Challenges to Public Participation in Political Processes in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT The constant violence associated with public participation in Nigeria can be attributed to processes of state formation. The colonial state played a significant role in the process of ethnic identity formation. Consequently, the present Nigerian- state is inherently a crisis prone and a violence generating mechanism. This militates against substantive public participation.The main objective of this paper is to examine the challenges to public participation in Nigeria. One of the suggestions of this paper is that conscious and concerted efforts must be made by the government in the form of an implementable policy framework to eliminate or reduce to the barest minimum the hindrances to political processes in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The persistent, indeed protracted, emasculation of public participation in Nigeria can be attributed to processes of state formation in the colonial and the post-colonial era. The colonial state was, in many ways, a template upon which the post-colonial state was built. It has played a significant role in the process of ethnic identity formation. In post-colonial Nigeria identity has been politicized. In consequence, the present Nigerian state is inherently a crisis prone and a violence generating mechanism. This militates against the rule of fairness in public participation. Perhaps this is to be expected since the historical legacy of colonialism has not been fully resolved. Moreover, the development of a democratic order was not actually the concern of the colonial masters. After all the political entity today known as Nigeria is a product of the forceful amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 by Lord Fredrick Lugard.

Public participation is on the agenda globally and in Africa, as well as in Nigeria. This is because public participation can help to enhance development and service delivery, make governance more effective, accountable and deepen democracy particularly in a diverse and plural society like Nigeria. However, public participation in Nigeria and most African nations are mostly mere consultation rather than formal empowerment.

Starbird et al. (2015: 605-607) are of the view that "there are wider spaces for citizens participation in political processes, particularly on the issues that affect their day-to-day lives as citizens through the social media and the surrounding internet appliances such as witnessed during the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill. In this situation, the various Twitter accounts used by a variety of different actors during this environmental disaster went a long way to help the locals in holding the administrators responsible on daily basis and equally helped to emanate quick response to the environmental disaster".

Mobile news use and participation in elections has now become a potent tool to bridge the democratic divide. "The role played by mobile news in public participation and political process by individual based on demographics, socio-economic indicators and mobile media activity is now increasingly been associated with election campaigns, electoral participation and public participation. Mobile election news use is a significant positive predictor of the odds of having voted and whether individuals used their mobile devices to make contributions during the campaign. This supports the arguments that the unique qualities of mobile devices are contributing to new and different pathways to political engagement while also retaining significance in relation to traditional forms of offline political participation" (Martin 2015: 2).

Nze (2008:1-13) "views public participation in its overall context as a widely used one spanning politics, community development, rural area planning and development, environmental sanitation, social activities, provision of infrastructure and relatively, to physical planning and plan implementation."

For Oyediran et al. (2002) public participation relates to those activities through which political parties, civil society, labour unions, traditional leaders, academics, religious groups, student associations, community based organizations and others participate in the selection of public office holders or leaders directly or indirectly, and in the formation of public policy for good governance.

Subsequently, public participation refers to the way people are involved in public life, even if their roles are relatively passive or ostensibly powerless. It is a way in which communities can participate and become involved in governance, utilizing different methods and processes and by taking the appropriate actions. Furthermore, public participation can range from minor and infrequent comment to active and powerful influence (Sassen 2003).

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to examine the challenges of public participation in Nigeria vis-à-vis the political process with a view to suggesting lasting solutions to these challenges.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Materials for this paper were largely based on secondary data. The secondary data was collected from published literature that was relevant to the topic such as books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines and internet sources as well as other library materials. The paper analyzes materials collected using a qualitative methodological approach. No primary data such as that derived from questionnaires or interviews was used.

DISCUSSION

Challenges to Public Participation in Political Processes in Nigeria

Adeoti and Olaniyan (2014:5-6) claim that "the root of the decadence in the democratization dates back to the colonial period. The nationalists, either in Nigeria or elsewhere in Africa made one fundamental error in their struggle to decolonize and democratize their respective countries. They did not allow mass participation in the political emancipation of their countries".

For Joseph (2014) one of constant and critical hydra-headed malaise afflicting public participation in political processes in Nigeria is that of cultural systems denoting group boundaries in class and ethnicity most often than not, Nigerians usually base their participation on class and ethnicity. This problem has the tendency of preventing people from involving themselves in honest and objective participation and has also led to many becoming disinterested in participation. Participation is thus based on class and ethnic considerations and not on the Nigerian nation building project.

