Civil Society Organisations and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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Abstract
The 2015 general election was without doubt marred by violence in some areas, as reports in Rivers, Delta, Akwa-Ibom, and Benue states among others suggested. The general outcome of the election however revealed that the alleged incidences of violence were not enough to compromise the credible and transparent nature of the 2015 polls. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was given a pat on the back for organising an election that was largely adjudged free, fair and credible. However, interest groups such as the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have been playing significant role since the reintroduction of civil rule in Nigeria to ensure that the nascent democracy is sustained. The CSOs ensure that there is peaceful conduct of the electorates before and during elections, which is mainly achieved through voters' education across the country, and monitoring of election at polling units on election days. This paper is an attempt to highlight the key roles played by the CSOs in sustaining Nigeria nascent democracy. Employing the functionalist perspective, the paper highlights the role played by these organizations towards consolidating the Nigerian democracy. The research relied on secondary data and concluded that the CSOs play an important role in ensuring violent free elections in Nigeria; hence democratic consolidation. The paper therefore recommends that government should partner more with CSOs to sustain the ethos of democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Civil society organisation, democratic Consolidation, Election Violence

Introduction

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Nigeria have played crucial and different roles in returning the country to civilian rule. Since then, it has ensured that the state is checkmated while at the same time helping the state to consolidate on the ethos of democracy and consequently sustainable development (Igbokwe-Ibeto *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, they were at the vanguard for the liberation struggle that culminated in the achievement of independence in 1960. In pre-colonial and post-colonial government especially during the military regime, the Nigerian print media was the standard bearer of the civil society organizations as they sought to expose acts of authoritarianism, mismanagement, and corruption in the polity.

According to Uadiale (2011), the meaning and ontology of civil society evolved considerably since its uses in the context of the 18th century European Enlightenment. Civil society today is a surrogate for revolution that seems a remote possibility towards the attainment of an alternative social world order. This is clearly illustrated in the revolts that dominated the Magreb region of Africa where the civil uprising was responsible for the collapse of regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Algeria among others (Igbokwe-Ibo, 2014). In these circumstances, many activists and theorists have looked at civil society as the source from which alternative, more equitable forms of society might arise.

The rise, growth and development of civil society accentuated by a combination of factors which include the restructuring of the society by economic globalization, issues in global governance with consequences for the relationship of political society to civil society (Cox, 1999). According to Uadiale (2011), the stability of democratic regimes is enhanced by strong civil society organizations and trade unions whose components struggled for democracy. The efforts made by both the indigenous and international scholars towards examining the role of civil society with regards to sustaining the ethos of democracy and development in Nigeria have been commendable. However, there still appears to be a dearth of literature particularly on the appraisal of civil society organizations and the democratic project, especially their contributions in consolidating on the gains of democracy.

Problem Statement

For a while civil society organisations have made significant contributions to the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. They are engage in voters' education, monitoring of elections, dialoguing and sometimes engaging the government and other stake holders in ensuring peaceful elections and people's oriented policies. Often times, the role of CSOs is misinterpreted hence people conceived them as self-seeking and self-centred organisation which are bent on maximising only the interest of their members at the expense of the citizenry. A close look at the activities of some of the Civil Society Organisations will however revealed that they have made significant contributions to the sustenance of Nigeria's democratic projects. The focus of the paper is thus to assess the contributions of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to the democratic consolidations and to critically highlights the challenges of civil society organizations in their efforts towards democracy in Nigeria.

Conceptualising Civil Society Organisation

Civil society refers to non-governmental organizations that stand between the state and society which either cooperates or conflates or both with the state in the course of their activities. For Ekeh cited in Igbokwe-Ibo *et al.* (2014), civil society refers to those areas in the overall society in which there are institutions and associations that exist and function independently of the state. It is therefore clear from the fore-going that civil society not only antagonises but could cooperate with the state in realizing the common good for all in the

society. From the foregoing, the question begging for answer is; to what extent has the civil society in Nigeria helped in consolidating democracy considering its historical antecedents, structures, methods (some of which will be highlighted later in the paper) for influencing governmental policies to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people.

