



A Study on

**Why Liberal Democracy is a Threat to  
Nigeria's Stability**

By:

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## Introduction:

In 2015, Nigeria, a country of about 190 million, spent \$625 million to conduct federal and local elections. By comparison, India, with a population of 1.2 billion, spent \$600 million on its 2015 election, according to figures released by the Electoral Commission of India (ECI).<sup>i</sup> In 2019, the election budget of Nigeria's Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) rose to \$670 million. This represents about 2.5 percent of Nigeria's \$28.8 billion budget for 2019, a portion of which is being financed through borrowing. To put the electoral spending in context, more than half of the country subsists on about a dollar a day, and the country recently acquired the dubious distinction of being named the poverty capital of the world, with more people living in extreme poverty there than in any other country.<sup>ii</sup> Key infrastructures and services such as roads, railway, electricity, water supply, healthcare, and education are severely inadequate, requiring urgent investments and interventions. Election-related expenditure is expected to rise in the near future as INEC implements a wider slate of digital technologies to combat manipulation and improve the integrity of the electoral process. For comparison, Nigeria typically devotes about 7 percent of its budget to education. And yet Nigeria continues to maintain a four-year election cycle, with smaller by-elections occurring in between. This electoral calendar guarantees that about \$1 billion is spent on elections every four years. As the electoral price tag has grown, democratic dividends have plummeted.

Nigeria's predicament is a microcosm of the phenomenon of rising financial costs of elections in Africa and diminishing returns on democracy. Across the continent, the cost

of electoral democracy is increasing and threatens the delivery of social goods. As African countries battle myriad socioeconomic challenges, the question needs to be posed: is it wise for these countries to continue to spend a large percentage of their revenue every four or five years on a political ritual with fewer and fewer positive socioeconomic consequences for their populations? Is this expensive, periodic democratic ritual called election worth its price?

It is not only the monetary cost of elections that now threatens to defeat their purpose and engender disillusionment and, along with disillusionment, the erosion of trust in the state and its ability to produce and distribute public goods. The social cost of periodic elections has been arguably greater, depleting, with each election cycle, the residual stability of the state and the credibility of its institutions. Elections conducted in Nigeria since the return of civilian rule in 1999 have brought with them anxiety, tension, death, violence, and dangerous rhetoric that, taken together, have frayed the national political and social fabric. Elections have widened fissures and intensified preexisting primordial cleavages. I can recall no electoral cycle since at least 2003 that was not accompanied by fears of Nigeria's disintegration or at the very least the acceleration of its demise. In 2007 and 2011, post-election violence claimed hundreds of lives in Northern Nigeria as supporters of then candidate Muhammadu Buhari rioted after his loss. In the 2019 presidential and national assembly elections, at least 46 people were reported to have died from election-related violence. In the state assembly and governorship elections two weeks later on March 9, 2019, another 10 people died across five states in what the Sunday Tribune newspaper described in its headline as "another bloody

election.”<sup>iii</sup> Two riders below the same Sunday Tribune headline encapsulate the turbulent character of Nigerian elections. One was “Thugs, vote buyers, arsonists take over on election day”; the other was “Nigerians condemn militarization of elections in Rivers, Bayelsa, Kwara, Akwa Ibom, Benue,” a reference to the government’s deployment of soldiers and other military assets to opposition strongholds before and during the election. The involvement of soldiers and other military personnel in the election was a brazen violation of Nigeria’s Electoral Act, an action which many observers interpreted as the incumbent administration’s effort to use its might to manipulate the election in states held by the opposition. Every election cycle in Nigeria sees massive, fear-induced demographic mobility as members of different ethnic groups and religions relocate to areas considered dominated by their kinsmen and co-religionists to await the conclusion of elections that often degenerate into communal clashes especially in the volatile north of the country.

Periodic national elections have thus worsened Nigeria’s notoriously frail union and caused apathy and discontent. The Nigerian people, the major stakeholders in Nigeria’s democracy, have grown weary of being periodically endangered and rendered pawns in an elaborate elite ritual with little or no consequence for their lives. Electoral aftermaths have not improved economic conditions or strengthened the capacity of citizens to hold elected leaders accountable. Moreover, as I shall discuss shortly, the familiar abstract freedoms that democracy, lubricated by periodic elections, can confer on citizens who participate in such exercises, have eluded Nigerians.