Though a global phenomenon, the high intensity of poverty in Nigeria is obviously a great challenge for participation. "There is widespread poverty in Nigeria despite its great endowments this is in spite of the efforts by successive regimes in Nigeria to introduce different programmes to alleviate poverty. Hence, there is an established link between poverty alleviation programmes (strategies), governance/politics. The failure of such programmes is blamed on the absence of good governance and citizens' participation. Poverty has made Nigeria to attain an unenviable status as one of the poorest countries in the world, such that no government (no matter the level), organization, community, clan or family can survive effectively without introducing one kind of poverty reduction strategy or the other. This problem is essentially not that of programme and strategies so adapted in poverty reduction efforts. Nigeria has not been known to lack in such efforts; yet she is still ranked among the world's 25 poorest nations" (Aderibigbe 2015:1-2).

Consequently, the incidence of poverty is having an adverse effect on the socio-economic development of most families and communities, hence the lack of interest by the citizens in public participation as they have to battle with extreme poverty they face on a day-to-day basis, leaving no room or interest in participation. This makes them prone to manipulation by unscrupulous politicians.

For Idoko et al. (2015: 66-67) "corruption has been seen as one of the social problems confronting the developmental efforts of this nation. This is because money and other resources meant for development are often diverted to private pockets by privileged few individuals at

the expense of the entire population. The acquisition of wealth due to selfish acts and greed has characterized most societies in Nigeria and that has negated the social and economic efforts of many societies." Corruption has manifested itself in the form of election rigging, abuse of power, embezzlement of public funds, buying of voters and unreported cases of underage voting, distribution of money at polling centers, manipulation of voters' register, diversion of electoral materials, ballot box snatching, unlawful possession of firearms and other electoral offences. This has engendered a lukewarm political attitude and participation among some citizens. In such a political system, these are obvious obstacles to citizens' unprejudiced participation.

According to Falade (2015:17-18) "the Nigerian political system and acts of governance as presently constituted does not encourage the mass participation of people. It is discretely skewed to be continuously male dominated and elite driven". There is a lack of confidence in their political leaders by the citizens leading to mutual suspicion between the government and the citizens. This ugly scenario has implications for popular participation and governance. According to Falade (2015) this is corroborated by the report of an interview conducted during the 2011 election. One of the respondents said "My father told me not to vote when I was leaving home. This morning, my father said I was wasting my time. He said all politicians were the same and it would make no difference". Statistical analysis of the 2011 general elections showed that only 35percent of the registered electorates voted during the election. Commenting on this the INEC chairman expressed that the scientific evidence of poor turn-out of voters during the election was at variance with the belief of Nigerians.

According to Omotso and Abe (2014:64-69) "one of the most enduring modes of political arrangement in the world today is federalism. Federalism presupposes that national and states/or regional governments should stand to each other in a relation of meaningful autonomy resting upon a balanced division of powers and resources. Each state/or region must have power and resources sufficient to support the structure of a functioning government, able to stand and compete on its own against the others. The attraction for federalism borders on its perceived integrative tendency, which makes it capable of serving heterogeneous societies well in situations of crisis. Federalism does not necessarily possess the magic wand or formula that instantaneously resolves the problems and contradictions of heterogeneous societies." Rather they argue that the socio-economic and political specificities of different societies, coupled with constant and continuous engineering, re-engineering and adjustment is needed, if the goals of federalism are to be achieved.

According to McGowan (2003) most of the successful coups in the world have been carried out in Africa, particularly the sub- Saharan African region which Nigeria happens to be part of. These military coups have not only truncated political processes, it has also militarized the psyche of the people as more and more citizens take to civilian authoritarianism. It has limited the space for peoples' participation in the political process. This is against the back drop that out of the 45 years of the country's independence, the military has ruled for more than 29 years, that is, more than half of the country's independence. In essence, military coups remain a challenge to the political process in the country.

Akindele et al. (2012) is of the opinion that extra- budget spending by successive governments in Nigeria is a real threat to the political process in Nigeria. This is in view of the fact that the input of the electorate and the poor masses are not taken into consideration in the budget. Furthermore, there are enormous resources at the disposal of government, which can be used to manipulate or even thwart the political process as a result of the people being left out of the budget.

