

Political Democracy and the Imperative of an Indigenous Political System in Nigeria

Dr. Ekiyor Welson

School of General Studies, Nigeria Maritime University Okerenkoko, Delta State

Email: ekiyorwelson@yahoo.com

Abstract: *All that is expedient in assessing the growth of Democracy in Africa is a cursory study of Nigeria and its citizens. The basic sentiment which has the chances of being factual is the data that show that from all indices of Economics, Politics and Society, the current political system, largely borrowed from the United States have not delivered the expected results of Social Justice. From the inception of the current fourth Republic in 1999, the state of citizens' welfare and security have not improved. Poverty is still very high among the poor, insecurity is still ravaging the country, ethnic and tribal communal clashes are still rampant and the big elephant in the room, corruption has assumed a life of its own, becoming a major institution in the body politics of the country. In fact, Corruption has become the political culture of politicians and their friends and allies. This paper seeks to explore the conclusion that the situation in the country is caused by the application of a foreign political system that does not carry in its body the culture and social peculiarities of the Nigerian people. Further, we examine the concept of Political Democracy and how an indigenous brand of Democracy that is home grown and can serve the people well to achieve the goal of democracy which is Social Justice remain the silver bullet Nigeria needs.*

Introduction

After many years of military rule, 1999 ushered in a period of bathed hope and optimistic disposition to government and government. And exactly like the 2nd republic in 1979 which ushered in the regime of Alhaji Shehu Shagari as president to head a presidential system of democracy, Obasanjo was saddled with the responsibility of powering Nigeria with the same political system copied from the American presidential system. When Obasanjo took over from the Military leaders, the expectation was that all forms of executive arrogance would end and the problem of autocracy and impunity associated with military administrations would come to an end. It is quite shocking though the average Nigeria believes that there is a significant difference from the Khaki and the Agbada. Those who understand the dynamics of government know there is none.

So, erroneously, expectations in 1999 were very high and the elites in conjunction with their collaborators in the Civil society community were hoping to have an Eldorado. However, after 25 years of Presidential system democracy, only the political elites can celebrate, while the rest of the country continues to lament. Today, the complaints against military administrations have not changed, ranging from poor management of the country's resources to reckless spending and profligacy by the political class. Executive arrogance and impunity to legislative rascality and the treachery of the judiciary. The analysis is that democracy has been redefined, readjusted and redirected to the utmost benefit of the political class and their cronies and friends.

Opinions of major commentators (Utomi & Bolarinwa 2022) is that the structures and political compositions of political parties are not democratic enough to sustain the steam of democracy as most of them have lost focus and have failed to adhere to the rules and guidelines of their parties and are engaged in self-serving measures that satisfy only a few of their members. They both fault electoral processes and fraudulent elections in the country since 1999. Their argument is that faulty electoral processes by political parties and fraudulent elections are the toxins killing the growth of democracy in

the country and are drastically destroying the quality of leadership and governance. These two men are more concerned with the agency than the structure. In the real sense, however, it takes the structure and agency to achieve democratic gains.

Governance and the legacy of Leaders

Good governance in any society forms the philosophical groundwork upon which democracy and social justice are built and made productive. Social justice is the ultimate goal of any political system to which a good and successful government must aspire for. Justice and equality are twin objectives for the operators of any political administration and they ensure the fair and equitable distribution of power, resources and obligations of the citizens in the society and these obligations and responsibilities ought to be given to all regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, ability, status, sexual orientation and religion. Where this is not so, the shadow of injustice would show up and lead to the birth of many social upheavals in the society. Nigeria, today shows these tendencies and both the people and their governments are overwhelmed.

Historically, Nigeria's most worrisome challenge in its adoption of democracy has become the inability of its political system to adhere to its inherent particulars and characteristics in its administration of public affairs and even though democracy is meant to encourage social justice in Nigeria, it has become the vehicle to perpetrate unmitigated acts of political rascality and power mongering that has inadvertently resulted to widespread social injustice and inequality in Nigeria. The same institution that the people were told would make a difference and a marked departure from the period of military rule has become the vehicle used to continue the stealing and misappropriation of the coffers of the people.