The result has been noticeable apathy represented most poignantly by voter turnout, which declined from a peak of 69.1 percent in 2003 to 46.3 percent in 2015 and to about 35 percent in 2019. In the same 2019 election cycle, turnout declined to less than 20 percent in the governorship and state assembly elections, with many Nigerians on social media stating that they had lost faith in the electoral process and that the official results of the presidential elections two weeks earlier had shown that their votes would not count towards the declared outcome. Voter apathy alone is not an indication of democratic disillusionment but it can portend or indicate something more devastating: diminishing trust in the state, its institutions, and its processes. Such a trust deficit exists already and it predated the return of civilian rule in 1999 after about two decades of military dictatorship. However, by all theoretical formulations, such a cumulative loss of confidence in the transactional sociopolitical contract between the state and citizens should be corrected by the democratic ideals of voting, representation, and accountability. This has not happened in Nigeria. In fact, the opposite scenario is visible: a negative correlation between successive electoral cycles and citizens' trust in the Nigerian state. Therein lay the paradoxical consequences of democratic practice in Nigeria.

If elections are increasingly burdensome as they have become in Nigeria, the corrective potential of democracy, broadly speaking, is lost. Citizens consequently lose faith in the state and resort to self-help, including criminal self-help. That is how states collapse. Nigeria is not far off this possibility. In Nigeria, recent political realities reveal a blind spot of pro-democracy advocacy: without the modulating effect of decentralization, sustained economic growth, a growing, secure middle class, and a literate, hopeful poor,

liberal democracy can do and has done more damage than good. Liberal democracy has ironically become both an incubator and protector of mediocrity, corruption, and bad governance. The overarching casualty has been Nigeria's very stability.

## Gaming Democracy, Gutting the Nation

Members of Nigeria's ruling class have become adept at gaming democracy, rhetorically proclaiming their commitments to its tenets but subverting those same tenets through their actions. Since 1999, elected presidents have generally reneged on their promises and morphed into self-absorbed rulers unaccountable to and unfeeling toward the Nigerian electorate. This leitmotif is partly political theater to be sure, but it is also a manifestation of the uniquely high stakes of electoral politics in the country. The dramatics of verbalizing and performing democratic commitment caters to an external audience of Euro-American, democracy-promoting foundations and governments. The contrapuntal reality of manipulating elections, brazenly subverting the will of the people, avoiding accountability, aggrandizing power, and undermining institutions of checks and balances is designed to capture power in its totality because, in Nigeria, as in most African countries, the person or party that occupies the highest office also controls the nation's purse strings and the prerogative for distributing such resources. Elections and the political power that they confer on victors are thus seen merely as vehicles to access national resources and leverage them for personal and group gains.

Since 1999, Nigerian leaders, once elected, have seen no need to engage with or be accountable to the electorate. Instead, they have devoted their energies and the new resource pipelines they control to their own perpetuation in office or to the fight for a second term in the case of term-limited officials such as governors and the president. The current president, Muhammadu Buhari, typifies this Nigerian democratic paradox of pretend democrats undermining democracy while participating in its electoral formalities to obtain power and mollify external political pressures. A former military dictator, who ruled in the 1980s, Buhari, when running for the presidency in 2015, assured Nigerians that he had abandoned his draconian instincts and become a converted democrat. As the candidate of a new coalition, the All Progressive Congress (APC), Buhari unleashed a dizzying array of electoral promises. Upon assuming office in May 2015, he reneged on his promise to publicly declare his assets and sell off a fleet of presidential aircraft numbering about 9. That was his first act of disdain for the Nigerian electorate to whom he had made these pledges. Even before Mr. Buhari took office, he gave a speech at Chatham House, London, and disavowed several promises he had made during the campaigns, describing the promises as those of his party rather than his.

On the economic front, Buhari had promised to run the economy on market principles. Once he took office, he disregarded that promise and the counsel of economists and fixed the exchange value of the naira, Nigeria's currency. This act led to massive loss of foreign direct investment. Buhari then created a second-tier exchange regime where the naira's exchange rate against the dollar was higher. This opened to the door to massive profiteering and corruption. The economy tanked, deepening poverty and

unemployment. Mr. Buhari had promised to never pay subsidy on petrol but to rather fix Nigeria's broken refineries to provide access to cheap and abundant fuel. He reneged on that promise and increased fuel price by about 70 percent and continued to pay the subsidy he had condemned. For the country's poor, this is perhaps the biggest act of betrayal as the vagaries of every economic sector depend on the price of petrol. Increase the price of petrol and watch the price of everything from transportation to groceries move up in correspondence to the increase.

