The role of civil society in promoting and sustaining democracy in Nigeria

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Abstract: Modern liberal democracy and its values are constructed on the basis of the plural nature of society. For the multiple numbers of such individuals and groups to be accommodated, it aspires that their maximum participation and/or representation is assured or allowed. As a result, the increasing presence and role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) amidst other interest groups in modern democracy and political thinking depicts a phenomenon in political development that has drawn the attention of scholars in analysing the extent to which they shape the trend of political events, contrary to the erstwhile thought that nation-building and development in general could only be fostered by the state. This paper, without downplaying the importance of the state in fostering political development, argues that for Nigeria, the task of standing and remaining on its democratic feet is an imperative to be achieved and the role of the civil society is cardinal, if nation-building and the attainment of other national aspirations such as the Vision 2020:20 would be a reality.

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Introduction

Several years after Nigeria's independence, the challenge of nation-building and overall development at various fronts of national life has remained unattainable task due to innumerable factors that have beset her. Of particular concern has being the inability to evolve democracy to the level of its guiding tenets and sustainability. The bane has been hinged on the numerous years of colonial conquer and dominance, the onslaught of military despotic regimes and invariably the failure of the political class and other segments of the society to fashion the desired path of nation-building and national development. Largely therefore, a political class which draws its economic life-blood from the subversion of the national economy for private gains has often remained unchecked by a helpless citizenry pushed to the brinks of despondency, growing cynicism and apathy. To aggravate these predicaments, ethno-religious conflicts have constantly also posed a threat to the corporate existence of the Nigerian state and its still fragile liberal democratic experiment. The extent to which the Nigerian government resolves these challenges, in Imade's view (2010) will determine whether Nigeria's fledgling democracy is transient or sustainable and, more importantly, whether Nigeria disintegrates or reconfigures itself as a nation-state. But more importantly is the challenge posed to nation-building especially the attainment of such objectives as the Vision 2020:20.

In this paper, the role of civil society in promoting and sustaining Nigeria's fledgling democracy is the central thesis. It probes the idea of what agitates the progression of Nigeria as a democratic state aside the role of its basic agents and institutions by posing the research questions: What is civil society and do they exist in the Nigerian sense? Do civil society organizations in Nigeria play any role in promoting and sustaining democracy? How is this task achieved, if they do, in the face of a complex history of ethnic and religious divisiveness, coupled with apprehensive military and civilian regimes described as "an adversarial atmosphere of stalled structures" by Bradley (2005)? What have been the reason(s) for the repeated faltered attempts to sustain and consolidate democratic government in Nigeria?

Relying on a methodology that critically examines the roles of numerous civil society organizations in this process, the paper is premised on the argument that a vibrant civil society coupled with civility and social capital are the basic building blocks for democratic survival as mere elections alone do not secure democracy but require the civil society among other catalysts and agitators of the process. Moreover, it is further proposed in this analysis that a

vibrant civil society can champion government reforms such as the vision 2020:20, confront corruption, advocate respect for human rights, promote and defend democratic processes and institutions, alongside the state and overall nation-building. To achieve this objective and for the sake of brevity, this paper has been segmented in seven parts beginning with the introduction, theoretical examination of the subject matter of civil society, its features and democracy, tracing the origins of civil society broadly and situating it within the Nigerian context, its role in the democratic project in Nigeria, its challenges and the way forward proffered with the conclusion drawn.

Conceptual/theoretical framework

The civil society

The underlying theoretical and practical application of the idea of civil society is that it is an evolving one in response to environmental, technological and the current globalization world order. Thus, its definition is sometimes constrained by institutional norms of a particular political, economic system (Bradley, 2005). This often creates ambiguities in defining the concept but Diamond's (2005) idea is quite informing: To him civil society connotes: The realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by the legal order or set of shared roles… it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interest, passions and ideas, exchange ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable. It is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and state.

This broad postulation no doubt captures the crux of social action, shared interest and activity required of civil society to stand in the vacuum the state sometimes creates in failing to fulfill its essential welfare to the citizenry. This certainly informs the basis of it also been seen as embracing the "totality of voluntary, civic and social organizations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society as opposed to the force-backed structures of a state (regardless of that state's political system and commercial institutions of the market)" (Wikipedia, 2010). It is apt to link this to the multiple interests that exists within a society which often cannot be completely guaranteed by the state and it takes the functional role of

the civil society to meet these yearnings or as observed by Mattu (cited in Kohteh, n.d.), "a rich social fabric formed by a multiplicity of territorially- and functionally-based units".

