

ARTICLE

Interrogating Stateness-Democratization Nexus in Nigeria: Issues and Contentions

Adeniyi Semiu Basiru

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Abstract

Surely, many answers would be given to the question of why Africa is not democratizing: neo-colonialism, non-civic political culture, pervasive authoritarianism, weak constitutional base etc. Specifically, these answers are not completely irrelevant to the crisis of democratization in Africa. Alone or in combination, they could be serious impediments but this article, drawing inspiration from notable statist theorists and using Nigeria as a research backdrop, contends that statelessness is at the root of the democratization crisis in Africa. Like its colonial predecessor, the post-colonial state in Africa does not have the wherewithal to support genuine democracy. The article recommends that changing the tide in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, must entail the restructuring and the re-legitimization of the state.

Keywords

democratization, stateness, political culture, neoliberalism, hegemony, legitimacy, restructurings

A. INTRODUCTION

That political democracy is desirable in the post-cold war era is not in dispute (Huntington, 1991; Diamond, 1999): what is in dispute is the feasibility of the liberal variant of democratization in non-Western societies (Ake, 2000a; Nzogola-Ntalaja, 1997). In other words, whether people's struggle for democracy in these societies could be transformed into the 'good life' via liberal democracy (Nnoli, 1994:8). Democratization in non-Western societies (specifically Nigeria) since the 1990s has produced mixed results (Brown and Kaiser, 2007) or what Munetsi (2011) refers to as "the good, the bad and the ugly".

The neo-liberals, drawing inspiration from the success of Botswana, Mauritius, South Africa, Senegal and, more recently, Ghana, as reported by the Freedom House and other liberal monitors, contends that democratization is on course on the continent (Carothers, 1991). In contrast, the pessimists, basing their judgement on the experiences of failed democracies in Africa, reason that democratization is either blocked or incomplete in the region (see Bratton and de Walle, 1994).

Given the above theoretical dichotomies, it is instructive to note that recent African experiences have shown that the crisis of democratization reinforces that of development (Ake, 2000b; Are-Olaitan, 2006). This, in turn, has provoked many questions both within and outside scholarly circles. Indeed, Claude Ake (1996) working within a feasibility paradigm once asked: Is Africa democratizing?

Not surprisingly, Ake's question has elicited many answers from different theoretical positions but suffice to say that these could be pigeon-holed into two lines of discourse. The modernization discourse, as discerned in the works of neoliberal revisionists drawing from the classic works of Lipset (1960), argue that Africa, unlike other regions in the third wave, is not democratizing but witnessing a 'reverse wave' because of a combination of structural and cultural factors. For example, in their major works on Africa's democracy, Diamond et al (1988) eloquently argued that "constraints on democracy stretches from ethnicity through corruption, economic dependency and inefficient political institutions to unprecedented political leadership".

The other discourse, drawing heavily from the transitionology literature, berates the modernization revision-



ists for downplaying 'stateness' while laying emphasis on socio-cultural variables in explaining democratic failure in non-western polities (Skocpol, 1988; Fukuyama, 2004). As Linz and Stepan (1996:366) say, the "stateness problem must increasingly be the central concern of political activists and theorists alike".

Meanwhile, in this paper, we join the stateness camp by arguing that the quality of stateness is vital to the success of the democratization process in Africa, particularly Nigeria. Consequently, our thesis is as follows: understanding the crisis of democratization in Africa, particularly Nigeria goes beyond the socio-cultural focus but is hinged on the legitimacy of the superstructure, the state, whose foundations are rooted in history. This means that deciphering its historic mission is central to understanding the state's current defective, illegitimate and undemocratic nature.

Against this background, we seek to question the stateness-democratization nexus in Africa in the context of Nigeria. In the first section we set out the background and the main thesis of the paper, section two lays the conceptual blocks around which the study is based. The third section, in a discursive manner, traces the evolution of the global discourse on democratization and the entry point of Africa into it. Section four questions, in a qualitative manner, the stateness-democratization nexus in Nigeria. The final, fifth section concludes with a number of recommendations.

B. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUE

In this section, aside from operationalizing and contextualizing the two key concepts, we attempt to link them analytically. To start with, these two conceptual variables are not only essentially contested concepts (Gallie, 1962) but are also ontologically and ideologically diverse. Here, without going into great lengths, we begin with the conceptualization of stateness and follow on with that of democratization.

Stateness

An inquiry into the concept of stateness in its conventional sense requires an allusion to the basic constitutive components and features of the state. The reason for this is obvious: stateness ontologically depicts the quality of statehood, which in turn, is defined in terms of sovereignty, territoriality, legitimacy and hegemony (Jinadu, 2008).

What the foregoing suggests is that the concept of stateness cannot be separated from the characteristic of the state as a political entity. When any of these attributes is dispelled, the integrity of the entity is called into question (Roseberg, 2004). Suffice here to say that, in recent litera-

ture on political economy, it is fashionable for theorists to use the concept of stateness interchangeably with that of state capacity (Leftwich, 2005; Edigheji, 2006; Wesis, 1998).

Here, it should be noted that whether stateness is used synonymously with state capacity or not, it is like other emotive concepts in social sciences that have been enmeshed in ideological controversies. For example, while the neoliberal defines it in terms of market and growth (Wesis, *ibid*), the neo-Marxist sees it in terms of class hegemony. But despite these divergent viewpoints, most theorists agree that stateness cannot be viewed as an abstraction as it is relational. According to Jinadu (*op cit*: 4):

"State capacity is a function of the complementary, and reinforcing, and therefore, consolidating role of subsidiary associations, and group in mediating the relationship between the state and its institutions on the one hand, and the civil society, on the other hand, and in conferring legitimacy on the state. ...state capacity, therefore, is a function of the strength or deficit of these attributes, and of the extent to which a political culture of public spiritedness prevails among the ordinary citizens."

The above quote underscores the state-society nexus which underlies the notion of stateness (Chazan, 1998). In other words, stateness is defined in social contract terms. In this sense, legitimacy becomes the standard criterion for defining stateness in contemporary literature. In real terms, the stateness of the African state is defined by its ability to meet the democratic demands of the people (Mangu, 2007).

As will be made clearer, how the juridical entities in Africa approximate this ideal determines their democratic successes or failures. Given the foregoing, stateness for the purpose of this study is operationalized as a legitimizing credential ascribed to a juridical entity by its inhabitants.

On Democratization

The concept of democratization, like stateness, is also enmeshed in ontological controversy. It is an elastic concept whose definitions and interpretations vary according to different interests (Basiru, 2010). Suffice to say here that difficulties surrounding its meaning stem from the unclearness of the root concept - democracy (Danjibo, 2010:52).

Just as there are many interpretations of democracy (Osaghae, 1994), there are varying viewpoints on democratization. But can democratization be operationalized or conceptualized without grasping the meaning of democracy? Here, following Ake, (2000a, *op cit*), we contend that the controversies are unwarranted as they have been stirred up by liberal apologists who have succeeded in trivializing what democracy really means.



There is no doubt that Ake's position has generated debate about the meaning of democracy and democratization. While the neoliberals, under the cloak of Edward Burke's ideas and drawing inspirations from Schumpeter's classic *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1952) defines democracy in individualized, competitive and electoral terms (see Dahl, 1989; Carother, 2000, Fukuyana, 1989), the anti-liberals have attempted to conceptualize democracy, etymologically, as popular power (Ake, 2000a, op cit). In other words, it is more than electoralism.

Needless to say, the two perspectives have conditioned the meaning of democratization. For liberals, it is the institutionalization of liberal democracy in a given social milieu, Diamond et al (1995) identifying the liberal features as follows:

- 1) meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups for all effective positions of governmental power through regular, free and fair elections that exclude the use of force;
- 2) a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies such that no major social group is prevented from exercising the right of citizenship;
- 3) a level of civil and political liberties secured through political equality under a rule of law, sufficient to ensure that citizens can develop and advocate their views and interest, and contest policies and offices vigorously and autonomously.

