



Nigeria: Democracy and Public Opinion Since 1970

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Abstract: *The civil war in Nigeria ended in 1970. But, that did not bring to an end the bouts of military rule until 1979 to 1982. From there again came the military rules until 1999. Since, then we have seen successive democratic rules. But, the success of democratic government depends upon the degree to which public opinion is sound, well developed and effective in controlling the actions and policies of government. It is in democracy that people are free to express their opinion. But the opinion must not be libelous or defamatory. Public opinion and democracy therefore are complimentary to each other. It is only in a democracy that public opinion thrives which is the thrust of this paper.*

Key words: *Democracy and Public Opinion*

Introduction

Democracy and public opinion in Nigeria Since 1970

Democracy has its origin in Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, there are other cultures that have greatly contributed to the evolution of democracy as well. We have the Ancient Rome, Europe, North and South America. India today has the largest democracy in the world. The concept of representative democracy arose largely as a result of ideas and institutions that developed during the European Middle Ages and the age of enlightenment and, in the American and French revolutions. Democracy has been called the “last form of government”. And from an imperfect beginning to a much better admirable position now. In different parts of the world today there are various forms, shades and varieties of democracy. Each country in the world today is endeavouring to be called democratic.

Little wonder, when Nigeria obtained independence in 1960 and became a republic in 1963, these developments ushered in a liberal democracy. But the political parties that came with the independence were parties based on tribal/ethnic lines. For example, the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), Action Group and National Conference of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC). This brought about tribal politics leading to shameless election frauds, thurgery, gangsterisms, absence of electoral officials, open election riggings, booth capturing, breakdown

of law and order with unprecedented violence, corruption, etc. making a mockery of the liberal democracy that came with the independence. It is not surprising therefore, that, in the process, it became manifest that to participate in national politics, politicians must master the art of manipulating the minority to intimidate the majority to submission. Democratic government could not be defined here therefore, as the government of the people for the people and by the people as given to us by Abraham Lincoln.

It came to be that each regional party ensured absolute control of their tribal groups in each of the regions without regard for any opposition (Ogoloma May, 2015).

That was why, “the emergency of democracy in the early 1960s in Nigeria was a failure which ended in chaos. It gave the military the justifiable entry into the Nigerian political arena. This brought into the country the institutionalization of the military into the Nigeria body politic until 1999 when the Obasanjo Administration came into power”.

It is a known fact that internally, the military did not encourage nor listen to public opinion. And, as long as there was no regard for the opposition, it automatically means that, there was no regard to public opinion within or without. But, there was an exceptional case during the Murtala Mohammed and Obasanjo era (1975-76) when, the administration gave to the people what they wanted because; they listened to the opinion of the people.

Origin and definition of the term democracy

Democracy is a form of government where the governing power is derived from the people directly (direct democracy) or by means of elected representatives of the people (representative democracy). The word democracy originated from the Greeks where “demos” means the people and “Kretein/Kratos” means “to rule” or “the people to rule”. This literally means “Rule by the people”. It was used in the Middle of the Fourth to fifty century B.C to denote the political systems that existed in some of the Greek-city states like Athens following a popular uprising in 508 B.C. where the population was said to be about 500 people.

Though, there is no generally accepted definition of democracy, but the former American President, Abraham Lincoln, defined it as, the government of the people, by the people and for the people. But this is just a simple definition of democracy. A more concise and more detailed definition of democracy is that, the government of a country is carried out by representatives of the people, elected by ballot on a practically universal suffrage. In a representative democracy, every vote has equal weight, no restrictions can apply to anyone wanting to become a representative and the freedom of its citizen is secured by legitimized rights and liberties which are generally protected by a constitution. And whosoever becomes a representative is in power for a maximum period of four years as enshrined in the constitution and, should they fail to discharge their duties or separate the purpose for which they were elected, to the satisfaction of the electorate, will be dismissed and replaced by others in a much less time than that. Hence, the government of any such country is not merely for the people (Ogoloma and Sampson; May, 2015).