Within these conceptions, manifold social movements as civil society include a broad spectrum of institutions like the academia, (e.g. ASUP, ASUU), activist groups, professional associations, the media, charities, militia, civic groups, clubs, community-based organizations, cooperatives, cultural groups, NGOs, environmental groups, religious organizations, trade unions, voluntary associations, women's groups etc. They usually constitute themselves in an assemble of arrangement so that they can express themselves and advance their collective or common interests. This accounts for its class-related structure but no doubt depicts the essential reality of its complementary yet often contradictory role to the state, mobilized as a process of class struggle in a society. The sum total of these connected ideas is perhaps elaborately captured in the London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society's conclusion that civil society is:

> The arena of uncovered collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, through a practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions trade, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

It can therefore be drawn that characteristically, civil society organizations have offered the plausible potential for mobilizing an array of individuals and groups for popular participation, particularly in widening the democratic space in a society. A look at some of these features would suffice.

Features of the civil society

In a bid to understand why the concept of civil society is vital for sustaining Nigeria's nascent democracy, its common characteristics that work in that direction are worth examining. According to Diamond (cited in Kukah, 1999), the following are it basic features:

i. An organized civil society serves as a check against the excesses of government, human rights violation, and abuse on the rule of law, monitors of the application of constitutional provisions.

ii. Increases the participation and the skills of all various segments of society and instils a sense of tolerance, thrift, hard work, moderation, compromise among the various competing parties in the society.

iii. It serves as an alternative to political parties and can offer a refuge for those who are shut out from their rights due to non-membership of given political parties.

iv. It serves to enhance the bargaining power of interest groups and provides inclusive mechanism for them.

v. It has a role in mitigating the excesses of fundamentalist extremists and maximalists who tend to have a very narrow view of life in the context of either/or. It thus also provides other alternatives for negotiations within a multifaceted society.

vi. It can serve as recruiting ground for, and the training of prospective members of the political or economic classes to enhance the availability of participants in government. In effect it is a leadership recruitment field.

From the foregoing features, there is no gain saying that civil society forms the bedrock of democracy in a society and even though it is seen to have been considerably weakened and politicized in many post-independent African states (Konted, n.d.) or even as unorganized (Kukah, 1999); its being an effective check to state power in most of those countries has been significant and acknowledged over the years. It also implies that civil society can best be understood and analysed within a historical perspective which also shapes its implication for democratic growth, sustenance and the extent to which this has been achieved as examined in details in a later section.

The theory of democracy

From classical Athenian democracy to its modern liberal form, democracy has gained divergent theoretical explanations but maintains the key theme of a government emerging from the people that give it legitimacy and sovereignty. The feasibility of this within the African society has however been held suspect due its elitist demand for incorporation (Ake, 2000) described in Nkrumah's *"seek ye the political kingdom and every other thing shall be added unto thee"*. The discussion in this direction is however to understand the meaning of democracy especially within the African and/or Nigerian context.

Derived from the idea of popular government by the ancient Greeks, democracy referred to "rule by the people" that gives the insight of peoples equality, their natural rights and sovereignty that was defined by direct and active participation of citizens in the affairs of the state. This has evolved to the modern liberal democratic construct of representation through periodic elections and other forms of citizens' participation. But despite the dominance of this model of democracy, theoretical Marxist perspectives, assuming the proletariat socialist democracy exist alongside what Gauba (2003) describes as elitist, pluralist and participatory theories.

In all these the fundamental elements of democracy are embedded in the ideals, institutions and processes of governance that allows the broad mass of the people to choose their leaders and guarantees them a broad range of civic rights (Enemou, 2000), incorporating social and economic upliftment of the masses. Thus, Ake (2000) puts it to mean a notion of: "government by the consent of the governed, formal political equality, inalienable human rights including the right to political participation, accountability of power to the governed and the rule of law".

Again, notwithstanding the contestations about the theoretical foundations of democracy, democracy thrives in a historical and cultural milieu that requires an outcome of the interaction of all groups which make claims upon or express interest about a particular issue. Thus, in Enemou's view (2000), the imperative of the operational conditions of democracy is the desirability of it by the people who should "strive and sacrifice to attain it" and citing Heater, it also implies possessing political responsibility. With the emergence of the democratic wave in Africa and the world at large in the 1990s, the task of overturning autocratic regimes meant a coordinated action of citizens, through networks such as the civil society to promote and sustain it gaining a lot of impetus. For Nigeria this has been more

compelling considering her role and status in Africa, the relatively fragile nature of her young democratic institutions and other challenges such as accountability, electoral reforms and the current stride at achieving vision 2020:20. This no doubt requires concerted action of all groups and individuals.

