

# DEMOCRACY IN THE CONTEXT OF MATERIAL SHORTAGE IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC: LIMITATIONS AND THE WAY AHEAD

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## **Abstract:**

Virtually all modern independent States have as their fundamental goals the pursuit of the welfare and well-being of their citizens. To achieve these goals, the Nigerian State is required to harness its huge human and material potentials for the development of the country. This encompasses increase in employment generation, and improvement in literacy and health status as may be found in longevity and social stability. For several decades all these could not be realized due to bad governance under militarily authoritarian rule. With the inauguration of civilian rule in 1999, it was expected that democratic rule will stem the tide of economic decline and socio-political instability. Over a decade the country is still groaning under socio-economic and political miseries. With the use of political participation theory, the paper argued that the only practical way to surmount the present material shortage is to empower a person to make informed choices and contribute actively in making public decisions which affects their welfare and well-being to recreate their environment and unleash their innate potentials for self development and corporate co-existence. All these involve breaking with the tragedy of the past and increasing the likelihood of achieving the goals of a wealthier, healthier and better educated citizenry under democratic rule.

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**Key Words:** Democracy, Materialism, Nigeria, Fourth Republic, Politics

## **Introduction**

The return to civil rule in Nigeria after years of military and authoritarian rule, raised expectations for a possible resolution of the hydra-headed socio-economic crisis bedeviling the nation since flag of independence in 1960. Socio-economic development did not fair well under military/authoritarian rule in the country. The military that had no experience in governance when they first took power in 1966, gradually settled down in government, no thanks, to their prolong stay in political power. Yet, this failed to translate into consistent socio-economic and political development as the economy move from one crisis to the other. Austerity measures were introduced in the late 70s after years of mis-rule by General Gowon. As the economic condition of the country worsened, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was introduced under the kleptocratic regime of General Babangida in the late 80s and early 90s. These years were characterized by mal-administration, mis-management of resources, mal-development and mal-integration in the country.

The clamour for democracy by its founding fathers was predicated on certain universal goals and values which are capable of promoting human welfare and well-being. These core values of democracy include: freedom of speech, conscience and their correlate, liberty and fraternity. Where these values are properly activated, they lead to effective empowerment and mobilization of the people to participate in socio-economic and political decision making and development. However, this has not been the case in Nigeria. Consequently, the country has had to contend with a debilitating cycle of political decay and renewal. Yet, with the return to civilian rule in 1999, nothing seems to

have changed. The Fourth Republic political elite appear to have learnt and forgotten nothing of the despicable practices of previous Republics.

They appear to have lost the initiative in tackling the socio-economic and political malaise plaguing the nation's polity. This explains the deplorable state of different sectors of the economy. Virtually all sectors of the economy are at varying stages of decay. The expectations that the return to civil rule will stem the tide of socio-economic decline and deliver the dividends of democracy therefore, have largely been unrealized. This brings to the fore the apt question: can there be democracy in the context of material shortage in Nigeria? Can the country's economy midwife democratic consolidation? The discussion that follows attempt to address this and related issues.

To discuss issues raised, the paper is structured as follows: the First section discussed the conceptual and theoretical orientations of the paper. The second, engaged in an overview of Nigeria's political –economy, the third discussed the socio-economic performance of the country under civil rule since 1999. The fourth, analyzed challenges facing the country in its effort to deliver good governance. The fifth suggest ways forward for the nation and its people and then conclusion.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations**

Democracy is regarded as the best form of government because of opportunities it avails its adherents to govern themselves and uplift their material and physical conditions. Democracy therefore, can be seen from two levels. The first, perspective views democracy as a moral imperative. This imperative, in the words of Nzongola-Ntalaja (1997) is “a permanent aspiration of human beings for freedom for a better social and political order, one that is more human and more or less egalitarian”. This social and political order is necessary for the people to realize their goals. In the second perspective, democracy is seen as a social process. In this case, democracy aims at “radically changing the deteriorating situation to bring improvement in the material life of the people” (Nzongola-Ntalega, 1997).

