

# Challenges of Democratic Leadership and Governance at the Grassroots in Nigeria: 1999-2015

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## Abstract

This paper examines the concepts of democratic leadership and governance at the grassroots level in Nigeria from 1999-2015. It appraises the qualities of leadership in a democratic setting in view of the fact that Nigeria being a transition society is laden with a plethora of problems in her process of democratisation, such as weak institutional framework, absence of constructive opposition at the grassroots level and inadequate political education. The study evaluates the impact (if any) of democratic leadership on governance at the grassroots level in Nigeria. It equally review the success, failures, strengths and challenges of democratic leadership at grassroots level in Nigeria. Finally, the study makes some suggestions that could improve democratic leadership and governance at the grassroots level in Nigeria. Primary and secondary data were obtained. Primary data were obtained from interview conducted on both traditional and political leaders in some selected communities and government officials in rural and community development ministries while secondary data was obtained from published books, journal articles, newspapers etc. Data collected was analysed using simple descriptive analysis. The result reveals that the country has not demonstrated enough seriousness and sincerity of purpose in the manner in which the grassroots administration was operated. It is further discovered that the election of political functionaries at the grassroots level in Nigeria is not largely determined by the local people rather, it is subjected to the influence of political executives at the state level. Finally, the study recommends the full implementation of 1999 constitutional provisions for a more effective operation of grassroots administration.

## Keywords

Leadership, governance, grassroots, administration, democratic system

## Introduction

The governance of the people has always been at the responsibility of a particular government obtainable at different level i.e. federal, state and local. Duly formed government comes into being with the sole aim of bringing about efficient and effective public administration that guarantees freedom, liberty,

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socio-economic development and security for the citizenry (Olatunji, 1992). In the traditional literature on public administration, grassroots administration refers to an institutional arrangement that is creatively established at the local level, to perform specific functions. This locally based institutional arrangement is popularly known as “local government” (Ayo, 1995: 1). It is this level of government that is commonly referred to as the third tier of government which is assigned the responsibilities of attracting development to the grassroots and enhancing human development at the rural community. In this current political dispensation, which was inaugurated in May 1999 the government at the grassroots is expected to be democratically elected. Specifically, section 7 (1) of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended states that the system of local government by democratically elected local government council is under this constitution guaranteed and accordingly, the government of every state shall subject to section 8 of this constitution, ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils.

Agbakoba and Ogbona (2004: 5) opine that local government is one of man’s oldest institutions. The authors further reveal that the earliest form of local government existed in the form of clan and village meetings. Therefore, the concept of local government throughout the world appears to indicate the same thing. Supporting the above assertion, the United Nations Office of Public Administration (2010) observes that local government is a political subdivision of a nation or state which is constituted by law and has substantial control over local affairs, including the power to impose taxes or exert labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected. It is therefore not surprising that the Murtala/Obasanjo military administration in Nigeria initiated a comprehensive reform of local government in 1976. Through this reform, major functions were allocated to local government authority. Indeed, local government was expected to perform the following functions;

- i. provision of services and development activities responsive to local needs of the people;
- ii. as a result of its closeness to the people, the institution is expected to understand the people at the grassroots, analyse problems confronting them and create opportunities for them;
- iii. to facilitate the exercise of democratic government at local level and to encourage the development of leadership potentials;
- iv. provision of a two-way channel of communication between the local communities and government at the higher level i.e. state and federal (1976 Murtala/Obasanjo Local Government Reforms).

One could observe, at least from the above listed functions of local government, that democracy at the local level has been given a pre-eminent

attention since the local government reform of 1976. Additionally, the 1979 and 1999 Constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria place an emphasis on democratic governance at the grassroots level. However, a critical analysis of local government administration in Nigeria, as revealed by Fatile, J., Majekodunmi, A., Oni, A. and Adejuwon, D. (2013) state that from 1999 till 2015 as far as democratic governance at the grassroots in Nigeria is concerned, not much has been achieved. Against this background, the present study specifically seeks to:

- i. examine the concepts of democracy, leadership and governance as they relate to grassroots administration in Nigeria, between 1999- 2015;
- ii. review the historical origin and development of local government administration in Nigeria;
- iii. identify the structure and functions of local government administration in Nigeria;
- iv. appraise the strengths and challenges of democratic leadership on governance at the grassroots level in Nigeria; and
- v. propose some reform measures capable of enhancing democratic leadership at the local level.

