



A REFLECTION ON 20 YEARS OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

By: Mahmud Jega



Centre for Democracy & Development

Centre pour la démocratie et le développement



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The Fourth Republic differs from the three previous Republics we had in Nigeria in several respects. For one, it is the longest. While the First Republic lasted 5 years from Independence, the Second Republic lasted four years and three months while the Third Republic was inconclusive. It had elected state governors, state assemblies and even a National Assembly, to which the AFRC ceded some inconsequential powers including the power to legislate on museums, monuments and public libraries.

However, the Third Republic never had a civilian President. Even though a presidential election was held on June 12, 1993, the Returning Officer, Prof Humphrey Nwosu, did not declare the result until 15 years later, at an awkward and legally inconsequential public lecture in Abuja in 2008. Two federal elections were held in the 1st Republic, in 1959 and 1964; two were held in the 2nd Republic, in 1979 and 1983, and 6 have so far been held in the 4th Republic, in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019.

Throughout the 1st Republic there was only one Prime Minister. Throughout the 2nd Republic there was only one President. Throughout the 3rd Republic there was no civilian President but there was a military President. In the 4th republic however, we have had four civilian presidents so far, even though two of them are former Army Generals. We have had 6 presidential transitions so far in this Republic, five of them through elections and one after a death in office, though three of them were from one person to himself. In fact, the unimaginable in Nigerian politics happened in this Republic when a party ruling at the federal level was defeated by the opposition in a national election, and it peacefully handed over power.

The quality of a Republic is a mishmash and interplay of personalities and institutions. In the Fourth Republic, some institutions have exceeded the role prescribed for them by the Constitution. Many others fell below the role prescribed for them by the Constitution, while still other important elements, namely the citizens and voters, totally misunderstood the role prescribed for them by the Constitution. The performance of different institutions in this Republic is a mixed bag. Let's begin with the most visible and most powerful institution in the Fourth Republic, which is the Presidency.

The four presidents that we have had in this Republic differ from one another in democratic temperament, in tolerance of criticism, in anti-democratic short fuse, and in overarching ambition to dominate the environment. While some of them kept their political party on a short leash, others dined with their political party with a long spoon.

All four Presidents of the Fourth Republic are better known for their frown than for their smiles. Only one of them had the art of comic relief. None of the four is famous for his oratorical skills. Even though one of them is a PhD, none of the four is regarded to be an engaging intellectual, and certainly none of the four qualifies as a Philosopher-King.

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All four presidents are however united by a common dislike for the mass media, a common suspicion of the National Assembly, a common antipathy towards the Judiciary, a common distrust of labour unions and civil society groups, an abiding faith in foreign governments, a deep respect for foreign corporations, foreign newspapers and foreign associations; a common love for attending ceremonial meetings abroad; a common tendency to take citizens for granted; and a common predilection to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Since 1999, the Presidency has exceeded the role and powers prescribed for it by the Constitution. Through the agency of EFCC and ICPC, the Federal Government arrogated to itself the role of bullying state and local governments. At one time, it used EFCC to force some state assemblies to impeach their governors even when they fell short of a quorum.

It is forever grabbing for more power. One of the biggest power snatches is the arrogation by the President of an unknown role called Party Leader. In that capacity, a president determines the candidates to field at all levels, even determined who is a party member through “re-registration” in which he handed over membership cards to select individuals; invited people from other parties to come into his party and become candidates even after primaries were concluded.

At some point, the Presidency arrogated to itself the power to dictate to INEC who should be declared the winner of any election and how many votes to allocate to that person. The Presidency assumed the role of appointing Principal Officers of the National Assembly, and any NASS leader who tried to assert its institutional independence was removed through what was famously called “banana peel.” More recently, state governors are up in arms over a move by the Federal Government, through NFIU, to bulldoze away the State/LG Joint Account which is provided for in the Constitution, even though it is one of the most abused institutions of this Republic.

After the President, Ministers are the most visible and most powerful faces of the Executive. By now we have had hundreds of ministers in the Fourth Republic. Ministers are extremely visible in Nigeria and many Nigerians assess the quality of an Administration by the antecedents, sayings and deeds of its ministers. In the last 20 years, some ministers were extremely visible whereas many others were easily forgotten.

Portfolio often has much to do with it because some portfolios carry more weight and responsibility than others. However, a minister’s political antecedents, energy, political weight, thoughtfulness, presence of mind, cheerfulness, language fluency and media savvy, not to mention conception of visionary policies and programs and their successful implementation, all count towards his/her success.