Other promises made during the campaigns lay in ruins, disavowed or disregarded by the president and his henchmen. Buhari has sacrificed his promise to fight corruption on political expediency, going after opposition figures with graft allegations but not only ignoring credible allegations against politicians in his party but playing an active role in efforts to exonerate, reinstate, and rehabilitate them. Under Buhari, it is not just the GDP that has shrunk. The Middle class, which grew in the 2000s and seemed primed to become the bedrock of democratic accountability, has been decimated. No objective observer today considers the Nigerian middle class the democratic buffer that it seemed destined to be.

Mr. Buhari is only the latest elected president to thump his nose at the voters, fearing no electoral payback. This arrogance of power is fueled by one factor: with the almost unchecked power of incumbency, which can be deployed to manipulate the vote or to muzzle the opposition and win a default victory, incumbents fear little electoral consequence for their actions. Previous elected presidents have governed in a similarly indifferent way, and only in 2015 did an incumbent finally pay a price for governing poorly

and betraying voters' confidence. That was however an aberration enabled by a weak president who lacked the confidence, ambition, and guile of other presidents. Overall, there has been no electoral recompense at the ballot box.

## Fetishizing Liberal Democracy

Why is it possible for elected presidents to abuse democracy in such a manner while using its rhetoric and the legitimacy obtained through elections to bolster their power and undermine the stability of the polity? The other question is, what is the endpoint of the corrosive effect of these expensive “democratic” charades? The debasement of valorized democratic principles by Nigeria’s political elite has a genealogy that should be excavated in order to illustrate Nigeria’s ill-fated trajectory of democratization.

In the 1990s, when a plethora of Western foundations and governments encouraged and funded democratization in Nigeria and other African states, three critical, interrelated mistakes underpinned these efforts. One was an assumption that liberal democracy was its own justification and that Africans, traumatized by different iterations of dictatorship, would simply grasp democracy’s inherent virtues and take proprietary ownership of it precisely because it is superior to other forms of government. The second was a somewhat contradictory and deceptive association of democracy with development. In this rhetoric, democracy and development were Siamese twins, feeding off of each other. Democracy, in this orthodoxy, was the original, catalytic order of things, without which development was impossible.

The notion that democracy was synonymous with the amelioration of socioeconomic lag was a staple of Western prodemocracy propaganda. This functionalist, instrumental rhetoric on democracy was then taken up uncritically and amplified by Nigerian partners of Western democracy advocates. Over time, it fossilized into a banal folk wisdom which held that participating in democratic processes, especially elections, was a way of assuring one's socioeconomic future and/or improving one's present condition. In the incestuous and cacophonous world of prodemocracy jargons, neither African prodemocracy activists nor their Western ideological and financial benefactors thought about disentangling democracy from development. The two became intertwined in the minds of Nigerians. This rhetoric of democracy as a prelude to development inspired unrealistic expectations that democracy, liberal or otherwise, can never fulfill. I will return to this theme shortly.

The third error was the belief that Nigerian political actors would regard the democratic process and the institutions that safeguard it as sacrosanct, and that politicians would be accountable to the citizens they serve. The idea of public service as a platform to serve the public and of elections as the arbiter of this paradigm of service was a cardinal element in Western prodemocracy advocacy and was a blind spot in the cognition of local activists who echoed and fought out this advocacy on the ground. Western democratization theories argue that incumbents have a “desire to impress the voters” because if they do not they will be punished at the ballot box in the next election and if they do they will be rewarded.<sup>iv</sup> This may make sense in a perfect theoretical world, but in African settings, incumbents do not fear electoral punishment because they control

the levers of power that are critical to determining electoral outcomes, so the theoretical incentive to do right by voters is nullified in reality. None of the aforementioned prognostications has materialized in Nigeria. On the contrary, political leaders have acted in disregard for the rules, norms, and processes codified as guiding legal and constitutional frameworks for Nigerian democratic practice.

## **Democracy as Corruption**

Nigerians who yearned for electoral democracy in the belief that it would deliver development have been left disappointed. The material promises of democracy, that is, the supposed correlation between democracy and improved standards of living that was at the heart of the prodemocracy advocacy of the 1990s, has yet to materialize for Nigerians in almost twenty unbroken years of democratic practice. What's more, under the guise of democracy, Nigerian political leaders have found the perfect alibi for corruption: the very legal processes designed to promote transparency, probity, and procedural integrity. Democracy has provided the perfect cover for corruption – massive corruption. Democracy has – forgive the redundancy – democratized corruption. Under military rule, corruption was a quasi-monopoly; it was tightly controlled by a small cohort. Under Nigeria's current democratic order, the need to cultivate political support and immunity means that the loot has to circulate, expanding the network of patronage and corruption.