The Concept of Democratic Consolidation

Diamond cited in Kwasau (2013) sees democratic consolidation as the process of achieving broad and deep legitimation such that all significant political actors believe that popular rule is better for their society than any other realistic alternative they can imagine. It also connects the act of reducing the probability of the breakdown of the system to the point where democracy can be said that it will persist. Omordia and Erunke (2007) and Udiale (2011), view it as regime maintenance and about regarding the key political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation and adherence to the democratic rules of the game. It manifests under enhanced economic development, developed democratic culture, stable party system, suffice to assert that this cannot be attained in Nigeria until stability is attained. This therefore shows that though under democratic regime, Nigeria is striving for consolidation

Theoretical Framework

Theories are very useful part of research; they provide direction and bases for explaining phenomenon. But the ability of theories to fulfil this obligation depends on their suitability to explain the subject matter in question. Bearing this in mind, this work will make use of the functionalist theory to explain the role of civil societies in democratic sustainability in Nigeria.

The functionalist perspective has its roots in the structural functionalist anthropological works of Branislow Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown. The introduction of the theory into the discipline of sociology was through the efforts of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and the more contemporary works of Talcott Parsons (1937) and Robert Merton (1968) (Ritzer, 2008). The theory is based on analogy between biological organic system and social systems.

Functionalism likened the society with its basic sub-systems or institutions like family, kinship, economy, legal, beliefs as well as politics to the productive, circulatory, respiratory and digestive organs of a biological being. The importance of parts of a system is seen in terms of their contribution to the survival and maintenance of the whole system; their contribution to integration of the whole system as equilibrium sustaining mechanisms and the survival requisite. These parts or sub-systems that make up the body or society are distinctive or separate and yet inter-dependent or interlocking. In this way problems or dysfunctions with any of the parts will organically spread to the other parts as well as creating a dis-equilibrium state or condition for the body or entire system (Gidddens, 2006).

Functionalism also uses the "biological homeostasis" which is a combination of all the organs of the body to restore the organism to good health when there is an imbalance in the system. For instance, just as prolonged diarrhoea or dysentery may lead to death of an organism if not arrested on time, political violence and electoral malpractices could result to war and total breakdown of the entire society, if not checkmated by collective social action. It is therefore our submission that the intervention of CSOs in the political development of Nigeria could have a significant influence on the education, economy, legal, religion, health and social lives of the members of any society as well as on the development of political culture and democratic sustainability. This implies that bad democratic governance will bring about general decay and stagnation in all sectors including political sector (i.e consolidation of democracy). According to the functionalist, every institution in the society is assessed based on its contribution to the maintenance of the system. In this regard, the contribution of the CSOs to sustainable democracy with regards to voters' education, civic education through enlightenment campaign, monitoring of elections as well as its role and oversight duties as a watch dog to the government of the day can be considered essential to democracy where these functions are actually performed.

An Overview of Civil Society Organisations in Nigeria

Ekeh (1994) stated that an organization or association qualifies as civil society, if it is non-governmental and meets the following additional criteria: it is voluntary, independent and self-governing, non-profitable, participatory, formal and legal. Agreeing with Ekeh's (1994) characterisation of CSOs, we will say that civil society organisation in Nigeria are as old as the movement for the independent Nigeria. Prior to colonialism, social movements arising from discontent of British administration existed in Nigeria. At the beginning of colonial conquest, resistance was organized and coordinated in the social formations that constituted Nigeria. The organized resistance by chiefs and kings like Jaja of Opobo, Nana of Itsekiri, the Hausa Madhist (Satiru) groups and a host of others against colonial rule were all elements of civil society (Abari, 2013).

