

Strengthening Consociational Democracy for Nation-Building in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Democracy aims at self-determination and runs government on the general will of the people. A good democratic system for any country is the one that adequately serves its existential realities. Nigeria is facing sociopolitical instability due to its cultural plurality. The country is composed of heterogeneous, communalistic cultural groups, suspicious of each other's domination and inwardly cleaving to protect groups' interests against marginalisation, which hinder sociopolitical opinion mobility, national cohesion and stability. The country has embarked on some centripetal and consociational policies to promote unity, such as federal character and concentration of power at the centre, but the distrust persists because the policies failed to address the threat of domination. The policies made the central government too strong, so that any group that controls the presidency controls all, exposing others to its mercy. This paper perceives that a coalition of elites of the different cultural groups can promote understanding and respect for each other's interests in nation building. It, therefore, calls for the strengthening of consociational democratic policies to recognise the different communal groups and accommodate their leaders in a coalition government to broaden participation, allay the fear of marginalisation and strengthen nation-building. The study adopts a philosophical hermeneutic analysis of Nigeria's historical sociopolitical development and crisis of nation-building.

Keywords: Consociational democracy, plural society, cultural identity politics, coalition government, general will, nation-building

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a heterogeneous nation. According to the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Nigeria is home to over 371 ethnic groups and over 500 distinct indigenous languages as of 2026. The diverse cultural groups were arbitrarily brought together as a country by the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria by the British colonial master, Lord Lugard. Since her creation, she has had the problem of establishing a viable sociopolitical structure that unifies the people and produces credible leaders for sustainable nation-building. The poverty of the Nigerian sociopolitical system is manifest in the salience of ethnicism and the instability of the polity. There is a general sense of insecurity, fear of domination, distrust and centrifugal pull, manifested in sectional consciousness, cleavages and the proliferation of ethnic and sectional militia in the country like the Niger Delta militants in the South-south region agitating for resources control, the Indigenous People of Biafra movement for the secession of the South-east region, the Amotekun security outfit for the security of the South-west region, The Boko Haram and other terrorists groups ravaging the Northern region, and the Fulani herders' militia terrorising farmers in the different parts of the country. The system frustrates open-minded discussions and negotiations necessary for the mobility of sociopolitical opinions and national cohesion. To govern by the democratic principle of majority rule empowers the majority sectional group to dominate the polity for its selfish ends, to the detriment of minority groups and the stability of the polity.

The centripetal federation-leaning of the nation's 1999 Constitution concentrates power in the central government, heightening ethnic struggles to control the centre and fears of marginalisation. The paper observes that fears of domination and marginalisation strengthen the formation of solidarities along communal ties to promote interests. Any group that finds itself at the helm of affairs uses the opportunity to divert national

resources to itself. The administration of President Mohammadu Buhari (2015-2023) saw gross lopsided appointments to critical government positions and citing of infrastructure in favour of his cultural group and region (the Northern region) and marginalisation of his perceived enemies (the South-east region), in violation of the federal Character principle enshrined in the constitution. It argues that the centripetal sociopolitical structure of Nigeria's federalism needs to be restructured to allay the fears of insecurity and domination among the different sectional groups. In the restructuring, the philosophy of consociational democracy needs to be strengthened. The significant sectional groups should be recognised as sociopolitical blocs with their leaders integrated in a coalition government to remove fears of marginalisation. In pursuit of this goal, the paper uses philosophical hermeneutic analysis to examine the diversity of Nigerian society, the meaning of democracy, the problems of democracy in Nigeria, and the meaning and relevance of consociational democracy, especially as it addresses the problem of marginalisation and attainment of a democratic general will of the people.

Diversity of Nigerian Society

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society that harbours hundreds of autonomous cultural and linguistically divergent peoples that had only peripheral interactions before the advent of British colonial rule in the area. Most of the cultural groups were unaware of the existence or the activities of some others. The few existent interactions in the areas of migration, trade and warfare involved mainly the immediate neighbouring groups. Each of the cultural societies had its independent social and political structures.