The majority rule that is a characteristic future of democracy without, responsible government or constitutional protections of individual liberties from democratic power, it is possible that, dissenting individuals might be oppressed by the tyranny of the majority. And

competitive elections is one of the essential process in a representative democracies.

Moreover, freedom of political expression, freedom of speech and freedom of the press are essential so that, the citizens are informed and able to vote freely in their personal interests.

Popular sovereignty is one of the tenets of democracy. In most countries, democracy is based on the principle of equal rights. And when we talk about liberal democracy, we associate it with multiparty system, equality before the law, due process, civil liberties, human rights and the existence of civil society.

Separation of powers that calls for checks and balances as in Nigeria and the USA is equally one of the attributes of a liberal democracy. But in the United Kingdom, it is the parliamentary sovereignty. Though in practice, it is judicial independence that is maintained.

A modern democracy implies certain privileges for its citizens such as;

- A) The election of their government through free and fair elections.
- B) The rule of law
- C) Human rights

What Is Public Opinion

Public opinion is the aggregate of individual attitudes or believes held by the adult population of the people on the issues bothering on their interests. It is also, the complex collection of opinions of many different people and, the sum of all their views. The principle approaches to the study of public opinion may be divided into four categories. They are;

- A) Qualitative measurement of opinion distributions;
- B) Investigation of the internal relationships among the individual opinions that make up public opinion on an issue.
- C) Description or analysis of the public role of public opinion.
- D) Study both of the communication media that disseminate the idea on which opinions are based and, of the uses that propagandists and other manipulators make of these media.

The Concept and Origin of “Public Opinion”

Public opinion as a concept gained credence with the rise of “public” in the 18th century. The English term “public opinion” dates back to the 18th century. The word “public opinion” is derived from the French word “opinion publique”. It was first used in 1588 by Montaigne. The concept came about through the process of urbanization and other political and social forces. For the first time, it became important what people thought, as forms of political contention changed.

Adam Smith, as one of the earliest classical economists, refers to public opinion in his “theory of moral sentiments”, but, it was Jeremy Bentham, the famous utilitarian philosopher,

who fully developed theories of public opinion. He opined that, public opinion had the power to ensure that the ruler would rule for “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. He brought in utilitarian philosophy in order to define theories of public opinion.

However, the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas contributed to the idea of “public sphere” to the discussion of public opinion. Public sphere, according to Habermas, is where “something approaching public opinion can be formed (2004:351). Habermas claimed that, it is featured as universal access, rational debate, and disregard for rank. However, he believed that these three features for how public opinion should be formed are not in place in western democracy. Public opinion in Western democracy is highly susceptible to elite manipulation. Herbert Blumer the American sociologist has proposed all together different conception of the public”. According to Blumer, public opinion is discussed as a form of collective behaviour (another specialized term) which is made up of those who are discussing a given public issue at any one time. Given to this position, according to Blumer, there are many publics; each of them comes into being when an issue arises and ceases to exist when the issue is resolved. Blumer went on to say that, people participate in public in different capacities and to different degrees. So, public opinion polling cannot measure the public. It must be said that, an educated individual’s participation in public opinion is more important than that of a drunk. The “mass” in which people independently make decisions about, for example, which brand of tooth paste to buy, is a form of collective behaviour different from the public. To sociologists all over the world, public opinion is a product of social interaction and communication. To them, there can be no public opinion on an issue unless members of the public communicate with each other. They maintained that, even if, opinions of individuals are similar, they can not constitute a public opinion until they are conceived to other in some form, whether through print media, radio, television, the internet, or telephone or face- to- face conversation. Moreover, the sociologists point also to the possibility of the existence of different public opinion on any given issue at the same time. To them, one body of opinion may dominate or reflect government policy without excluding the existence of other organized bodies of opinion on political topics like that of the political scientists and historians.

