

Nigeria's Democracy: Civil Society Organization, A Tool for Democratic Consolidation

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Abstract— This research focuses on the role of civil society as a tool for democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The role of the civil society remains invaluable and cannot be overemphasized as civil society remain one of the veritable tools through which Nigeria's democratic sojourn can gain a formidable consolidation. Many have categorized the Civil society as an essential 'third' sector, as its activities have the propensity of exerting very positive influence on government policies and decisions. The paper concluded and recommended amongst others that, the resource base of CSOs within the country must be expanded to avoid situations where CSOs continue to depend on foreign donors because such situations leave them vulnerable and restricted to implementing the agenda established by their donors, there should be an increase and focus networking among civil society groups to aid training of cadres in grassroots mobilization and advocacy.

Keywords— Civil Society, Democracy, Democratic Consolidation, Government.

INTRODUCTION

Civil Society is seen as that realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, largely self-supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order and a set of shared rules (Diamond, 1999). In Nigeria, the history of civil society dates back to the struggle for political independence during the colonial era. Though several factors may have contributed to the democratic transition in Nigeria, civil society has been identified in most cases as being instrumental in the process. Their role in democratic consolidation in any given nation is indisputable, if such nation's quest for sustained democracy, good governance and development must be actualized.

It is against this background that civil society organizations, based on the significant role they play in facilitating the smooth transition from autocratic to democratic rule, are being deemed, specifically, by liberal democratic theorists as springboards to facilitate these transient democracies into consolidation (Diamond, (1997), Gyima-Boadi, 1999). It is as a result of this critical role of civil society that donor organizations and governments tend to invest

significantly, both in financial and human resources in civil society, particularly in developing countries, in a bid to strengthen their capacity and help consolidate their respective democracies (Monga, 2009). Regardless of the fact above, Odeh (2012) believes that CSOs have displayed genuine commitment to the continued effective discharge of their civil role in consolidating Nigeria's democracy.

However, despite the presence of myriad CSOs in Nigeria, the country has seemingly found it difficult to consolidate her democracy, which according to Dode (2010) and Imade (2001) is as a result of either because the country has a fragile political party system, weak electoral institutions as well as high level of corruption or the relative inability of civil society in the country to effectively influence the consolidation process. It is against this background that this brief seeks to investigate the role of civil society organizations in the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Civil Society: Conceptual Exploration

Civil society is a sphere of social interaction between the household (family) and the state which is manifested in the norms of community cooperative, structures of voluntary association and networks of public communication, norms are values of trust, reciprocity, tolerance and inclusion, which are critical to cooperation and community problem solving. Structure of association is the full range of both the formal and informal organizations through which citizens pursue common interests (Center for Civil Society, 2004). Civil society is composed of independent (autonomous) groups which develop a diverse, pluralistic and dense network. As it evolves, civil society constitutes of a range of local groups, organizations that are specialized, forming linkages between them to amplify the corrective voices of civil society as a partner in governance and the market. Diamond, (1999) sees it as that realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, largely self-supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order and a set of shared rules.

The formation of CSOs is a function of people having common shared values such as common needs, common

interests as well as values like tolerance, inclusion, cooperation and equality; and development through a fundamentally endogenous and autonomous process which cannot easily be controlled from outside. CSO has been widely recognized as an essential 'third' sector. Its strength can have a positive influence on the legislature. Civil society is therefore seen as an increasingly important agent for promoting good governance like transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness and accountability. Civil society can advance good governance through the following ways; one is by policy analysis and advocacy; two, by the regulation and monitoring of the performance of the state as well as the action and behavior of public officials; three, by building social capital and enabling citizens to identify and articulate their values, beliefs, civic norms and democratic practices; four, by mobilizing particular constituencies, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized sections of masses, to participate more fully in politics and public affairs; and five, by development work to improve the wellbeing of their own and other communities.

Historical overview of CSOs in Nigeria

Nigeria has a long and strong tradition of civil society, which represents the diverse and pluralistic nature of Nigerian society. Primarily, a group of civil society led Nigeria's history of struggle and resistance. In fact, the formation and activities of civil society in Nigeria is traceable to the colonial period when different groups, sometimes locally and territorially based, and at other times transcending clan and "tribal" boundaries, became part of the nationalist protest against the repressive colonial state. Examples are the likes of Egbe Omo Oduduwa, the Jamiyar Mutanin Arewa that later metamorphosed into political parties to contest power after Independence. In the early period of independence, CSOs engaged in community "self-help" activities, provided humanitarian assistance at the grassroots level (CIVICUS Civil Society Index, 2007). Following this, labour organizations, student associations, and the media provided a strong leadership and organized protests against unpopular policies during the first civilian administration in 1960 to 1966. Uganwa, (2014) maintains that subsequent military regimes which came to power through coup d'états resorted to mounting political transition programmes without a push from CSOs. Under the military regimes in Nigeria, there were attempts to stop, reduce or manipulate the activities of the CSOs. This is probably understandable, as civil society organizations thrive better in free democratic and liberal society. In spite on the limitations placed on their activities, the civil society under the military played a significant part (particularly in the late 1990's)

