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A Critique of Civil Society: The African Experience

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The recent emphasis on civil society in Africa is a result of the many years of autocratic and dictatorial rule which have resulted in the oppression and neglect of the people's participation in politics. Therefore, the presence of viral civil society is a pre-condition and a necessity in the whole democratization process. These groups have been major actors in the fight against abuse of human rights, corruption, and misrule. They are veritable instruments for the development and promotion of dialogue among communities for collective action. They also provide platforms to articulate demands and voice concerns at local, national, regional, and international levels. Consequently, no progress in governance will be made without a viral civil society because civil society continues to be engines of democracy. They play myriads of roles in the enthronement of genuine democratic principles and structures which can bring about stable political governance in the scheme of things. Therefore, with particular reference to the Nigerian experience, this paper examines the status of civil society in Africa today and its prospects for the future.

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INTRODUCTION

Democratic systems of government today have raised many controversies as democracy seems to have lost its essence and value in many countries of the world today. The reason for this problem is not farfetched. Hadenius and Ugglå (1996) have argued that the absence of a strong and viable civil society in many third world countries is part of the reasons for democratic failures in Africa. Consequently, we can say that our democratic experimentation in Africa has constantly failed because of the lack of a vibrant civil society. Similarly, Matthew Hassan Kukah (2003, p. 280) maintains that “the lack of civil society has made democracy vulnerable in the hands of a manipulative and power-hungry military elite.” Thus, it suffices to note that the failures of democratic governments in Africa are a product of the weakness of civil society because civil society is the organ for development, democracy, and good governance. Therefore, civil society continues to be the engine of democracy; this explains the reason why the struggle for democracy and good governance in Africa is incomplete without active civil society.

CONCEPTUALIZING DEMOCRATIZATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Democracy is a form of government just as oligarchies, plutocracy, or monarchy depending on who rules. In an oligarchy, it is the *oligos*, the few; in a plutocracy, it is the *plutos*, the rich; in a monarchy, it is the *monos*, the one, and the king. In a democracy, it is the *demos*, the people or their elected representatives (Okere, 2005). According to Prof. Julius Azelama (2002), democracy is a:

Reversal of dictatorship, it is a system wherein the internal sovereignty resides in the people. It is the people who rule, the people determine what is contained in the constitution, other parts of the law who occupies which position who ceases to occupy which position, a major policy that gets, etc. made through elections (p. 136).

Therefore, democratization is the process of the establishment of democracy. This is aimed at a

progressive removal of political power from a dictator(s) and giving it to the people. Democratization, therefore, means the process of transition to a consolidated democracy (Majekodunmi, 2012). Simply put, it is the movement from dictatorial rule to democracy. Abraham Lincoln (1935), in his Gettysburg address, said that “democracy is a government of the people by the people, for the people.”

Civil society on the other hand according to Kukah (2003, p. 217) can be seen as the

Set of diverse non-governmental institution which is strong enough to counterbalance the state and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling its own role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent it from dominating and atomizing the real society.

The origin of civil society is traceable to the works of philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. The civil society is an indispensable factor for the sustenance of democracy. For this reason, the success of a democratic government solely relies on the commitment of the civil society; a robust, virile, politically conscious, effectively mobilized, and properly motivated civil population is indispensable to the consolidation of democracy (Edet, 1997). The Evolution of Civil Society in Africa

In recent times, civil society has crept into many works of literature on the political economy in Africa.

Civil society is a hitherto missing key to sustained political reform, legitimate states and governments, viable state-society and state-economy relationships, and prevention of the kind of political decay that undermined new African governments' generations ago... The idea of civil society has been of central importance for movements of political reform... (Harbeson, 1994, p. 2).

From the above, it suffices to argue that there is a great need for African states to adopt a kind of political reform in which civil society becomes a core component of democratic transformation. Furthermore, Kukah (2003) asserts that the notion

of civil society is relatively new in Africa, although some scholars have argued that civil societies have existed in Africa before the colonial era. According to Kukah, the expression ‘civil society’ was first used in relation to Africa only recently and was brought to prominence when in a seminar essay entitled “*Civil Society in Africa*” Bayart used the concept as an analytic tool for looking at the problems of political domination in the continent (Obi, 2011).