Therefore, the focus of this paper is to critically appraise the operation of the 1999 constitutional guidelines on democratic governance at local government level in Nigeria, in view of the numerous challenges confronting electoral process in Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Discourse**

### ***Democracy***

Democracy popularly defined by Abraham Lincoln “as the government of the people for the people and by the people” was approached from the negative side by Sartori (1987) when the author contends that democracy is the opposite of autocracy. Democracy was described as a system in which no one can either choose or invest himself with the power to rule or arrogate to himself unconditional and unilateral powers. Democracy therefore is a government of the people, especially rule of the majority. Sartori (1987) further argues that democracy is a system of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free and fair election.

A democracy is a political system, in which all members have an equal share of power. Modern democracies are characterised by two capabilities that differentiate them from earlier forms of government: the first is the capacity to intervene in their own societies while the second is the recognition of their sovereignty by an international legal framework of similarly sovereign state.

Historically, democracy is generally associated with the efforts of the ancient Greeks and Romans who were themselves considered the founders of western civilisation by the eighteenth century intellectuals.

It appears that modern representative democracies attempt to breach the gulf between the Hobbesian state of nature and the grip authoritarianism through social contracts that enshrine the right of the citizens, curtail the power of the state and grant agency through the right to vote. Democracy is a concept based on tolerance, fair play and respect for the right of others. However, the extent to which the above statement is relevant to grassroots administration in Nigeria, is the focus of this paper.

### ***Leadership***

The concept of leadership may mean different things to different people depending on one's background, context and level of operation. Ukaegblu (2010) describes leadership as a reflection of characters, which include but not limited to knowledge, vision, courage, openness, etc put in place by office holders to lead their people to achieve reasonable and positive societal development while Omolayo (2005) sees leadership as an essential oil that keeps the wheel of government working with little hindrance. Democratic leadership, also known as participative leadership or shared leadership, is a type of leadership style in which members of the group take a more participative role in the decision making process. This type of leadership can apply to any organisation, from private businesses to schools, then to government. Everyone is given the opportunity to participate, ideas are exchanged freely, and discussion is encouraged. While the democratic process tends to focus on group equality and the free flow of ideas, the leader of the group is still there to offer guidance and control. The democratic leader is charged with deciding who is in the group and who gets to contribute to the decisions that are made. Researchers have found that the democratic leadership style is one of the most effective types and leads to higher productivity, better contributions from group members, and increased group morale.

### ***Governance***

Governance according to World Bank (2010) is defined as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development. Adamolekun (2002) defines governance as the process of exercising political power to manage the affairs of a nation. The author posits that governance is commonly defined as the exercise of power or authority by political leaders for the well being of the citizenry. In a similar perspective, Bratton and Van de Walle (1993: 3) submit that governance refers to the conscious management of regimes with the aim of enhancing the effectiveness of political authority. In this sense, governance is often thought as

the applied realm of politics, in which political actors seek mechanisms to convert political preferences into concrete outcomes.

Governance can assume diverse forms, authoritarianism or democratic governance which allows for political participation of all, subject to previously agreed limitations such as age or level of education. Additionally, it upholds the rule of law through majority rule that respects minorities' rights and views.

### ***Local Administration***

By grassroots administrations, one intends to say that, there are such institutional arrangements that are consciously created at the local level to perform specific functions (Ayo, 1995). As a result various authors describe local government as grassroots government, because it is the closest to the rural people and in most cases, it is the most known level of government to the rural areas where most citizens live. Conceptually, local administration is different from local government particularly in terms of the selection of leadership of local authorities. There may be need to discuss this conceptual difference between local administration and local government to enrich this study.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Oladoyin (2008) has identified two major schools of thought on local government administration; the first school of thought is the democratic participant school while the second school of thought is the efficiency service school of thought. However, the efficiency service school postulates that the main purpose of local government is to provide service to the local people. Among the advocates of this school is the French scholar Languod (1953) who opines that democracy is the affairs of the nation state as a whole, issue of majority rule; equality and uniformity are the norms. Local government by contrast was parochially concerned with local differences and separation. The two are opposed and it was a historical fact that they had developed together in the 19th century. The author stated that it was equally false to believe that local government is so restricted while national goals are wider in scale; local experience and knowledge are hardly appropriate to national affairs. Sharpe (1970) provides a very strong case for local government on the grounds that it was the most efficient agent for providing those services that are essentially local. The school of thought suggests that the main functional responsibilities of local government, therefore is to efficiently carry out local duties and allocate to it, at the highest efficiency rate. This theory, even though it explains the major reason for grassroots administration yet it fails to relate to democratization at the grassroots level, which is the major focus of the present study. On its own part, democratic participant school is influenced by the work on utilitarianism of John Staurt Mills. The school asserts that local government