in the final ouster of military rule in Nigeria. Organizations like National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), Civil Liberty Organization (CLO), and Campaign for Democracy (CD) etc. were part of the civil society that fought against the subversion of the will of Nigerians and enthronement of democracy in the country (Wisdom, Harrison & Ebueku 2011).

The civil society groups had largely been affected by the nature and politics of Nigeria since independence. During the colonial era, the civil society groups were mainly concerned with the nationalist protest against the repressive colonial state. After independence, the emphasis was on social and economic development. The civil society groups had to adapt its basic role to the new challenges. With the military incursion in January 1966 and the abolition of the constitution, the civil society groups became exposed to functions essentially incompatible with its traditional roles. According to Mohammed-Salih, (2001) in Africa, the elite as well as ethno-nationalists have elevated ethnicity into a liberating force against colonialism and, after independence, ethnicity was elevated against authoritarian states.

With the conclusion of the Nigerian civil war in 1970, the focus of the existing civil society groups moved to preserving national unity, reconciliation, rehabilitation as well as reconstruction. More so, with the oil boom, attention was concentrated on the development of critical infrastructures and provision of social services. From early 1979 till date, the role of the various civil society groups in existence within the country has been that of trying to adapt to modern complexities of managing an ailing economy through Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), Rationalization, Nationalization and of recent, Privatization, Poverty alleviation, empowerment etc.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory adopted for this study is the Citizen Participation Theory. Citizen Participation is a process which provides private individuals or civil society an opportunity to exert influence on public decisions which has long been a component of the democratic decision-making process.

The origin of citizens' participation can be traced to ancient Greece and Colonial New England. Governmental processes and procedures were designed to facilitate external participation, prior to the period of 1960. However, in the mid-1960, with the Great Society programs of President Lyndon Johnson, citizens' participation was institutionalized.

The essence of public involvement or if you like, citizen participation to ensure that citizens have a direct input in public decisions. The terms "citizen" and "public," and "involvement" and "participation" are often used interchangeably. While both are generally used to indicate a process through which citizens have a voice in public policy decisions, both have distinctively different meanings and convey little insight into the process they seek to describe. The term "citizen participation" and its relationship to public decision-making has, according to Mize (1972) evolved without a general consensus regarding neither its meaning nor its consequences. Many agencies or individuals choose to exclude or minimize public participation in planning efforts claiming citizen participation is too expensive and time consuming. Yet, many citizen participation programs are initiated in response to public reaction to a proposed action by the legislature. However, there are tangible benefits that can be derived from an effective civil society involvement program. There are five benefits of civil society participation in the governance process as posited by Cogan, Sharpe & Hertzberg (1986):

- Information and ideas on public issues;
- Public Support for planning decisions;
- Avoidance of protracted conflicts and costly delays;
- Reservoir of good will which can carry over to future decisions; and
- Spirit of cooperation and trust between the agency and the public.

All of these benefits are important to the strengthening of Nigerian legislative practices in its legislative efforts, particularly the last few years.

Civil Society and Democratic Practice

In a weak, vulnerable and inefficient democracy as ours, one of the challenges facing us is how to strengthen and make democratic consolidation possible. Civil society organizations can help consolidate democracy in a number of ways. Civil society Organizations serve as watchdogs. They play a role in checking, monitoring and restraining the exercise of power by the state and holding it accountable. In the realm of CSOs, Najam (2000) defines monitoring as simply the function of keeping policy honest. CSOs are very important key agents in the process of monitoring various activities in the country. Monitoring and evaluation accordingly, enhances the effectiveness of the governance processes as well as institution building by establishing clear links between past, present and future interventions and results. Monitoring and evaluation can thus help the state to extract relevant information from past and ongoing activities that can subsequently be used as the

basis for programme fine-tuning, reorientation and planning (UNDP, (2002). This function can reduce political corruption, which is pervasive in emerging democracies. It can force the government to be more accountable, transparent, and responsive to the public, which strengthens its legitimacy.