The civil society-democracy nexus: a review of related literature

The complementarity of the civil society to the state has generated a lot of academic interest and literature on political development. According to Imade (2010), as increasing attention is paid to democratization, human rights, popular participation, regime stability, transparency, accountability, probity, privatization, and reducing the size of the state, the important role of civil society can no longer be ignored. He notes that the growing universal consensus on the relevance of civil society to the survival of democracy can be traced to phenomena ranging from the decline of the Western welfare state to the transformation of the former Soviet bloc to resistance against authoritarian regimes in the developing world.

The Wikipedia (2010), tracing the origins of the literature on relations between civil society and democratic political society to have their roots in early liberal writings like those of Alexis de Tocqueville and 20th century theorists like Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, who identified the role of political culture in a democratic order as vital, presents this situation more clearly thus:

> …the political element of many voluntary organizations facilitates better awareness and a more informed citizenry, who make better voting choices, participate in politics, and hold government more accountable as a result. The statutes of these organizations have often been considered micro-constitutions because they accustom participants to the formalities of democratic decision making. More recently, Robert D. Putnam has argued that even non-political organizations in civil society are vital for democracy. This is because they build social capital, trust and shared values, which are transferred into the political sphere and help to hold society together, facilitating an understanding of the interconnectedness of society and interests within it.

In this connection too, Konteh (n.d.) in justifying the position of civil society, observes Mattu's concept of civil society as a "a rich social fabric formed by a multiplicity of territorially- and functionally-based units increasingly linked to the dissolution of

authoritarianism and the establishment of political democracy. He argues that this has a dual implication of first allowing individual units within civil society to determine their collective interest's independently of the states, thereby making for the representation of all sectors by lessening the dominance of the interests of the elite. Moreover, he notes, because the units of civil society are self-created, they provide the basis of political democracy. On the other hand, he posits that this also creates a causal relationship of the state and civil society where he the "dual dynamic of resistance inclusion" illustrates that political democracy is often the product rather than the cause of civil society. And though autonomous, they are not detached from the state and so seek inclusion into national political structures but set limits on each other. In his words, as a result of this process, "ultimately, competition among self-constituted, democratically minded identities in pursuit of common interest allows for the dispersion of political power. Thus, the stability of democratic regimes is enhanced by strong civil societies whose components struggled for democracy".

The totality of this thinking certainly creates the idea that civil society should be regarded as constituting the total of civic and social organizations or institutions that form the bedrock of a functioning democracy as it advocates and takes action primarily for social development and public interest.

Corroborating this argument, Harbeson (1994) contends that civil society is synonymous with society's conception of optimal normative bases of governance and societal organizations and hence represents the blueprint and design for the structure of the state. Similarly, Gersham's (2000) conclusion that civil society refers to the networks of citizens' organizations independent of the state that promotes civic engagement in countries trying to consolidate democracy encapsulates the fact that even in more established democracies, it is also understood to mean the independent "third sector" that mediates between citizens and both the political and economic sectors in each country, especially considering the present global world order. Thus, its strength is visible when it represents the interest of society against an authoritarian state; and often, it may adopt orderly, peaceful or process of non-violence but may be confrontational that demands citizen activism.

The connecting element of these issues underscores the fact that building a democratic state is the task that civil society cannot perform alone but should remain the principal instrument working in concert with societal institutions and related groups. This is more apparent for an emerging fragile democracy like Nigeria that is beset by corruption, is prone to power abuse

and electoral vices, among other maladies. Ekeh (1992), Bratton (1994), Azarya (1994), Young (1994), Kukah (1999) have made extensive studies that radiate around the African and Nigerian experience of these issues.

Origin of civil society

Classical European conceptions to the current global order

It is instructive to begin here by observing that a common theme running through the history of western political philosophy is the idea that civil society consists of those processes that define the purposes and rules of government and its societal foundations i.e., the processes of state formation and reformation (Harbeson, 1994). From its classical historical dimension, civil society was used as a synonym for the good society, and seen as indistinguishable from the state e.g. Socrates' idea of "dialectic" to Plato's just society of common good of practice of civic virtues of wisdom, courage moderation and justice and Aristotle who saw the state *(polis)* as an "association of associations" that enable citizens to share in the virtuous task of ruling and being ruled in the political community (Wikipedia, 2010). The Roman's *societas civilis* introduced by Cicero also buttressed the idea of having a good society, with no distinction between the state and society.

The Treaty of Westphalia became a watershed in creating the sovereign states system based on territoriality that resulted in a period of absolutism in monarchical Europe until the mid-eighteenth century to the enlightenment period which challenged the concept of divine rights of the monarchy. Thus, philosophers of the time such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes theorized forging a social contract in society on the one hand limiting the power of the state and a powerful society on the other that can help humans design their political order. Their ideas were an affront on the existing order of their days, particularly the idea of divine rights, prescribing rather a willful contractual role of those in authority holding power in trust for the society to avoid anarchy. The French Revolution reflected similar political thinking to overcome the conditions of that time too.