Democracy has also made corruption legitimate, as contradictory as that may sound. In the days of the military, the zones of legal and illegal monetary appropriation were clearly demarcated, so citizens could easily determine when an act of corrupt self-enrichment had occurred. Not anymore. Under the current democratic order, public officials steal public funds legally. They only have to underwrite what they steal as a licit item in the legislative appropriation process. This can be done in a few choreographed, taxpayer-funded legislative committee sessions and a hurried process of debate-less approval. Political office holders even steal public funds in anticipation, carefully documenting future thefts and including them as budgetary earmarks or exculpatory footnotes in legislations. And this is all legal – and perfectly within the procedural norms of liberal democracy. In recent years, this legitimate, democratized corruption has found a name in Nigeria’s capacious political lexicon. Nigerians call it anticipatory corruption. I call it legitimate corruption, intending the oxymoron to intensify my designation. Where the law did not exist to legitimize the theft, Nigeria’s legislators have enacted or been goaded by executive pressure into enacting one-off bills to authorize acts of pilferage deemed in the pecuniary interest of legislators and their executive partners. In other words, democracy as currently practiced in Nigeria has licensed and unleashed novel forms of corruption. Democracy has expanded the stealing field by legitimizing corruption.

What is clear, then, is that Nigeria’s ruling elites have figured out a way to turn the rules of democracy on their heads and to thus take perverse advantages of the very democratic processes promoted as inherently good, as instruments of public restraint, and as catalysts for enlightened political behavior in the public interest.

## The Real Cost of Democracy

Aside from the aforementioned financial cost of elections and patronage, other expenditures bring the recurring cost of the Nigeria's 20-year democratic project into tens of billions of dollars, an expense that will sooner or later cripple the country financially. Let me expatiate. A recent report confirmed what many Nigerians have long suspected about the remunerations of their elected executive and legislative leaders: Nigerian elected public office holders at all levels of government are the highest paid in the world.<sup>v</sup> Together with their string of assistants and advisors (who sometimes have their own paid advisors), Nigeria's public officers gobble up at least half of the nation's revenue and budgetary appropriations in legitimate rewards. This prohibitive democratic overhead has left the country with a smaller pool of funds than ever to invest in the things that matter to Nigerians: roads, healthcare, schools, water, electricity, and food production. This odd reality of low returns on democratic investment is unsustainable. Something has to give!

What is being eroded is the very stability of the state, along with any trust that citizens still have in it. This is a proverbial ticking time bomb that will implode or explode if the trend continues, if this democracy endures. Twenty years since the return of civilian rule, it is not an exaggeration to say that not only has democracy not paid off for Nigeria but that it is now a threat to its stability and survival. This is a radical shift that has occurred stealthily and has thus been missed by the Western governmental and non-governmental actors that encouraged and funded democratic advocacy in the 1990s.

## Democratic Disappointment

With such a low dividend of democracy, and with democracy being so costly and toxic to the body politic, it is no surprise that many Nigerians have begun to question their loyalty to the received wisdom that democracy is superior to its alternatives. For many Nigerians and Africans, democracy has failed. It has failed to live up to its publicized benefits – tangible and intangible. A survey conducted by the respected Afro-barometer polling organization in December 2014 concluded as follows:

*“Focusing on attitudes toward democracy and accountability, the analysis finds that while most Nigerians embrace the concept of democracy and reject other forms of government, significant proportions of the population express support for non-democratic practices, such as military rule or an authoritarian president who is above the checks of Parliament and the courts. Public dissatisfaction with how democracy is working in Nigeria and with the performance of their elected leaders is high. Many Nigerians believe that public institutions and office holders can serve as checks on each other, but they do not see voters as playing a leading role in holding political officials accountable.”<sup>vi</sup>*

The finding of this survey is a remarkable development given that in 1999 when civilian rule was restored, Nigerians were overwhelmingly hopeful about democracy and

its capacity to catalyze development and accountability and reinforce Nigeria's fragile national cohesion. Since 2014, this democratic disillusionment has only deepened along with distrust in institutional constraints and in the potential of electoral participation to effect change. Western democracy theorists may be scrambling to comprehend this dramatic reversal of public opinion from a craving for a democratic overthrow of a military dictatorship two decades ago to a yearning for authoritarian rule today. But this attitudinal shift is completely understandable as a logical outcome of democratic overpromising and under-delivery. The significant number of Nigerians who expressed a favorable view of undemocratic processes and forms of government in the survey were not enamored with military autocracy per se. They were voicing their disillusionment with a failed democracy.