From what I can gather in media and in private discussions, National Assembly is the most unpopular of Fourth Republic institutions. MPs try to assert NASS’ democratic standing by saying it was the only one of the Big Three that was abolished during military rule. This is also its main excuse for observed weaknesses. I suspect that NASS’ relative openness counts against it because the salary and allowances of its members is publicly known, unlike that of ministers and heads of key federal agencies.

Then also, the Nigerian public does not really appreciate the importance of law making. Nigerians generally do not see why it should cost so much to make laws. This is understandable because, unlike in other societies where law is seen as all important, here the law is seen as an inconvenience which should be circumvented or ignored.

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The general feeling therefore is that we are maintaining the National Assembly at great expense when what it is doing has little or nothing to do with the people's welfare.

The conduct and utterances of some National Assembly members did not help matters. In 1999 when NASS was freshly inaugurated and the newspapers reported that MPs would get N3m each as furniture allowance, there was a loud outcry. Senator Chuba Okadigbo appeared on NTA and said, "We are here to alleviate poverty, not to spread it." Other things that gave NASS a bad image including budget delays, budget padding, scandalous stories about oversight function, equally scandalous allegations regarding constituency projects, etc.

The worst claim ever to come out of NASS, I think, was in 2014 when it defended its N150 billion annual budget by comparing it to that of the Executive. This happened around the time that then CBN Governor Sanusi Lamido Sanusi said at a lecture in Benin that the National Assembly consumed too much of the budget. One Assembly spokesman said that the National Assembly is constitutionally equal to the Executive but that it took only 25% of the Federal Government's recurrent budget whereas the Executive took 75%.

As for the Judiciary, it has also not earned popular respect in this Republic. This is perhaps because justice is much delayed, courts adjourn too many times, there is too much technicality in administration of justice, too much miscarriage of justice, too much corruption, too much discrepancy between what happens to a small thief and what happens to a big one, slap in the wrist judgements where powerful people are involved [e.g. the pension thief Shu'aibu Teidi who was fined N750,000 for stealing N21 billion], ruthlessly partisan orders such as the judge who stopped the ANPP convention in 2001 hours before it started, which even Obasanjo described as wicked; too many interim injunctions, contradictory orders by courts of coordinate jurisdiction, subservience of state high courts to state governments, etc.

Some of the problems may not be the fault of judges but that is how the public sees it. Apart from the Presidency, State Governors are the next most powerful and the next most visible actors in this Republic. I must choose my words carefully because some governors are listening to this discussion. However, the power that state governors are exercising is beyond what the Constitution envisaged.

The over concentration of power in the hands of governors, the total control of contract awards and the virtual jettisoning of the Tenders Board and financial rules, the lush security vote, the disregard for rules in civil service appointments and sackings, the advisory nature of the budget law in the sense that governors pick and choose what they want to implement; the ability of governors to create and fund all manner of unbudgeted projects; the usurping of local government funds through the system of Local Government Joint Accounts; the virtual jettisoning of the constitutional requirement that Local Governments should be run by democratically elected councils; and the relegation of state assemblies to rubber-stamp status are all powers not envisaged by the constitution.

As for State Assemblies, I have already said that most state assemblies in Nigeria are rubber stamp and they contributed very little to our democratic experience. Even though they have enough powers under the constitution to check the excesses of their governors, in practice they have jettisoned these powers in favour of a lapdog role.

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Trouble only comes when a governor refuses to meet the MPs' insatiable appetite for money, hajj seats, fertilizer, contracts or safe return tickets.

All the governors who were impeached in the Fourth Republic, in Bayelsa, Plateau, Ekiti, Oyo and Adamawa, were only removed because the Presidency bludgeoned and black mailed the respective state assemblies to do so.

Local Government Councils: Of the three tiers of government in Nigeria, local governments have been the least assertive, the least impactful and the least respected in this Republic. Many factors are responsible for this but I think the most obvious is the desire of state governors to emasculate them in order to usurp their funds. The funds allocated to local governments from the Federation Account are nearly as much as those allocated to the states, and governors are visibly hungry for these monies.

Even though the Constitution requires that local governments be run by democratically elected leaders, this law is observed mostly in the breach. Most of the time, local governments across the country are headed by unelected Caretaker Chairmen and Councils. This situation perfectly suits the governors, because unelected chairmen and councilors cannot assert their right to their resources, of which they are given only a small part. One state in Nigeria, Anambra, did not hold local government elections for 13 years, allegedly because of court injunctions.