The failure of the 4th republic democracy got so bad that Enahoro (2006) strongly argued that there is no democracy in Nigeria. This is in contrast to what he has read and experience as democracy in other climes. He notes that what Nigeria has are different administrations that are not responsible to anybody but themselves. In the same vein Madunagu (2010) argued that the entire political system in Nigeria is nothing but a fraud against the people, stating that it was even more disheartening that leaders emerged from fraudulent political processes. What these commentators believe in strongly, is that though Nigeria is a democracy, it is not practicing democracy and this presents a very serious logical contradiction. Can a thing be and not be at the same time? The answer is the mystery in Nigeria's political system currently running.

Democracy and its meaning in a society

It is trite to state that democracy is one of the most widely recognized and practiced systems of government in the world today and it is based on the idea that power should rest and emanate from the people and this people should be involved in the decision making through a free and fair election and total participation in all democratic processes. Democracy is a system of government in which power is held by the people, either directly or through the elected representatives. This means that citizens have the right to vote, to express their opinion and engage in political activities without fear of reprisal. Democracy is built on the principle of individual freedom, equality and protection of human rights. In a democratic state, the government is accountable to the people and the people have the right to hold the leaders accountable for their actions. How much of these ideals can we glimpse in the Nigerian experience?

Democracy can be in different forms and vary from one place to another, but it remains an essential component of modern day governance and it is regarded by many as the cornerstone of a free and just society. The rule of law is a fundamental code of democracy and the government is required to uphold the laws and regulations that govern the society. Democracy is designed to protect the basic human rights of its citizens including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and right to fair trial. Democracy is a popular form of government in the world today, with many countries adopting it as their preferred

system of governance. Some countries have a presidential while others parliamentary system, while some priorities federal or unitary approach. However, all of them have an element which is common among them protection of individual rights and freedom, rule of law and participation of the citizens in decision making process.

The Practical Reality of Democracy in Nigeria

Diamond (1988, x) argues that ‘...democracy is the only model of government with any broad ideological legitimacy and appeal in the world’. For this reason, the institution represents a very critical one in the social structure of Nigeria, because the idea of justice cannot make any impact in any society without the existence of democratic structures (Maathai 2010; Rawls 1993), and from the perspective of political institutions, the structure of the Nigerian society shows that in theory there is a democratic government in place but in reality it is not as the necessary ingredients of democracy such as the rule of law, basic liberties and rights and free and fair elections are lacking. The implication of this is that development which is expected to thrive in a democratic environment in the long run, is stunted because of the reality of lack of true democracy.

Maathai (2010, 55-56) strongly argues that ‘too often the term “democracy” has simply become bromide offered during voting rather than a means of enhancing the capacities of governmental and non-governmental institutions, providing basic services to the people and empowering them to be active partners in development’. In this vein Rudebeck and Olukoshi (1990) contend that for politics to be constitutional, it must be democratic and be firm on popular sovereignty and social citizenship. After a long spell of military beginning in 1966 with a brief civil rule in 1979-1983, the country returned to civil rule again in 1999 and has remained so till now.

Political transition does not however translate to transition to democracy (Burnell 2008). Can there be democracy without addressing the doctrine of basic individual liberties in society? The diversity of doctrines and pluralities in Nigeria is not just historical reality that will not pass away but is also at the root of the political structure of the country; and people look up to democratic institutions to help the overall structure to ensure national cohesion. Diamond (1988) gives this idea some depth when he asserted that even if authoritarian regimes show some commitment to human rights and collective goals, it does not make them democratic, ‘nor are all democracies, especially unstable democracies good for the people. But certainly, non-democracies are not likely to achieve those social and moral goals that require democratic institutions and freedom’ (Diamond, 1988, xxv)

Wright (2008) argues that the political class in Nigeria, which he judged to have failed the people, carries out political activities without democratic fundamentals and necessary elements. True democracy in society will only be realised when the political class and the government involve the people in the political process (Roemer 1999, Dahl 1956). But in a wider context the understanding of the concept of democracy itself would reveal the extent to which the social-political structure of the Nigerian society needs to transform to achieve stability. It is open knowledge that the 2007 elections conducted in Nigeria were reported by almost all observers including the EU and the TMG as grossly fraudulent yet it has produced the current set of political elites and leaders thereby denying the people a basic right.