However, Hegel, Marx and Gramsci all appeared to later expound that the idea centres around serving the interest of individual rights, interest and private property that strengthens the hegemonic role of capitalism holding the structures of domination. The civil society is therefore seen existing to secure the stability of capitalism and is an intrinsic part of it.

At its post-modern history the civil society is conceived as having been developed through the 1980s in political opposition in former Soviet block East European countries to authoritarian socialist regime types. By the 1990s it became a strategic action to construct an alternative social and world order (Wikipedia, 2010) championed by NGOs and New Social Movements. It hence became what is described as the *third sector* in such discourse. Similarly, to the multilateral institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, the civil society should be a panacea that replaces the state's service provision and social care especially in the 1990s.But with their single-dose panacea to all third world economic conditions under such aegis, the civil society emerged in such societies as anti-government movements; for example, Kukah (1999) notes that the quest for democracy during the SAP era stimulated a lot of controversy and civil society activities in Nigeria. With the turn of an emerging global world order in the 1990s, civil society became a counter force to globalization, resisting its perceived ills across national boundaries. In a whole, these historical transformations are not ends in themselves as they have systemic outcomes on African/Nigerian evolution of civil society.

The emergence and evolution of the idea of civil society in African/Nigerian political development

Many writers on African political development attest to the lack of the use of civil society in the African context despite its rudimentary semblance in pre-colonial ethnic and voluntary associations considered by some writers of that era. Thus, Ekeh (1992) argues that in picking on this term in the 1980s and 1990s, the discipline of African studies has borrowed directly from trends in international Political Sociology which re-discovered civil society from the usages of western political thought. He notes further that the idea resurfaced to offer new opportunities for the freedom of the individual which contrast with previous or existing authoritarian regimes that limit individual liberty. Coinciding with the collapse of Eastern European state Communism, Africa's post-colonial military and personal rule and the apartheid system led to the civil society being characterized as "efforts and structures that challenge dictatorship and maximize individual freedom in Africa". (Ekeh, 1992).

Evidently, constructs of the idea in African intellectual discourse relates to what he further describes as the "nature of the individual and state and kinship in African history". He asserts that "slavery and colonialism altered African states and societies and histories, with European colonizers using kinship structures as public institutions, canonized it and used it in political

matters that created them as alternative public institutions. In the final analysis the creation of kinship as an alternative public institution, existing side by side with the formal state" using it for primordial interests emerged. Some of these are socio-cultural and ethnic militia groups, religious institutions, cults and others societies that sprang up. During colonialism, groups such as the Egbe Omo Oduduwa and Jami'ar Mutanen Arewa rose to challenge it.

The African state is also typically weak and even when democratically elected, is characterized by high aberration of the non-adherence to the rule of law. Several democracies in Africa today reflect this and hence the need for the role of the civil society to check the excesses of the state and its institutions. Bratton (1994) opines for example that the contours of civil society are shaped by the social groups and classes that come out openly in favour of political liberation, concluding that in Africa, three broad classes of it exists: the popular classes of self-employed peasants, artisans, and marketers; the working class of unionized employees, and the middle classes of entrepreneurs, administrators and professionals. Such are commonly mobilized for mass actions such as strikes in support of better salaries and working conditions or explicitly political demands for freedom of associations or accountability in the management of public agencies and corporations. In fact, through trade unions, the working class usually enjoys both formidable organization and a leadership capable of mounting a bid for political power. In pot-colonial Nigeria, the activities of civil society groups such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Petroleum and Natural Gas Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) have been a vital component of the struggle for democracy and a better society.

The civil society, promotion and sustenance of democracy in Nigeria

Nigerian democracy like most African countries is very fragile often touted as being experimental. To this end, the quest for civil society in this analysis would then imply the need to lend, support to democratic struggles and structures in Nigeria. Ekeh (1992) attests that:

> The quest for unearthing the dynamics of civil society in Africa would be without purpose outside its political relationship with democracy. It is because democracy has a

weak base in Africa that civil society is being promoted as a possible method of reformatting Africa's democratic need. This is in contrast with previous theories urging that strong states would supply Africa's political salvation.

However, it is not enough to state that the mere presence and even further growth of civil society will help the development of democracy in Africa; rather it needs to be found out measures that have enabled the civil society to be mutually engaged in the public arena, lessening the claims of the political space of the public realm. As earlier noted, this takes the form of complementary or even sometimes antagonistic pursuit of such ideals by the civil society.

