

The Dilemma of Nigeria Statehood: Theoretical Explication

Dr. ODANWU, Augustine Ituma¹, Dr ARUMEDE, Martin Uhwo², Dr. OKENE, Nelson V.C³

¹Open, Distance & e-Learning Centre, University of Port Harcourt.

²Department of Public Administration and Local Government, University of Nigeria Nsukka.

³Department of Public Administration, University of Port Harcourt

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is a country highly blessed with abundant human and natural resources. The population strength and economic relevance of Nigeria to the globe have made it to be once regarded as the giant of Africa. However, following the recent insecurity and economic instability that have bedevilled the country, it has become absolutely difficult to say that the country's strength lies in its diversity. This paper has made some significant efforts to look into the past and the current situations of Nigeria with the view to determine how bad governance, insecurity, ethnicity and religious challenges have plunged Nigeria into its current state of dilemma. The paper recommends national identity, true federalism, accountability and an independent judiciary as panaceas to unite and rescue Nigeria from its fragile state.

Keywords: True Federalism, Ethnicity, Good Governance and Equity Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country with more than 250 ethnic groups (Hilal and Andy 2013), with different languages, cultures and religions. Although these groups have been polarized into Hausa-Fulani-of the northern extraction, the Yoruba-of the southwest, and the Igbo-of the southeast, minority groups under such polarization have been clamouring for recognition and self-independence from their dominators. The forceful amalgamation of Nigerian different ethnic groups in 1914 and her independence in 1960 has made the country to witness series of political, ethnic and religious conflicts, violence and wars. The most prominent of these disputes in Nigeria is the Biafran War which raged for nearly three years from 1967-70 as a result of the attempted secession from Nigeria by then Eastern region led by Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. Notwithstanding the war which was latter put under control, Nigeria today is operating under federal system of government with 36 states grouped into 6 geopolitical zones.

Despite its federal status, Nigeria is considered as a deeply fragile state with major political issues witnessed alongside the complex ethnic, religious, and regional divisions in the country. The issues that have generated the fiercest contestation include those that are considered fundamental to the existence and legitimacy of the Nigerian state; competing groups especially those from the domineering ethnic nationalities tend to adopt exclusionary, winner-take-all strategies (Hilal and Andy 2013). The quest for control of power among the various ethnic and religious groups have enthroned insecurity orchestrated by non-state actors. These activities of the non-state actors have weakened the capacity of the Nigeria state.

In the Northern region, the Boko Haram which started as a form of politically induced militia group has now metamorphosed into a fierce terrorist group(s), in the South East, the agitation for the independence of Biafra has birthed so many restive groups such as Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB and the most recent one, the Independent People of Biafra, IPOB which the federal government has

declared a terrorist organization with its leader under detention for over 5 years. In the West, there was high agitation for the Oduduwa Republic by the Yoruba ethnic nationality.

These various agitations coupled with bad leadership have made Nigeria a fragile state gasping for solutions to maintain its position under one united-state. According to Sletteboe (1997) in Edwin, Odanwu and Arumede (2024), Nigeria is already in a state of problem that cannot provide good solution leaving them to be uncertain about the alternative they are making in providing solutions to its problem. It is on this backdrop that this study sought to answer the following research questions. How has bad governance threatened the existence of Nigeria as a United Nation-State? How has insecurity hindered the unity of Nigeria as a united-state and to what extent has ethnicity and religious differences made Nigeria a fragile State?

Conceptual Discourse Of The Dilemma Of Nigeria Statehood.

National Unity/Ethnicity

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has grappled with the complex challenge of forging a truly united nation out of its vast ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. With over 250 ethnic groups and multiple religions, Nigeria's pluralism is both a source of richness and tension. The aspiration for "unity in diversity" has remained elusive, as centrifugal forces often threaten the cohesion of the state. The dilemma of Nigeria's national unity lies in balancing these diversities with the need for a shared national identity. The roots of Nigeria's unity problem can be traced to the colonial era. The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by the British was carried out primarily for administrative convenience, without considering the distinct social, cultural, and political differences among the regions. This artificial union created a state without a sense of shared destiny.

