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Public Participation in Selected Civilizations: Problems and Potentials

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ABSTRACT Public participation is not a recent phenomenon. It has spanned centuries, cultures and civilizations. The aim of this paper is to present a historical overview of public participation in some selected civilizations across the globe. The conceptual basis of the paper is premised on participatory democracy. It will adopt an analytical and historical approach. Scholars have recognized that public participation remains a relevant concept globally. The concept is not unproblematic, but there is enormous potential for substantive democratization of the public sphere. Hence, one of the key recommendations of the paper is that the potentials of public participation have to be fully explored and exploited.

INTRODUCTION

Public participation is an inherent part of human civilization. It is a phenomenon that is rooted in history, culture and civilization. Public participation concerns the active involvement of people in day-to-day governance. However, the history of public participation may be traced to ancient Athens around 6th century BC.Public participation is one of the variants of democracy wherein all members of the society have a stake in formal political power. In contemporary representative democracy, this formal equality or political power is encapsulated primarily in the right to vote and be voted for.

Moreover, it is generally believed that the idea of public participation and constitutional laws were created in a particular place and time that is in Ancient Athens around 508 BC. There exists evidence to suggest that public participation and democratic forms of government, in a broad sense, may have existed in several areas of the world well before the turn of the 5th century (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013: 1-21).

According to Temkin (2015: 157), considering public participation and civilization in the American society, "the attitudes and conduct of a number of prominent or influential public intellectuals in the United States during the Great Wars, particularly those who supported American participation in the war, shared a general lack of concern with the realities of full-scale warfare.Their response to the war had little to do with the war itself, its political and economic causes, brutal and industrial character, and human and material costs. Rather, their positions were often based on their views of culture and philosophy, or on their visions of the postwar world. Consequently, few of these intellectuals fully considered the political, social, and economic context in which the catastrophe occurred. The war, to many of them, was primarily a clash of civilizations, a battle of good versus evil, civilized democracy versus barbaric savagery, progress versus backwardness, culture versus *kultur*".

For Bingtao (2015: 172) "changes in the public economic institution using the demand structure of public goods could be said to be the contributing cause of the evolution of human civilization from traditional to modern. The shifts of public economic institutions between the mass democratic one and the elite constitutional one contributes to the current modern economic crisis and the stagnancy of modern civilization", and by extension the participation of the people.

In recent decades, scholars have exploited the possibility that advancements towards democratic governance had occurred somewhere else, other than Greece given that, Greece developed its complex social and political institutions long after the emergence of the earliest civilizations in Egypt and the Near East.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to evaluate public participation in some selected civilizations across the globe vis-à-vis the problems

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and potentials inherent in public participation. The paper is based on the theoretical framework of participatory democracy. Consequently, the intention is to illuminate these problems and potentials inherent in the selected civilizations.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Materials for this paper were mainly 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 in line with the explorative nature of the paper. The adoption of this model of data analysis makes the paper easy to appreciate and understand. No primary data such as that derived from questionnaires or oral interviews was used.

Theoretical Framework

Gelderloos (2014) asserts that participatory democracy has long been a feature of human society. Primitive peoples, including hunter-gatherer tribes engaged in different types of participation. During the Spanish civil war (1936-1938) participatory democracy was the mode of governance. During this period anarchist, Republicans governed the region. During the revolutionary 1960s in America, participatory democracy was ubiquitous in leftist organizations. In 2011, participatory democracy became a notable feature of the Occupy movement, with Occupy camps around the world making decisions based on the outcome of working groups where every protestor gets to have his say, and by general assembly's where the decisions taken by working groups are effectively aggregated together.

Participatory democracy is a process of collective decision-making that combines the elements from both the direct and the representative democracy. Citizens have the power to decide on policy proposals and the politicians only assume the role of public policy implementers. "The electorate can monitor the politicians' performance simply by comparing citizens' proposals and wishes with the actual policies being executed by the politicians. In view of this, the absolute powers enjoy by the politician are severely restricted to the barest minimum" (Aragon and Sanchez 2008: 164).

According to Aragon and Sanchez (2008: 165), participatory democracy is a process emphasizing the broad participation of constituencies in the direction and operation of the political system. The etymological roots of democracy, Greek *"demos"* and *"kratos"* simply imply that the people are in power meaning that all democracies are participatory. However, participatory democracy tends to advocate more involved forms of citizen participation than traditional representative democracy. Participatory democracy strives to create opportunities for all members of a population to make meaningful contributions to decision-making and seeks to broaden the range of people who have access to such opportunities.