Origin and definition of Public Opinion

It is not easy to exactly say how the term public opinion came about or how it originated. But, the ancient Romans spoke in terms of “consensus pupil” in the legal sense of it. And in the Middle Ages there was this saying of “Vox Populi, Vox Deli” meaning “the voice of the people is the voice of God” this gained currency at that time. But Machiavelli more or less gave importance to the voice of the people, which he compared to the voice of God. Nevertheless, the introduction of public opinion into the political science vocabulary in Europe is credited to the French writers, especially Rousseau, who perhaps was the first to use it before the out break of the French revolution.

Public opinion cannot be easily defined. As Finer puts it, in spite of extensive study on the subject “, public opinion is still perhaps lacking proper analytical definitions”, (Gokhale, 1979). The diversity of beliefs according to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2005:1173), public opinion is the opinion that people in the society have about an issue”. Jaja, J. M. and

Aba-Erondu, N. (2010:102) defined public opinion as, “the collective beliefs, Judgment or views held by majority of the citizens of a country about the public or actions of the government”.

It must be noted that, the opinion of a people is made up of different views or currents of sentiment, some currents, says Bryce, “developed more strength than others because, they have behind them large members or more intensity of conviction, and when one is evidently the strongest, it begins to be called public opinion per excellence being taken to embody the views supposed to be held by the bulk of the people”.

It must be realized that, an opinion held by a group of people’s selfish interests will not be called public opinion. It may best be called a group feeling. Willoughby write, “community of men which has assumed the charter of public welfare, public opinion result not of the opinion of all its members but only of those persons, few or many, who are led to think and to form judgments regarding matters of general interests”. Social good is the primary consideration for public opinion (Chaturved: 2006).

In the formation of public opinion, we realize that, on every issue of common interest and public importance, there is often a variety of impressions and views. Some of which are confused, incoherent and amorphous. Discussions and clarifications diminish much confusion and diversity so that, interconnected views which is held by an apparent majority of citizens begins to be called the public opinion. All opinions points out Lowell, involve a choice between different views begin to take shape. Of these, the view which is held by an apparent majority of citizens begins to be called the public pinion. All opinions points out Lowell, involve a choice between different views which may be rational, or based on some conviction, or it may proceed from feeling and emotion (Dictionary of Political Science: 2006).

Agencies of Public Opinion

According to Jaja and Aba-Erondu, the following are the agencies of public opinion;

a) **The Mass Media**

This is done through the news papers, magazines, journals, periodicals, handbills, leaflets, social media, etc. for example, the news paper editorials of both national or local news papers depending on whether the matter is of national or local importance. Radio and television commentaries, as well as shows go a long way in influencing the opinion of the members of the public on an issue where the freedom of the press is guaranteed. As they have set up high standings.

(b) **Rumours and Gossips**

The illiterate members of the public that are not informed about certain issues, forms their own opinions from gossips, hearsays and rumours. In such a situation, unless proper enlightenment campaign programmes, announcements, and commentaries are undertaken to counter the wrong impressions created by such rumours before they become public opinion which might have dangerous consequences on the government programmes and the society in general.

c) **Political Parties and Associations**

Political parties and associations influence public opinions during their election rallies, manifestoes and their expressed opinions on certain important national or state issues. This is mostly done by the opposition parties and non-governmental organizations.

d) **Influential or Eminent Citizens**

There are groups of people like traditional rulers, business moguls, lawyers, scholars, artists, activists, etc, that acts as public opinion moulders and leaders of thought in any given society or country as the case may be. Their view points and statement help determine the type of opinions their citizens are likely to hold.

e) **Pressure Groups**

These groups sometimes may be organized or unorganized. It could be spontaneous as well. But it is important to note that, they are organized social interests and may employ different methods like strikes or demonstrations in trying to influence public opinion and government policies.

f) **Public Platforms**

Political leaders, scholars, journalists, artists and others can express their views at public meetings and influence public opinion. On the eve of elections, public platforms are fully exploited. Each speaker puts his views before the people to convince them that, their standard or that of his party is correct and better than that of the other parties and individuals. The public gets the various types of opinions and view points through the public platform.