## **Between Abstract and Tangible Democracies**

Africans' perception of democracy is a largely utilitarian one. It is similar to Africans' relationship with religion, which is also starkly utilitarian, rooted more in lived experience and its quotidian dimensions and needs than in abstract spiritual and doctrinal aspirations.<sup>vii</sup> Whether it is a new religion or the new concept of liberal democracy, Africans' encounter with new ideological formations is often marked by this utilitarian ethos. Africans rarely engage with systems of thought and practices from the perspective of their alleged intrinsic merits. Instead, what matters is how these practices translate to

improved socioeconomic wellbeing. It is a rational thought process grounded in the materiality of self-interest.

As a subset of Africans, Nigerians are similarly inclined in their perception of democracy, going beyond its abstract benefits to make tangible demands of it. It is a cultural phenomenon that neither Western nor local prodemocracy activists took into account in the 1990s' prodemocracy frenzy. It is also, as earlier stated, a product of the expectational universe created by an overzealous prodemocracy movement. If democratization fails to engender tangible improvements in the body politic it is unrealistic to expect that, in a developmentally-challenged country such as Nigeria, democracy would be seen in any other way other than as a failure. Or that citizens would embrace an abstract barometer for evaluating post-Cold War political liberalization.

Nigerians who campaigned for democracy in the 1990s have been slow to acknowledge the nexus of democracy and systemic dysfunction. When they recognize the disappointment of democratization, they tend to retreat into two unhelpful bromides of prodemocracy orthodoxy. One is to say that democracy takes time to get entrenched, to mature, and so the answer to a broken democracy is more democracy, as the popular cliché goes. This contention does not account for the enormous, unsustainable cost of democracy. It also does not consider the fact that countries besieged by a perfect storm of economic, political, and existential troubles do not have the luxury of waiting for democracy to mature. Time, literally, is not on the side of such countries. The second response is a belated attempt to decouple democracy and development and to affirm a more abstract democracy of rights and liberties, a democracy, if you like, that privileges

recognition over redistribution, to invoke the moral duality posited by Axel Honneth.<sup>viii</sup> In social media forums and Nigerian list-serves, I read the argument from some career prodemocracy activists that democracy is intrinsically virtuous even if it does not lead to development because it promotes abstract freedoms, civil liberties, and rights. This claim is little comfort, of course, to Nigerians who were seduced and then left disappointed by the earlier advertised correlation between democracy and development.

This argument rests on the power of incremental improvements over several election cycles, of cumulative democratic self-correction. For this logic to materialize in Nigeria, however, there needs to be accountability at the ballot box. There is not. Even if there were, in a country already fractured by the Boko Haram insurgency, armed herdsmen attacks and banditry, a persistent if mutating Biafra agitation, and other centrifugal forces, and in a country saddled with weak institutions, four years of bad, unaccountable democratic rule can cause irreparable damage. And without the robust structural buffers and safety nets of Western countries, such a country could collapse or be put on the path of disintegration. A country already beset by debilitating threats cannot afford four years of democratic dysfunction and a suffocating political gridlock that maps onto preexisting fissures, let alone several four-year cycles of these debilities.

The argument about the abstract merits of democracy also does not account for the fact that, far from guaranteeing or promoting civil liberties, democratization has at best only had a modest impact on civic freedoms. Since 1999, political freedoms, the valorized abstract benefits of democracy, have been receding under the assault of democratically elected leaders. In this respect, the abysmal human rights record of the current Buhari

administration is a great example. Previous democratic administrations sought to constrict the civic space by pushing laws to their most elastic limits or by exploiting legal and constitutional loopholes. Each administration operated in an ever-expanding territory of extra-legal exactions and rights violations. The current administration and its human rights record is thus the climax of the sustained erosion of civil liberties since 1999.

In December 2015, hundreds of Shiite Muslims who had protested against the persecution of their group, were massacred by troops in the city of Zaria. Their homes were destroyed and many of their surviving members, including their leader, Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, were detained without charges. The detainees are now being tried in secret in defiance of supplications and protests from local and international human rights groups. Sambo Dasuki, the National Security Adviser under the previous administration, remains in detention despite several court orders granting him bail.

In September 2017, soldiers attacked members of a nonviolent pro-Biafra group called Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), killing, maiming, and arresting hundreds of them. Some of the soldiers attacked and ransacked the family home of IPOB leader, Nnamdi Kanu, briefly detaining his aged parents. Activist and anti-Buhari critic, Deji Adeyanju, languished for two months in prison on a farcical charge for which he had been acquitted several years ago, and after he had been granted bail by a federal court. Dino Melaye, a senator and member of the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) has undergone an ordeal of several arrests and detentions in what many Nigerians believe to be retribution for his persistent criticism of the president.