According to Adegboye (2013), political variants of participatory democracy include consensus democracy, deliberative democracy, démarche, and grassroots democracy.

"Deliberative democracy differs from traditional democratic theory in the sense that authentic deliberation, not mere voting, is the primary source of a law and legitimacy. Any law or conclusion without authentic deliberation is therefore illegitimate, null and void, and of no effect as far as deliberative democracy is concerned. Deliberative democracy adopts the elements of both, consensus decision-making and majority rule. When practiced by small groups, it is possible for decision-making to be both, fully participatory and deliberative. But for large political entities, the democratic reform dilemma makes it difficult for any political entities, and the democratic reform dilemma makes it difficult for any system of decision-making based on political equality to involve both deliberation and inclusive participation" (Adegboye 2013: 244-245).

Rationale and Justification for Public Participation

"The basic assumption underlying public participation is that decisions made by people themselves are often more acceptable than those made on their behalf. Furthermore, there is always the potential for skills to be transferred to other aspects of participants' lives. For example,

the experience of participation often leads to a general increase in the level of individual confidence and development" (Adegboye 2013: 244).

According to Agboola (2005: 3-5), "the rationale for public participation is to ensure that processes are created through which conflicting or adverse interests of citizens are accommodated and cooperative action in their resolutions are actively promoted. It is a means of increasing people's trust inthe government and their identification with the resulting decisions. This should be so because they contributed to the process".

Agboola (2005) assumes that public participation should and must be a bottom-up policy implementation and management process that involves significant local input at every single stage. It must not be perceived as an up-bottom policy if the whole essence of public participation is to be achieved.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Public Participation in Some Selected Civilizations

India

A serious claim in early public participation came from the independent republics of India, *Sanghas* and *Gana*. These existed as early as the 6th century BCE and persisted in some areas until the 4th century CE. The Gana monarchy was characterized by a deliberative assembly, which was headed by a monarch known as the *Raja* (Trautmann 2014; Anand 2015).

In essence, the major political actors were the *Raja*, the head of the monarchy and a deliberative assembly comprising 7,077 members. These men met regularly to discuss the affairs of the state. The deliberative assembly had full financial, administrative and judicial autonomy. Other officials of the state, who are rarely mentioned, carried out the rules and regulations of the assembly.

The monarch is usually elected by the *Gana*, and always emerged from the family of the noble, known as K'satriya Varna. It is the duty of the monarch to direct the affairs of the state, with the help of the assembly and in some cases, with a council of the nobles. What is, however, in doubt is the fact that despite all the power and influence of the assembly, it has not been established whether the composition and the participation of its members was truly democratic or not (Trautmann 2014; Anand 2015).

Nepal

The Newars in Nepal are thought to have lived in the Nepal village, since 4th century AD, developing a Hindu Buddhist culture. A hereditary prime minister controlled Nepal, the world's only Hindu monarchy, until 1951. The first election was held in 1959. In 1960, King Mahandra dismissed the cabinet, dissolved the parliament and banned all political party activities (Mocko and Penjore 2015: 14-16).

Sparta

Ancient Greece, in its early period, was a loose collection of independent city-states called the Poleis. Many of these Poleis were oligarchies. The most well-known Greek oligarchy, and the state with which the democratic Athens is most fruitfully compared, was Sparta. However, Sparta was a peculiar oligarchy for its rejection of emphasis on private wealth as a social differentiation (Kvaskova and de Olea 2015).

The political arrangement of Sparta, comprised of the two Spartan Kings (monarchy), the *gerousia* (council of Gerontes/elders, including the two kings), the *ephors* (representatives who oversaw the kings) and the *Apoella* (assembly of Spartans).The members of the Gerousia had to be over sixty years of age and were elected for life. These elders were always from wealthy and aristocratic families and were given full legislative powers.

Apoella, the most democratic element, was the assembly where the Spartans above the age of thirty years are elected as members. The legendary lawgiver, Lycurgus, created the Spartan system of law (constitution). Equality was a key feature of the Spartan society. They often referred to themselves as *Homotoi*, which meant men of equal status and all men had equal public education, rich or poor, known as Agoge (Kvaskova and de Olea 2015).

Athens

Many are of the opinion that, Athens is regarded as the birthplace of democracy and public participation, it therefore remains a signifi-

cant reference point. Athens emerged in 7th century BCE, made up largely of dominating and powerful aristocracies. Many of these aristocracies were disrupted and terminated by popular revolts. These revolts lead to the emergence of a man known as Solon, who served as the mediator between the aristocrats and the people, culminating in his emergence as the leader of Athens. Solon was an Athenian (Greek) of noble descent with moderate means, and a lyric poet, who later in life became a lawmaker.