For Nigeria, the roles of civil society groups in this direction have been copious and there is no doubt that despite its relative weakness and unorganized nature, it has evolved as a veritable instrument that promotes and potentially would continue to be the major agent in sustaining and strengthening democracy. An analysis of some of these antecedents of the civil society can be evaluated from the historical and prevailing stride of political events and developments in Nigeria.

Like all colonized territories, the Nigeria state was a colonial project conceived, nurtured and sustained by violence implying for instance that issues such as taxation completely new to some of the colonized communities had to be resisted. The cases of the exile of King Jaja of Opobo, King Kosoko of Lagos and numerous chiefs who resisted colonial rule attest to this fact. The Abba women's riot represented such agitations against despotic British colonialism, reflecting the role of civil society existence. Young (1994) refers to this when he notes that one may suggest that civil society existed in pre-colonial Africa but was extinguished by the colonial state, maintaining that the existence of pre-colonial states of widely varying scale centralization and ideological basis implies an interactive linkage with societies.

Moreover the incorporation of the newly colonized Nigerian state into the world capitalist economic system entailed a disruption of the spade of indigenous development with communal existence to individualism. The end of colonialism did not abate and has not abated the inherent contradictions in these systems and supports our earlier theoretical standpoint that the civil society itself is a part of the capitalist system, with its inherent contradictions.

Lending support to this line of thought, Kukah's position (1999) is quite insightful. He notes that "in colonial Africa, four projects were considered to be most urgent: the process of state-building, Africa's economic development, modernization and democracy" with huge capital implications in the pursuit of these project culminating in the "loss of freedoms, deprivation of productive energies of citizens they were now channelled into the needs of the state", introduction of primitive accumulation, compulsory adoption of new societal moral systems, attitudes and ways of life, incorporating into power hierarchies etc. Citing Ake, he maintains the view that such changes result in "orientational upheaval, widespread anomie and insecurity especially among those who see themselves as losers by its discontinuities, disorientation and ruptures frantic identity affirmations render people edgy, aggressive and available for mobilization into extremist social movements". These have generated a lot of conflict against the state by associations, communities and organizations.

The post-colonial Nigerian state therefore became a strong dictatorial military one for control of state resources, forging hegemony along ethnic identities. In fact, the early struggle of immediate post-independent ethnic minorities against the dominant tripod construction of the Nigerian state on the three major ethnic groups (Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo) were vehemently suppressed by the state.

Till today, the expression of such groups in the Niger Delta and in the Middle Belt regions of Nigeria reflect agitations for freedom over the dominance, exclusion and tyranny of the majority often visible in the suppression of the movement even within a democracy. Even the contestations about *zoning* the presidency reflect group interests that are largely primordial in such power equations in Nigeria.

Furthermore, Kukah (1999) has argued that the economic situations during the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was a part of the Babangida democratization process that vented out a lot of controversy and civil society activities. With subversion of the programme, SAP led to unprecedented corruption in the polity with the final collapse of the transition programme. All these were opposed by civil society groups and individuals that emerged. In Kukah's word, "the upsurge of human rights work in Nigeria coincided with the failure of the economic and social fabric of society as a result of the failure of SAP noting that anti-SAP riots of 1988, 1990 and 1999 were spearheaded by the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) founded in 1986 by Mr. Olisa Agbakoba, student union bodies led by NANS, ASUU, NBA, Trade Union Congress, the Nigerian Labour Congress then led by Ali Chiroma etc. All made

remarkable achievements in trying to assert the rights of Nigerians including the role played during the anti-fuel hike prices between 1986–1988. It can then be concluded that such associations' operations are additive and have contributed to the generalized definitions of personal freedom and individual liberty (Ekeh, 1992:208) that civil society represent.

However it can only be useful and instructive to understand and agree with Kukah (1999) that the discussion about civil society can take place mainly within the larger picture and context of the struggle for democracy and its attendant attributes since the civil society and authoritarian regimes are strange bed fellows or what he terms *important enemies of civil society*. The Nigerian state and people became casualties of many years of military despots who used the instruments of coercion to suppress the civil society. Through their draconian laws, press freedom was curtailed; labour activities and students' unionism were proscribed with many human rights activists caught in the vortex of the high-handed military use of power. The Buhari, Babangida and Abacha regimes had notoriety for the suppression of the civil society at various forms. The academia was not spared. University lecturers in ABU Zaria, Universities of Ibadan, Calabar, Port Harcourt and Jos became what Kukah (1999) terms "hotbeds of very informed Marxist radicalism in the 80s" and were becoming a threat to the ruling political elites. As a result most of them known to be associated with the left were harassed or detained and "were accused of not teaching what they were paid to teach". This led to a lot of migration by some of them or the brain-drain phenomenon. These do not only demonstrate the threat of subjugation of the civil society by Nigerian despots but the role such groups played in standing against the suffocating affront of authoritarianism.