After colonial conquest, the resistance was sustained by civil organizations of both modern and traditional colourations. The Nigerian civil societies were also actively involved in various forms of rural-urban protest and revolts against the colonial rule. Such uprisings were based on local grievances against the colonial government. The Egba uprising, the Aba Women Riot of 1929 and the Enugu Coal miners' strike are notable examples. Omordia and Erunke (2007) also submitted that, the onerous attempt by the civil society to truncate colonial rule in Nigeria was further boosted by the formation and emergence of socio-cultural formations like *Egba Omo Oduduwa, Jamiyar Mutanin Arewa* among others. According to Ajir (2009), civil srife became more pronounced when trade union was legally recognized in 1930 following the promulgation of trade union ordinance. In the same vain, Igbokwe-Ibeto *et al.* (2014) also

averred that civil society organizations subsequently played active roles in terminating colonial rule. The nationalist parties and groups were bolstered by a myriad of civil organizations. Indeed, civil groups became the breeding ground for would be nationalists and politicians (Nwachukwu, 2003).

After independence, civil society organizations continued to increase and expand in their structure and operations. During the early years of independence, Nigeria witnessed several workers' strikes and civil strives by associations and organisations protecting the interest of their members. Worthy of mention is ASUU's struggle with the military government on various issues related to human rights and social justice. Iyayi (2002) put it succinctly that ASUU's stand on social justice and accountability always put it at logger heads with government of the day. The Buhari/Idiagbon regime in 1985 for instance embarked on a programme to massively retrench workers, clamped down on the striking National Association of Resident Doctors and the Nigerian Medical Association. ASUU objected and incurred its wrath in return; some of its leaders were arrested, others were intimidated and threatened with sack. ASUU's opposition to SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme) and protest against murder of ABU students in 1986 by Mobile Police also made it members target for attack by the Babangida regime (Nwabugo, 2011). According to Nwagbara (1999), the Union also maintained an open very strong, unambiguous condemnation of the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa. One clear dimension of the growth and development of civil society in Nigeria in the 1980s is the frequent face off with the military government. In some cases, government is forced to reconsider its position or policies that appear unpopular with the people.

In contemporary Nigeria, the democratic atmosphere and freedom it brings lead to the proliferation of several civil society organisations such as the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), National Committee of Democratic Lawyers (NCDL), Constitutional Rights Project (CRP), etc, were formed to press for democracy, good governance, peace, justice and protection of human rights (Kukah, 2003).

The Role of Civil Society in Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Democracy is never a finished business, but rather work in progress. Its processes require gradual measures captured in not only the divide between democracies and non-democracies, but differences in degrees of democratic qualities (Lundberg, 2008). What is important in the democratic consolidation is that political, social and economic re-engineering efforts should bring about qualitative changes in the lives of the people, while the building and remodelling of political institutions and structures go on. Civil society therefore has an important role to play in ensuring all these especially where opposition party appears to be docile. In pursuing these goals, civil society may cooperate or disagree with the state with regards to its mode of operation regarding policies that bother on the lives of the citizenry (Igbokwe-Ibeto *et al.*, 2014).

CSOs are also involved in the civic and moral education of the citizens. This is one area which is crucial to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. A number of innovative approaches have crystallized over the years. A good example is the introduction of "Town Hall Meetings", a forum which assembles the electorates and elected officers to discuss issues affecting them (Takpa, 2010). Uadile (2011) averred that civil society organizations engage in voters' education to educate the voting population on the need for free, fair and credible elections.

Civil society organizations are also involved in the struggle to ensure accountability and transparency in governance. Groups like Transparency International in Nigeria and Integrity Group have been mobilizing against corruption. According to Takpa (2010), the NLC and three other organizations led the formation of network of civil society on public expenditure and budget monitoring. Part of the objective of the network is to find ways in which citizens can influence public expenditure (spending) through participation in the budgeting processes. It is in the same vein that the League for Human Rights, an NGO based in Jos, decided to be publishing the monthly federal revenue allocation meant for Plateau State, for citizens to know how much is being allocated to the state by the end of the month (Uadiale, 2011).