Before the advent of the colonial system, what is today called Nigeria was made of various independent sovereign states. By 1906, Britain took control of western Africa and these sovereign kingdoms were forced into the Colony (i.e., Lagos) and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria and the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. In 1914 the two regions were amalgamated and the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria was established for British colonial administrative purposes. It is generally agreed that colonialism is the 'cradle' of ethnicity in Nigeria and, more specifically, that the politically salient identities evolved within the context of the contemporary Nigerian state.

With this, the unity of Nigeria as a nation is still in doubt considering the perceptions our nationalists had about the country called Nigeria. Okoli (2003) raised concerns that Chief Awolowo, one of the leading Nigerian nationalists at a time would, for a moment, draw a parallel between Nigerians as he Awolowo stated in 1946 thus:

Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no "Nigerians" in the sense as there are "English", "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.

In 1948, the prime minister of Nigeria, Sir Abubaka Tafawa Belewa was reported to have affirmed in the Legislative Council that:

Since 1914, the British has been trying to make Nigeria into one country but the Nigeria people themselves are historically different in their background, in their religious beliefs and customs, and do not show themselves any sign of willingness to unite... Nigeria Unity is only a British intention for the country...

Indeed, colonialism was one of the most important factors in the crystallization of contemporary identities and identity conflicts in Nigeria. By blending the different ethnic groups into a culturally artificial political entity for instance, the British stimulated inter-group competition and mobilization for power and resources in the new state, thereby fostering ethnic conflicts.

According to Udokang (2006) during the late colonial era in 1954, Nigeria was made a federal structure of three units, namely, the northern, western, and eastern regions. Although it reflected the historic patterns by which the British acquired and administered Nigeria as well as the country's tripartite major ethnic configuration, the three-region federal structure was inherently divisive, disintegrative and unstable. The tripartite federal structure, in particular, promoted the invidious political hegemony of the Hausa-Fulani-dominated northern region, which officially contained over half of the country's population and two-thirds of its territory; fostered ethnic majority chauvinism and secessionism by erecting the boundaries of the northern, western and eastern regions around the identities of the major ethnic formations of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, respectively; fuelled ethnic minority agitations because it denied the country's non-Hausa-Fulani, non-Yoruba and non-Igbo groups the security of their own regions; and encouraged an enormous degree of ethno-regional polarization as the imbalanced tripartite ethno-regional structure (which became even more structurally lopsided with the creation of the Mid-west region in the south in 1963) inexorably collapsed into a bi-polar north-south confrontation (Chris, 2014).

At independence, regionalism dominated politics, as leaders prioritized ethnic and regional interests over national cohesion. The first republic's collapse in 1966 and the subsequent civil war (1967–1970) further exposed the fragility of Nigeria's unity

The lopsided colonial ethno-regional federal structure in particular, was heavily implicated in the first wave of violent ethno-political discontent and conflict in the postcolonial era, as evidenced in the Tiv riots of 1962 and 1964, and the secessionist campaign of Isaac Boro and his Ijaw collaborators in 1966, all of which underscored the continuing disenchantment of the ethnic minorities with their inequitable incorporation into the majority-dominated regions. The polarizing effects of ethno-regional federalism were more or less directly expressed in several other political tribulations that assailed Nigeria in the sixties, including: the 1962 declaration of a state of emergency in the Western region; the bitter ethno-regional dispute over the 1962-63 census; the 1964 federal election crisis; the 1965 western election debacle; the eventual overthrow of the First Nigerian Democratic Republic in 1966 following a bloody ethno-military coup; the complete fragmentation and politicization of the military establishment along ethno-regional lines; the attempted secession of the Eastern region, as the independent Republic of Biafra; and, the eventual outbreak of the 30-month civil war, which claimed an estimated one million lives, mainly in the ill-fated Biafra.

During the postcolonial era, Nigeria is still witnessing ethnic and national unity problems. These problems range from mutual suspicion, distrust and hatred amongst the diverse ethnic groups. Disagreements are often expressed through violent acts which have given birth to a violent culture in some parts of the country today thereby threatening the socio-economic development of Nigeria.