Similarly, Michael Walzer (1991) argues that civil society has its origin in the struggle for freedom. Though often violent, the struggle held open the possibility of peace. Moreso, the concept of civil society in Africa, can be characterized into three stages, namely the pre-colonial period, colonial period, and post-colonial period. In the pre-*Colonial Era*, Kukah argues that Africa did have structures that approximated what we may refer to today as civil society. These structures were in the tribal associations that came into being during the colonial period. Their basic pre-occupation in this stage was to contribute positively to the welfare and security of members of the communities (Kukah, 2003). Orji (2009) further argues that:

Civil society in pre-colonial Africa was organized around age-grades, women, youth, and brotherhood associations. These traditional organizations provided the impetus for the emergence of new forms of voluntary associations during the colonial period (for instance, hometown associations, labour unions, and professional associations (p. 84).

Fadakinte (2015) argues in the colonial period, there was absent of civil society because it did not evolve a national entity as a modern state but forcibly brought together different peoples of disparate cultures. For this reason, individuals organized themselves and began to confront the state. This led to a great development such that some associations became openly political, offering the people a voice in their opposition to the indignities of colonial rule and demands for self-determination (Bratton, 1989).

This explains the reason why Kukah (2003) maintains that four projects were considered to be most urgent; they are the process of state-building, Africa’s economic development, modernization,

and democracy. For him, the colonial pursuit of these projects in many states led to the loss of freedoms, deprivation of profitable and productive energies of citizens. While in *post-Colonial Africa*, the emergence of civil society was a necessity soon after independence. The independence of Africans led to the creation of a one-party system that was hostile and this made the military to take over political power from the civilian politicians. After the fall of the Soviet Union, in the early 1990s, described by Fukuyama as the end of history, a wave of democratization started sweeping across some parts of the world, from eastern Europe to Africa, which brought the civil society into relevance as they were thought to be useful instruments in getting rid of the military and assisting in the democratization process (Fadakinte, 2015).

CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

The struggle for democracy outside the context of civil society is incomplete. For this reason, to make civil society meaningful, there must be democracy as a method of rule. This is because democratic theory, not only specifies that people should govern themselves, but also that the purpose of government is the good of the people (Fadakinte, 2015). Following this line of thought, it suffices to argue that “the weakness of civil society in most African countries greatly help in the flowering of authoritarianism; for in the strength of civil society lies the survival and development of democracy” (Omoruyi, 1994, p. 258). Little wonder, Kukah convincingly argues that:

The first Lesson that anyone involved in the struggle for the evolution of a vibrant civil society must learn is the fact that civil society and dictatorship cannot co-exist. This includes any form of dictatorship at all, be it military or civilian, benevolent or tyrannical. Unless we make this connection no number of the transition program, will bring us democracy, and since dictatorship destroys the civil structure, it is expected, that unless we put the structures of civil society back on track, we can only have truncated dictatorship masquerading as democracies (Kukah, 2003, p. 216).

Following this line of thought, Walzer (1991) maintains that only a democratic state can create a democratic civil society; only a democratic civil society can sustain a democratic state. Civil society remains an indispensable factor in actualizing democracy because civil society acts as a watchdog on the government; it fights dictatorship, corruption, injustice, oppression. Thus, the idea of civil society has been of central importance for movements of political reform (Herbeson, 1994). For this reason, said Adejumbi (2000) argues that among the ingredients of democracy and good governance, civil society stands out. That engendering democracy and good governance in Africa will be actualized with the strengthening of civil society and unleashing and actualizing its democratic potentials. In line with the above, Hadenius and Ugglä (1996) contends that:

An active civil society is a necessary condition for the development of a democratic system of governance... only the free practice of democracy found in the civil sphere can promote the development of the democratic popular culture that makes the rule by the people a feasible option (p. 1628).

Therefore, it suffices to argue that all civil society organizations are automatically, universally, or by definition beneficial for democracy, stability, and pluralism (Wiarda, 2018).

For this reason, Diamond et al. (1997) write: A vibrant civil society is probably more essential for consolidating and maintaining democracy than for initiating it... Where civil society is considered to be weak, underdeveloped or fragmented, or where there is severe socio-economic strain, corruption, an ineffective legal system, a tendency towards civil disruption and conflict and a lack of 'democratic culture,' democratic consolidation is thought to be threatened (p. xiii-xlvii).