While the ideal type democracy may not be feasible in this modern times due to increase in population, Dahl (1971) suggests that the next possible alternative to it is Polyarchy. He refers to Polyarchy as “administrations that have been substantially popularized and liberalized, that is, highly inclusive and extensively open to public contestations”. The reference to citizens' participation underscores the relevance of the people's welfare and well-being to democratic rule. Democracy is able to harness and release the potentials of the people to make important decisions which affect their lives. In the process they exercise power however, small or symbolic (Ake, 1994).

As citizens participate in political affairs in a democratic system, the more they become democratized. Democratization can be viewed from two broad perspectives. From a narrow angle, democratization means, “a stage in the creation and maintenance of democracy”. This process entails the movement from the old (authoritarian) administration to the establishment of new one (Levine, 1989). From a broad perspective, democratization is seen as the creation, nature and spread of more egalitarian social relations and norms of leadership and authority (ibid). In both perspectives, democratization entails extending the norms, procedures and mechanisms of democracy (Gerraton, 1997).

The end product of democracy is development. Development is a multi-faceted concept that has experienced shifts in its paradigm. Beyond commodity fetism, development now embraces “...broad-based growth, employment generation, and steady improvement in literacy, and health status implicit in longevity and social stability” (Iwayemi, 2001). It is further argued that “development is about change that results in sustained improvement in the general well-being of people in the society” (ibid).

All these processes create tangible material context on which the people can live and actualized their potentials. The better context that development creates is epitomized in “...rising income per capital, better education, better health, increase in life expectancy, full employment, and

social stability” (Iwayemi, 2001) especially in a developing societies. All these help democracy to be depended and the citizenry better able to make informed choices and decisions.

Several theoretical platforms could prove heuristic for analyzing issues germane to the study. Some of these include: Ekeh (1976) theory of the Two Publics, Ake (1981) political economy theory, Dudley (1987) State-society relations theory, Huntington (2001) political institutionalization theory, to mention few of them. In the pursuit of the core values of democracy as captured in our conceptualization of democracy, political participation theory comes out forcefully. While political participation could be seen as means of reaping the reward of holding political offices, others see it as avenue of affirming one’s efficacy in the political system. In the view of Lipset (1960) it offers “...opportunities for changing the governing officials and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing contenders for political office”, ensure they are politically accountable and in the process promote good governance. All these are central to achieving the peoples’ material ends. But this is not always the case because in representative democracy, the elected them to dominate the electors.

### **Understanding the Nigerian Political Economy: An Overview**

In Africa, the pre-capitalist economic arrangement before the advent of the British Colonial Administration was largely agrarian. Art and craft, trans-Atlantic slave-trade and commerce were the other dominant occupations. The exposure of Africans to European trans-Atlantic traders brought to the fore foreign commercial interests who dominated and consequently sidelined craftsmen and peasant producers. Agriculture was the main-stay of the rural economy. It employed over 70 percent of the rural inhabitants, besides providing food for over the same number of people. Under colonial rule, it was the chief revenue earner for the country. However, before long, imperialist domination of the pre-capitalist mode of production aided capitalist penetration and the development of its forces of production.

The incorporation of Nigeria into the world capitalist order led to the development of its forces of production. But this has been carried out not in ways that favours craft making and commercial agriculture, on the contrary it has grown in ways which met the requirements of commercial capitalism. Thus, the development of indigenous capitalism limited the development of peasant production (Williams, 1980). Unfortunately, Nigeria lacks the essential conditions which produce and promote indigenous capitalist. Attempts by the state to do this have led to:

*Shifting resources from more competitive to less competitive producers, from craft to factory production, from agriculture to industry, from rural to urban areas, from the poor to the rich, and from the Nigerians to foreigners. It has hardly given free rein to the ability of people to produce goods. It has promoted the wealth of the nation, but only by the impoverishment of the people (Williams, 1980).*

The capitalist model introduced into Nigeria’s economy distorted the pre-capitalist mode and forces of production to the extent that Nigerians have lost the initiative in organizing and directing their economic development from within. More often than not, economic policies are either received from Europe and America or fashioned along development in the capitalist or ex-metropolitan countries.