g) **Cinema and Radio**

In the world over, cinema has become an effective instrument for spreading of ideas. Even though, it is used for entertainment, commercial purposes are meant for educating and enlightening the people. Yet, the films can be a more powerful instrument of public opinion. This is because, the reading culture of the people is low and, only few people can read books and newspapers. But almost everybody see films.

h) **Legislature**

Discussions in the legislature have great educational value and can go a long way in developing healthy public opinion. In the developed countries, the standard of discussions in the legislature is high. The speeches of members of the government and the opposition and the questions and supplementary questions put in the house are reported in the newspapers, which influence the minds of readers. Anyone studying the discussions in the legislature is in a position to know facts and judge the caliber of the government and of the opposition.

i) **Educational institutions and Associations**

It is a known fact that good education develops a healthy outlook in the young stars and equip them mentally to think for themselves.

Without such men and women, there can be no healthy public opinion. That is why, educational institutions have important place in influencing public opinion, prepare youngsters for good citizenship. The work of educational institutions may not have an immediate effect in the political field. Its value is to be realized from a long range point of view. Because, they enlighten and educate students, who come out of good institutions in the long run to become good citizens and excellent agents of moulding public opinion. That is why there is a marked difference between the reaction of an ordinary man to the policies of the government and the reaction of a learned man. Equally, various associations having specific aims in view are also instrumental in influencing public opinion.

Conditions favourable for the formation of public opinion

According to Sachedeva and Gupta (1980), the following are the conditions favourable for the formation of public opinion;

1. **People's Capacity to Think**

It must be realized that, those who are able to give opinions, should also have the capacity to think. Otherwise, there can be no opinion either for or against certain issues of both interval or external importance. For illiterate and ignorant people can not be said to be competent enough to give their opinions on certain political issues. For example, in Nigeria, many people may not be in a better position to comment whether non-alignment has influence in Nigerian foreign policy positions. Because, they do not know much about non-alignment and what it stood for.

2. **Role of Writers**

Good writers can always prepare the background for the formation of public opinion. Leaders or political elites, and writers as well as journalists can provide the public with the necessary tools for the formation of public opinion.

3. **Formation of Groups**

It is necessary for people to form groups and associations and be able to communicate with one another regarding the various problems confronting them.

4. **People's interest in problems**

It is of utmost importance that people must have interest in studying the problems of government with good education which empowers them to deal with political issues and other matters in the society.

5. Initiative by Political Leaders

Most of the time, it is the political leaders and elites that can take initiatives in creating and directing public opinions.

6. Homogeneity of Community of Interests

Gettel says that, homogeneity and community of interest are necessary for public opinion to thrive. "Wide differences in race, religion or class interests interfere with the formation of a general consensus of opinion on public questions. If the political mind of the people is to be sound. There must be behind minor differences, as essential agreements on the nature of the government to be maintained and the national ideas to be realized" (SachDeva and Gupta: 1980).

The Difference between Propaganda, Indoctrination, Inculcation, Appeal and Public Opinion Propaganda

It must be noted that the latest scientific devices are being developed to be used in influencing public opinion in modern times. Roucet and others explained the meaning of terms like propaganda, indoctrination, inculcation and appeal. According to them, "at present, propaganda is a one-side effort frequently used as secret or undercover methods to present information which the author knows to be at least partially false.

Indoctrination and inculcation

Both indoctrination and inculcation may mean a one sided efforts to present information which is untruthful only to the extent that, any partial presentation is false. But an appeal is a frank statement of position that is usually in the form of an opinion is which; no concerted efforts are made to disguise the source or intent. Today, the term propaganda carries an unpleasant meaning and the propagandist is looked upon with suspicions by the public. And in the relationship between public opinion and democracy, it is generally accepted by now that, the success of democracy depends upon an effective public opinion.