If Diamond and other transitologists see democratization as the consolidation of liberal values, Afrocentric democratic scholars contend that democratization entails the realization of democratic principles of governance and the balance of social forces in the community rather than consolidating electoralism (Nzogola-Ntalaja, op cit; Nwabueze, 2003a).

As laudable as the above perspectives are, what is their relevance for our present purposes? There is no doubt that they offer major insights into the practice of democracy in Nigeria. In real terms, whether democracy is defined in individualized or socialized terms, existing evidence suggests that, since the commencement of the third wave, democratization in Africa has not proceeded as it should have (see UNECA/AGR, 2010).

Analytical Compass

By now, there is no disputing the fact that the two conceptual variables that are central to this study are eclectic and ideologically loaded, but how can they be linked for analytical purpose? To begin with, the relationships between stateness and democratization have been the subject of age-long theoretical discourse in political studies. In ancient Athens, the existence of a legitimate *polis* presupposes

the existence of a 'good life' which, in modern terms, translates into democracy dividends. For example, Aristotle in his *Politics* not only identified the end of politics but saw the enjoyment of good life taking place within the framework of the *polis* (Aristotle, 1962).

Unfortunately, the Athenian gift to mankind did not last beyond 200 AD. However, the ideal resurrected with the emergence of the nation-state in Europe, in the 17th century. Needless to say here that the Westphalian states that emerged had an authoritarian character as they were established through wars (Tilly, 1975) but with the rise of liberalism in the western hemisphere, the idea of the democratic state resurfaced. First in the United States and later in France, the liberal state paradigm was used to construct democratic infrastructures in the 18th and 19th centuries.

It should be noted that the idea of the utilitarian state in 19th century Europe re-echoed the Athenian notion of a 'good life'. Also during the same period, the idea of written constitutions as the bedrock of democratic society emerged. According to the 18th century philosopher, Thomas Paine (cf. Nwabueze, 2003a, op cit), "constitution is not the act of government but of a people constituting the government".

As a matter of fact, the written autochthonous constitution in the United States not only created the political interface between the state and the citizens but also determined the structure of legitimacy. Before adopting the constitution in 1787, there were thirteen political communities occupying contiguous areas of territory in North America but there was no common political arrangement uniting them into a polity or state.

So the first function required of the 1787 constitution was to constitute the several political communities into one body politic under the name of the United States of America. It is significant to note here that the new state was constituted by the constituent power of the people. As with the United States, so with Canada and Australia but the experiences of the non-Western societies were fundamentally different.

In Africa, for example, some of the sovereign states created by European colonialism shared a common origin, as with the United States, being constituted via written constitutions, but lack of an autochthonous process robbed the former of legitimacy (Basiru, 2010). As Nwabueze (2003 op cit) comments:

"Whereas the US was created by a constitution adopted and enacted into law by the people in exercise of their revolutionary sovereignty, the African states were the creation of colonial constitutions made by European imperial powers by virtue of sovereignty seized from colonized Africans. Lamentably, because of their origin in colonial constitutions made abroad by the European colonizers, the new states have no founding



fathers: they were illegitimate offspring of European colonialism.”

From the beginning, the state that was born in Africa and other colonized territories was completely illegitimate. It did not come as a surprise, in the Nigerian case, when some of the ‘founding fathers’ had reasons to denounce the grafted entity during decolonization. For Chief Obafemi Awolowo, “it was a mere geographical expression” while for Sir Ahmadu Bello, “it was the mistake of 1914” (see Ezera, 1960).

