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GOVERNANCE AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS:

NIGERIA AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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THE ECONOMY AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

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Introduction

Although democracy is a form of government, many of its activities directly affect economic issues. A democratic government has economic responsibilities to the electorate and it is accountable to the electorate for its economic policies and programmes. As the citizenry is aware that its economic well-being depends heavily on state activities, it must have a say in political discussions concerning the state's economic policies. The state and its politics affect the shape, structure and performance of the economy and the latter has an important influence on the state and its electoral politics.

This is because most of the issues raised during the electoral campaigns and rallies are predominantly economic. It is through the electoral process that mass participation in a democracy is effected and a government is appointed to translate into reality the electoral promises. As the political parties compete for power, they address the economic problems and propose solutions for all of them. The results of elections are determined more by the individual voter's feelings about his or her economic situation than by anything else. There is, therefore, a special relationship between economic factors and democratic and electoral benefits. This paper argues that democracy provides a conducive environment for executing a well formulated and coordinated programme of economic development.

Historical Background to Contemporary Advocacy of Democracy and Economic Development

In the 1970s and 1980s, Africa was beset by the failures of economic

development. Indeed economic development rather than democratic development was given an undue attention by the successive regimes. And in the final analysis military dictatorships and one party states in the Third-World countries justified their existence and relevance in the 1980s for promoting economic development at the expense of democracy.

The endemic crises in the African states under military dictatorships were attributed to gross mismanagement, corruption and inefficiency. Lack of stabilization in the balance of payments thereby compelled African states to borrow huge sums of money from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These institutions imposed certain structural adjustment programmes and economic conditionalities that inadvertently had persistent adverse effects on the populace in the individual African states.¹

The citizens who were beset by ignorance, hunger, poverty and disease protested against both military and civilian dictatorships, suppression of basic human rights and oppression. Protesters in the various African cities demanded freedom of expression, a multi-party system, free elections and provisions of essential public services.

Of course, this new political orientation was not confined to Africa. Similar political and economic crises in central and eastern Europe precipitated disenchantment within the urban and lower middle classes who condemned dictatorships and central economic planning. There was a clarion call for democratization and respect for human rights. Since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, several American and European institutions have insisted that Third World countries should embark on democratization as a channel of economic development. Since the 1990s, this has been a debatable proposition.²

In particular the idea emanated from the philosophy of Human

Development that was enunciated by the United Nations Development Programmes. Essentially, the philosophy affirms that economic and social deprivation are potent factors that can hamstring democracies. The new concept, therefore, prescribes the erection of democratic institutions, the rule of law and respect for human rights as a basis for the provision of political, institutional and legal framework for the programme of economic and social development.³

Some for a were organised in East Africa and West Africa by the United States embassy in 1990 to promote democracy, multi-party politics, the rule of law, market-oriented economy and public accountability. This "new method of applying economic pressure to necessitate political reform is known as political conditionality".⁵ Since 1989/90 some donor countries have adopted certain methods of sanctions to encourage democracy in Benin, Liberia, Kenya, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Somalia, Malawi, Ghana etc. Unfortunately, the application of sanctions precipitated civil wars in Liberia and Somalia and this development has led some critics to accuse the donor countries of double standard because of their atrocities in Kenya, Zaire and Gabon where a gross abuse of human rights has been perpetrated.⁶

In 1991, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe launched a crusade for the new political reform. Since then, it has repeatedly called on the South to initiate a programme of democratization and protection of human rights if the component states of the South needed financial and economic assistance. Western donor countries now recommended democracy as a precondition for development cooperation for the recipient countries.

In 1992, the Council reaffirmed its commitment to financing economic development and building democratic human rights institutions in the developing countries. Most donor countries have decided on new instruments they would apply in ensuring the establishment of an

enduring democracy and socio-economic reform. It is the realisation of these objectives that will attract more financial assistance from the donor countries.⁷ In turn Third World countries that comply with the new conditionality might have free access to the markets in the North, enjoy higher commodity prices as well as substantial debt reduction or debt forgiveness by the I.M.F. or the World Bank. An assurance has been given that any democratizing country will be accorded facilities for the relaxation of structural adjustment programmes.