is a prime element of democracy and demonstrates the intrinsic values of democracy, irrespective of the service it produces in it that local government offers the closest thing to widespread consultation and participation. Ntiwunka (2011) asserts that local government is the prime element of democracy irrespective of the services it provides. A very important part of this democratic role is the opportunity it creates for political activity and social interaction. Such a forum helps to inculcate the idea of democracy like election or selection of local committees and boards, public debates, pressure and interest group activities through these ideas. By emphasising the principles of devolution and representation, local government thus seek to involve local people in the management of their affairs by providing them access to local representative institutions (Eminue, 2006). This particular theory is relevant to the present work, because the major focus here is the process and impact of democratic leadership.

### **Methodology**

The major focus of this study is to examine the challenges of democratic leadership and governance on grassroots administration in Nigeria from 1999-2015. Some specific objectives were formulated and as a result, the study employed both the primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was obtained from well structured interview conducted on both traditional and political leaders in some purposively selected communities and government officials in rural and community development and ministries. Ten traditional leaders across the communities and fifteen political leaders that cut across legislature and executive branches of government as well as principal officers of the major political parties were randomly selected for the study. Six officials from the directorate level and above were purposively selected from both the Department of Community Development and Ministries of Local Government while secondary data was obtained from published books, journal articles, newspapers, government gazettes, bulletin, materials from internet and term papers. Data collected was analysed using simple descriptive analysis.

### ***Democratic Leadership: Prospects and Problems in Nigeria***

Generally, there are diverse views on the concept of leadership. It is often explained in terms of a natural inherent quality that helps individual rise to certain occasions. For others, leadership can be developed with the appropriate types of training while leaders respond to stimulus from the facilitating factors. In Nigeria, it is expected that people with specific qualifications and traits will emerge as leaders in their respective organisations and institutions, but this rarely takes place. Kellerman (1980) observes that leadership is viewed as power relation or as a form of influence. According to the author, leadership can be associated with a formal position in an organised system, other time, with an informal relationship between the individuals who make things happen

and those who lend them implicit or explicit support. Leadership is an important element in any organization, the concept can be approached either from managerial or political context. As such, much of literature in public administration and management concentrates on the traits, roles and effectiveness of leaders as managers in administrative organization.

However, the concern of the present paper is the development of democratic leadership potentials at grassroots level. Blondel (1987) describes political leadership as the ability of one of few who are at the top to make others do a number of things (positively or negatively) that they would not, or at least might not have done. While contributing Moghan and Patterson (2001) view political leadership as the process of mobilizing followers to achieve goals. Furthermore, Hall (1991) demonstrates a distinction between “public” and “association” leadership, the author argued that public leaders are those who run for and hold office, while the association leaders operate behind the scenes.

It is obvious, that political power is entrusted to elected officials by the people, but ultimate power in the sense of decision making at elections belongs to the people. Therefore, democratic leadership at the grassroots level is an end product of electoral process at the local government level. Usually, the peak of an electoral process is the conduct of election. Therefore, elections serve as a mechanism for building support in respect of those to govern the entire area or district. In this regard, elections strengthen people’s attachment to the government of the day. Elections are the means through which the people select their leaders. Apart from election of political leaders, election according to Lawal (2003: 127) can also serve as political education to the people. Through campaigns, citizens are directly or indirectly educated by the candidates and their political parties. Election in a nutshell, is a bid to entrench democracy and its principles, enable the electorate to, in some ways participate in the political process as people are able to influence government policy.