A common political organisation across several cultural communities existed only in Northern Nigeria following Uthman Dan Fodio's Jihad in the 19th century. The jihad brought several autonomous tribal communities in the North under one political entity with Islam as the binding ideology. However, there were also some kingdoms in the South: the Yoruba, the Benin, the Igala, the Onitsha and a few other kingdoms. Outside these kingdoms, the present Nigerian territory was inhabited by fragmented native states.

With British colonialism, these culturally diverse people were forced to become a country without any integration policy, for British economic interests. Even conscious efforts were made to discourage integration and harmonious development among the different cultural groups, with the policy of non-assimilation or accommodation of the southerners in the North. The limited interaction and integration achieved among the cultural groups were due to the need for clerical officers and other workforce from the South to aid the colonial administration.

Awolowo observed the diversity and lack of socio-cultural harmony in Nigeria in 1947 and declared:

Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no 'Nigerians' in the same sense there are 'English' or 'Welsh' or 'French'. The word Nigeria is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not (Awolowo, 1947: 47-48)

In the same vein, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, in the Federal House of Representatives, Lagos, stated:

Since the amalgamation of Southern and Northern Provinces in 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper.... It is still far from being united. Nigerian unity is only a British intention for the country (Okadigbo, 1987:12)

Sir Arthur Richards, British Governor-General of Nigeria in the colonial era, succinctly presented the situation thus:

It is only an accident of British Suzerainty which has made Nigeria one country. It is still far from being one country or one nation socially or even economically ... socially and politically there are deep differences between the major tribal groups. They do not speak the same language and they have highly divergent customs and ways of life and they represent different stages of cultures. (Okadigbo, 1987:12-13)

Activities for the integration and well-being of the people began with the nationalistic movements of Nigerian nationalists. The nationalists confronted the challenges of Nigerian sociocultural diversity. The struggle of the cultural groups for relevance in the new social order amid their conflicting interests strengthened ethnic groups' consciousness, solidarity and competition for dominance. The 1954 Lyttleton Constitution transformed Nigeria into a federation with three federating units, the Northern Region, the Eastern Region and the Western Region. The three major ethnic groups, the Hausa-Fulanis in the North, the Igbos in the East and the Yorubas in the West, emerged as the principal rivals in the competition and major centres of political activity in the negotiations for Nigeria's independence. They became the dominant ethnic group in each of the three federating regions. The Hausa-Fulanis dominated the cultural groups in the Northern Region, the Igbos dominated those of the Eastern Region, and the Yorubas controlled those in the Western Region. The smaller cultural groups' agitations for relevance and protection of their interests led to the creation of more federating units (states) to grant them some autonomy. Nigeria now has 36 federating states and a Federal Capital Territory.

The negotiated 1960 Independence Constitution recognised the fears of domination and loss of autonomy among the federating regions, provided a loose federation, where the regions control their cultural heritage, economic resources, and contribute a percentage of their resources to the national government. The regions control most cultural and economic affairs that affect individuals' lives. The 1999 Constitution weakened state powers and strengthened the central government's power, giving any ethnic group that controlled the centre undue advantages in the management of national resources. The Hausa-Fulani ethnic group has dominated national politics since Nigerian independence, to the dissatisfaction of other ethnic groups. As other groups, especially those in the South, struggle to end this domination, the Hausa-Fulani conservatively insist on the status quo, thereby generating significant ethnic tensions and conflicts that have been threatening the stability of the country.

The gravity of the salience of sectionalism in Nigerian society is manifested in the height of ethnic intolerance, suspicion and violence in the society. The Jos riot of 1945, which started as a dispute between the Igbo and Hausa traders, was an outburst of pent-up ethnic tension necessitated by inter-ethnic socioeconomic competition for limited available resources. Northern region's delegates to the National Legislative Council in 1953 refused to endorse the proposed national independence in 1956 by Ernest Enahoro, for fear of Southern domination. The misunderstanding over the date heightened the already existing ethnic tension and led to the Kano riots against the Southerners. The Tivs' struggles against the Hausa-Fulani domination of the Northern Regional Government resulted in the ethnic violence of 1960 and 1964 in Tiv land. The May and July 1966 pogrom against the Easterners in the North was aimed at ending the fear of Igbo domination in the country. The pogrom led to the secession and declaration of the Republic of Biafra in the Eastern Region and the civil war of 1967. The bloody civil war lasted for thirty months. The Hausa-Fulani-controlled North always stir up ethnic or religious-motivated crises against the Southerners whenever it considers that its interests are threatened. The Middle Belt region of Nigeria has, for decades, been experiencing ethnic motivated terrorist attacks from Fulani herders. The Niger Delta region of the south has been boiling in their struggle against marginalisation, despite the huge chunk of national resources coming from its land. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitate for the secession of the East because of marginalisation. The Boko Haram and other terrorist groups operating in the North region identify with the dominant religion in the region in search of relevance and control.