Early Scepticism About the Political Conditionality

Some development economists and scholars of political economy were the first to open some spirited debate on the new political conditionality. Their consensus is that economic development is very crucial to the development and progress of democracy; and that economic problems have often precipitated pro-democracy demonstrations in Eastern Europe in 1989/90 and in sub-Sahara Africa. While a cross-section recommends the financing of economic development as a prerequisite for the enthronement of democracy⁸, a radical sub-section has suggested a concurrent promotion of democracy and economic development arguing that one of the two must not be sponsored at the expense of the other. The latter shares the sentiment of African poor masses by insisting that persistent socio-economic crises must be eradicated while a conducive environment is being created for democracy to mature.⁸ The economists regretted that the 1980s was a decade of failure in economic development in the South because of the miserable decline in the commodity market, burdensome debt obligations, very high interest rates and the ominous impact of the structural adjustment programmes.

Initially, the assertion that democracy and economic development should go together appeared to be a distant dream. Rather than generate an excitement, it bred deep pessimism on account of a proven

hypothesis that a democratic polity that boasts adequate democratic institutions can experience some persistent economic failures. They argued that where this occurs, there would be an endless demand for a change of government, hence their conclusion that democracy and development do not automatically become companions.¹⁰ To support their claim that economic development cannot guarantee an enduring democracy and vice-versa, they cited North Africa and the Asian countries where success in the economic sphere is not attributable to any type of political reform or democracy. Plausible though their argument appears to be, they have forgotten that social and economic development and transformation encompass all levels of society and all spheres of human activity. Democracy also permeates all levels of society and its economy as it matures. In the process, people's life, attitude and organization become transformed.¹¹

The economists have also argued that economic growth which has to do with macroeconomic objectives could be realised in the absence of political rights, participatory democracy and economic equality. To them, socio-economic development is human-centred in the sense that it involves social mobilisation and economic empowerment of the people for the eradication of poverty. The programme involves a thorough restructuring of the economy to make it truly market-oriented so much so that the broad masses of the population appropriate the benefits of development.¹²

Inherent in this theory is the insinuation that such an envisaged reconstruction could only be accomplished under a dictatorship. But whatever economic breakthroughs were credited to dictatorships have been at the expense of human rights, equality, accountability, probity, financial prudence and the political empowerment of the people for mass participation. No wonder the trend of instability, intolerance, assassination, personal insecurity, demagoguery and violence that characterised dictatorships and led to their collapse. This development is exemplified by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the

communist countries in Western Europe.¹³

There is no doubt that restructuring of the developing countries is a herculean task. What provides a relief is the new political conditionality that is to be enforced by the donor countries and the international institutions. They have reiterated their commitment to effecting a political miracle in Africa by creating a liberal and favourable international economic environment for African commodities, granting debt forgiveness and providing facilities for an overhaul of the structural adjustment programme.¹⁴

However, there is a rider to this proposition; democracy is a way of life, a culture and a life style. The democratic culture must be developed consistently and must be well nurtured and sustained to enable the operators of democratic institutions to instinctively formulate policies that stimulate or trigger development process. The post-Cold War political discourse has inevitably led to the conversion of the sceptics to the camp of pro-democracy and development. The idea now enjoys a popular reception worldwide by virtue of the activities of some international organisations like the U.N.O., Trans Africa, E.C., and the Commonwealth of Nations. The United States is still sponsoring many organisations for sustained campaigns against the autocratic regimes. Indeed, adequate backing has been given to pro-democracy groups in the developing countries and those of them that resist democratization have been subjected to economic sanctions.¹⁵

Historical Evidence in Support of Democracy and Economic Development

In Europe and America where democracy has a track record of socio-economic development, some ample historical evidence corroborated the arguments of the Euro-American marabouts of

development. Democracy flourished in Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand and Canada in the nineteenth century as a result of agricultural revolution. A high standard of living was attained because of the democratic systems of government.¹⁶ Also in the United States, the chequered history of democracy is well known. There is democratic culture, and democratic institutions have been consistently developed for over two hundred years. Democracy and economic development have thereby reinforced each other and culminated in the emergence of a world power. In the United States, the democratic culture manifests in almost every sphere of life. Indeed, scholars of technology have asserted that the "biggest and best that science and industry made available were the best guarantees of democracy, freedom and social justice".¹⁷ However, this claim is contestable in the light of the obvious paradox in the American democratic experience.