INEC is central to the health of Nigerian democracy. I think INEC is one of the few national institutions that has gained respect over the years. From its lowest point in 2007 when it organized probably the most fraudulent election in the country's history, it has since redeemed some its public respect especially because of PVC and card reader. However, serious problems remain in the area of logistics, the role of some of its ad hoc staff, as well as suspected partisanship in some areas by RECs who connive with ruling parties in parts of the country. INEC should also re-examine the order of elections and must learn to speed up result collation.

It is not good enough, for example, that in 1979, presidential election was held on Saturday and Shagari was declared winner at noon on Thursday. Forty years later in 2019, election was also held on Saturday and the result was declared at dawn on Wednesday. That means we gained only about 30 hours in 40 years. This, despite the coming of fax machines, photocopiers, personal computers, GSM, smart phones, emails, Wifi and social media.

SIECs: Compared to INEC, which at least gets praised for certain things, SIECs are the institutional sick babies of the Fourth Republic. Almost no one takes them seriously, and there are calls to transfer their function of conducting local elections to INEC. This is because, in almost every state where local election is conducted, the ruling party in that state wins all chairmanships and councillorships. The belief is that there are no real elections and these seats are simply allocated. It is also observable that the 100% sweep of some state ruling parties in local elections did not translate into similar performance in the general election conducted by INEC. In fact, some ruling parties at the state level that swept local elections by 100% were subsequently defeated in the general election.

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Political parties: Compared to the political parties of the First Republic, which commanded the life-long loyalty of their members; and compared to the political parties of the Second Republic, which were accused at the time of over-mobilising supporters, the political parties of this Republic are something else. They have no ideological direction, no policy platforms, no solid cohesion and except for a few cases, no charismatic leadership. You can't tell them apart with respect to any policy or program.

Right now, their number is also a problem because there are 93 registered parties in Nigeria, compared to 5 in the 2nd and 2 in the 3rd Republics. Most of them are brief case political parties that are only there to cash in on the crises in major parties. Their number is also responsible for the length of the ballot paper; their number increases the possibility of mistakes in printing the ballot paper. The sheer number and the similarities of their logos also confuse especially illiterate voters, and their number is also responsible for the unnecessary delay in result counting and collation.

The weakness of the Fourth Republic political parties is also responsible for the prominent role that regional and ethnic groups have acquired in this Republic. Groups such as ACF, NEF, Afenifere, Yoruba Council of Elders, O'dua Peoples Congress, Ijaw National Congress, Ohana'eze Ndigbo, Middle Belt Forum, Southern and Middle Belt Leaders Conference, National Christian Elders Forum, MASSOB and IPOB are all filling the political vacuum left by political parties.

All these organisations did not exist in the Second Republic because the parties of that era were extremely effective and they overmobilised voters, unlike the parties of the present day where people go in and out without the slightest shame. Other agencies and institutions that play crucial roles in the survival of liberal democracy in Nigeria include the security agencies, mass media and CSOs including trade unions, women, youth and student organisations. Together, these agencies are crucial to the health of a democracy.

The security agencies place a lot of premium on protecting elected leaders and other VIPs, but they place much less premium of protecting the lives of ordinary citizens or of respecting their civil liberties. The quality of the democratic Republic is marred by too much extrajudicial killing, too much illegal detentions, too many accidental shootings, too much detention without trial, too much prison congestion, too prolonged trials, too much harassment of citizens at checkpoints and borders, too much delay as well as too much corruption in the criminal justice system. Women, youths and other disadvantaged groups are still struggling to make some headway in this Republic. Democracy does not begin and end with voting but with civil rights, personal freedoms, justice and accountability.

Of the mass media in Nigeria, I will rather say less because I was already an editor when this Republic began in 1999. Suffice it to say that the arrival of GSM phone technology and the later arrival of the internet and social media has completely changed the media landscape and even editors now have little control over public information. While social media has democratized information flow and reduced the tyranny of editors, our society is still coming to grips with the consequences of unedited information flow.

As for CSOs, it has been another story of ups and downs. Remarkably, trade unions in Nigeria were more powerful under military rule than they are now. NLC is now a shadow of its former self. Some of the most powerful unions of 40 years ago such as Nigeria Union of Teachers, Railway Workers Union, Dockworkers Union of Nigeria and Civil Service Technical Workers Union, are all shadows of their former selves.

Nigerian students, who 40 years ago were the best organized, most vocal and most radical of civil groups in Nigeria, are now reduced to organizing events to award governors with Best Governor in Education, Best Governor in Health etc. awards.