The structure in place negates Williams’ (2000) belief in transparent and proper elections because they allow the people to make choices as to who will represent their views, interests, in the legislatures and other public arenas. It is this kind of criterion that attracts attention to why democracy since its emergence in Nigeria in 1922 has not delivered its dividends to the country. Even though Williams sees the institution as a process, it remains a means and not an end. Politicians in Nigeria, however, practice it as an end believing that once a man is elected into a public office, he has achieved prosperity rather than being elected to work for the interest of his people. For this reason, many scholars such as Diamond

(1988) and Maathai (2010) argue that democracy has failed and has fallen short in Nigeria and Africa because the purpose of democracy which is social development is not pursued by politicians.

It is our belief, however, that the country and continent retain potentials for democracy if structural roots of previous failures are identified and altered. The institution of democracy is a structural design aimed at giving people the power to institute governments of their choice. Maier (2000) and Diamond (1988) on the contrary argue that the institution of democracy in Nigeria has been corrupted by the agency of the ruling class occupied with the desire to keep itself in power and control the resources of the country at all cost and this has grossly negated the essence of democracy and leads to the conclusion that democracy is yet to be instituted in the country because if it is the situation would have been different. This institution is thus one of the institutions through which social injustice in Nigeria is perpetrated.

It is for this reason that the democratic institution is classified as one of the institutions in the structure through which the phenomenon of injustice is sustained. Scholars such as Soyinka (1996, 2010) and Achebe (1984, 2009) strongly contend that once the people are able to elect leaders of their choice whom they may have judged to be competent into public office, the incidence of corruption and social injustice would be minimised. This idea is based on the assumption that political leaders control the levers of the structure of society and steer them in their selfish interest and favour while elections are rigged, citizens are shut out of the process, people are selected rather than elected, and the idea of liberty and equality are absent.

The question, as Roemer (1999) asks, is thus very pertinent: does democracy engender justice? I believe it does if it is practiced in spirit and letter and it would promote injustice if corrupted and confirmation of this are societies that profess to be democratic just because they hold elections regularly but deny even basic rights. Countries such as Nigeria and Zimbabwe,⁹ to name but two in Africa, seem to be democratic in this sense but are riddled with widespread acts of injustice so serious that the people are denied their basic right of choosing their leaders in a free and fair election. Elections in these countries, as studies have shown, are pre-determined. Elections in these two countries have been criticized for falling short of the standard expected. Apart from people being disenfranchised, the results were fixed (EU 2007, 2008).

Roemer, however, believes justice as elaborated by people like Barry (1995), Rawls (1971, & 1993) and Cohen (1996) is capable of being promoted by democracy on the condition that certain conditions are put in place. He supports those that advocate the existence of a larger set of criteria as necessary for democracy and these must be: "...institutional criteria that are designed to permit and encourage equal political participation, or equal opportunities for political participation among the citizens. These criteria should be stated in institutional terms. For example, it would be admissible to say that democracy requires a system of one man one vote, where electoral districts satisfy demographic characteristics" (Roemer, 1999, 58).

Ake (1996) in many of his studies argued that the role of democracy in the attainment of social justice in Nigeria within the social-political structure of the society is that of creating the enabling environment for the ventilation of opinions and the possibility of reforms in society and an undemocratic environment precludes the possibility of such. Nigerian political leaders have never denied that the practice and institution of democracy is not producing fruits in the country yet as expected they attribute this to the fact that the concept is new and its existence is relatively young. Some even talk of adapting the concept to the Nigerian environment by accepting all anti-democratic and undemocratic acts as the country's style (Yar'adua 2007). Williams (2000) argues against such a view when he noted that democracy should be discussed within the multiplicity of meanings, ramifications and implications in African contexts without rationalizing and justifying tyranny in the guise of tropical or African democracy.

For Gallie (1956), Tilly, (2003), and Dahl (1956) the central point of democracy is the power of citizens to choose their government through competitive elections and the equality of opportunity for all citizens to have access to political office. It is also the ability of citizens to take full part in the political process of the society. Two ingredients that can be discerned from this are the concepts of liberty and equality. A society that affords citizens the opportunity to fully participate in the choice of their leaders can be said to be leaning towards democracy clearly; in the same vein a society that offers equal opportunities to its citizens to access political offices carries the image of democracy.

Going by these criteria then, Nigeria cannot be classified as democratic. This is based on the outcome of political and democratic institutions which are not in line with the principles of the concept. Democracy requires that crucial public decisions concerning some aspects of society such as law and policy depend on public opinion expressed by citizens of the society within the context of equal rights. The most important element in democracy is thus the focus on the citizens of society and the emergence of public decisions through public deliberation, while those decisions must necessarily be to the benefit of the people.