Notwithstanding, American scholars while referring to the political environment from 1900 to the 1940s concluded that "the factory system, automobile, telephone, radio, television, space programme and nuclear power have all at one time or the other been democratizing liberating forces".¹⁸ And one cannot forget at this juncture the impact of progressivism on the social, economic and political change in America. Under Presidents Theodore Roosevelt (1900-1908), W. Taft (1909-1912), and Woodrow Wilson (1912-1918), the political progressives from the Republican and Democratic parties sponsored a virulent campaign and launched a devastating blow at abuses of urban political bosses and corporate robber barons. The phenomena of socio-political and economic reform were predicated on the manifestos of the progressives which included greater democracy, honest government and more efficient regulation of business and greater social justice for the masses.¹⁹

Furthermore, economic development in all its facets according to moral and political thinkers from Machiavelli to Montesquieu and Adam

Smith, was regarded as supportive of development of democracy. Their political discourses attacked orthodox political practice by insisting that a pragmatic economic progress as an outgrowth of economic policy, serves as a "civilizing moderating influence in society, the very basis of stable government".²⁰ This impulse has been the basis for the shape and the structure of the American political system and democratic constitution.

The Electoral Process

The electoral process is very crucial to the success of any democracy provided there is a solid financial support base. Where there is a financial problem financial assistance must be secured from outside to organise and manage political parties and ensure their proper functioning. Fortunately for the Third World countries, aid donors are prepared to assist in ensuring that the necessary democratic institutions function properly to make the electoral process a success. This obligation is part of the political conditionality that must be fulfilled by the democratizing countries before they could be considered for financial assistance from the donor countries.

Although the electoral process is not strange to the developing countries, it has however been subject to gross abuse by the ruling parties.²¹ But the new dispensation aims at reforming the electoral process to ensure that elections legitimize rule and serve as a means of demanding responsibility from and control over the democratically elected government. Inherent in the electoral system is the principle of temporary rule, a measure of accountability, a means of change of government and of mass participation.²²

It is an open secret that majority of the developing countries lack the requisite resources to execute the reform in accordance with the policies of the financial institutions and other donor countries. These

institutions have therefore insisted on constant supervision of the reform programmes undertaken in each country in order to sustain democracy in the long run. It is expected that the democratizing countries will cooperate and thereby qualify for debt reduction or debt forgiveness. But it appears that the programme of electoral reform involves a great deal of investment over a long period. It includes the proper organisation of national convention and presidential elections, the provision of electoral guidelines to ensure that elections are free and fair, establishment of an electoral commission, preparation and revision of the electoral register, demarcation of constituencies, prevention of electoral malpractice, constitutional provisions that guarantee human rights to vote and be voted for, allocation of public speaking time on the official media on the basis of equality to rival political parties, arrangement of polling stations, vote counting and the announcement of results.²³

The new political order has also introduced the practice of allowing the international observers to monitor the elections in the democratizing countries. The latter are expected to oblige. But in recent years, the ruling parties in some countries have been resisting or preventing international observers from visiting certain polling stations under the pretext that their security could not be guaranteed.²⁴

However, the donor countries are yet to tackle the role of money at elections in Africa that often encourages the practice of rigging. There is no doubt that election expenses are incurred by both the state and the candidates, hence the state needs money for ballot paper, transportation of facilities and staffing of election centres. Candidates also need money for campaign posters, newspaper advertisements, transport and campaign personnel. Elections are therefore regarded as a do-or-die game because of the enormous investments of the contestants. Since the state cannot underwrite all the electoral bills, how much can the donor countries give to several democratizing countries for their respective general election? How regularly will this

financial assistance be forthcoming? Will these donations not be regarded as bribes for democratizing in Africa? What happens to elections and democracy when the donor countries can no longer underwrite the vast continental electoral bills? These are some of the mind-boggling questions that must be addressed in determining the future of democracy in Africa.

These questions point to the fact that democracy is an expensive political arrangement which may not flourish in a fragile economy. Therefore it needs a solid economic base for its development and sustenance.²⁵ And for this reason any democratically elected government must formulate economic development policies and other programmes that address the electoral promises. To do this, accountability can be enforced through the electoral process; the actions of a government can be checked and punished. A conducive democratic environment has an organised opposition or pressure groups that function in accordance with the relevant constitutional provisions. Under the new dispensation, trade unions and pro-democracy groups are supported in their activities as instruments of reform. Indeed, free press and free opposition can facilitate the establishment of an accountable government, curb corruption and prevent the monopoly of social benefits by a few.