Nigeria has operated three republics and failed, experienced seven military coups and so many social and political upheavals, and fought a civil war due to the salience of sectionalism based on primordial affinity. The country was under military dictatorship for 28 years. The military had always claimed that its involvement in governance was to sanitise society of the evils of ethnicism and sectionalism, but in practice, it strengthened these vices with military dictatorial commands.

The politicians hide under the cloak of sectionalism to perpetuate all manner of fraud and misrule. They divert people's scrutiny away from their fraudulent actions and misrule with cries of ethnic prejudice. The consequence is that over sixty-five years of Nigeria's independence, the country has not attained a collective

national spirit to be called a nation. Nigeria is still an amorphous collection of diverse cultural nationalities, with each nationality distrustful of the others.

Meaning of Democracy

Democracy is broadly used to describe a form of social and political system that allows self-determination for one's life. As a social term, it is a system that provides for tolerance and personal enterprise; freedom of opinion, of association and of political participation; and respect for human dignity and self-determination. It is based on the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and autonomy in self-determination. A democratic society is "so organised that every man shall have equal opportunity to develop what is finest in him" (Bryn-Jones, 1945, p.12). People should individually and collectively determine what concerns them. Politically, we have democracy when the people have control over their governance, irrespective of status or birth. Bryce (1921, p.20) conceives democracy as "that form of government in which the ruling power of a state is legally vested, not in any particular class or classes, but in the members of the community as a whole." Abraham Lincoln (1863), in his Gettysburg Address, gave a popular and classical definition of democracy as a "government of the people, by the people and for the people."

Democratic government is essentially based on the consent of the governed. Ideally, in a democracy, the people take collective decisions through consensus. But where this is not possible, recourse is made to the majority decision. It is in the latter sense that democracy is often seen as a government of the majority. Though decisions may be made by majority opinion, it should reflect the common interest of all, including the dissenting minority. This implies that all opinions are considered and respected in making decisions.

Direct participation of all in governance or in deliberation on issues is not practicable in large organisations and modern states, due to problems of manageability and specialised knowledge needed for effectiveness. It is only practicable in small organisations or states like Athens of old, or in certain communal villages or towns, like in traditional Igbo society. But in the modern nation-state, people relinquish many aspects of their right of governance to representatives. The people participate in governance through discussion on public issues, forming pressure groups, electing representatives, and voting on referenda. Outside these occasions, the general running of the state is always in the hands of the elected representatives. Hence, it is referred to as representative government. Bryn-Jones (1945, pp.8-9) states:

Its (democracy's) features in the modern world are the responsibility of the government to the people; the choice of representatives by election on the basis of a broad franchise; the freedom of the people to discuss issues of principle, policy, and administration; and opportunity for the people, when they have formed an opinion, to make that opinion effective.

Also MacIver (1956, p.22) describes democracy thus:

The function of the people is not to govern but to make the government constitutionally responsible to, and utterly dependent on, its will. And the only way the people with their multitudinous differences can have a will at all is ... to choose their political representatives.

Democracy operates by the frame of mind of the people. It reflects a people's conception of society, its goal, structure and mode of operation. People resist any structuring of society that runs contrary to their worldview. For efficient democracy, the structuring and governance of society must align with the orientation, values and aspirations of the people. J.S. Mill, in his book *Representative Democracy*, appreciates this fact and recommends that a people's democracy should reflect their level of social development.

Democracy for Nigeria

The efficiency of democracy in any society depends on its blending with the sociopolitical realities. No one model of democracy suits every society. It is always a challenge to model a democracy that suits a people's peculiar sociopolitical situation and perception. The success and effectiveness of any democracy depend on its

ability to promote sociopolitical stability, social justice, and the liberty of individuals and groups to develop their talents and resources to attain their goals.