The shift from agriculture to oil has not uttered the structure and orientation of the economy. Oil that was first discovered at Oloibiri in the present day Bayelsa State, now accounts for over 90 percent of the country’s foreign exchange earnings. However, the way and manner oil is explored and exploited has not improved the lot of Nigerians rather they have led to comprador capitalism and a rentier economy. The state relies on oil rent to survive. Graf (1998) characterized such economy as rentier, the features of which:

*...is that it severs the link between production and distribution, revenue accrues from productive activities. This production depends, however, on techniques, expertise, investments and markets generated outside the territory controlled by the state. For this reason practically all aspects of exploration, production and marketing are dominated by international capital, typically in the form of the multinational corporations.*

The transition from agriculture to oil economy has not changed the pattern of trade relations with the West. The implications of this structure of the post-colonial economy on Nigeria can be summarized thus: the economy is susceptible to crisis and shocks in the prices of commodities in the World Market, the economy is dependent on South-South trade patterns, it disarticulates the economy, discourages agricultural development and vitiates the growth of non-state capitalism. Also, these factors mitigate against the state's autonomous action and has led to the externalization of efforts to arrest the economic decline in the country, (Osaghae, 2002).

Politically, the concentration of oil revenue at the center or federal level has made the state very attractive to different groups and power centers within the federation. The premium on power has become very high and competitive party politics has taken a zero-sum approach where the winner takes all and the loser is vanquished. This has led to intemperate political behaviour that sometimes translates into political thuggery, assassination, ballot box snatching and stuffing, among others. Tendentially, the country is inherently unstable as different parts of the country are under siege either by militants, kidnapers, and or ethno-religious insurgency. The most recent and attritions of them is the Boko Haram sect terrorizing some parts of Northern Nigeria.

#### **Nigeria's Political Economy under the Fourth Republic**

The return to civil rule in 1999 raised hope for an improvement in the economic situation in the country. All sectors of the economy came under review. A new philosophy and orientation was encapsulated in a document called The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). The document lays out the policy thrust of government which is aimed at re-directing and re-focusing the economy for the challenges of an ever competitive and complex global order. NEEDS is "to create a Nigeria that Nigerians can be proud to belong to and grateful to inhabit, a Nigeria that rewards handwork, protect its people and their property and offers its children better prospects, than those they will attempt to seek in Europe or the United States" (NEEDS, 2004). To achieve its vision, it focuses on four key strategies "re-orienting values, reducing poverty, creating wealth and generating employment (ibid).

Implementation of these strategies began with efforts by the central government to repay and reschedule some of the country's debts. To this end, in 2005 and the early part of 2006, the federal government successfully paid \$12.4bn to the Paris Club of creditors nations to earn \$18bn write off of the outstanding \$30bn debt owed the group" (New Age, 2007). The repayment and rescheduling of the country's debts, it would seem, was to provide soft landing for the government, to buy the favour of the international financial institutions in the country's drive to resuscitate the ailing economy, and create window for further loans and assure of liberalization of the economy.

The electricity power sector is one aspect of the economy that received and is still attracting the attention of government. In a bid to increase the country's power generating capacity, the government envisaged that by 2007, it will increase its present generating capacity put at about 3,000mw to 10,000mw. To this end, the government has sunk about ₦18.6bn into the power sector. While the government is encouraging the participation of Independent Power Producers (IPP) in the electricity industry, it has embarked on the construction of new thermo power stations across the country (Reforms of the Power Sector, 2004).

Another sector of the economy that has received major attention from the federal government in the period under consideration is the oil and gas sector. The government has made efforts to bring

into full operational capacity, the four refineries in the country. It has sunk billions of Naira into the turn around maintenance of this vital sector of the economy, to ensure smooth supply of petroleum products in the country that is one of the world's leading producer of oil and gas products. But the oil industry has turned out to be a hard nut to crack. The enormous resources sunk into the sector have not reflected in its domestic prices and efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery.