Dahl (1956) advocates 'polyarchy' and this, he claims, ought to be the vintage standard of democracy suitable for the real world and is a kind of minimum level of democracy that can be expected or demanded of societies and States that lay claim to democracy. The standards or criteria advocated in polyarchy are among other things, proper and healthy competition among the players at regular intervals with the exclusion of force; an inclusive level of political participation through regular and fair elections; freedom of expression; freedom of the press; and freedom to form and join organizations. Sadly, the consensus among observers of Nigeria's democracy is that these are yet to be entrenched in Nigeria's democratic experiences.

Resources Control and Power Sharing: Resources control and allocation in Nigeria is replete with tensions over political and economic marginalization of some ethnic Nationalities. Democracy in Nigeria which supposed to affect the equal distribution of social justice equality is highly unconvincing and in terms of tangible outcome has failed to meet the social economic expectations of the people. Genuine or True democracy is impossible in Nigeria because the citizens are grossly unequal in wealth and the poor who are invariably the majority are dependent on the wealthy minority, the democracy Nigeria is practicing is " plutocracy " because in Nigeria wealth is power and where political power is inevitably in the hands of the wealthy. Therefore, Nigeria has ceased True democracy rather the system in practice in Nigeria is plutocracy. Because of this democracy in Nigeria, there is bitter struggle between the people for resources control and power tussle which was created political tension among Nigerians and leading to inequality and encouraging social injustice, because those denied what is due them in terms of unequal distribution of resources are therefore disadvantaged in terms of social justice. Democracy is then encouraging social injustice and promoting inequality in Nigeria due to the mode to which it's practiced in Nigeria.

Ethnic Rivalry and Bias

Ethnic bias and Ethnicism are another product of Nigeria's democratic system. The idea of rotating power to among certain ethnic lines at all levels is against the spirit of democracy but is rampant in Nigeria. Nigeria's leadership system in the shadow of democracy has become a recycling business of a certain group who have formed themselves into cabals and cartels. Hence the bureaucratic melodrama arising from benching a certain region or ethnic group is now a trending gimmick of Nigeria democratic system. This results in ethnic distrust, humongous imbalance and hegemonic power control. Another tapestry of democracy of Nigeria is ethnized transfer of resources from one region for the development of another and the underdevelopment of the other regions as a result of the problem of democracy.

The practice of Utilitarianism urges that the best government should affect the distribution of greatest good to the highest number of people. Here, Democracy is supposed to positively affect all citizens equally to the highest number of Nigerians and not a certain region which is producing political rivalry and regional hatred on the course of resource control and distribution of social justice. The struggle for regional advantage in distribution of wealth has led to ethnic rivalry and unequal distribution of resources in Nigeria. This unequal distribution and promotion of economic marginalization of one region over another has led the country to plutocracy, also social distrust, humongous imbalance and ethnized social distribution, social injustice and promote inequality in Nigeria.

Democracy, which was supposed to protect the right of Nigerians, freedom of expression, equal access of wealth and social justice and be open to public scrutiny has become a shadow of itself and has turned to totalitarian in nature whereby leaders have complete power and control of wealth and everything leading to underdevelopment of Nigerians and encouraging social injustice, infringements of rights of Nigerians. Nigeria's democracy is yet to embrace true federalism as democracy is truly presented. Ethnic bias in appointment and provision of basic amenities indicate that democracy in Nigeria is not focused on the prosperity of the people and the state but rather a fragmented approach to satisfying self and relevant stakeholders.

For Itodo (2024) democracy in Nigeria shows great signs of progress and lists challenges of democracy. What he failed to realise is the list is actually the way of democracy in Nigeria. For those who are very conversant with politics in Nigeria, one of the things constantly experienced remain incidences of election manipulation, where the highest bidder is backed by electoral officers to manipulate the election in their favour. Following this is the reality of election violence. It is not a problem in Nigeria but actually the reality of what democracy means in Nigeria. It clearly means that without election violence, there can be no democracy in Nigeria, Reason the Military all security organisations are engaged during elections. Voter intimidation is closely tied to the practice of election violence. In Nigeria, voters are forced through intimidation to vote for certain candidates and parties.