The dominance of Western culture has led many developing nations to perceive the Western version of democracy (fashioned for Western sociopolitical culture) as the ideal democracy to emulate. This is Eurocentrism that hinders the sociopolitical creativity of many developing nations. This is part of the reason Nigeria copied the British parliamentary system in the First Republic and the American presidential system in the present republic. Western democracies are essentially individualistic and formalistic, blending with the people's historical developments and political socialisation. Nigeria, like other African societies, is not an individualistic society but a communal society with a strong communal ethos permeating every aspect of its social life. A Nigerian is essentially a man-in-community, and he realises himself in the "we-existence" of his community. He does not see himself as an independent, isolated individual who happens to belong to a society. He perceives his being and destiny as inseparable from his community. He is inextricably attached to his community through webs of relationship that transcend the physical and reach the spiritual world, including the living, the dead and the yet unborn. His actions and achievements are not only for himself but also for his community. John Mbiti expresses African communal identity with the phrase, "I am because we are and since we are, I am." (Mbiti 1969)

An African sees it as his responsibility to protect the interests of his community and its members. The community also gives meaning, support and protection to his being. The communal ties start from the basic unit of human aggregation of the immediate family, extended family, and gradually extend to the community, clan, cultural group, and nation to embrace all humanity if properly harnessed. It is this sense of communalism that manifests in the sectional and ethnic cleavages that tend to undermine political stability in Nigeria.

Sectional cleaving in Nigeria, like in many other plural societies, challenges the stability of democracy by stimulating sectional discrimination, struggles for dominance, social injustice and sociopolitical opinion immobility that disrupt social harmony. The common good is sacrificed on the altar of sectional aggrandisement. Dominant groups use their positions to exploit society and marginalise the other minor groups. The minority groups cannot positively and legitimately protect their interests in competition with the dominant groups. They often adopt anti-social and illegitimate means to fight for their rights, which leads to conflicts, violence and instability.

In Nigeria, sectionalism along cultural lines has permeated every aspect of national life, be it in politics, the military, civil service, business and even in educational and recreational institutions. People are known and treated as members of different sectional groups, not as members of one society. National issues are treated not as they affect the common good but as they affect the selfish interests of the groups. People allow themselves to be blinded by sectional sentiments in assessing governmental programmes and making decisions for the country. Those in public service see their positions as opportunities to promote the interests of their groups. They abuse their office as they struggle to concentrate governmental projects and amenities at their sectional base and unjustly secure appointments for the members of their groups. Justice and merit are thrown to the winds. The consequences of all these are moral decadence, social injustice, mediocrity, corruption, sectional distrust and poor inter-sectional relationships that undermine the unity, stability and progress of Nigeria.

The social anomaly and poor inter-sectional relationships intensify the sectional polarisation of political behaviour in society. Political behaviour revolves around sectional solidarity. To attain any sensitive or political position, one has to be a vanguard of a sectional rather than a national course to get a group's support. The groups try to get champions of their course in sensitive positions to avoid being marginalised. This situation undermines tolerance and accommodation of others for the common good of society.

Sectional cleaving in this kind of society hinders the attainment of the "general will" in an unguided majority rule. The people's identification with the interests of their sectional groups on national issues creates a permanent majority and minority based on the numerical strength of the groups. The majority opinion in this situation represents the interests of the majority group. The minority groups are continually marginalised. This was the case in the Nigerian First Republic when the Nigerian People's Congress (NPC), a Northern political party, controlled the national government despite the fact that it pursued sectional Northern interests and

refused to even campaign in the Southern part of the country. It was able to achieve this because the Northern Region, which was its base, had more population than the other parts of the country put together and the other half of the country was also fragmented into smaller groups. The point here is that the general will of the society is abandoned and replaced with the will of the dominant group.