In January 2019, Nigerians were shocked to learn that soldiers had invaded and were occupying the offices of the national daily, Daily Trust. This was an event reminiscent of the military era and a scandalous departure from the press freedom Nigerians expect under democratically elected administrations. Yet anyone who had been watching the muzzling of the press, the detention of journalists and activists in several parts of the country, and the growing governmental intolerance for dissent would hardly have been shocked by the assault on the Daily Trust newspaper. The Nigerian press, once hailed as a bastion of expressive freedom, is now cowed by intimidation, harassment, and the arrest of journalists.

The Nigerian civil society, traditionally one of the most vibrant in Africa, has either been coopted into the emerging fascistic order or has lost its voice under the ongoing assault on the discursive public sphere. The recent brazen removal of the Chief Justice of the Federation, Walter Onnoghen, without resorting to the prescribed constitutional process signaled the extent to which the democratic and constitutional order has been desecrated.

Under Buhari and to a lesser degree his predecessors, Nigeria has degenerated into a contradictory brew of democratic pretensions and authoritarian disdain for political freedoms. What this reality means is that democracy is fast losing legitimacy on account of its failure to deliver the abstract benefits that one takes for granted in a democratic system, the freedoms that are supposed to compensate for democracy's failure to produce development. Far from being a bulwark against instability, democracy has become a threat to whatever stability remains in Nigeria.

## Reworking Democracy, Reforming the Nation

Democratic setbacks do not necessarily authorize or legitimize authoritarianism. They merely make it tolerable — a tolerable, desperate afterthought. The solution for Nigeria and other African countries experiencing democratic disillusionment is not the Utopian promise of a benevolent dictatorship articulated by Zambian economist, Dambisa Moyo, because as she herself acknowledges, dictators are rarely benevolent because there is no incentive to be.<sup>ix</sup> What is required rather is a radical shift in attitude away from orthodox thinking and towards an acknowledgement that multiparty liberal democracy can, as Moyo argues, “hamper development” as political rivalry and dueling ethnic and regional agendas create gridlock and stall policies and developmental initiatives. Democratic failures do not discredit democracy as a generic set of ideas connoting accountability and representation, nor do they call for the abandonment of democracy altogether. What is required is a reimagining of democracy and, along with this reimagining, a willingness to redesign and redefine it to take into account and respond to each country’s peculiar socioeconomic and demographic circumstances.

For Nigeria, the foundational problems are fairly familiar and cannot be solved by a democratic project that avoids rather than enhances solutions to these first order problems. Nigeria is a nation cobbled together from hundreds of different ethnic constituents by British colonizers for their own purposes. Today, those ethnicities divide into several broad regional and religious cleavages and are marked by drastically

divergent, competing visions and aspirations. Ethnic and regional identities have, for good or ill, persisted as the organizing idiom of politics and sociopolitical claim-making. This is a recipe for intense rivalry, suspicion, enmity, distrust, and zero-sum political maneuvering.

The only institution ironically preventing this cauldron from boiling over, but which is itself a permanent impediment to both national unity and democracy, is the de facto unitary governmental structure of Nigeria, which keeps resources, power, and initiatives concentrated in the center while stymieing subnational constituencies and forcing them to subserviently look to the center in Abuja. This system reverses the order of popular sovereignty as an all-powerful central state usurps all sovereignty, which then flows vertically upwards rather than manifesting first in horizontally-linked constituents and then flowing from them to a weak center. The result of this unitary system is that the state enjoys no legitimacy in the eyes of subnational constituents as it is seen as a distant, aloof entity. Another result is that all consequential electoral stakes reside at the center, hence periodic national elections are do-or-die affairs, literal struggles for control of national resources and for the power to distribute and withhold them. Needless to say, this is a threat to democracy, any kind of democracy, but especially to the presidential winner-takes-all democracy practiced in Nigeria. The presidential system, coupled with an ill-fitting zero-sum democratic order, is unsuitable for a unitary state. Thus, in Nigeria, a structural problem was exacerbated by the importation of the wrong type of democracy.