They also carry out enlightenment campaigns to educate the people about candidates and political parties. As Abari (2013) argued that CSOs also send out monitoring team on general election days in conjunction with foreign observer missions to monitor the outcome of election. And more importantly, the civil society with its traditional role of restricting the state by its oversight activities, prevent the incumbent government from manipulating the elections through the divesting of the electoral umpire's power to work independently. By so doing, civil society organizations help to ensure the acceptability and credibility of outcomes of elections which depend greatly on the measure of independence of purpose, neutrality and impartiality of the electoral umpire and election observers. Civil society organizations engaged Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to enhance the conduct of the 2007, 2011 and 2015 general elections (Transition Monitoring Group, 2003). In fact, the INEC/civil society desk was established in September, 2006 (Uadiale, 2011).

The Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU) and National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) have also played commendable efforts in challenging the military dictatorship in Nigeria during the Babangida and Obasanjo regime. ASUU for instance unambiguously condemned the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the sacking of 49 lecturers from Uni-Illorin by the Obasanjo regime in 2001 for refusing to break ASUU strike and return to work. Credit must also go to the CSOs and other organizations for pushing the government of President Olusegun Obasanjo to concede to the idea of a National Conference. Even though the government opted for what was tagged the National Political Reform Conference, observers believe it was a result of the pressure from the CSOs (Iyayi, 2002). The Transitional Monitoring Group

which is probably the most successful umbrella for collective action by the CSOs has since been actively involved in monitoring voters' registration. The TMG and other CSOs also played active and vital roles in the 2003, 2007 and 2011 elections (Transition Monitoring Group Report, 2011).

Similarly, the NLC and TUC and their affiliates in the civil society organisations, for instance not satisfied with the conduct of the 2007 general elections after the announcement of the results, called for the cancellation of the elections and threatened to begin a nationwide strike in protest of some of the sharp practices inherent in the electoral processes that were sometimes regarded as less than democratic (European Union Report, on 2007 general elections).

Furthermore, the pressure put by some of the CSOs and bodies like the Open Society Initiative of West Africa (OSIWA), International Development Partners (IDP) and others brought together women from various works of life in the country to strategize on ways of establishing affirmative actions in Nigeria. Many of the suggestions provided by OSIWA in 2001 targeted governance at the senatorial level to ensure the adoption of more women in the 2003 elections. Consequently, Partners for Development launched a national campaign known as Gender Agenda 2003. The programme brought people to form a constituency that demanded for a certain number of seats for women at all levels in the 2003 electoral process (Ibid). The efforts and contributions of the CSOs in the establishment of Electoral Acts Review, Constitution Review (the first in the history of Nigeria) and the registration of more political organizations cannot be easily forgotten (Abari, 2013).

Critical Assessment of Civil Societies in Nigeria

In Nigeria, because the upsurge of civil society groups coincided with the wind of democratization that swept across the African Continent in the early 1990's, most of these have centred on the potentials and limitations of civil society in promoting and sustaining the democratization projects (Abari, 2013). Nevertheless, most active civil society groups have become ethnic based. They have shifted from their initial focus as platforms for democratic advocacy and popular protest and resistance against excesses and abuse of state power to platforms for ethnic militancy against marginalization and agitation for resource control (to even the most extreme of criminality such as hostage taking, piracy, oil theft and bunkering) (Uadiale, 2011).

According to Omordia and Erunke (2007), they have become veritable platforms for violent confrontation with other groups and the state. Since the return to democracy, there has been an explosion of ethnic-based civil society movements most of which are ethnically based, and hence overzealous towards protecting sectional interest. Among these are the Ijaw National Congress (INC), Afenifere, Ohaneze Ndigbo, Arewa Consultative Forum, Middle Belt Forum, Isoko Development Union (IDU), Urhobo Progress Union (UPU), Egbema National Congress (ENC), Movement for the Survival of Itsekiri Ethnic Nationality (MOSIN), Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Isoko National Youth

Movement (INYM), Urhobo Youth Movement (UYOMO), Egi Youth Federation (EYF), Ikwere Youth Movement (IYM), and Bayelsa Youth Federation of Nigeria (BYFN) (Nwanbugo, 2011). Others include Esan Youth Movement, Egbe Afenifere, Odua People's Congress (OPC), Igbo Salvation Front, Igbo Redemption Council, Federated Council of Igbo Youth, Igbo People Council and Ndigbo Liberation Movement (Abari, 2013).