Although, agriculture has taken the second place in the priority of government, it occupies an important position in the life of the nation. This is why successive governments have given attention to this sector. Government has been making serious efforts to increase production of basic staple food items in the country such as rice, wheat, sugar, beans, cassava, among others. This is not unconnected with the increase in the prices of these staple food items which serve as major sources of protein to Nigerians but whose prices have sky rocketed since the return to civil rule. Also the fear of food crises in Nigeria remains pervasive. The country now relies on import to meet its local demand for rice, beans, sugar, etc.

**Table 1:** The Cost of three staple food items: Rice, Sugar and Wheat Flour

Year	Rice	Sugar	Wheat flour
2006	₦4,000	-	₦2,900
2007	₦6,000	₦4,800	₦3,200
2008	₦10,000	₦5,500	₦5,000

Source: Tell Magazine May, 2008.

To cushion the effect of decline the in production of staple food items, government has embarked on frantic importation of food items hitherto produced in large quantity in the country. For example, in four years, Nigeria spent about 47.88 billion dollars on importation of consumables (Odion-Akhaine, 2008).

### **Democracy in the Context of Material Shortage: Challenges and the Way Forward**

A strong correlation has been established between economic performance and democratic consolidation. As Diamond (1999) posits:

*It is by now a truism that the better the performance of a democratic regime in producing and broadly distributing improvements in living standards, the more likely is to endure.... While the level of economic development powerfully shapes the survival, prospects of democracy and affluence democracies survives no matter what, among moderate income and especially poor countries, democracy is much more likely to last when the economy grows rapidly and with only moderate inflation.*

If the above claim is anything to go by, then Nigeria is still groping in the dark. The expectation that the return to civil rule will stem the tide of economic decline has not been met rather at the macro-social level, poverty, unemployment; lack of social infrastructures have been on the increase. Poverty is on the increase in the country as over 65% of Nigerians are poor. And if Huntington (1991) view to the effect that poverty is the principal obstacle to democracy is anything to go by, then democracy is certainly not being consolidated in the country.

The reason for this claim may not be unrelated with the failure of government at the center to carry out its annual budgets efficiently and effectively. As members of the Nigerian Parliament in Nigeria recently lamented, by the month of July 2012, funds have not been released to ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) to carry out capital expenditure. In the view of some members,

these bodies were being starved of funds by the non-release of funds to them by the ministry of finance. It contends that while “recurrent expenditures have kept pace with expectations, the capital budget implementation is suffering” (The Nation, 2012).

Currently, the people’s conditions are in a very sorry state. Essential commodities are priced out of the reach of the ordinary Nigerians who earn ₦18,000 per month in some states of the federation as minimum wage – a take home pay that cannot take many home – can only result in material shortage: hunger, desperation, crime and the likes. Indeed, hunger has intensified over the years. According to the report of the United States based ‘International Food Policy Research’ and a German Non Governmental Organization “Agro-Action” Nigeria ranked 40 out of 119 developing countries on the global hunger index (The Punch, 2006). Similarly, the human development index 2006, ranked Nigeria as 117<sup>th</sup> out of the 140 countries in the quality of life index (The Punch, 2006).

The declining material conditions of the people under a supposedly democratic system throws spinner in the wheel of the democratization process in the country and is gradually alienating the people from their government with devastating effect on the legitimacy of the government and its agencies to act which means that it will have to rely on force to get its decisions and actions carried out. Inability of government to pursue the public interest has serious implications for the sustenance of democracy. As Laski (1921) persuasively argues:

*.....a state which refuses to me the things it declares essentially to the well-being of another is making me less a citizen. It is denying that which invests its power with moral authority. It is admitting that its claim upon me is built not upon its ethics, but its strength.*

Democracy endures not by the use of force but the good will of its citizens. The neo-liberal market reforms in Nigeria have extended rather than bridged the gap between the rich and poor in the country. This inequality is promoted by the rentier economy propelled by the oil cabal who feeds on distribution of oil wealth rather than its production. The stark revelation about the running of the oil industry shows that revenues from oil find their way into the hands of comprador capitalist in the private and public sectors with active connivance of the oil multi-nationals.