Another obvious demonstration of the courage of the civil society in the face authoritarianism is notable during the failed democratic transitions in Nigeria. A significant case in point was the annulment if June 12 Presidential election believed to be the freest and fairest in post-independent Nigeria's political history. Aside the Nigerian Civil War, it is said to have tested the unity and resilience of Nigeria (Kukah, 1999:107). But it is the role of the civil society such annulments precipitated that is our point of departure: it saw an amalgamation of civil society groups confronting the Interim National Government (ING) and later the Abacha regime. The intellectual class especially ASUU vehemently confronted the regime. Nigerian human rights groups formed a coalition under the aegis of an organization, the Campaign for Democracy led by late Dr. Beko Kuti and Chima Ubani its Secretary-General with the aim of overthrowing the ING and install a democratically selected government headed Chief by

Chief Abiola but due to internal wrangling, it ruptured leading to another coalition, NADECO, consisting of seasoned politicians, the military and bureaucracy who stood for the restoration of the June 12 mandate and against Abacha's self-succession bid. Many were incarcerated; some left Nigeria into exile and others like Alfred Rewane and Mrs. Kudirat Abiola, paid the price with their lives and 'hostile' media houses were closed down. By 1995, this situation worsened with the arrest, trial and sentencing of 40 Nigerians including Olusegun Obasanjo on charges of complicity in an illegal coup against Abacha, followed by the hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists (Akinboye and Anifowose, 1999). This was condemned the world ever, including the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth and limited sanctions imposed on Nigeria by the USA, Britain and the EU.

By 1997, the United Action for Democracy (UAD) was also formed as an amalgam of a civil society groups with the aim of ending military rule and enthronement of a people's democracy, creation of political education to empower people in the defense of fundamental human rights and demand unconditional release of political prisoners (Kukah, 1999:263). With similar roles coming from the CLO and Afronet, an African human rights organization led by Olisa Agbakoba, the civil society groups were relentless in the fight against military despotism. For example, the UAD organized a rally in Lagos opposed to Daniel Kalu's Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA)/ National Council of Youth Associations in Nigeria (NCYAN) coalition's two million man march in Abuja. The fall out was arrest of democracy activists like Chief Bala Ige for disrupting pro-Abacha rally organized by Lamidi Adedibu and Arisekola in Ibadan. But for the death of Abacha, he might have succeeded himself as a military- turned civilian president despite the agitations by these groups and individuals.

However, what was remarkable and indisputable was the upsurge and commitment of these movements to confront authoritarianism despite their limitations. This in O'Donnell and Schmitters view (cited in Bratton, 1994) are known as the "popular upsurge" which implies an ephemeral activist coalition through which various social classes momentarily suspend divergent interests in favour of the common goal of removing an incumbent regime. Thus the emergence and mobilization of such multi class alliance demonstrated an affront at promoting and trying to sustain the values of democracy in Nigeria.

It is however not right to say these efforts were ends in themselves with the emergence of civil democratic rule in Nigeria by 1999. As observed by Gersham (2000):

> Significantly, the process of transition initiated by civil society, once it culminates in the downfall of autocracy, demands that the role of civil society itself be transformed. Instead of working in opposition to the state, groups representing civil society have to help fashion a democratic state that is responsive to popular needs and attitudes. Their task in the post-breakthrough period is neither to subvert the state nor to defend it uncritically, but to monitor its performance and insist on its accountability and transparency. Civil society must also encourage citizen activism in solving practical problems, foster tolerance and inclusiveness, and begin the difficult process of bringing social reality and respect for rights into line with the new democratic aspirations and values.

Therefore, sustaining democracy in Nigeria since 1999 has been a lot of the dynamic role of civil society groups. From impacting on electoral reforms, legislative issues and outright condemnation of tyrannical tendencies in a democracy, the polity has attained some level of relative democratic stability. Even though affronts on democracy by groups such as the militant Odua People's Congress, MEND, the *Boko Haram* religious upheavals etc., there is an increased role of the articulation of ideas by more organized civil society groups to the extent that they consolidate and help in institutionalizing the democratic space. Obasanjo's failed 'third term' bid through a constitutional amendment process, was but for civil society resistance that swayed or influenced the options of the National Assembly. Similarly, the recent political statement of a power vacuum created by Yar'adua's sickness saw the civil society making demands and pressures that resulted in a resolution of the problem by the National Assembly's use of the its *doctrine of necessity*. The Save Nigeria Group (SNG), NBA, NLC, NUJ, the academia and other groups were instrumental in shaping the activities of government. In fact, the much applauded removal of Professor Maurice Iwu was a feat of civil society pressure while the appointment of Professor Attahiru Jega as INEC Chairman has not just been informed by his past antecedents as ASUU President, but his acceptance among the civil society groups. It is hoped that his experiences and the support expected from Nigerians will lead to credible elections by 2011. And with the right leadership (which has been our development bane), the attainment of Vision 2020:20 and other broad nation-building projects at large may be possible.