Also on Itodo's (2024) list re corruption and lack of accountability. Democracy in Nigeria is highlighted by lack of accountability and corruption as the political office holders have formed a link with all the institutions that are saddled with the responsibility of holding the politicians to account. This is condition of "chop-I-chop". Being corrupt in Nigeria's politics is now a matter of political culture and trend and not a challenge to democracy. There is also a high level of social-economic inequality and deprivation in the exposition of democracy. We have a situation where problems that should be addressed by democratic practice are now becoming part and parcel of the democratic experience in Nigeria and this situation seriously hinder the full realisation of the democratic rights of many Nigerians.

We can actually write volumes of literature on the warped nature of democracy in Nigeria and still be scratching the surface of the issue. The fact remains that undemocratic politicians have successfully high jacked all democratic institutions in Nigeria and turned them into tools to perpetrate their sleaze and misrule. They have also captured the power of the people to choose their leaders and made the people to practically dance to their tune. In doing this analysis and within the intentions of this paper, we are able to come to the conclusion that the American style presidential system of democracy, adopted by Nigerian military in 1999 is responsible for the situation the people find themselves. While the system favours the politicians it strips the people all power to benefit from it and achieve their life goals through the government. Until there is an appropriate brand of democracy that is not only home grown but puts into consideration, the culture and traditions of the people in addition to their religious heritage where there is a link between leaders and their ancestors.

The Imperative of Political Democracy indigenous to the People.

Ibrahim (2023) has become a leading voice in the advocacy for an indigenous democracy, means simply means the complete rejection of the Western style democracy and the creation of one that suits the peculiarities of the African people. He has quite support in literature from the examples of Rawls (1993) when he released his work on Political Liberalism, which focuses on the idea of tinkering with liberalism and making it less pure in order to accommodate a peculiar situation of intervention of the state to take some kind of affirmative action for the good of society. Saward (2003) argued strongly that democracy cannot be defined and can mean many things to my people. His argument is that giving democracy a single definition can limit it and curtain its scope. Gallie (1956) equally talked about essentially contested concepts n democracy, like Justice falls into this categorization.

Based on the foregoing, Ibrahim has a very strong argument in calling for an indigenous democracy in Africa. After all, African history is replete with examples of sophisticated governance systems that predate colonial rule. Kingdoms such as the Mali Empire (c. 1226 to 1670 AD), the Ashanti Empire (1701-1901 AD), and the Great Zimbabwe civilization (11th century- 15th Century AD) thrived through systems of governance that combined political authority with cultural and economic institutions. They stand as remarkable examples of African societies that experimented with diverse forms of democratic governance, challenging conventional narratives of autocratic rule in pre-colonial Africa. The Mali Empire, renowned for its wealth and power under leaders like Mansa Musa, employed a system where power was decentralized among local rulers and their tribes, fostering a sense of participation and representation among its citizens. Similarly, the Ashanti Empire, with its complex political structure and emphasis on consensus-building through councils of elders and popular assemblies, exemplified a form of participatory democracy that allowed for the expression of various viewpoints within society.

Ibrahim (2023) argues that in the discourse of global governance, Western democracy often stands as the epitome of political organization and representation. Yet, across the African continent, there exists a critical perspective on Western democratic models. Many Africans, he opined, informed by their rich tapestry of tradition, history, and social structures, believe in the necessity of re-evaluating Western democratic paradigms and advocating for forms of governance that are more rooted in African realities. This critical view Ibrahim argues, stems from a deep-seated belief that Africa should develop its own forms of democracy, inspired by indigenous practices, religions, traditions, and communal values.

At the heart of the African critique of Western democracy, Ibrahim (2023) continues, lies the recognition of the dissonance between imported political systems and the diverse socio-political landscapes of African nations. Western democracy, often characterized by ultra-individualism, elitist power structures, and a focus on “progressivist” values, may not fully resonate with the communal ethos prevalent in many African societies. In contrast, traditional African governance systems, such as those found in various kingdoms, chiefdoms, and tribal structures, prioritize consensus-building, communal decision-making, and the integration of spiritual beliefs into governance.

Ibrahim (2023) further argues that one of the primary reasons many Africans hold on to traditional ways of governance is the historical context of colonialism and its enduring impacts and the imposition of Western political systems during the colonial era disrupted pre-existing structures of governance and often marginalized indigenous institutions. This historical legacy, he notes has left a profound imprint on African societies, fostering skepticism toward Western models and a yearning to reclaim and revitalize indigenous governance practices.