All these developments feed into the political space in the country that has become expectedly tense, insecure, and winner –takes-all. Politics of impunity has become the order of the day because the stakes are high and politicians will do anything to lay their hands on the national cake. Institutional rules in the process become the first causality as they are observed more in their breach than observance. In all these, the social concerns of the citizenry are given scant attention to by those holding political and economic powers. This is reflected in the rapidly decreasing standard of living across the length and breadth of the country. These challenges, as enormous as they might seem, are not insurmountable. In the section that follows, we shall proffer some steps which might take the country out of this quagmire.

### **Democracy in the Context of Material Shortage: The Way Forward**

The greater part of the country’s post independence years were spent under authoritarian rule. The present democratic experiences present the country with another auspicious chance of institutionalizing democracy and an egalitarian society. Given the country’s pedigree of government by compulsion or force “State power which seems consistently to favour particular interest at the expense of others not only forfeits the support of the excluded interests but also undermines the legitimacy of its own claims to authority” (Williams 1980). There is need therefore, for transformational leadership to bring forth a new political ideology .....under which all can contribute to the concerted match to orderly progress and in which public objectives are taken out of political contention, (Williams 1980). Its socio-economic and political ideology should embody public goals and values not parochial interests.

The country is in dire need of statesmen “whose minds are elevated sufficiently above the conflict of contending parties to enable him/her to adopt a course of action which takes into account a great number of interests in the perspective of a longer period of time” (Magstadt, 2006). It is only leaders with extra-ordinary political skills and practical wisdom that can resolve the hydra-headed socio-economic challenges facing the nation.

The answer to the poverty question and other social malaise in the country lie in government efforts at unlocking the “welfare of the individual through providing better educational facilities, housing, health facilities, more jobs and rising standard of living for the people as a whole (Williams, 1980). These goals might be difficult to achieve under a neo-liberal market reform with its high social cost (Olukoshi, 1998). State managers should therefore come up with innovations which will incorporate the country’s own values and goals into its home grown socio-economic system.

This will require mobilization of the populace to take active part in sustaining this “new” socio-economic model for the country. In this regard, broader consultation should be made with Community Based Organizations (CBOs), People’s Organizations (POs), Voluntary Organizations (VOs) among others, to evolve a system that will take a bottom-top approach that will bring to the fore a truly indigenous development paradigm into the socio-economic system in the country.

The immediate outcome of such measures could easily be imagined. It will bring about diversification of the economy and a shift from the reliance on oil as the chief revenue earner of government. Other veritable sources of job creation and resource generation would be revived. The agricultural sector will be properly linked with the urban industrial sector to ensure that rural produces are not allowed to rot away due to low patronage from the urban areas. Such linkages will boost agricultural production as farmers would be assured of patronage and in the process stem the tide of rural – urban integration. More jobs would be created and production of goods and services would be increased.

In a democratic system, political parties are some of the political organizations which help to organize the populace for political participation and decision making. Without their presence, the electorates may not be able to make informed choices which could affect their welfare and well-being. Therefore, political parties are central to modern democratic system. Yet, unless they are institutionalized, they might not play roles carved out for them under this system efficiently and effectively. Party is institutionalized when as “...organization, it is detach from being a means to an end to become an end in itself” (Gunther and Hopkin, 2002). A party is institutionalized when it acquires values and stability (ibid). A nebulous party system can not midwife the dividends of democracy nor help resolve the manifold contradictions in a neo-liberal market economy because of lack of doctrinal and programmatic orientation, lack of internal democracy, separation of power, etc.

There is need to evolve a new political culture away from ethno-religious politics, win at all cost syndrome, prebendal use of state positions and intemperate political utterances. These political attitudes and behaviours over-heat the polity and divert political energies into unproductive ventures. Government by politicians should be able to create conditions necessary for democratic consolidation and not breakdown as it was in previous Republics. Brokerage and patronage politics should be deemphasized for politics of tolerance and accommodation, consultation, bargaining and compromise. Internal party democracy should be pursued to give the people a say in how the party is run, respect for institutional rules and the practice of good governance in the running of the party finance, separation of powers within the party organization, among others. It is when these core democratic values are in place, that democracy can take root in the society.