In Nigeria, there have been series of elections conducted at local government level, but sadly enough, the December 5th, 1998 local government elections conducted by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) under the supervision of the then Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar led military government was adjudged by both foreign and local observers to be the best out of all elections conducted at local government level, since 1998 till date [Saliu, 2011]. For instance, local government elections conducted in 2004 in all South West states were won by the political party controlling government at the state level. In Osun state, democratically elected councils were put in place between May 1991 and May 2002. And out of the thirty local governments in the state, the Alliance for Democracy had twenty-two, defunct All Peoples Party had two while Peoples Democratic Party had six. Between May 2002 and April 2004, there were unelected care-taker committees in place. In March 2004, an election was conducted whereby all the thirty chairmanship seats

were won by the party that had only six seats in 1999 elections – ‘Peoples’ Democratic Party’ - what a landslide victory! The feat was recorded again in 2008. In Ogun, Oyo, Lagos, Ekiti and Ondo States, the story was the same. To buttress that position, a Peoples’ Democratic Party Chairman in Alimosho Local Government Area of Lagos State, insisted that Lagos State Independent Electoral Commission announced all the candidates of All Progressives’ Congress contesting the chairmanship position in the state 2015 Local Government elections without recourse to the actual votes recorded by the candidates while supporting the above position, the State Chairman of Peoples’ Democratic Party in Osun State wondered why an opposition party could not win a single councillorship position in Osun West Senatorial District where his party (PDP) won in 9 out of the 10 Local Government Areas in a senatorial re-run election conducted by INEC in July, 2017. In Ekiti State, the Commissioner for Local Government and Community Affairs equated his party’s (PDP) victory in all 177 wards and 16 Local Government Areas at the December 2017 Local Government elections to the popularity of PDP, whereas in less than 8 months after, the PDP in Ekiti State lost a gubernatorial election conducted by INEC to All Progressives’ Congress. What all these positions point to is that, the victory at local government elections was determined by the political party in power in each of the states, why it has never been possible for the Peoples Democratic Party not to have won any chairmanship seat in Lagos state is because, the party has never controlled the governance of the state. Even though Peoples’ Democratic Party won six seats out of twenty in the 2015 House of Representatives Elections, that victory still failed to translate to success at the post - 2015 local government elections in Lagos State. And the trend is the same all over the country. At this juncture, there is a need to ask ourselves some pertinent questions such as:

- i. in a multi- party democracy, is it possible for a single political party to win all the local government chairmanship seats at the same election in a state?
- ii. could local government elections conducted so far in Nigeria between 2002 to 2015 by the State Independent Electoral Commissions be regarded to be free, fair and transparent?
- iii. can the constitutional, legal and logistic frame work guiding the operations of the State Independent Electoral Commissions and the conduct of local government elections be improved upon?
- iv. can the State Independent Electoral Commissions have the institutional capacity to organize local government elections that will reflect the wishes of the people, thereby meeting national and international standards?

With a benefit of hindsight, it appears a bit difficult for a single political party to win all the chairmanship seats, in a state. Most especially, under a multi-party democracy. The situation we presently have in Nigeria, whereby the

party in government at the state level wins all the local government chairmanship seats, is a clear manifestation of Nigeria's flawed democracy and underdeveloped electoral process.

### ***Development of Grassroots Administration in Nigeria***

Akinbade (2008) has noted that local government system in Nigeria has its root in the indirect rule policy, which was designed to share power between the colonial government and the powerful Northern Emirs who initially resisted the imposition of British rule on the area.

For whatever purpose, the fact remains that local government administration appears to be fascinating theatre, precisely because of its up-close and personal nature. The actors and institutions of localities are more directly involved in our day-to-day lives. In view of the above observation, local government institutions are essential institutional arrangements that are either created or exist naturally. Various studies have revealed that the above development is not limited to the industrialised countries of the world, even the third world countries realised the indispensability of the grassroots machinery. The realisation of their imperative nature has led to series of reforms and manipulations that were undertaken on this institutional arrangement from time to time. On a comparative note, the developed countries of the world appear to have made use of their local government institutions to render service to the people and they should be credited for making this grassroots administration people centered. However, be it in industrialised countries or third world countries, the albatross that undermines effective operation of local government is the tendency of higher level of government, to subordinate local administration to caprices of higher level of government irrespective of the constitutional provisions covering the status of the local government. The governments at the grassroots were not allowed to breathe as the state government does all it could to make the local government perform political functions, such as stabilising and enhancing the political interest of the politicians at the state level rather than serve the common people.