Furthermore, in the project of democracy, should civil society be seen as a passive entity? What are the boundaries of its legal standing? Is civil society an alternative to society? What is the relation of civil society with the political life of the State? What is civil about civil society? In reaction to these questions, Dukor (2015, p. 254) defines "civil society as exclusively the domain of the unarmed forces of society and these include students,

teachers, labourers, bankers and the whole gamut around civil life." Diamond et al. (1994) give the very idea of civil Society when he writes:

Civil society organizations occupy the realm of organized social life that is open, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting and autonomous from the state, it involves citizens acting collectively in the public sphere to express their interest, passion, preferences, and ideas, to exchange information, to achieve collective goals, to make demands on the state, to improve the structure and functioning of the state and to hold state officials accountable (p. 4-7). The above, suggests that civil society enhance political participation in a democratic rule. Therefore, civil society is the means by which the community can force the state to respond to its end of the social contract, and since social contract forms the basis on which the state is formed. Kukah (2003) understands the social contract as the unwritten law of duty and obligation between the citizens and the state.

Accordingly, Hellner (2009, p. 123-4) Civil society provides a space in which citizens can meaningfully practice democracy on a day-to-day basis; anchor the legitimacy of political practices and institutions in vigorous public debate; and serve as a countervailing force to the power-driven logic of political society. Therefore, without an active civil society, the government may use the opportunity to contravene the constitution and manipulate the public just as we experience in many African countries.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE IN AFRICA

Civil society remains a pre-requirement for democracy and good governance. Thus, without civil society, good governance remains a daydream. With the emergence of democratization and the goal of improved governance, civil society became the central focus of analyzing the relationship between the state and society in Africa. This analysis sparked what has become an ongoing debate over the role of civil society in opposing undemocratic governments and furthering democratic consolidation in Africa (Bodewes, 2014, p. 23). Therefore, civil society aims to balance the state tend to seek ever greater amounts

of power by achieving a measure of power in its own right. Civil society, in short, functions as a tool for the citizens to curb the power of the state (Haynes, 2013). The state remains an indispensable factor in the actualizing of civil society.

Consequently, civil society exists in relation to the state. This explains the reason why there is a strong relationship between the state and civil society. The existence of a state is a major pre-condition for civil society to be meaningful. This is precisely because civil society is relevant and meaningful to the extent that there is a state whose authority and powers are to be checked in order to prevent the state from being authoritarian (Fadakinte, 2015, p. 134).

From the above, it suffices to argue that civil society can be regarded as a countervailing mechanism to state power while simultaneously engaging the state (Hope, 1999). On the other hand, some scholars have argued that civil society should be independent of the state, so that the state cannot interfere in its organization or activities. Such independence, however, does not prevent civil society from recognizing the legality of the state, and that it is no substitute for it, and may even fulfil some of its obligations (Hassan, 2009).

On the whole, the vast majority of Africans have been excluded from participation in matters related to national affairs since the patrimonial state rendered any form of associational activities as impractical and improbable. Indeed, through coercion, manipulation, and control, the components of civil society have been denied the necessary autonomy to be effective as a countervailing mechanism to state power (Hope Sr, 1999, p. 58). Kukah's (2003) political philosophy pictures the state and civil society as interrelated; this is because civil society exists in relation to the state. Unfortunately, in Africa, the weakness of the state has led to the failure of the project of democracy and civil society. Therefore, Kukah notes that a weak state is alchemy for disaster and a poor platform for erecting the structure of democracy or civil society; a weak state reflects the weakness of the constitutive elements of its society. When a weak state becomes incapacitated and loses legitimacy, other alternative power contenders come to the fore" (Kukah, 2003). These alternative power contenders are caused by the enemies of civil

society which exist within the state. These enemies of civil society include dictatorship, the false quest for virtue, false nationalism, and misguided development.

THE ORGANS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Kukah (2003) argues that without the organs of civil society, which include professional bodies, trade unions, students' bodies, medical associations, churches, we cannot talk of democracy. Reflecting on the failures of these organs of civil society, Kukah notes that the rise of military rule has led to the failure of civil society itself. Similarly, Obi Neji (2011) writes: It is the various organs of civil society along with other democratic institutions that will hold those who govern in check. The lack of a vibrant civil society with means of achieving its ends as well as choice of time and program of intervention has made democracy vulnerable in the hands of the manipulative power elite, be it a military regime or an elected civilian class (p. 110).