For many other Thinkers like Ibrahim, African traditional systems are often viewed as more inclusive and participatory, encompassing a broader spectrum of voices within the community. Decision-making processes in traditional settings typically involve consultation with elders, community leaders, and spiritual authorities, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered and a consensus is reached. This

contrasts with the hierarchical nature of many Western democratic systems, which can further marginalize disenfranchised groups and perpetuate power imbalances. African religions and spiritual beliefs also play a significant role in shaping the concept of governance and policy-making on the continent. Indigenous belief systems often emphasize interconnectedness, reverence for nature, and collective responsibility.

Many Africans argue that incorporating these values into governance structures can lead to more sustainable and holistic approaches to development, as opposed to the often utilitarian and anthropocentric outlook of Western political frameworks. African leaders of national liberation, from Patrice Lumumba to Gamal Abdel Nasser and Muammar Gaddafi, always attacked the economic inequality and liberal/neoliberal policies in the West which prioritize market-driven growth and privatization. In many African countries, these policies have exacerbated economic hardships, widened the gap between rich and poor, and perpetuated dependence on foreign aid and investment. This economic disparity undermines the democratic ideal of equal opportunity and social justice.

Ibrahim (2023) propounded that: *“There is also the issue of Western values’ incompatibility with African cultural diversity. Western democratic norms and practices may not always resonate with the cultural diversity present in African societies. For example, issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, gender-centered divisions and secularist policies of state building may clash with traditional and national beliefs and norms in certain communities. This cultural incompatibility can lead to tensions between progressive democratic principles and local customs, potentially undermining social cohesion and stability”*.

Critically looking at the continent of Africa, it is obvious that before the advent of colonialism and importation or rather imposition of Western culture, African history is replete with examples of sophisticated governance systems that predate colonial rule. Kingdoms such as the Mali Empire (c. 1226 to 1670 AD), the Ashanti Empire (1701-1901 AD), and the Great Zimbabwe civilization (11th century-15th Century AD) thrived through systems of governance that combined political authority with cultural and economic institutions. They stand as remarkable examples of African societies that experimented with diverse forms of democratic governance, challenging conventional narratives of autocratic rule in pre-colonial Africa. The Mali Empire, renowned for its wealth and power under leaders like Mansa Musa, employed a system where power was decentralized among local rulers and their tribes, fostering a sense of participation and representation among its citizens (Ibrahim 2023).

Similarly, the Ashanti Empire, with its complex political structure and emphasis on consensus-building through councils of elders and popular assemblies, exemplified a form of participatory democracy that allowed for the expression of various viewpoints within society. Today, however the situation is different as the imported western political systems have only created African leaders who live above the accountability of the people. These leaders in most cases are motivated and supported by western leaders and are encouraged to move their country’s resources abroad to develop western countries and boost their economies. These African leaders are in turn protected against their people. It is for this reason that the African continent has not benefitted from Western democracy after decades of practicing them and remain poor and underdeveloped.

Evaluating Benevolent Dictatorship as an Alternative Path to Nigeria’s Justice

Based on the consensus among commentators that the current western style democracy has not brought the much expected Justice and development, Political Philosophers in Nigeria must take the bull by horn and advocate for an alternative system that is consistent with the culture and traditions of Nigerians. Nigerian tribes, ethnic groups and communities have all experienced political organizations from antiquity and the systems delivered the expected ends to the people and their leaders. From different empires to emirates and different kingdoms, Nigerians organized themselves creditably well and built their cities and communities with equality and justice. At a higher plane, leadership was mystical and

depended on the directions of ancestors and mystical forces that controlled the conduct of leaders. In these eras, well before the era of colonialism and modernism, corruption was nonexistent and leaders never oppressed their people and they never stole their resources.

So, the discussion on an alternative to the current system must become loud and sound. In this direction, the idea of benevolent dictatorship is being explored. Even though it is being discussed now, it is not a new idea and neither is it a new practice. To understand this concept, all we need to do is to cast our mind back to the period in Africa when the continent was blessed with political leaders who were not democratically elected but ruled in the interest of the people by the rule of force. In Nigeria, we remember the Murtalas and the Buharis who though, were not elected, got into government through military coups and ruled in the interest of the people and for the good of the people. In Burkina Faso, there was Sankara who was very revolutionary in nature and was almost worshiped because of his benevolent style of government. Gadaffi is another example in Libya.