The Nigerian local government administrative system is supposed to be an institutional mechanism for promoting social and economic development at the local level; in addition to that local governments in Nigerian context are expected to promote participatory democracy, sharpening the political awareness of the local populace. The inability of the grassroots administration to undertake its statutory functions may not be disconnected from the dysfunctional system in the appointment of its leadership. Political leaders at the state level appear to be averse to election instead they prefer selection of their cronies in order to further their political interest at the grassroots level. Where elections were held at all, it was usually a mockery of electoral process.

## Discussion of findings

Having established, through the various responses of the study respondents, the poor trend of elections and consequently the low governance performance of the Nigerian local government system based on the parameter set down for measuring the variable which includes:

- i. the promotion of democratic principle in governance;
- ii. sustainable development of societal transformation; and
- iii. the promotion and defense of the dignity of humanity

It is not out of place to ask what is wrong with the Nigerian local government system, perhaps this question too can be applied to other local government systems on the African continent, but emphasis is placed on the Nigerian example. This question is fundamental for the following reasons:

In the first instance, democracy as it is conceived in the western world, may not succeed in the Nigerian context without a proper codification of the local government system within the democratic framework. In addition, since development, both social and economic cannot happen on a national basis without a firm take off at the grassroots level, it becomes pertinent to revisit the question, what is wrong with the Nigerian local government system and how can it be revitalised? Furthermore, since it is impossible to eradicate local administrative system in whatever form it is constituted, it becomes more imperative to address the problems facing the local government and attempt to find solution to them. Several things are wrong with the Nigerian local governments; many of these problems are heart breaking. For example the quality of the chairmen and councilors that are recruited to the local government either by election or by nomination needs to be examined.

Secondly, it is important to underscore the fact that, elections are considered vital and indispensable to determine the democratic nature of a political system. Adigburo (2008) views electoral contest and context in which political parties compete for the votes of citizens at regular interval, as the common defining property of democracy. Apart from the role of election in leadership recruitment, election also provides the means by which the citizens in any given political system indicate their preferences in election to those whom they perceive as being worthy enough to rule over them. In spite of the fact that elections are to be used as a means of expressing the acceptance for a candidate or political party in Nigeria, manipulation and distortion of the electoral processes have become order of the day.

## Conclusion

The place of elections in any democratic process needs not to be emphasised. However, the wide acceptance of any electoral process would mostly be determined by the quantity of elections in that society. The near absence of democratic leadership and by extension good governance at the grassroots

level in Nigeria could be linked to undue interference by the State government. Grassroots administration in Nigeria has been reduced to an area office, the various governments at the State level, irrespective of party politics ideology have been consistently abused the third tier of government. The study finds that in spite of the concerted efforts of the Federal Government of Nigeria to make the third tier administration function optimally, governments at the State level have continued to frustrate the efforts. Leaders selected for local administration have displayed their lack of capacities and understanding of their local environment and even democratic local governance. Even, in peace period, they rely on state government for survival and continuous support. The study reveals the non-commitment of the state administration to the growth of democratic governance at the grassroots level. It is suggested that election and administration of local communities be left to the people to determine, it was curious to discover that democratic leadership at local government administration fared better under the military government than the present civilian government.

In view of the above observations, the study recommends that State Independent Electoral Commissions should be reorganised. The appointment and tenure of office of members must be made to be secured. Additionally, fiscal allocation for state independent electoral commissions should be put on first line charge. It is hoped that the financial autonomy and secured tenure of office will reduce the dependence of the state electoral body for survival, on the state government. As a result, members of the state electoral commission would not be willing tools in the hands of the state chief executives. Members to be appointed to this commission must not be partisan.

Moreover, for local government administration to serve as a veritable tool of community mobilization for development; and for the existence of local government to promote and facilitate the provision of essential services and amenities to the community in order to bring about national development, there is thus, a need for local government administration in the country to be constitutionally detached from the state administration. The attachment of local government to the state appears to do more harm than good. Efforts must be made by administrators at both local and state levels to reduce the attachment. Local government must be encouraged to operate as the third tier of administration in Nigeria. Issues relating to joint account, discipline of staff and tenure of political office holders at the local level should be holistically addressed through pro-active constitutional reforms.

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