Then there is the Electorate. There are now 84million registered voters in Nigeria but despite all the intense mobilization, only 29m turned up at the polls during the last presidential elections. I have not yet seen a very good explanation as to why this was the case.

If we extrapolate from the NBS national figures, 38% of these registered voters are illiterate and fully 50% of them live in extreme poverty. Among the remaining voters that are neither illiterate nor poverty stricken, regionalism, religion, ethnicity, kinship, personal friendship and personal benefit are their top guides in casting their votes.

A man can successfully contest for governor or even for president in Nigeria without having a program at all. No one will ask him or her what is his program for education, health, economy, infrastructure or welfare. In Nigeria therefore, a man throws all his energy into getting elected and after winning, he then constitutes a team to work out a program. Needless to say, even this is for show only because he will never really pay attention to that bureaucratically produced program. Nigerian voters do not hold anyone to any promise because there was none in the first place.

What is the main measure of success and quality in this Republic? In the early days of the Fourth Republic, the concept of 'Dividends of Democracy' was crafted or at least was popularized by the first Information Minister, Prof Jerry Gana. This was defined as provision of roads, electricity, water, hospitals and schools. As some people quickly pointed out, even military rulers could provide basic infrastructure. In fact, some military regimes provided infrastructure more efficiently than politicians ever did.

Luckily, the first six years of this Republic were characterised by high international crude oil prices. Although the FG did little, state governments built a lot of basic infrastructure and in fact they saved this Republic. In 2001 when Prof Jerry Gana organized what he called Good Governance Tour to show case the Dividends of Democracy, it was said that he and his tour team only inspected state government projects because the Federal Government had no projects of its own to showcase.

The question to ask after 20 years is, is democracy here to stay? In 1976 when the US celebrated 200 years of its Declaration of Independence, TIME magazine published a special edition titled In Line Unbroken. It listed one by one the long line of US Presidents since 1789, with the obvious boast that no unelected person ever usurped the US Presidency in 200 years. As we mark this 20th anniversary of the Fourth Republic, we can also make a list of our presidents and boast that it is In Line Unbroke. Ours is however an unbroken line of four people.

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Political parties: Compared to the political parties of the First Republic, which commanded I think liberal democracy survived in Nigeria uninterrupted for 20 years not so much because of its own evident success but because of the international situation, which is hostile to military and other types of unelected government.

Back in the 1970s and early 1980s, any one of Niger Delta militants' attack on oil installations, Boko Haram insurgency, farmers/herders clashes in the North Central states, IPOB secessionist agitation in the South East, kidnapping/banditry in the North West, high-level corruption in government as well as electoral fraud is enough to invite a government's overthrow.

Nor should we rely solely on the international situation to guarantee the survival of liberal democracy in Nigeria. This is because with the rise of right-wing populist regimes in many Western nations, there is no guarantee that they will continue to insist on upholding liberal democratic values in Third World countries. We could easily be back to the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s when the Western Powers valued a tyrannical but pro-Western regime much more than they valued a liberal democratic but non-aligned one.

Besides, it increasingly looks like the days of the current international order dominated by Western values and nations are numbered. With the increasing assertiveness of Russia; the steady rise of China to great power status and the corresponding decline of American and Western dominance in the scheme of things, liberal democracy may one day be an orphan on the international stage. Imagine what is happening in Sudan, including the shooting of unarmed protesters who are demanding reform and democratisation. While Western nations are making feeble protests, the most influential foreign power in the country, China, has not said a thing.

In the long run therefore, if we desire to have liberal democracy in Nigeria, we must prepare to do so on our own steam. Democracy in Nigeria can only be guaranteed by internal successes. The most urgent one is to guarantee internal security, without which nothing else matters. If Nigerians continue to die in large numbers in the hands of insurgents, armed robbers, kidnappers, bandits, militants, herders, farmers, communal warriors, cultists, human traffickers, smugglers, drug dealers and other criminals, then democracy as a system of government will be discredited and no one will raise a finger to save it when it is threatened.

Apart from security, I think the most urgent need is to build infrastructure and adopt policies that will ensure rapid economic growth and transformation; if possible, double-digit economic growth sustained over several decades. Right now, progress is held down by our very high rate of population growth which by far outpaces the rate of economic growth. This means we are becoming poorer every year on a per capita basis.

A socio-economy in which 70% of the people live below the poverty line is not conducive for the flourishing of liberal democracy, to put it mildly. Problems such as vote buying may never be overcome when voters are so poor. A man who is desperately looking for what to eat today cannot be convinced by a sermon about the need to elect good leaders and wait for the dividends later.