CSOs play the role of advocacy. Advocacy here refers to the role of CSOs in lobbying directly for the policy options they prefer or against those they oppose and which policy in turn influences positively on attempts geared towards consolidating democracy in Nigeria. Advocacy thus include the many activities that the CSOs undertake including media campaigns, public speaking, commissioning and publishing research among others. They perform the function of representing the interests and asserting the rights and power of the people. In Nigeria, many interest groups are loosely organized and unable to articulate their interests. It is therefore within the purview of Civil-society organizations to come in and help interest groups and people to fight more effectively for their interests, thereby empowering them. Civil society organizations play the role of making the public more committed to democracy by disseminating democratic principles and ideas. The activities of civil society help to stimulate critical citizenry at large in politics and to promote their involvement. In several emerging democracies, Nigeria inclusive, voluntary political participation is not always high and political indifference and apathy tend to slow down the consolidation process. Civil-society organizations therefore, can supplement the role of political parties in encouraging people to get involved in politics, especially as voters in elections as political participation strengthens the legitimacy and the institutionalization of democratic government, which are essential for consolidation.

Some Contributions of Civil Society Organizations to the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria

The following are some of the contributions of Civil Society Organizations to democratic sustenance in Nigeria since 1999:

1. ***Protest against the third term agenda:*** Ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration (1999-2007) attempted to insert an elongation clause in the constitution to ensure his continuous stay in office. Though there were controversies surrounding this issue on the basis that the president did not make a categorical statement announcing tenure elongation but actions and utterances of his aides without rebuff from him indicated his willingness to have an extension (Saliu & Muhammad 2007). Largely, antagonists of the third

term bid cuts across different facets of the Nigerian society but prominent were the CSOs. Their protest was championed by the National Civil Society Coalition against Third Term (NACATT). Other civil society organizations that participated in this protests were; Peoples Problems and Solutions (PPS) organization, Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria and individuals like Prof. Wole Soyinka, former Governor and factional chairman of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), Chief Bisi Akande, Prof. Ropo Sekoni, Dr Joseph Oladokun, Solomon Olufelo and Adeola Odusanya among others. All these and many more protests from the civil society groups paved way for the senate arm of the National Assembly on Wednesday May 16, 2006 to throw out, in its entirety, a bill seeking 116 amendments/alterations of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria which sought a three-term maximum of 4 years each for the President and the Governors as opposed to a two term of 4 years each prescribed by the Constitution (<http://www.socialistworld.net/doc/2335>).

2. **Doctrine of necessity clause:** CSOs also rose to the occasion to demand for the recognition of the then Vice President Good-luck Jonathan as the Acting President when Late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua was indisposed and was away to Saudi Arabia on medical treatment between November 2009 and March 2010. Civil rights organizations such as the Save Nigeria Group and Enough is Enough Group actually seized the initiative, mobilised and marched on the National Assembly to demand for a resolution that will give due recognition to the vice president as acting president. This led to the adoption of the now popular "Doctrine of Necessity" by the National Assembly on February 9, 2010 (Ojo, 2011).
3. **Electoral reform:** One of the unforgettable efforts of the CSOs in the consolidation of Nigeria's democracy was the unflinching support they gave to the Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) inaugurated on August 28, 2007 by late President Yar'Adua. CSOs submitted tons of memoranda to the ERC offering suggestions on how Nigeria can break the chain of her electoral debacle. Indeed, significant number of the 22 member ERC were drawn from the civil society groups. They helped in analyzing the challenges of Nigeria's previous elections as well as charted the way forward.
4. **Election Monitoring:** The contributions of CSOs in electioneering activities cannot be overemphasized. They embarked on series of advocacy to mobilize the citizens and encourage them to actively

participate in the voter registration exercises that preceded the elections.

5. **Freedom of Information Act:** The passage of a Freedom of Information (FoI) Act is a victory for Nigerian democracy. A law that stipulated that all institutions spending public funds will have to be open about their operations and expenditure while citizens will have the right to access information about such activities. The FoI bill was first submitted to Nigeria's 4th National Assembly in 1999 when the country returned to democracy but did not make much progress. It returned to the legislative chambers in the 5th National Assembly in 2003 and was passed in the first quarter of 2007 by both chambers. However, President Olusegun Obasanjo vetoed it. It returned to both chambers of the 6th National Assembly in 2007 and was finally assented to by the president, Goodluck Jonathan on 28th May 2011 (Vanguard News, 2011). This success is chiefly attributed to the relentless efforts of the coalition of Nigerian Civil Society Groups.