Because the newly-constituted colonial state lacked moral and social bases, it had to depend on physical power rather moral right: since it was driven by exploitative imperatives (Rodney, 1972; Ake, 1978; Onimode, 2000:74), it was majestic in form. Claude Ake (2000b:2) captures the *raison d'être* of the African colonial state thus:

“Since the colonial state was called upon by the peculiar circumstances of the colonial situation to carry out so many functions - indeed to do everything - it was all powerful. It needed to be all powerful not only to carry out its mission but also to survive along with the colonial order in the face of the resentment and hostility of the colonized.”

Given the absolute and arbitrary nature of the colonial state, no democratic link was forged with the natives (Young, 1994), such that, in essence, the colonial state deprived the natives of their democratic rights. As Rupert Emerson (1962) sadly remarks in the context of Asia, “colonialism was not a school of democracy but tyranny”.

However, as independence beckoned, expectations were high that the post-colonial environment would offer ‘bread and butter’ to the people but, disappointingly, the new order was not markedly different from its predecessors. The new political elites, rather than transforming the illegitimate state of affairs, sought to preserve it to serve their inclination to amass power (Onimode, op cit).

With its overwhelming power, the post-colonial state became the most prized political institution and was therefore sought by whatever means (Gana, 1985; Ekekwe, op cit). In this context, politics became a matter of life and death, paving the way for the military to gain power. As Ake (2000b:6) put it:

“Political competition now assumed the character of warfare and paved the way for the ascendancy of the specialists of violence, the military. The rash of military coups that came later essentially formalized a reality that was already firmly established. It was not the military that caused military rule in Africa by intervening in politics, rather it was the character of politics that engendered military rule by degenerating into warfare inevitably propelling the specialists of warfare to lead the role.”

With the appearance of the ‘specialists’ on the African political turf, the colonial legacy of brutality and crudeness was further entrenched in Africa, for decades, until the commencement of the third wave in 1990s. Since then, have there been fundamental changes in Africa? Has the African state been decolonized to serve as a haven of democracy? Before we answer these questions, let us put the ‘third wave of democratization’ into its historical context.

C. THE THIRD WAVE OF DEMOCRATIZATION AND AFRICA

In most political change literature (Linz and Stepan, 1978; Dahl, 2001), the globalization of liberal democracy has passed through three phases, but the phase that has had the most impact on societies all over the world is the third, tagged the ‘third wave’ (Huntington, op cit). The third wave started on the Iberian Peninsula and marked the resurgence of the liberal multi-party democracy in different parts of the world. As Hague and Harrop (2007:57) remark “the third wave transformed the global landscape”. Consequent upon the emergence of the third wave, the issue of democratization became the core discourse in global policy and academic circles.

Indeed, from the perspectives of the western governments and donor communities, either a state democratizes or it is ostracized (Carothers, 1991). In Africa, as in other regions of the South, countless social movements sprang up to push for democratization (Bratton, 1994). As Nzogola-Ntalaja (op cit: 9) notes:

“From its violent outbreak in October 1988 in the streets of Algiers, this new social movement for democracy has manifested itself all over the continent, changing the rules of the political game and bringing about meaningful reforms in the institutions of the post-colonial state.”

As the transitions were under way in different parts of the continent, the concern of donor communities and scholars was how to consolidate liberal democracy in Africa. Drawing from the experiences of Latin American countries, new discourses on democratization emerged in scholarly circles on the best model of democratization for the continent (Gillespie, 1989).

For western scholars, the liberal model offers the best prospects for Africa (Carothers, op cit). According to this school of thought, if democracy could be institutionalized in Latin America in the 1980s, and given the similarities



with Africa in terms of history of authoritarianism, a liberal competitive model could also succeed in Africa (Diamond et al, op cit).

Publications by notable African scholars counter the views of neoliberal evangelists such as Fukuyama (1991). They contend vociferously that, given African historical specificity and cultural uniqueness, at variance with western societies, the individualized model of democratization might not suit Africa's purpose (see Ake, 1991, 1994; Onoge, 1997; Nzogola-Ntalaja, 2002; Mkadawie, 1999; Mafeje, 1995, 2002; Shivji, 2003). The premise of their arguments is: liberal democracy is associated with a particular culture and environment, which belies its claim to universality.