A viable democratic order for Nigeria must recognise the communal cleaving nature of the society as well as its plurality. The neglect of people's communal orientation in governance creates social friction that causes insecurity. Hence,

Political arrangements must be found which accord to all communal groups a meaningful role in national life and which are able to keep communal conflict within manageable bounds. The stability of culturally plural societies is threatened not by communalism, per se, but by the failure of national institutions explicitly to recognise and accommodate existing communal divisions and interests. (Nelson and Wolpe, 1977, p.142)

Consociational Democracy for Nigeria

Consociational democracy is a model of democracy that accommodates a society's plurality and organises the polity through the significant sectional groups that make it up. It recognises individuals as members of communal groups and society as an association of the groups. It therefore structures governance to accommodate the groups by involving their leaders or representatives in governance in proportion to their political and numerical strength, and aspires for the consensus of the representatives. Pinkney (1993, p.12) states:

The object of consociational democracy is to seek consensus between different groups (that make up the society) through a political process that brings all their leaders into the governmental process, whether through properly tailored forms of proportional representation or federalism or by specifically reserving offices of state for members of different groups.

Consociational democracy addresses the problems of marginalisation by adequate representation of all groups in government. The Federal character policy of the Nigerian government and the policy of political parties rotating the presidency and other sensitive government positions among the six geopolitical zones of the country are in line with consociational government. These consociational arrangements should be institutionalised in the constitution.

Consociational democracy could also involve true federalism that respects sectional groups and devolves appropriate powers relating to local autonomy, cultural identity and local affairs. This system aligns with African political communalism, which checks individual or group alienation, protects different levels of human aggregations, harmoniously integrates them into higher aggregations and ensures that everybody is carried along in the process of governance. In traditional African society, an individual is identified through levels of traditional aggregation of family, kindred, village, clan, etc. Issues with conflicting opinions or sides were resolved through elaborate deliberation and consensus. Even when the majority opinion is taken after an elaborate deliberation, such a decision is most likely to reflect the general will.

Consociational democracy ameliorates the fear of majority tyranny, domination and marginalisation. It reduces inter-group conflicts and creates room for trust as each group is secured within the structural provisions to effectively dialogue and represent their interests. In a new and unstable plural society, it can be a step towards the consolidation of the different groups into a more unified democratic society by developing a culture of tolerance and accommodation.

Democracy structured in a government versus opposition model with the "winner-takes-all" orientation is alien to traditional Nigerian socio-political culture. It fans the embers of sectionalism and polarisation of the society, with the exploitation and marginalisation of people in opposition. To run Nigeria by the simple Western democratic principle of the rule of the majority would create one permanent ruling majority group, and the minorities would be permanently in opposition and marginalised from participating in government,

which would prove unsatisfactory and threaten the stability of the society. Northern Nigeria, especially the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, has been dominating Nigerian politics to the dissatisfaction of other ethnic groups. The principle of the “winner-takes-all” without consociational protection of the sectional groups would make the Hausa-Fulani perpetual rulers and marginalise other peoples from national government.

CONCLUSION

Democracy is a system of government that promotes self-determination and people’s participation in their governance. There are different models of democracy depending on the sociopolitical realities of societies. No model is ideal. A democratic society only approximates democratic ideals as it manages its practical challenges in line with its culture and sociopolitics. A particular version adapted to a given society may be very effective, but ineffective for another. It is left for every society to evolve its own version of democracy, considering its sociopolitical history and realities.

Nigeria, as a plural communal society with strong sectional solidarity and inter – ethnic conflicts based on fear of domination and marginalisation, needs a cooperative government that will allay these fears and create room for nation building. The Western liberal democracy of the winner versus opposition conflict model tends to ignore the salience of sectional attachments in hindering the mobility of sociopolitical opinions. Sectional solidarity under this kind of democracy creates permanent winners (the majority group) and permanent losers (the minority group). The majority group continually dominates society and marginalises the minorities, generating dissatisfaction, tensions and instability in society.

Consociational democracy recognises the impact of sectional solidarity in social and political behaviour and accommodates it in structuring governance. It recognises politically relevant sectional groups in a society and builds the society on those solidarities. The groups are adequately involved in the governance, reducing the fear of marginalisation. This aligns with African communalism, where everybody is accommodated and participates in the affairs of the society without discrimination. Strengthening consociational democratic principles in Nigeria would promote integration of the diverse cultural groups in governance, reduce fears of marginalisation, ameliorate conflicts and tensions and create avenues for nation-building.

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