According to All Africa (2003) it is so sad that we are only professing democracy, but not possessing in the real sense genuine democracy. It is so glaring that the society we are today is not democratic— so many things are happening which have clearly indicated the glaring level of insecurity in the country.

The sudden death or assassination of some renowned politicians, journalists, businessmen and women in the country still lingers on, and are still fresh in our memories. The impeachment syndrome in the House of Senate and Assembly, falsification of election results, snatching and carrying away of electoral boxes and rigging of elections, and many more were the characteristic features of the 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections in Nigeria.

Another challenge to public participation in Nigeria is the evil of thuggery and political hooliganism. This has led to the loss of life and property. Many Nigerians have lost their lives and property through violence perpetrated through thuggery and hooliganism. There has been so much of such senseless exposure of the young to blood and arms that they are becoming narcotized. We have an increased number of armed robberies and the establishment of private militia (euphemistic expression for personal thugs of the political actors) (Point blank 2013).

Akingbogun (2009: 1-2) identified the inability of successive governments in the country to respond to the welfare and well-being of Nigerians as a challenge to the political process. Promises are only made but not fulfilled. This led to the Niger-Delta conflicts, and development of groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger-Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta People Volunteer Front (NDPVF) and more recently the Boko Haram insurgency.

The proliferation of small arms has also characterized Nigeria's political process. Small arms and light weapons in form of handguns, rifles, grenades, machine guns, mortars and other portable devices are easily accessible. Small arms are cheap, portable, readily available, easy to maintain and even easier to use. More disturbing is the fact that, these arms have found their way into the hands of trigger happy Nigerian youths that have no prior training or orientation on the use of weapons.

This state of affairs has caused some citizens not to be supportive of the political process. There is a low level of political participation and disinterest in government in the country. In essence, political processes are in place, but the people are absent, thus a situation of democracy without the people is gradually becoming entrenched in the country.

In Nigeria, partly a consequence of proportional representation (based on political party affiliation), patronage and carpet crossing has become the order of the day. Thus, the electorate cannot be sure that the party they voted for will stay in parliament as voted. There are individuals within political parties who according to their own conscience, whims and caprices can decide to switch allegiance at will.

Carpet crossing has generally been viewed as political opportunity to explore greener pastures where there are jobs and opportunities.

However, democratic ethos also suggests that such a Member of Parliament (MP) has to resign and a by-election be held in that Member of Parliament's constituency, so that s/he could go back to the parliament as a newly elected representative of another party, but always with the voters' endorsement (Anazodo et al. 2013:1-15).

In essence, carpet crossing is not new, but its' present application in Nigeria and several African States alienates voters and makes them powerless. They absolutely have no power to influence what is happening, except to resort to other means — this ultimately affects the level of public participation in the political process.

Alonge (2005) summed up the challenges of public participation of Nigerian's political process as ignorance and low level of education, public distrust, the role that money plays in political patronage, increasing government authoritarianism, militarized and executive-dominated system of governance, the rising unemployment and inequality levels. Resource others are highly concentrated in the hands of very few businessmen and the political elite.

EVALUATION

What Is To Be Done?

According to Fung and Wright (2003:5) "public participation helps to empower citizens. Ordinary citizens are involved in the process of decision making. It helps to generate superior solutions as a result of wider deliberation and the existence of multiple strategies to solving problems. Bureaucracy is removed. It provides an opportunity for the ordinary citizens to have first-hand knowledge of governance and citizenship education. It also serves as an index in measuring success."

"Strengthening and empowering local government has been justified not only on the grounds of making local government more efficient but also on the grounds of increasing accountability and participation" (Heller 2001:132).

The proposition of Wright (2003) and Heller (2001) forms the basis of solutions to the challenges of public participation in Nigeria. The attainment of these lofty ideas will definitely reduce the challenges to a minimum.

According to Jega (2001), Nigeria is a nation-state with diverse ethnic groups, religions, historical background, languages and culture.

There is a dire need for national unity, cohesion and integration. Therefore, one of the foremost means of fostering this national integration is to have mass participation of the populace in governance. This will improve the involvement of more citizens in the political process and strengthen democratic structures.