These leaders were dictators but ruled with the mind of the general good of their people. Their style was indigenous and anti-western and benefitted their people. At the global level, we can mention Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, Xi Jin Pi of China and Putin of Russia. It does not matter whether these leaders are loved or not but the focus of this paper is the examination of their style as an alternative to the western democracy that Washington imposes on the world. When Lee Kuan Yew took over the reins of leadership in Singapore, the country was 3rd world and after decades of his leadership, Singapore became 1st world. China today is the 2nd largest economy in the world and Russia is 4th. Our argument is that these countries abandoned the Western style democracy and applied home grown political systems that produced results and what they chose is ***“Benevolent Dictatorship”***

The Concept of Benevolent Dictatorship

A Benevolent Dictatorship is a system of government run by an authoritarian administration which seeks to work in the interests of the nation, and the well-being of its people. Here, the focus is on the people and not politicians and their friends and families as we have in Nigeria today. These benevolent dictators may allow some form of representation among their populace, either to serve as an advisory body to the dictator's office, or to allow the dictator to delegate part of their authority to the masses for a period of time. A major instance of a benevolent dictatorship was the highly revered Lee Kuan Yew's leadership of Singapore, whose three decades in office saw the economic and societal growth of Singapore into a very wealthy and stable economic power, at the expense of certain civil liberties being curtailed such as the right to protest.

Benevolent Dictatorships are commonly praised for their transparent efficiency and resistance to alleged 'harmful' influences on a society that the dictator may otherwise snuff out, but in practice these governments will more often than not end up degenerating into the more tyrannical and oppressive interpretation of dictatorship if care is not taken. As such, many dictators in history and in the present who refer to themselves as 'benevolent' are often found to be guilty of conducting policies which are widely viewed as tyrannical or oppressive to the general populace of their nation by the West. In most cases, the problem is not that their regimes are ineffective, it is actually that civil liberties are curtailed. The question is, which is more important? Rights or the Good of the people? Opinions are different on this.

The concept of benevolent dictatorship must ignite global debate throughout countries and political schools, and it recently emerged as a topic in a discussion on the UK politics thread after polling in the UK suggested that a new generation of young people is inclined to believe it is a good idea. A benevolent dictator is typically defined as an individual or small number of individuals who wields near-absolute power but uses it for the greater good - prioritizing the welfare of the people or nation over personal gain. This discussion invites us to explore whether benevolent dictatorship can ever be a justifiable form

of governance and if it can apply to an environment that suits it. History is replete with examples of countries that are practicing it with massive success. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar to mention a few. These countries are full of massive development but lack democracies. They simply found alternatives to the Western political system.

Gyesaw (2023) argues that the Platonic doctrine of the Philosopher-King, coheres well with the idea of benevolent dictatorship: “In this context, a Philosopher-King is an enlightened and wise ruler who governs with the well-being of the state and its citizens as the primary goal. Philosopher-King rule is based on wisdom, knowledge and a deep understanding of Justice and it is in the case of leaders like Yew and Kagame, that the comparison to Philosopher-King can be drawn, because they are often viewed as having a deep understanding of their people’s needs and working to achieve long term prosperity”. The idea is that there are some basic assumptions in the concept of benevolent dictatorship and some of that are the dictator is wise and has a deep knowledge of what justice is and must had the requisite education and training. There is an *a priori* understanding that the dictator cannot misbehave,

Gysaw (2023), highlighting the plausibility of Benevolent dictatorship argues that such leaders are disposed to crafting and implementing long term development strategies and policies that go far beyond electoral cycles, to ensure sustained investment in critical sectors such as education, health care and critical infrastructure vital for the lasting development of their countries and people. He postulates that a dictator prioritizes competence and merit over political patronage and the idea is to achieve a more efficient governance and effective economic management. This, he notes eliminates perennial problems in democracies such as corruption and mismanagement that plague the current useless Western style democracies that support and promotes vested interest and party patronage.