Elections in industrial democracies have been studied and analyzed from the dual perspective of citizens and candidates and have been regarded as the interplay between the two groups. The linkage that such elections afford has imposed certain constraints upon each of the groups.²⁶ But this trend is far-fetched in African democracies. As a matter of fact the practical world of presidential politics differs in Africa from democratic practices in America where elections provide a linkage between the preferences of citizens and the actions of government.

The African electorate faces a great dilemma on account of its

ignorance of the differing postures of presidential candidates on approaches to a wide spectrum of issues ranging from a general philosophy of government to the specific issues of social welfare. African electorate needs proper education about the difference between candidates and their respective programmes to enable them to decide which election issues are most important for their electoral participation.²⁷ A voter should be able to know which party is more likely to fulfil a mandate. Whenever campaign promises are broken, voters are disappointed. Rather than abstain from voting during subsequent elections, they should participate and vote to punish incumbents and parties that have failed to honour campaign pledges. When this happens in Africa, elections will henceforth serve as a sanction as well as an object lesson to leaders who want to remain in office.

Conclusion

Hitherto elected presidents in most of the developing countries have pursued certain programmes other than their election promises and thereby disappointed the electorate. These incumbents often seek re-election and expect the same electorate to support them. When rejected by the electorate or when such rejection is imminent in an election, such incumbents resort to gross abuse of human rights and electoral malpractice. Any segment of the electorate or opposition that criticizes or exposes the underground unconstitutional strategies of the incumbents will invite political incarceration or assassination of the critics.

This commonplace practice in Africa has caused widespread political alienation among the intelligentsia and the political elite. Generally, the electorate is powerless in curbing political inefficiency and eradicating both the incumbent-based and regime-based distrust.²⁸ Among the educated elite and the business class, political apathy is

deep-rooted. While it is difficult to measure political apathy, it is believed that it assumes different dimensions and scales in different African countries. It is hoped that a proper implementation of the new political conditionality will precipitate positive change for the realisation of mass participation.

Should the new political experiment fail, the usual political alienation and declining voting turnout will persist. One hopes that the enthronement of an enduring democracy and the installation of political efficacy will enhance voter participation. Once a democratically elected government is responsive and attentive to public opinion, political apathy and alienation will diminish and its cessation will pave way for the development of "an allegiant and participant political culture".²⁹ The citizens will, like their counterparts in the industrial democracies be proud of their nations' political institutions, attentive to public affairs and confident of their political leaders.

NOTES

1. Proceedings of an International Conference on "Democracy in Africa -- New Beginning?", Bonn, June 1-3, 1992, under the auspices of Friedrich Ebert/Stifting.
2. Claude Ake, "The Role of the West" in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.) The Global Resurgence of Democracy. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1993, p. 77: see also pages 271, 260 - 266.
3. Proceedings of Conference on "Democracy in Africa...". p. 19.
4. In March 1991, a colloquium was held in Dakar, Senegal on the theme "Democracy and Development in Africa: The Experience of African ACP Countries". The Harare Declaration supported democracy and condemned military regimes and human rights violation.
5. Claude Ake, "The Role of the West", p. 77.
6. Ibid, p. 78.
7. Proceedings of Conference on "Democracy in Africa...", pp. 36 - 38.
8. On economic development as a prerequisite substructure for democracy, see Arend Lijphart, Democracy in Plural Societies, Yale University Press, New Haven and London/University Press Limited, Ibadan, 1977, pp. 229 - 230. Dan Usher, The Economic Prerequisite to Democracy, New York, Colombia University Press, 1981.