Agboola (2005) and Adegboye (2013) indicated that solutions to increased public participation in Nigeria should include respect and sanctity of the ballot boxes, the presence of transparent administration, robust civil societies, media and, diverse interest groups. Also, the presence of an efficient and effective bureaucracy and the guarantee of welfare of most citizens is paramount.

Elections in Africa, are usually a very volatile, serious and sensitive issue, so serious that politicians would go to any length to sway the results in their favour to the detriment of the electorate (Ighorojeh 2008). This compromises the political process. This undemocratic attitude often leads to political violence. One of the means through which rigging of the election and political violence could be reduced is for citizens to play an active role in the political process and for the government to manage, without fear or favour, free, fair, credible and transparent elections.

According to Lowndes (2001) a tool which can strengthen public participation is the increased participation of women. Women constitute a significant segment of the country's population and play various roles. According to the World Bank (2011) women constitute 49.36 percent of Nigeria's population. In essence, the more woman participate, the greater the likelihood of curbing the emergence of tyrannical leadership and promoting participation in the political process.

In most African countries, the political elites are merely interested in just occupying posts and enjoying the paraphernalia of office. According to Agbude and Etele (2013: 2-14) responsibility is being jettisoned to the detriment of authority, not realizing that, with every authority there is attendant responsibility. They are not accountable; yet, the hallmark of good leadership is transparency, tolerance of opposing opinions and accountability. When more people take part in the political process, the leader is made to realize the fact that s/he is accountable to the electorate and the democratic structure. This will go a long way to bring about accountability in government. Transparency and accountability

by the political elites will encourage public participation in the political process.

Cohen et al. (2001: 727-757) are of the opinion that "public participation in political process serves the purpose of psychological satisfaction. The populace has a say in who governs them. Therefore, those who are politically active could take up political offices and those who are politically less active can at least also participate by voting during the elections".

In a nutshell, both the active citizens and the not so active feel that sense of belonging that they are part and parcel of one geographical entity. Therefore, no one feels left out of the political process and democratic structures. This further improves citizens' participation in the political process.

"Participation itself constitutes a human right which must be respected by all democratic governments" (Ndiva 2008: 233-234). In the same vein, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was released by the United Nations in 1948 also included Civil and Political Rights as basic rights of the people. In essence the people must have a say in who governs them. It is clear that Nigeria, being a signatory member of the United Nations (UN) must abide by the convention of the world body to protect, preserve and respect this right, thus making public participation a relevant and cardinal issue to Nigeria as a country.

The recognition of this basic human right by the government will not only serve the purpose of more citizens taking part in the political process but will also go a long way to improve the relationship between the government and the governed. Thus allegiance to government policies becomes easier.

CONCLUSION

The importance of public participation in the political process cannot be over emphasized. This is against the backdrop that homo-sapiens (human beings) and their participation is at the heart of any political or democratic arrangement. The fact that citizens surrender their power and authority to a set of people that is, their representatives, should not signal the end of their participation in the political process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to reduce the challenges to public participation in political processes in Nigeria, there has to be an effective and concerted effort

to also reduce the high level of poverty among Nigerians, since millions of Nigerians presently live below the poverty level. Doing this will create more space for citizen participation and also make it difficult for unscrupulous politicians to buy the popular vote and manipulate them for their selfish ends.

Furthermore, politics which promotes ethnicity and difference must be done away with. This situation has only made the citizens to think first about their different ethnic groups to the detriment of the country, Nigeria. Thus, a situation where everybody is for his or her ethnic group and nobody is for Nigeria is on the increase in the country. It is disturbing that voting patterns reflect ethic divisions.

Furthermore, corruption which has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigeria must be checked, particularly electoral and political corruption. A failure to do this, will result in undesirable elements becoming entrenched and will further limit the space for participation.

The present level of unemployment particularly by the youth must be quickly addressed if the dream of a flawless political process is to be achieved. A fair proportion of these youths constitute the ready-made tools in the hands of the politicians. They are the political thugs who rig elections, snatch ballot boxes and create all forms of political violence.

In a nutshell, both the government and the governed must as a measure of good governance work together for the sustainability of the democratic structure. Furthermore, civil society, non-governmental organizations, community based organizations, labour groups and others should not be perceived as enemies of the state by the government but must be seen as partners in the political journey towards true democracy.

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