Similarly, the sustained role of election monitoring by the civil society has largely been a response to the challenges of the Nigerian electoral milieu. Under the auspices of the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), a coalition of civil society groups interested in promoting and sustaining democracy, the 2003 and 2007 elections were under their watchful

eyes as observers, with most of them noting the shortcomings of the process in their reports. The Electoral Reform Network (ERN), the Catholic Church's Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) and the Muslim League for Accountability have been involved in ensuring that credible, free and fair elections are conducted in Nigeria.

The organized labour under the umbrella body, Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and its corollary associations have also been actively involved in pro-democracy movement activities in Nigeria. Ihonvbere (1997) affirms that workers' role have been relied upon by political parties, human rights and pro-democracy movements, acknowledging them as the "popular communities and constituencies which determine the dynamics of politics and shape the overall character of the transition from forms of authoritarianism to multiparty systems". PENGASSON, TUC, NUPENG, ASUP, ASUU etc. have spearheaded the clamour for good and acceptable electoral practices, better management of resources and general participation in governance by the citizenry.

It is essential to admit the significant the activist elements of the civil society in Nigeria have mostly been shaped and influenced by a crop of professionals and intellectuals who believe in human rights, equal opportunity and democracy and who, by virtue of these values, according to Ake (2000) so grossly neglected in post-colonial Africa have always been outsiders to power such as the indefatigable late Chief Gani Fawehinmi (SAN), Femi Falana, Late Bala Usman, Tai Solarin, Beko Ransome-Kuti, Balarabe Musa, Prof. Wole Soyinka, Pastor Tunde Bakare and a host of others. Their dogged clamour and supports have been relentless in ensuring institutional liberal democracy via multi-party elections accountability and the rule of law in securing rights, overcoming economic and political marginalization, exploitation and empowering those who are weak and making public policy responsive to social needs (Ake, 2000). All these are components that support democracy and nation building.

Challenges of civil society in the promotion and sustenance of democracy in Nigeria

The civil society's quest for the promotion and sustenance of democracy in Africa and particularly in Nigeria have been misconstrued as reference to sources of resistance to the domain of social life. With this, it is understandable that they have been a target of hostility by authorities through their activities and struggles. As a result, the environmental and other

factors have been key challenges to the role of civil society organizations in achieving their objectives among which are:

- **Then politicization and weakening of the civil society:** Many civil society groups in Nigeria have faced this problem through patronage or repression, making it easier to suffocate democracy. To some civil society leaders, the offer of lucrative jobs in government (especially labour union leaders) have resulted in what Konteh (n.d.) describes as silencing the dissenting voices, paving way for autocratic and dictatorial regimes. This was most prevalent during the military dictatorship in Nigeria. Kukah (1999) corroborates and depicts this phenomenon as "co-option, incorporation and rejection" empirically revealing that some key members of the Campaign for Democracy "had sold out by reaching to Abacha in the search for a solution to the problem of the annulled election". This did not only rupture the organization but demonstrated the compromise that may arise in a politicized and divided civil society. The politisation and paralysis of the National Association of Nigeria (NANS) and the National Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN) are typical examples of bodies that used to lend a strong voice to the civil society in the cause of democracy and justice.

- **Lack of clear-cut objectives, experience and organizational discipline:** According to Kukah (1999), many civil society movements in Nigeria emerged without any experience in the "art of the dynamics and organizational discipline" required of them resulting in disunity among the groups. He provides the reasons to this in the internal contradiction of their emergence which was without clarity of purpose and objective, making it an "all-comers job" that was uncoordinated.

- Related to this is **the ideological war among the civil society ideologues** where the radicals perceive it as an arena to challenge the status quo and build new alternatives, while the neo-liberals situate it as an avenue to remedy the ills brought to the fore by what Edwards (2009) describes as "marked failures" in order to be engaged in service provision not for profit. He contends that such result to a "mania for business metrics, commercial revenue generation and induced competition between civil society groups supposedly designed to deliver better results" rather than concentrate on specific contentious societal issues of governance and public good.