Conclusion

Based on the many decades of political failure and reign of corruption, incompetence and vested interest by the political class and elites in Nigeria, we believe strongly in the rule of meritocracy, knowledge, wisdom and justice as opposed to the current meaningless western style democracy that is yet to deliver justice after 25 years and has only offered more misery and poverty to the people. Nigerians must join the debate for a better political system and must not be opposed to a non-corrupt or at least mostly uncorrupt dictatorship based on a system of merit. Benevolent Dictatorship ought to be seen as a public service to the people, as it was in Ancient Rome and ancient Nigeria. Most of the problems with democracy in Nigeria is that it relies heavily on corruption and vested interest to maintain power, this is why it must be disapproved and rejected completely. Nigerians must support meritocracy because it is (at least ideally) a fair and balanced system. What ultimately matters are effective government and social justice; therefore, putting the best qualified people in positions of power must be the best way to go.

Benevolent dictators all over the world and in history, despite their authoritarian nature and style have presided over transformative economic booms and developments that have moved their people out of poverty and underdevelopment in short periods. Like we highlighted earlier, in the last 25 years, under the dictatorship in China, close to a billion people have been taken out of poverty and pushed into economic prosperity. Nobody knew Rwanda beyond being a tiny country in East Africa before the coming of Paul Kagame but after decades of dictatorship, Rwanda is now a very credible destination for Tourism and investment. Dubai, a city in the Middle East was not known 40 years ago but decades of benevolent dictatorship has made it one of the best cities in the world.

In the words of Gysaw (2023): “the debate surrounding the viability of benevolent dictatorship as an alternative path to development for African nations is multifaceted and while this model offers advantages regarding effective governance, long term development planning and adaptability to local realities, it is not without offs”. Overall, careful and thorough deliberations must be applied in looking at the merit of this system. It is a political system and must be recognized as such and explored fully.

The argument of the suspension and suppression of civil liberties is neither here nor there as what matters most to citizens is their ability to achieve their life goals and their personal ambitions and that is the primary responsibility of any government.

References

1. Achebe, Chinua. 1983. The trouble with Nigeria. Oxford: Heinemann Educational publishers.
2. Ake, Claude. 1996. Democracy and development in Africa. Washington: The Brookings Institution
3. Dahl, Robert. 2000. On democracy. New Haven, CT: Yale University press
4. Diamond, Larry., 1988. Colonial Legacy & Post-colonial Experience in Nigeria. In Diamond, Larry; Linz, J; and Lipset, S. (Ed), Democracy in developing Countries. London: Lynne Reiner Publishers Inc.
5. Enahoro, Anthony. 2006. Let's forget elections in 2007. Lagos: Punch Newspaper of 30th December, 2006
6. Gallie, W. 1956. Essentially contested concepts, proceedings of the Aristotelian society 56, pp 167-198
7. Ibrahim, Moussa. 2024. Indigenous democracy: Why Africa should reject the Western way. Rt.com. Accessed on 16/2/2025
8. Itodo, Sampson. 2025. Nigeria's 25 years of a democracy. Time to negotiate new social impact. Yiaga.org. Accessed on 7/2/2025
9. Gyesaw, Stephen. 2023. Evaluating Benevolent Dictatorship as an Alternative Path to Development for African Nations. Modernghana.com. Accessed on 16/2/2025
10. Madunagu, Edwin. 2010. Political Power and Yar'Adua's Illness. Lagos: The Guardian Newspaper of 28th January
11. Maathai, Wangari. 2010. The challenge for Africa. London: Arrow books
12. Rawls, John. 1993. Political Liberalism. NY: Columbia University press. .
13. Roemer, John. Does democracy engender justice? In Shapiro I & Hacker- Cordon. Ed., Democracy's Value. Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1999, pp 56 – 68.
14. Saward, Michael. 2003. Democracy. Cambridge: Polity press.
15. Soyinka, Wole. 1996. The open sore of a continent. A personal narrative of the Nigerian crises. Oxford: Oxford University press
16. Tilly, Charles. 2003. Democracy. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
17. Utomi, Pat & Bolarinwa. 2022. Why Nigeria's democracy is faulty. Business day of 28th of April 2022
18. Williams, Gavin., 2000. Democracy as idea and democracy as process in Africa. www. Jstor.org/stable
19. Wright, S., 2008. Nigeria: Building political stability with democracy. Ed. Burnell, P & Randall, V. Politics in the developing world. Oxford: Oxford University press. pp 463-472