There are three imperatives in light of this conundrum. First, there needs to be a constitutionally mandated reordering of the nation's architecture. There needs to be

decentralization and devolution. Power, resource management, and developmental agency need to be devolved to subnational units. This would not solve all of Nigeria's problems as subnational units themselves are riddled with ethnic and other tensions, and as state executives, like the national ones, display a tendency towards usurpation and authoritarianism. Nonetheless, if decentralization and devolution trickle down to local government and district levels, the stakes of governance and electoral politics would become localized. Battles over accountability, representation, and governance are better and more effectively fought out at local levels than in distant national and state capitals. This prescription is nothing new. It has been making cameo appearances in Nigerian political discourse under the lingo of restructuring since at least the 1990s. Many Nigerian intellectuals pitch it. Newspaper articles debate it. Nigerians on social media routinely discuss it. Decentralization through national restructuring has not gained much consequential purchase because standing in the way of it are the political elites for whom the current system provides both an alibi and a refuge from the expectations of constituents. As things stand, local political leaders can conveniently but plausibly blame the overbearing central government in Abuja for their failures. Thus, the unitary state not only stifles development and frustrates democracy; it is also the perfect exculpatory excuse for bad political leaders.

The second thing that needs to occur is a move from the presidential system to a parliamentary system of government. This will improve the representational dynamic and cut the cost of elections and democracy. There is no reason why Nigeria should have two legislative chambers other than the desire to ape the United States (from where the

institutions of Nigeria's current democratic project were borrowed), so the senate should be scrapped. There is also no reason for a four-year election cycle other than the impulse to copy the United States, so a six- or seven-year single term should be adopted to save money and reduce election-induced instabilities and crises. The Nigerian national question turns on the struggle of the country's various constituencies for representation and inclusion. The recurring agitational rhetoric of marginalization stems from the failure to construct a system of representation considered fair and inclusive. This failure of inclusion produces both separatist aspirations and sociopolitical volatility and needs to be corrected. This correction can be effected by constitutionally mandating the rotation of elected public offices at the federal, state, and local government levels, where many groups feel that their minority status or their historical political marginality has shut them out of the state.

A notable example is the case of the Igbo people of the Southeast, one of the three most populous ethnic groups in the country. About fifty years after the defeat of their secessionist Republic of Biafra, Nigeria still treats the Igbo as untrustworthy pariahs and has not integrated them into key institutions of the state. The most poignant illustration of this post-civil war failure of national reconciliation and inclusion is the fact that the Igbo have not produced a president since the civil war ended in 1970. The twin phenomena of marginalization and secessionist mobilization coexist causally and symbiotically in the Southeast as a result.

The standard argument against rotation is that it is undemocratic, but that is precisely the problem because such a contention rests on a doctrinaire, rigid

understanding of democracy and also results from the seduction of Western liberal democracy, which stresses the tyranny of majoritarian rule, a form of rule that alienates and excludes. Besides, Nigeria already practices a similar representational policy of inclusion called the federal character principle. Although compliance is uneven, the constitution requires that each state of the nation be represented in public job recruitment, admissions to federal high schools and colleges, in the bureaucracy, and in the federal cabinet. If this constitutional provision is deemed necessary for achieving national inclusion and representational fairness then there is no credible reason for not extending it to the realm of elective politics.

If Nigeria is going to make democracy an asset rather than a divisive burden, the practice needs to be domesticated. Seemingly sacrosanct principles of liberal democracy have to be rethought and Nigeria's political elites have to get creative about the type of democracy they want to practice to suit Nigeria's sociopolitical and cultural realities. In this endeavor of reworking democracy, orthodox democratic principles imported uncritically from the West in the 1990s need to give way to pragmatic solutions even if these solutions run afoul of ideologies promoted by Western prodemocracy funders and activists.

## **Elections or no Elections?**

There is one final problematic that needs to be broached. The triadic expression of democracy involves representation, accountability, and participation. I have spent the

foregoing pages arguing that liberal democracy has failed to engender the first two values in Nigeria. When it comes to the third — participation — we tend to lazily posit elections as the only guarantor of it. Democratic participation is crudely reduced to voting in periodic elections. Scholars and prodemocracy activists need to rethink the lionization of elections as the only instrument of democratic participation. As contrarian political theorists have contended, elections are a flawed mechanism for gauging democratic participation, not only because electoral democracy disempowers non-elite voters and reinforces existing sociopolitical orders,<sup>x</sup> but also because democracy can thrive without periodic elections. Critics of liberal democratization processes have as a result of this antagonism between elections and democracy coined the idea of “elections without democracy.”<sup>xi</sup>

Since the argument on electoral inefficacy emerged, alternatives to voting have followed, proposed by those who desire to produce an egalitarian political field and give every citizen equal opportunity to obtain and exercise political power. The idea of random selection has gained recent currency. Nigerian scholar, Nimi Wariboko, has proposed the drawing of lots to “complement [Nigeria’s] system of election,” proposing that “one-third” of all federal and state legislative seats “be filled by lot.”<sup>xii</sup> This idea deserves serious consideration within a broader menu of new democratic innovations, for it would cut the financial and social costs of elections while ensuring a more egalitarian and thus more accountable leadership selection process.