- **Funding** is another great challenge to the civil society in Nigeria. Largely motivated and funded by international donor organizations and countries, they are not designed to clearly undertake a locally designed democratic initiative for the Nigerian society.

Kukah (1999) links this to their apparent urban-based location and suspicious inability to garner local and internal economic support. To Edwards (2009), this brings to bare the problem of accountability and transparency the civil society is often faced with.

- **Ethno-religious and other forms of conflicts** have been a great challenge to civil society organizations in finding lasting solutions to them within a democracy. Often fanned by the embers of poverty and unemployment, youth become ready tools for unmitigated conflicts that threaten Nigeria's democracy and corporate existence. Linked to this is the challenge of educating the citizenry from its growing apathy to democratic and governance issues due to the pervasive divide between those in power and the citizenry which must be bridged.

- **The challenge of a globalized world system** no doubt impinges the role of the Nigerian civil society in promoting and sustaining democracy. The challenge confronting civil society within this view according to Gershman (2000) is to develop new forms of international collaboration that will enable ordinary citizens to defend their interests and identities in the face of powerful global forces that often seem beyond anyone's ability to control. It can be right to say the civil society currently lacks the capacity to meet this challenge due to the numerous factors even affecting it locally.

Faced with these challenges, the civil society in Nigeria requires options for it to deepen the task of ensuring democracy is promoted and sustained.

Alternative futures for the civil society in Nigeria's democratic development

In Nigeria like other emerging democracies, the requirements for democratic development today go beyond the institutional arrangements of it as a country but rather by having in place what Linz and Stephan (cited in Gershman, 2000) refer to as "the five arenas of a consolidated democracy": civil society, political society, the rule of law, the state apparatus and economic society that must complement and re-enforce each other. For the civil society to achieve these in furtherance of promoting and sustaining Nigeria's nascent democracy for nation building, the following would be relevant practical options for the civil society:

- The civil society in Nigeria needs to sustain its advocacy for supra-national laws to control tyranny by political leaders in the areas of human rights, fights against

corruption, money laundering, popular participation in governance and the search for free and fair elections in Nigeria.

- For the civil society in Nigeria, the struggle to promote and sustain democracy for nation-building should be independent and consistent to the extent that can be configured to enhance its capacity for independent action in the midst of its operational and organizational challenges.

- To be able to maintain such independence and struggle, the civil society should be able to garner adequate independent resources and "profound moral commitment and emotional allegiance" (Diamond, 1990) from the citizens. This will secure its action and provide leveraged support from the populace, especially when the civil society observes the democratic and other values it professes in its internal operation.

- Civil society activists in Nigeria need to form alliances and networks through three fronts Gershman (2000) prescribes as: "cross-sectoral-domestic alliances, international civil society network and developing regional and global, cross-sectoral networks". Through this kind of partnership, civil society and other democratic forces and institutions as the media, political parties, trade unionists, intellectuals, etc., can be empowered by new advocacy techniques and political networking to fight corruption, election rigging, helping eliminate discrimination, human rights abuses etc. that are antithetical to democratic values and nation-building at large.

- Generally, it is advocated that the Nigerian state should be in a position to guarantee minimum economic subsistence to its citizens if democracy can be achieved and sustained. This can ensure pluralistic participation by the citizenry and prevent extreme inequalities that engender conflicts, political thuggery and other forms of vices tearing the fabric of Nigeria apart.

- To create the desired sense of common humanity, justice, human rights and other values democracy represents and champion, the civil society need to mobilize Nigerians for social change to the grassroots rather than their urban-based elitist and mass approach to the concerns of the society. Through this, adequate awareness, transformation and mass civic action can be anticipated.

- The civil society in Nigeria need to have limited and specific objectives that are not parochial but rather focused on social challenges such as democratic transition, fight against corruption and injustice etc. to provide the scope and focus for clear-cut activities in such areas.

Conclusion

The contemporary world view of political democratic development and nation-building incorporates vital values and multiple numbers of actors that are instrumental for change in a society and in analysing such developments. In Nigeria, the civil society encapsulates this reality and reflects the notion of collective action towards achieving shared values of the society. In serving as a "counter hegemonic social movement" against authoritarianism, it has been instrumental to regime transition in Nigeria and a vehicle that has helped in securing, promoting and sustaining Nigeria's nascent democracy amidst the turbulence of the socio-political milieu. Mostly championed by professionals such as the academics, lawyers, labour, doctors and other segments of society, the outcome of civil society activities in Nigeria have demonstrated efforts of creating a just democratic society where citizens' rights are fought for, accountability by public officials is demanded, electoral reforms are necessary and nation-building is the objective. This will help in filling the vacuum the state has created and spells the essential component of the civil society.

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