According to Osaghae (1997) wild passion, violence, divisiveness, exclusiveness, disorder, embryonic, ethnic division, manipulation of foreign donors, suppression by authoritarian states, lack of influence, creativity, unity, elitism, urban based, lop-sidedness, restrictive to the privileged few, ineffective organization, limited effectiveness, patrimonial, personal repressive, corrupt, co-option, clientelism, opportunism, parochialism, manipulative, crippling poverty, nepotism, illiberalism, participation, consensus, egalitarianism also cause the failure of civil society in Nigeria (Uadiale, 2011). We must add that the lack of global vision of development, poor institutional and organizational capacity, inadequate professionalism and chronic dependence on external funding are other weaknesses of most CSOs in Nigeria.

Since 1999, Nigeria has experienced a proliferation of CSOs. Notably among which are the Civil Liberty Organisations (CLO), The Save Nigeria Group, United Action for Democracy (UAD), and Trade Unions organisations such as: The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), and Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC), and their affiliates. They continue to press for more democratic ethos and to promote the sanity of the rule of law in Nigeria (Igbokwe *et al.* 2014). In the wake of the campaign for the return to civil rule, some of the civil society organisations and activists publicly were co-opted into joining the ruling military junta under General Babangida and Abacha at the expense of their pro-democracy roles. Similarly, others were too weak to challenge the undemocratic ideologies of the then ruling party; PDP. This development has led to question the democratic credentials of civil society and its ability to mid-wife and consolidate democracy in Nigeria. Accordingly, the ability of civil society to help deepen democratic governance and put it beyond reversal remains in serious doubt. For Ekeh (1994) this is among other reasons due to the fact that civil society in the third world is much interested in matters that the state shows little interest in, probably to maintain their autonomy or to avoid being contaminated by the ills of the public realm.

Similarly, it would seem that some of the civil society organizations are not above manipulation by some powerful elements in the private sector as recently shown in the failure of civil society to condemn and campaign against the unpopular strike action by the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) over payment of fuel subsidy to those alleged to have breached the fuel subsidy regime of the Federal Government. For civil society to have taken sides with the oil cabal that is milking the country dry is anti-people and in dissonance with the democratic role of civil society (Abari, 2013).

Furthermore, civil society has failed to update its mode of operation by evolving new political and economic culture in Africa. There is the "tendency to copy not just the constitutions of democracy from the West, but also, its norms" (Gyimah-Baadi, 1998). Such practices, have failed to bring about political and economic stability to Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. Contemporary activities of civil society are bound to face similar fate unless concrete efforts are made to change its modus operandi.

Civil society in Nigeria tends to be reactive rather than proactive in engaging the state on matters affecting the people and the polity. More often than not, civil society has tended to rely on government for information and direction, thereby giving the government the head-start on sensitive issues. This may be pinned down to the weak structural and organizational bases of most civil society organizations. All these go a long way to affect their ability to gauge public opinion and react to them in ways that would favour the democratic course.