To this end, they argue that the purveyors of liberal democracy ignore the differences in the process of historical development and change in different regions of the world. Also, the preference for a state-centric legal-bureaucratic basis of authority that is tailored after the experiences of western societies does not hold actual or potential benefits for Africa (Parekh, 1993). As Claude Ake (1993:242-3) submits:

“Liberal democracy is a product of a socially atomised society where production and exchange are already commodified, a society which is essentially a market. It is the product of a society in which interests are so particularized that the notion of common interest becomes problematic, hence the imperatives of democracy.”

Given this liberal logic, electoralism, according to the radicals, became the standard for evaluating democratization. With this mindset, Onoge (1997:5) argues that the emphasis is not on actual participation of the people but on the party or candidate that wins in a competitive election. Afrocentric radicals further claim that the proponents of liberal democracy in Africa, by focusing on elections, have failed to factor in the issue of popular empowerment defined in a social democratic context. As Shivji (2003) put it “the struggle for democracy is ultimately rooted in the life conditions of the people”.

For the democratization process to succeed in Africa, contend the radicals, the superstructure of the African society, the state, which by its nature is anti-democratic, must be democratized. In this sense, democratizing the state in Africa becomes the sine qua non for genuine democratization. As Ake poignantly avers “democratization in Africa can only be meaningful if it addresses and changes the constricting context of the state”.

Given the above dichotomies on democratization discourses in post-cold war Africa, which of the two best approximates the Nigerian realities?

D. NIGERIA'S EXPERIENCE WITH DEMOCRATIZATION

Nigeria is an example of a country in Africa where liberal democracy as championed by the donor communities has outlived its values (Momoh, 2006). In Nigeria, as for many other Africa countries, attempts have been made to study the feasibility of liberal democracy. Some contend that, given its heterogeneous nature, a liberal model may unleash centrifugal forces that ravage its body politic (Nnoli, op cit; Osaghae op cit). Others argue that cultural heterogeneity cannot be a stumbling block towards realizing the liberal dream in Nigeria, but its inability to consolidate democracy is due to the neopatrimonial and informalized nature of its politics (see Bayart, 1996; Bayart et al, 1999; Chabal and Daloz, 1999).

While some of the arguments by the second school might be plausible as they centre on Nigeria's stateness, we contend that they hardly touch on the history of the Nigerian state. They do not deal with the issue of how the anti-democratic status of the Nigerian state has been shaped by certain historical forces and how these forces have constrained its ability to act in peoples' interests, consequently unleashing issues that today constitute national questions (see Momoh and Adejumbi, 2002).

Since its emergence, first as a colony and later as a neocolony, Nigeria's political space has been littered with contentious issues which many analysts have termed democratic questions (Ake, 1996). In 1995, the National Constitutional Commission, under the General Abacha regime, identified thirty issues in Nigerian polity, ranging from the philosophical foundation of the Nigerian state to the fundamental rights of the citizens (Nigeria, 1995). To be more specific, some of these issues range from the most basic (e.g. labour issues) to the most volatile (Sharia, derivation etc.).

While some of the issues are nascent, some are as old as the Nigerian State itself. For example, in the first republic, issues of ethno-nationalism rocked the new nation and paved the way for military intervention in politics and eventually, the civil war (Dudley, 1973; Post and Vickers, 1973). Even under various military regimes, critical national issues continued to destabilize the nation. During this period, the military succeeded in suppressing some of the issues (see Elaigwu, 1979; Jega, 1995), but with the emergence of democratic rule on May 29th, 1999, various ethno-national issues that had been suppressed for decades resurfaced (Imobighe, 2006).

The indications point to three dominant issues which have underwritten the democratic process in Nigeria since 1999: ethno-nationalism, secularity and elections. There is no doubt that these issues have stretched the Nigerian State beyond limit and have even threatened its existence as an independent State. At this juncture, a



question is apt: Why has the Nigerian State, since its inception, not succeeded in aligning itself with its people in order to build legitimacy?