One of the intractable problems Nigerians have had to contend with is electricity (Power) supply. As the government has observed, “the availability of electricity (power) is a sine qua non for economic and industrial development of any nation” (Reform of the Electric Sector, 2005). This is because, “in contemporary times, the per capital consumption of electricity determines the level of

industrial activities and hence the development cum standard of living of any nation” (Ibid). Nigeria with a population of over 150 million people is said to generate below 4000mw with a 0.0BKW per capital consumption. Government had envisaged that by 2007 it would be able to generate 10,000mw of electricity. Yet, reliable power supply is inaccessible to majority of Nigerians talk less of having it at affordable prices (Reform of the Electric Sector, 2005) .

To improve electricity supply, the Jonathan administration has signed a number of contracts to build new power stations and improve electricity distribution to Nigerians. In pursuance of this goal, the Federal Executive Council (FEC) recently approved ₦8bn for the construction of five additional power substations to address the lingering problem in the national power grid (Punch, July, 28, 2012). Following the abysmal power supply in the country, the FEC again, approved the construction of the strategic gas pipeline from Obiaku Obrikon in Rivers State to Oben in Edo State at a cost of over ₦60bn (ibid). It is yet to be seen how these measures would improve the epileptic power supply across the country. A point that need be emphasized is that unless and until there is behavioural and attitudinal changes among stakeholders in the electricity sector, like the oil and gas sector, it will be hard to achieve efficient and effective power supply in the country.

We will like to end this discussion by stating that for the country to break from the tragedy of the past, the respect for the rule of law and constitutionalism hold the key. The law is no respecter of persons therefore; there should be no sacred cows in its application. This is why a people centered constitution should urgently be put in place. The subsisting constitution in the country came to being through military fiat though the then head of the ruling military junta claimed that their usual “wide consultations” were carried out. Yet, the constitution remains an albatross by virtue of its exclusiveness. A political culture should be evolved that will make the spirit of the constitution rather than its letters, the driving force behind state and individual actions in the public and private realms.

As Rousseau has rightly admonished:

*.....The real constitution of the state which acquires new strength daily, which when other laws grow old pass away revives then (which) preserved a people in the spirit of their institutions and in perceptibility substitutes the force of habit for that of authority is the constitution graven.....in the hearts of the citizens (See Eckstein, 1963).*

It is the spirit in the constitution graven in the heart of its operators and those affected by it that keep society together and make its institutions function. The call for a new constitution should not mean that once given, it would resolve the numerous challenges facing the nation. If when such constitution is put to use that it could moderate the conduct of state duties and its force comes alive. This is what well meaning Nigerians should aim at.

All these efforts could only take place in the context of peace. It is by now a truism that the main goal of every independent state is to provide security for its citizens (Magstadt, 2006). This view is ably supported by Hobbes (in Magstadt, ibid) when he argues that “safety from harm constitutes the chief justification for government’s existence”. The politics of impunity in the country should give way for consensual politics. As some statesmen rightly noted, Nigerians now live in fear due to the security concerns in the country. Those at peace work for it. The surest basis for peace is social security. It is when the people are assured better standard of living that political and social security endures.

## **Conclusion**

Economic prosperity and social security are key ingredients for the substance of democracy anywhere in the world. This is because better economic performance leads to improvement in the people’s standard of living. This explains why we have argued that the present economic condition in the country that has taken the people below poverty line portends danger for the country’s nascent democracy. In Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, politicians tend to capitalize on the



electorates' socio-economic condition to manipulate and influence their choices at the polls. This is done through monetary inducement and or distribution of essential but scarce commodities in this part of the world, such as: rice, sugar, milk and even bread before and during elections. The phenomenon of material shortage has also made it expedient for politicians to seek office because of material gain. In this context, democracy is endangered and the possibility of its consolidation becomes far-fetched.

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