Challenges of Civil Society Organizations in the Democratic Consolidation Process in Nigeria

Despite the various invaluable contributions of CSOs to consolidate democracy in Nigeria, they continue to encounter numerous encumbrances that hinder the smooth and effective discharge of their responsibilities. These challenges include, but not limited to the following:

1. Most of the civil society organizations in Nigeria are mostly domiciled in urban areas, with many of them in the southern parts of the country. The northern part houses very few CSOs.
2. Lack of unity. Divisions among the Nigerian civil society along the ethnic and regional lines have not helped its democratic advocacy. This led to disunity and disagreement among the Nigerian CSO practitioners in terms of decision-making and unity of purpose and has given rise to competition among themselves. The internal contradictions within the membership make it difficult to agree on common positions during the period of engagement with the state. Such inherent divisiveness weakens efficiency and makes the associations vulnerable to penetration by government agents. This has given rise to situations where CSOs protests in the country have always taken the form of Pro and Anti-government.
3. Funding: according to Boad, (1995), one of the critical challenges of CSOs in Nigeria is the issue of insufficient funds. Most civil society organizations in the country rely heavily on government funding for their various operations, which is not a healthy

development as it breeds loyalty of civil society organizations to government. CSOs that rely on other sources of funding, such as donor funding, also face the challenge of dwindling donor fund especially in the area of democracy and governance.

4. Some Civil Society Organizations collaborate with government in order to benefit one form of favour or the other. This is to a great extent attributable to the poor economic conditions of the Nigerian state which led to the emergence of civil society that are state inclined because members of such groups believe strongly that by showing loyalty to the incumbent government, material resources are assured.
5. Lack of State Support and Partnership: The relationship between civil society organizations and the state is largely characterized by suspicion and tension. For the most part, rather than state officials seeing CSOs as development partners, they see CSOs as competitors of power in the public sphere. Largely, this has hampered the actualization of the expectations of CSOs in their bid to consolidate democracy in the country.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's experience since 1999 clearly shows that a civilian government does not necessarily equate to a democratic government as several principles of democracy such as adherence to rule of law, equity, justice, fairness, citizens' participation are clearly missing with evident lack of good governance. The role of the civil society can be said to be important and needful in the democratic consolidation process in Nigeria. In fact, the present democracy, right from its emergence in 1999, its consolidation and its present sustainability can be chiefly attributed to the efforts of the civil society. One should also recognize the contribution of donor agencies which makes it possible for the civil society to work independently without recourse to the government for funding. However, this does not go without its own problems. Donors have utilized a number of different civil society strategies across Nigeria to influence and determine the political and economic roles of these groups. This notwithstanding, civil society has been successfully assisted by the donor agencies to strengthening and consolidate Nigeria's democracy.

There is no gainsaying, the need for a vibrant civil society cannot be over-emphasized especially in a democratic setting like Nigeria. Despite the shortcomings of civil society in Nigeria, its impact on socio-political life has been enormous. It has also exposed the citizenry to varieties of issues, which hitherto were the preserve of only those at the corridors

of power. However, a lot needs to be done to strengthen the capacity of civil society groups for a more robust and deepened democratic consolidation. As Adewuyi (2012) rightly puts it, that the strength of a civil society depends on the democratization level of the government because it is the latter that provides the former with the necessary conditions and access to public decision-making without which the existence and the activities of the civil society becomes questionable.

Recommendations

As pointed out supra, the CSOs have made meaningful contributions to the Nigerian democratic project. However, more needs to be done to engage the state, mobilize the citizenry as well as provide a credible platform that will aid the quest for the establishment of a durable and dependable democratic order. The following recommendations are advanced:

1. There should be an increased and focused networking among civil society organizations to aid training of cadres in grassroots mobilization and advocacy. CSOs in the country should make efforts to be more visible in the country, spreading their visibility across all divides. In fact, the rural areas should house more CSOs especially the pro-democracy groups. The argument here is that, for purposes of governance and democratic consolidation in a country with a predominantly rural population, it is pertinent for the CSOs to extend their activities, such as their watchdog role and engendering active citizens' participation in governance to the rural areas;
2. For civil society to remain autonomous of government, their resource base within the country must be expanded to avoid a situation where CSOs continue to depend on foreign donors as this leaves them vulnerable and restricted to implementing the agenda established by their donors;
3. Government should see CSOs as development partners rather than competitors. By so doing, government will be creating an enabling environment for CSOs activities to thrive considering how essential a role they play in the society;
4. Opportunities should be provided by the National Assembly for civil society to submit comments on draft laws; and
5. Corruption within the CSO should be tackled headlong in order for them to maintain reputation and garner trust amongst the populace.

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