9. Robert Kitgaard, "Strategies for Reform" in Diamond and Plattner, The Global Resurgence of Democracy, pp. 230 - 244. Pat Divine, Democracy and Economic Planning, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1988, pp. 149 - 152, 189 - 196.
10. Claude Ake, "Is Africa Democratizing?" Sunday Guardian, Dec. 12, 1993, p. A7; Mbaya Kankweda "Marabout and Merchants of Development in Africa" in CODESRIA Bulletin, No. 2, 1991, Dakar, Senegal. p. II.
11. Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz and Seymour Martin Lipset (eds.), Political in Developing Countries, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder & London, 1990, pp. 6 - 7; Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave" in Larry Diamond et. al. eds. The Global Resurgence of Democracy, pp. 3 - 25.
12. Richard Joseph, "The Rebirth of Political Freedom" in Larry Diamond et. al. eds. The Global Resurgence of Democracy, pp. 316 - 318; Macropaedia Britannica, vol. 17, Chicago, 1987, pp. 904 - 909; Anyang Nyong'o, "Development and Democracy: The Debate Continues", in CODESRIA Bulletin, Number 2, 1990, Dakar, Senegal, p. 12.
13. Larry Diamond et. al., Politics in Developing Countries, pp. 14 - 15, 19.
14. Proceedings of International Conference on "Democracy in Africa", p. 36.
15. Claude Ake, "The Role of the West" in Larry Diamond, et. al., The Global Resurgence of Democracy, p. 79. Libya, Iraq and Nigeria are the current victims of such sanctions.

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16. Leslie Lipson, The Democratic Civilisation, Bombay, 1964, pp. 86 - 87.
17. Langdon Winner, The Whale and the Reactor, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, p. 20.
18. Langdon Winner, The Whale and the Reactor, p. 20.
19. George Tindall and David E. Shi (eds.) America, New York, 2nd edition, 1989, pp. 597 - 624. The forerunners of progressivism were the populists, the mugwumps, the socialists and the muckrakers. See also Alan P. Grimes, American Political Thought, revised edition, University Press of America, Lanham-New York, 1983, pp. 174 - 176, 192, 354, 378 - 381. See also Tony Smith, America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth century, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994. Boorstin, Daniel J. The Republic of Technology, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1978.
20. David Lilienthal, T.V.A. Democracy on the March, New York, Harper, 1953.
21. Claude Ake, "Is Africa Democratizing?", pp. 5 - 6; G. Bingham Powell, Jr., Contemporary Democracies, Participation, Stability and Violence, Howard University Press, Cambridge, 1992 (Sunray Publications Ltd. Port Harcourt, Nigeria, 1992), pp. 31 - 34, 167 - 168; Himore, L. M. Corrupt and Illegal Practices: A General Survey and a Case Study of an election petition, London, Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1967; Nigeria and Supreme Court, Judgement on the 1979 Presidential Election Petition between Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Alhaji Shehu Shagari and others, Lagos 1979; Ofonagoro, W. I. The Story of the Nigeria General Elections,

1979, Ministry of Information, Lagos 1979.

22. Herbert B. Asher, Presidential Elections and American Politics, The Dorsey Press, Homewood, Illinois, 1984, 3rd edition, p. 26; Thomas R. Dye and Harmon Zeigler eds., The Irony of Democracy, California, Books/Cole Publishing Coy. 1990, p 209.
23. Proceedings of International Conference on "Democracy in Africa...", pp. 38 - 39, 53.
24. International observers were barred from some areas during the 1993 presidential elections in Nigeria. Various commonwealth observer groups monitored presidential and parliamentary elections in Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Zambia, and Seychelles in 1992 and 1993. Reports for the respective countries have been published by the Commonwealth Secretariat, London.
25. Herbert, A. E. Financing Politics: Money, Elections and Political Reform, 2nd ed., Washington D.C., Congressional Quarterly Press, 1980; Nicholas David, Financing Elections: the politics of an American Ruling Class, New York, Watts. 1974.
26. Herbert Asher, Presidential Elections, p. ix.
27. Claude Ake, "Is Africa Democratizing?", p. A5; Leslie Lipson, The Democratic Civilisation, pp. 100 - 107; Thomas R. Dye, et. al., The Irony of Democracy, pp. 198 - 217.
28. Kevin Chen, Political Alienation and Voting Turnout in the United States, 1960 - 1988, Mellen Research University Press, San Francisco, 1992, pp. 39 - 52, 67 - 70, 100 - 116.

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29. Kevin Chen, Political Alienation, p. xi. It is generally believed that this ideal was achieved between 1950 and 1960 by the voting turnout in the United States national elections.