Solon reformed the Ecclesia (the Assembly) where all citizens could attend and vote, and was no longer the preserve of the Aristocrats. The Ecclesia, which was given full autonomy, had the executive, administrative and legislative power (Bingtao 2015: 172).

The Roman Republic

Rome was a city-state in Italy. It shared borders with powerful and influential neighbors, such as the Etruscans to the central Italy and Greek colonies to the south. Rome was ruled by Kings.

However, due to social unrest and upheavals, led by Lucius Junius Brutus, the monarchical system collapsed. Following this development, a new constitution was drafted, but the conflict between the ruling families (Patricians) and the rest of the population, the plebeians continued (Pieper 2015: 201).

Following this, three Patricians were sent to Greece to study and report on the legislative effort of Solon and other lawmakers.

"The three man Patrician commission, under the leadership and supervision of Appius Claudins, transformed the old customary law of Rome into twelve tables, with two major parts, the Senate for all the Aristocrats and the Assembly, for the People. The requirement for becoming a Senate, is to possess a minimum of 100,000 denarii (the currency spent then) worth of land. The Roman Republic was to later transform into the Roman Empire. Julius Caesar then emerged as the leader after many battles had been fought" (Pieper 2015: 201).

The Indigenous Peoples of the Americas

"What is known today as the American constitution and democracy was the idea from the various indigenous peoples of the Americas, mainly the "Iroquois" tribe. The Americas democracy was formed between 1000 and 1450 and lasted several hundreds of years, and the American democratic system was continually changed and improved upon by the influence of the Native Americans throughout the North America.

The House of Burgesses of Virginia was established in 1619, as the first representative- legislative body in the New World. The first bill of rights to protect the rights of the citizens was enacted by the Parliament of England on the 16thof December, 1689" (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013: 3).

African Tribes/ Kingdoms

Prior to 1800 AD, there had been participatory democracy among the African Tribes and Kingdoms, such as the Ashanti on the Gold Coast (Ghana), the Zulus or the black peoples in South Africa, the Mali Kingdom, under Mai Idriss Alooma.In Nigeria, the Hausa/Fulani Kingdom of 'Uthman Dan Fodio', the Yoruba Kingdom, headed by the Alaafin, the village square meeting of the elders, among the Igbo and a host of others (Omotosho 2015).

The emergence of public participation either in India, Egypt, Greece, Sparta, Athens, Rome or the contemporary United States of America (USA),all attest to the fact that, there is a need for popular participation and inclusion of the people in governance. This is significant because, it gives people a sense of belonging in the government. Furthermore, a major feature among all the old democracies, is the presence of a general assembly where all citizens come together to discuss issues germane to the community. The implication is that public participation in democratic governance has been with us for ages, but has witnessed a lot of transformation over the years, culminating in modern day participation that is currently in operation.

The essence of public participation is to carry along as many people as possible and involve them in the day-to-day running of the government in order to have sustainable peace and stability, confer legitimacy on the government, encourage citizens' loyalty and guarantee people's welfare (Almond and Verba 1963).

Evaluation

Potentials of Public Participation

Public participation as highlighted earlier, has been on the agenda of many civilizations from time immemorial. This was pertinent because

people of various tribes, languages and cultures felt the need to come together to address common problems as a community.

According to Financio (2015: 3-15), from the point of view on the field of land use and environment approvals there is, and has been for many years, a tension between the need for expedition on the one hand, and an abiding desire to ensure that good decisions are made. "One of the many means of arriving at these good decisions is through the rigorous analysis of the best available material. This is based on the thorough participation of the people. Hence, a good or correct decision can only be described as such when it enjoys the confidence of those most affected by the outcome, whether they agree with the decision or not".

For Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015), public participation has impacted positively on the quality of decision-making, policy making, fast tracking more collaboration among various stakeholders such as the civil societies, the non-governmental organizations, and the civic engagement of the community associations.

Wijnhoven et al. (2015: 30) are of the view that "public participation has enhanced transparency in government objectives and aims. Furthermore, it has acted as a catalyst in improving the engagement of citizens in public sector activities. It has equally improved the understanding of the citizens' motivations to engage in the many different variants of open government particularly in innovation objectives (high or low) and at the managerial level (political versus administrative). It has brought to the front burner issues of collaborative democracy, citizen sourcing, and citizen ideation and innovation".