My own provisional proposal is that Nigeria adopts a proportional electoral allocation process whereby elective public positions are distributed based on the number of votes gotten in an election. Under this proposal, there would be no winners and losers

as the current winner-takes-all adversarial electoral model posits. Rather, there would be big winners and small winners. There would also be fewer electoral contests. A single election would produce multi-tiered winners. Candidates would go into elections knowing that even if they are not the top vote getters, they would end up with other, albeit lesser, public positions stipulated in a new electoral legislation. For instance, if the top vote getter gets the office of president, the next top vote getter gets the office vice president, etc. On the legislative side, if the top vote getter gets the federal legislative seat for a constituency, the next top two or three vote getters get the state assembly seats, and the next top three vote getters get the local government legislative seats, etc. Furthermore, the selection of leaders at small subnational units can be done without elections. Specifically, such selections could occur through informal community congresses where community groups under the guidance of traditional rulers and elders select representatives and leaders by consensus and popular acclamation on a rotational representational basis.

## **Concluding Remarks**

If implemented these reform proposals would make elections less raucous, less costly, and less violent. They would make Nigeria's democratic system less adversarial and more consensual. Such a reformed political structure would also reduce the anxieties of ethno-religious and regional representation and access, ensuring that every group — majority or minority — is represented in the country's leadership at all levels. Since electoral volatility is a product of the understanding that exclusive, zero-sum access to

state resources comes through total electoral victory and the exclusion of electoral losers, my proposals would defuse the charged political rituals we call elections and remove the fears and anxieties invested into them in Nigeria and other African countries. They would additionally decentralize politics and contestations over its spoils and stakes, while reducing the zero-sum calculus that fuels rivalry, competing agitation, and political violence, all of which erode the stability of the state.

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### Endnotes:

- i “Nigeria’s Election Among World’s Most Expensive,” by Nurruddeen M. Abdallah, AllAfrica.com, May 7, 2018: <https://allafrica.com/stories/201805080951.html> (accessed February 4, 2019).
- ii “Nigeria Overtakes India in Extreme Poverty Ranking,” by Bukola Adebayo, CNN.com, Tuesday, June 26, 2018: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/26/africa/nigeria-overtakes-india-extreme-poverty-intl/index.html> (accessed on March 15, 2019).
- iii “Another Bloody Election,” The Sunday Tribune, March 10, 2019, front page.
- iv See Scott Ashford, “Electoral Accountability: Recent Theoretical and Empirical Work,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 15: 183-201: 84.
- v “Nigerian Senators Earn \$1 Million Yearly, more than What the US President Receives,” by Tunde Ososanya, Legit.com: <https://www.legit.ng/1157726-nigerian-senators-earn-1-million-yearly-us-president-receives.html> (accessed February 25, 2019); see also <https://www.thecable.ng/falana-shehu-sani-whistleblower-senators-salary> (Accessed February 25, 2019).
- vi “AD 18: Nigeria’s Pre-election Pulse: Mixed Views on Democracy and Accountability,”: <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad18-nigerias-pre-election-pulse-mixed-views-democracy-and-accountability> (accessed on February 22, 2019).
- vii Jacob K. Olupona, “15 Facts on African Religions,” Theinterfaithobserver.org: <http://www.theinterfaithobserver.org/journal-articles/2017/10/30/15-facts-on-african-religions> (accessed on February 22, 2019).
- viii Axel Honneth, “Recognition or Redistribution? Changing Perspectives on the Moral Order of Society,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 18 (2-3): 43-55.
- ix Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is not Working and Why there is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009), 42.
- x Brian Martin, “Democracy without Elections,” *Social Anarchism* 21 (1995-1996), 18-51. See also David van Reybrouck, “Why Elections are Bad for Democracy,” *The Guardian*, June 29,

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2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/29/why-elections-are-bad-for-democracy> (Accessed March 3, 2019).

<sup>xi</sup> Larbi Sadiki, *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>xiii</sup> Nimi Wariboko, "Election by Lottery: A New Approach to Nigerian Democracy," *Premium Times*, September 22, 2017: <https://opinion.premiumtimesng.com/2017/09/22/election-by-lottery-a-new-approach-to-nigerian-democracy-by-nimi-wariboko/> (Accessed on March 3, 2019).