the academic requirements of political leadership at all stages. Most people that are not well educated have proven to be incompetent from a realistic point of view. The Popperian view that proposed how we should organize our society to avoid bad and incompetent leaders can be answered in the context of Nigerian

situation by targeting a higher educational qualification as a prerequisite for eliminating cluelessness and incompetence from the seat of political powers.

The contextualization of the Popperian vision of democracy in Nigeria necessarily demands electoral reform in such a way that the level of contacts during the election is reduced to the barest minimum. Technology has made such process possible. Until the Nigerian electoral umpire is truly independent and applies electronic voting system, the election in Nigeria can hardly be free and fair. For example, using ICT to reconfigure ATM Card and Machine in such a way that they can serve dual purpose could be a potent way of having an election without bloodshed. Invariably, in the midst of high electoral malpractices, electronic voting is a sine qua non for a free and fair election in Nigeria. Reformation of electoral process along ICT is inline with Popper's emphasis on strengthening political institution by falsifying the current process with the technological advancement as the problem-solving approach.

Criticism in Popper's view can be a source of growth if it is not taken in an offensive note. Institutions like ICPC, EFCC can function better if they are reorganized in such a way that their leaders are not appointed by the executive. For institutions of criticism to work properly, their appointment must be re-ordered.

Evaluation And Conclusion

Popper's vision of democracy as a model for a progressive society is based on the contents of Popper's idea capable of enhancing stable democratic society once it is followed to the letter. However, Popper gives a paramount place to election by equating it with democracy. It is worth noting that election is only a process of democracy. A free and fair election does not guarantee the implementation of democratic ideals. Practical application of Popper's view would entail constitution amendment, a viable rule of law, fallibilistic approach to the existing policies, a free and fair election, and above a well-established democratic government.

Karl Popper's profound voice against authoritarianism and totalitarianism is a key to a better democracy which would lead to development. His defense of democracy is unprejudiced offshoot of his critical philosophy (critical rationalism) which opens everything to modification for better understanding.

In all, having established the views of Popper as the antithesis of democracy in Nigeria, the synthesis is a contextual application of the ideal vision of democracy espoused by Popper in the Nigeria by inculcating active involvement of institutions of criticism and create more as a way of checkmating political leaders, this demands eliminating the zoning principle by creating an institution that would ensure competence as the criterion for opting for any political position, electoral reform that would ensure free and fair election devoid of bloodshed or violence, change of process of appointing leaders of political institutions capable of upholding the ideals inherent in Popper's vision of democracy and re-orientation on the need for democracy through education at all levels of education.

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