As argued at the beginning of this paper, an illegitimate state cannot promote democracy as it is detached from the people. According to various historical accounts, the Nigerian State was grafted on the people by the forces of British imperialism, so, from the beginning, was devoid of legitimacy. The grafted colonial State, by virtue of its creation, could not promote popular interests as it served the interests of the minorities in the metropolitan countries (Ekekwe, op cit). In the realm of politics, the authoritarian nature of the colonial state made democratic politics difficult. Even by the time independence beckoned, politics was still characterized by violence (Ake, op cit).

If the colonial state in Nigeria was not a school of democracy, liberal or otherwise, the post-colonial state was expected to be. In fact, prior to independence, expectations were high that the new state and elites would promote and protect democratic rights but unfortunately, peoples' expectations were dashed as the post-colonial state failed to respond to the demand for a good life. Being the successor to the bourgeois colonial state, it continued to serve the interests of the national bourgeoisie (Beckman, 1981, 1982). As a result, it became the arena of a class struggle between those in and out of office (Ake, op cit). For decades, the bourgeois state in Nigeria only served the interests of a tiny section of the populace rather than the people in general. Has the situation changed since the becoming part of the third wave? Or simply put, have the Nigerian state and its governing elites spurred democratization?

If we evaluate the Nigerian situation since 1999, based on either liberal or participatory criteria, it has not succeeded in institutionalizing democratic values. Firstly, in terms of electoralism, except the 2011 elections that were judged 'free and fair', those in 2003 and 2007 not only diminished the country's standing externally [Basiru, 2010(b)] but further marginalized the people (Emordi and Osiki, 2008, Omotola, 2009). Secondly, if democratization is evaluated in terms of governance and human security, Nigerians are probably worse off now than in 1999 (see UNECA/AGR, 2010).

Aside from these two critical failures, democracy deficit in Nigeria has also been manifested in the suppression of minorities, particularly in the oil rich Niger-Delta (Raji, 2000). In this region, the tactics adopted by the custodians of state power at the centre are not very different from those employed by the pre-1999 military regimes (Iyayi, 2007; CLO, 2001; Darah, 2001; Basiru, 2009). Save for the amnesty programme, the people of the region have been treated in an undemocratic manner. Following the experiences of Odi, Choba and other villages in River State demonstrate, a discerning mind wonders if repression and human rights violations of such magnitude could take place in a nascent democracy (CLO, op cit).

The foregoing evaluations have placed the process of democratization in Nigeria, since 1999, in context. It has shown that the institutionalization of democratic ethos has not really advanced as expected. Indeed, whether democratization is assessed in terms of liberal democracy (electoralism, pluralism etc.) or in terms of peoples' empowerment, the supposed beneficiaries, the people, have not been rewarded. In competitive terms, elections have produced outcomes that are unfavourable to the people. Save for the few 'riggers' and their cohorts (Omotola, op cit).

E. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper set out to question the stateness-democratization nexus in Africa, Nigeria in particular, in a discursive, historical manner. Following a conceptual dissection of the key variables, we laid bare the nature of stateness in Nigeria: it is an illegitimate state which implies that it is undemocratic. Given this reality, the Nigerian state cannot be a harbinger of democratization.

Therefore, setting things straight must involve re-legitimization of the neo-colonial Nigerian state via re-constitutionalization. Although this recommendation might sound utopian, in a peripheral capitalist-social formation like Nigeria, a determined people can force this agenda on the nation through popular struggle. Re-constitutionalization through struggle by the people is imperative for re-engineering stateness and democratization in Nigeria. ■

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■ *About the author*

Adeniyi Semiu Basiru
asbash72@yahoo.com

Adeniyi Semiu Basiru teaches Political Science in the College of Social and Management Sciences, Crescent University, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria. He holds a Master's degree in Political Science from the University of Lagos, Nigeria. He is presently reading for his doctorate at the same institution.



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