Bratton and Van de Walle (1997) argue that these organs of civil society play a major role in the consolidation of democracy in Africa. They noted that: Religious groups, labour and professional associations, human rights groups and the media play intermediary roles between state and citizen, provide public arenas for political participation, and promote the accountability of the political class... professional groups and unions may defend the interests of segments of the population rather than general principles of governance... At the same time, labour unions, in particular, have greater mobilizational capacities than other groups do and are most likely to be feared by governments, given their ability to orchestrate disruption. By contrast, churches and human rights organization are more likely to defend the democratic order per se and serve as the conscience of the nation... (p. 253-4).

Furthermore, Kukah (2003) asserts that these organs of civil society form the foundation on which any democratic government can stand. Diamond et al. (1997) share the same view with Kukah, noting that in this third wave of global democratization, no phenomenon has captured the imagination of democratic scholars, observers, and activists alike than 'civil society.' What would be

more moving than the stories of brave bands of students, writers, artists, teachers, labourers, challenging the duplicity, corruption and brutal domination of authoritarian states? Taking a historical look at Civil Society Organizations in the early 1980s as it pertains to Nigeria, these organs of civil society contend with the excesses of the military administration. Ibrahim (2003) contends that:

The dynamism of trade, professional and students' unions in Nigeria is one of the clearest signs of the democratic drive embedded in its civil society. For example, Nigerian students have played a very significant role since 1934 when they established the Lagos Youth Movement (LYM), the core on which the first nationalist party, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) was built. In the post-war years, the West African Students' Union (WASU) played a galvanizing role in the independence movements... Nigerian students have continued to play a significant role in the country's democratic struggles (p. 29).

Kukah argues that many nervous governments under the military rule have tried to either circumscribe or ban these associations; the endless banning of these vital organs of civil society has made it extremely difficult for these organs to play its role effectively. Kukah contends that such professional associations were suppressed by different military governments, the years of military rule managed to completely destroy civil society, these organs of civil society were in internal decay and fragmentation because the military rule systematically emasculated and truncated all these organs of civil society. For this reason, the environment became hostile to these groups; these associations were distanced from the political affairs of the nation (Kukah, 2003).

EVALUATION

It is a truism that no human thought system is totally perfect. If it were perfect, academic endeavour would have ended long ago. Philosophy, in particular, thrives on detecting the imperfection and defect in theories, views, and opinions of others. Taking these points into cognizance, Izibili (2006, p. 3) opines that: "conclusion reached in philosophy, are never absolutely conclusive." This

means that such conclusions are only tentative and not definitive. Thus, through critical and objective analysis, new thoughts and ideas are born, old ones developed, and mature (Ogunmondede, 1986). Thus, the quest for civil society in a democratic government does not claim to be exhaustive; this is because every philosophical work has its own strength and weakness.

Civil society must be appraised because civil society is a pointer to the fact that no democracy can survive without the harmonious working relationship between the government and the people. Therefore, a visible and informed civil society remains an indispensable factor in actualizing democracy; as it acts as a watchdog on government fall stop, it fights dictatorship, corruption, injustice, and oppression. For this reason, the saying that democracy and the principles of democratic sovereignty reside in the people is true. A major weakness of civil society in African is that civil society organizations are sometimes driven by selfish motives. Little wonder young argues that in reality, "not all of the identities, practices, or goods and services that flourish in civil society are necessarily good; nor do they coexist without conflict" (Ogunmondede, 1986). Civil society has been criticized because they are often internally undemocratic characterized by authoritarian or charismatic personalized leaderships; competitive; driven along with class, gender, religious, spatial, and ethnic faultiness; and steered by either the state or donors or both. Again Fatton Jr. (1995) writes;

Civil society in Africa is conflict-ridden and prone to Hobbesian wars of all against all. It is the prime repository of 'invented' ethnic hierarchies, conflict class visions, patriarchal domination and irredentist identifies fuelling deadly conflicts in many areas of the continent (p. 73).

Another major shortcoming of civil society is the lack of internal democracy in most of the Nigerian civil society organizations which makes it difficult for members of these organizations to learn democratic values/norms within their organization. Thus, they cannot adequately inculcate this principle to citizens.

CONCLUSION

Civil society in Africa is an agent for change, good governance, and political participation, especially in the democratization process in Africa. With the advent of military rule in Africa, political participation has been an illusion. For this reason, civil society is the bedrock of democracy. Therefore, no progress in governance will be made without a vibrant civil society because civil society continues to be the engine of democracy. Consequently, 'making civil society work' is a question of "socialization into democratic norms... it is a matter of changing popular norms (for mentality).

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