In a political system dominated by brokerage politics, civil society is very much vulnerable to state repression and co-option due to, in some cases, its dependence on government for funds and other logistic supports. The lack of financial autonomy of civil society compromises their independent approach to issues and ability to carry out long term plans and programmes (Abubakar, 1997). This perhaps explains why they could not insist on a new socio-economic and political order in Nigeria prior to the return to civil rule. Also, with growing poverty in the land, members and the leadership of civil society are likely to capitulate in the face of the present economic realities that has pauperized majority of the political and economic elites. The poverty question therefore, is crucial to roles civil society can play in democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Organizationally, most civil society organizations are weak. Most of their offices are located in urban centres, in make shift buildings with handpicked staff that lacks the requisite skills and experiences to run such organizations. Failure of most civil societies to link up with social formations in the rural areas as in the days of the nationalist struggle for independence in much of Africa, has deprived them of the support base they need to carry on a protracted and well organized campaign for an egalitarian and democratic society. This makes most civil societies, Africa elitist and or personalized in nature and character.

Consequently, the mobilization orientation of these organizations is limited to urban centres and elite while important social forces in rural areas are neglected. Contrary to what the comparative literature has shown, most civil societies in Africa unlike their counterparts in South America are shallow based. According to Ihonvbere (2000), this runs against popular opinion that civil society should be captured and incorporated into popular movements that can engage in political pedagogy that emphasizes the process through which social identities, particularly, among the poor in rural–urban centres can be captured and used to establish new relations between excluded citizens and the

state apparatus many civil society organizations lack the very democracy they are trying to promote or sell to the larger society. Substantially, internal democracy is almost absent in civil society as its members are treated as second class citizens by their leaders/founders. Unless this abnormality is corrected and their internal operations subjected to the rule of law and separation of powers, particularly in the areas of the use of funds and recruitment and selection of their leaders, its contributions to the democratization process could be vitiated. Can one give what he/she does not have? For civil society to contribute to reshaping and deepening the democratization of the polity and society, it should first demonstrate that it has what it wants to sell to the larger society which is democracy.

According to Igbokwe-Ibeto *et al.* (2014) civil society in promoting the country's democratic agenda has not been consistent and persistent in the face of intimidation and attack by government forces against their activities. Democracy is never won on a platter of gold; it is clear from the fore-going that civil societies in Nigeria are faced with several constraints in their efforts towards democratic consolidation.

Conclusion

The return to democracy in 1999 was received with high expectations by Nigerians. But the enthusiasm and expectations was soon short-lived by the incessant violence and electoral mal-practises which according to Kwasau (2013) have turned Nigerian political landscape into a *battle ground.* Political parties in Nigeria today lack clear cut ideologies and agenda for the masses. The right of citizens is constantly at risk, rule of law is relegated to the background, and there are several breaches of the constitutions by people who are entrusted with mandate to govern. The civil society organisations have in one way or the other intervened in policies that have direct bearing on the quality of lives of the people. There is however the need to do more given the impunity with which the business of governance is being conducted in contemporary Nigerian politics. It is therefore the submission of this paper that private-public partnership between government and civil societies will go a long way in checkmating the excesses of government and hence consolidate on the gains of democracy. This can be achieved if government agencies allow civil society access to information and resources they will be needing from time to time reduce political instability.

Way Forward

Government on different occasions in the past have accused civil society of being biased and used by opposition elements in the public sphere to uncritically mobilize the people against it. Abari (2013) seems to agree with this when he argued that most civil societies lack funds to carry out their activities and hence become vulnerable to be used by government. To make them play their role as a watch dog to government, the CSOs need to devise other ways of funding their programmes so that they can be financially

independent and hence play a significant role in consolidating democracy in Nigeria.

Similarly, activists working with CSOs need to be trained and exposed. This will increase their confidence and of course chances of winning concession with government. This training can be done through locally and internationally organised workshops and conference on the current trends and practices of lobbying, confrontations and other methods used to influence government.

Furthermore, for civil society to reasonably contribute to democratic consolidation in Nigeria, the masses need to be carried along. An active and well mobilised citizenry will help the CSOs in drumming for support when needed. This scenario was witnessed during the *occupy Nigeria protest* in 2011 oil subsidy protest across cities in Nigeria. The uprising in the Maghreb region has also been successful due to the mass mobilisation (Igbokwe-Ibeto *et al.* 2014).

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