For Ibrahim and Mussarat (2015: 55) "public participation is significant in that in most cases decisions that are arrived at through public participation are popular decisions. It is making more people civilized, informed citizens and becoming more associated together. It has improved the ration and quality of participation in democratization. The concept of participation has accentuated the relationship between public and decision-makers in democratic institutions. It has enhanced the rate of mobilization and equality of participation for political development and better principles for public participation".

However, Ibrahim and Mussarat (2015) argued that participation of citizens in voting may not be a measure of public participation as this has to do more with the different methods of campaign strategies employed by the political parties and the level of political culture of the region in contention.

Problems with Public Participation

Public participation is a more than a mere human endeavor aimed at solving communal problems. In line with this, it also has some problems just like any other human endeavor, which cannot be wished away.

According to Irvin and Stansbury (2004: 55),"public participation has succeeded in doing more harm than good to the democratic structures and the lives of the citizens which it claims to protect and improve."

Their arguments are based on the fact that public participation is too expensive to implement, it is time consuming as precious time is wasted on unending deliberations. The difficulty of diffusing citizens' goodwill, the so-called goodwill and loyalty of the citizens cannot be adequately measured empirically by any yardstick as the object of analysis are human beings with varying feelings, opinions, notions, beliefs, whims and caprices.

That lack of authority in most cases there are no identifiable, defined or recognized authority to actually be held responsible for the failure or ineffectiveness of public policies, there are usually complacency on the part of citizens, government and civil society; they often play to the gallery at the expense of the vulnerable poor masses in the community.

Furthermore, there is always the problem of persistent selfishness on the part of the government and the citizens, each always sticking to their own policies and agenda, with different motives of implementation. This brings with it the problem of wrong decisions as attempts are made to at every point, rationalize and prioritize the needs of the citizens. These are usually overdone, leading to wrong decisions taken, by both the citizens and the government.

Moreover, the so-called representatives of the citizens often constitute problems in citizens' participation. In most cases, they do not understand the issues at stake for discussion. Some representatives only represent their personal aspirations, while some even lack the required credentials, expertise and educational qualifica-

tions in the first instance to stand as representatives of the people, but were only chosen on primordial sentiments and emotions, devoid of objectivity and merit.

Irvin and Stansbury (2004) are of the opinion that engaging in a public participation process is good, but that talk is also cheap, but may not after all be effective or achieve the desired objectives.

Fung and Wright (2003: 3-44) also identified the following as some cogent and salient problems of public participation. The successes of participation are difficult to sustain over a long period, the power of the state is often jettisoned and the state power is colonized, and there is overconcentration on relatively narrow issues that is, redistribution of land, taxation or property rights.

A drawback of the engagement process is that participants often use their power to manipulate and enhance the legitimacy of their opinions and positions that are often motivated by particularistic or personal interests. The so-called participants are not equal relative to resources, education, intelligence, dominant racial group, ethnicity or culture.

Public participation also suffers from animosity and threats. This is due to strategic bargaining and deregulation, disrespect for local circumstances and intelligence, since they are linked to higher units, such as the municipal or central government. These units take the final decisions. This can ultimately make public participation fall prey to clientelism that is customer-client relationships, in place of state-citizen relationships. The low level of literacy among most of the participants is also a minus for public participation. It also has the problem of centralization, techno-bureaucratic state, and political democracy that over determines citizenship.

According to Ferguson (1994: 5), community engagement may not after all necessarily enhance participation. This is in view of the fact that, the needs of the various communities are different, yet the same mechanism is employed in solving these problems, irrespective of the geographical locations.

CONCLUSION

The paper set out with the aim of looking at public participation in some selected civilizations. The focus was on India, the Kingdom of Bhutan, Nepal, Sparta, Athens, the Roman Republic, the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and the African Tribes and Kingdoms. This was with the view of shedding more light on the problems and potentials associated with public participation.

The theoretical framework was established on participatory democracy. This is in view with the fact that public participation is all about the involvement of the people in governance, and this may not take place if participatory democracy is non-functional in the state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is the position of this paper that public participation remains relevant and it is in fact a *sine qua non* if the real essence of democracy is to be achieved. After all, governance and democracy is all about the people and they must be involved in the act of governance. The people must not only be seen, but they must also be heard and their aspirations must be accommodated in public policies by their representatives.

Furthermore, it is a fact that there are potentials in these various civilizations examined above vis-à-vis public participation hence, they have to be fully explored and exploited, while the problems have to be reduced to the barest minimum, in order to achieve inclusivity in governance.

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