Relationship between Public Opinion and Democracy

It is generally accepted by now that, the success of democracy depends upon an effective public opinion. This prompted Gettell to say that, "The success of democratic government depends upon the degree to which the public opinion is sound, well developed and effective in controlling the actions and policies of government". (Gokhale 1979) we saw how public opinion played a role in influencing the voting pattern of the people in the 2015 elections in Nigeria with the buzz word "Change". As an example, in military regimes, public opinion do not play much role in the governance of the people. The military sometimes might not be disposed to listen to any public opinion. Democracy sets its face against conflict based on violence, but it recognizes or even encourages a conflict of opinions. So, in democracy therefore, people are free to express their opinions, provided the opinions are not libelous or defamatory. It is not

wrong to say that democracy and public opinion compliments each other. Without democracy there will be no effective public opinion.

Public Opinion and Government Policies

Public opinion plays an important role in the political sphere and today governance of the society. The impact of public opinion is widely felt during elections. For example in the last election in Nigeria, through the public opinion, people were able to choose between “transformation” and “Change”. So, the effect of public opinion is mostly felt during elections since it has the power to influence the voting patterns of the people and, have also contributed to our knowledge about the effects of government propaganda and policy. Recently, the opinion of Nigerians were vehemently against the removal of oil subsidy and, the question of signing the “Gay Marriage” Law. We have also seen in the past more especially, during the military rule of late General Murtala Mohammed in 1975/76 period on the issue of supporting the then MPLA and the UNITA Forces. While Nigerians and the government were in support of MPLA and, the USA under Régime wanted Africans/AU to support UNITA. So, it depends on the government of the day to listen to public opinion on daily basis before executing their policies. Claude (1965:5) has also acknowledged that public opinion has always been a political factor guiding a country’s foreign policy.

World Public Opinion and Domestic Public Opinion: Relationship

World public opinion as we know and understand it today is very dynamic. It swings and changes like weather, and as waves and tide which are mostly unpredictable. Though, it is only occasionally that, it influences democratic practices. Most of the time, it is only when the domestic public opinion supports the world public opinion like in the “*Chibok Girls*” case, that, it can to a large extent become an important influence in democracy. So, in Nigeria, it is when domestic public opinion and world public opinion and their stand on issues fuse together with that of the government that, it acts as a booster to the avowed government interests.

The press, the mass media as well as the social media forms part of the world’s public opinion. Anyhow, the role of propaganda machinery, the absence of free press, especially during the military rules due to gagging and censorship; the level of illiteracy and awareness in the society and economic backwardness of the country has tended to mar the real effect of public opinion in the democratic practices in Nigeria and Africa as a whole.

What People think and want to be made effective

According to Bryce, “Public Opinion is commonly used to denote the aggregate of the views men hold regarding matters that affect or interest the community”. And to Soltau, “the term is usually applied to what people think and want for their common life. Public opinion in politics is not just what people think, nor even that part of their thinking, which they express in public: It is what they want to be made effective in practice. There are many things that people like and dislike. But what matters in politics are what they like enough to demand, what they dislike enough to resist” (Gokhale: 1979).

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a close relation between public opinion and democracy. They both work peri-persu. Where there is democracy, public opinion is there. Contrast this during the military regimes. You will discover that many people were incarcerated in prisons in some countries for example, even when they have not written any libelous things. In democracy you have to communicate as long as it is not libelous or one of this yellow journalism. The three categories of people that form public opinion are;

- a) Public leaders and thinkers
- b) The educated class
- c) The common people

Any of these three categories may from time to time generate issues, controversies, conflicts, etc that may require reactions from the people. The position of these categories in an issue may also explain their positions. Public opinions therefore help in shaping/swaying the position of the government as well as the generality of the people and what they want and desire.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that, there should be free press at all times to allow public opinion to thrive in the country. And the signing of the Freedom of Information Act into law acts as a booster to public opinion.
2. The government should embark upon lowering the level of illiteracy in the country for a more enlightened society.
3. The government should endeavour to encourage activities that will lower the economic backwardness of the country to enable most of the populace to appreciate the real effects of public opinion in the democratic practices of the country. Other African countries are looking upon Nigeria for acceptable practices.

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