Religious Differences

Nigeria's political evolution has been influenced by religion from colonial times. The North, which was predominately Muslim, was regulated differently by British colonial authority than the South, which was predominately Christian and orthodox, leading to disparities in political and educational prospects. Following independence in 1960, religious identities influenced elections, public policies, and leadership competitions by becoming more and more entwined with ethnic and regional politics (Rat, 2020). Today, religion is another fault line in Nigeria's unity. The country is almost evenly divided between Christianity and Islam, with a growing number of adherents of traditional beliefs. Religious intolerance, especially between the Muslim-majority North and the Christian-majority South, has fueled recurrent conflicts. People have died, property has been destroyed, communities have been uprooted, and national cohesion has been undermined as a result of these conflicts. The adoption of Sharia law in some northern states in the early 2000s reignited fears of Islamization, while the Boko Haram insurgency has intensified perceptions of religious polarization. Since 1999, a number of northern states have increased the use of Sharia law for Muslims in both criminal and personal cases. Critics contend that it creates constitutional issues pertaining to equality, human rights, and the consistent administration of justice within a federal system, while advocates see this as an act of religious freedom (Igbokwe Ibeto, Agbodike, and Anazodor 2015).

Just recently, the US President Donald Trump declared Nigeria a country of particular concern and ordered the military to prepare for action in Nigeria to tackle Islamist militant groups, accusing the government of failing to protect Christians. This action resulted to US strike on 25 December, 2025 in the northwestern Sokoto State as part of a broader campaign to degrade IS and its affiliates allegedly operating in the region (Malik, 2026).

Resource Control/Revenue Sharing

Economic disparity among regions further complicates the unity question. The concentration of oil wealth in the Niger Delta has led to feelings of exploitation and neglect among local communities, sparking militancy and calls for resource control. Similarly, the persistent poverty in the North and the uneven distribution of infrastructure across regions create resentment and suspicion toward the federal government. Resource control and allocation of revenue among units of a federation are very significant for both political and economic reasons (Watts, 2013). In Nigeria, the discovery, exploration, and subsequent realisation of huge revenue from the sale of oil, especially in the 1970's has led to high tension, controversy, negative politics, unhealthy rivalry among the components of Nigerian federalism and peoples. These have also been followed by dislocation and deterioration of economic and political development, unity and cohesion of Nigerian state; and instead of optimum utilisation of the proceeds from oil to invest in and diversify other non-oil sectors, there lingered the problem of both inefficient use and inequity in the distribution of oil wealth. With that, Nigeria became confronted by many forces among which are, the units of the government (federal, states and local) which all rely, near absolutely on oil revenue, and non-government dissident elements and groups who also enjoy the illegal oil money and increased animosity among its populace. The process of revenue generation and allocation has all along been defined by political contentions at numerous levels, such as in the constitutional development, fiscal and monetary policies and programmes, political scheming, militant activities and threats of secession (Oyediran, 1979). The oil resources predominantly found in the minority areas in Nigeria's has been held and controlled by the conglomerate of the major tribes who control the state political machinery. Increase in oil revenue has similarly, led to misuse by political leaders and more corrupt practices rather than investment and diversifications. Since the discovery of oil, Nigeria economic and socio developmental track have been dependent on oil revenue which contributed the inefficiency been witnessed in other vital sector such as agriculture and solid minerals which were the largest employers of labour (Watts, 2013). Indeed, the existing inadequacies and problems of Nigeria's federalism, especially on resource control and allocation have generated calls for fiscal federalism which most Nigerians commonly refer to as 'true federalism' (Suberu in Loughlin et al., 2013).

Corruption And Governance

Poor governance and corruption exacerbate the crisis of unity. When public officials divert resources for personal or sectional gain, they weaken citizens' trust in the state and in one another. The perception that national resources are captured by certain groups deepens the sense of alienation among others, fostering agitation for secession or self-determination, as seen in movements like IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra) and Yoruba Nation advocates.

As advocated by Ekanola (2006), Nigeria is not an ethnically homogenous society, having come into being accidentally, as a product of British imperialism. Today, rather than integrating into a cohesive community with a common sense of national identity and destiny, citizens of Nigeria are returning more and more to primordial affiliations for identity, loyalty and security. Instead of forging a united front and presenting a concerted effort to face the challenges of development in an increasingly competitive and globalised world, Nigerians are busy waging ethnic and religious wars, struggling for control over resources, resisting marginalization by dominant ethnic groups, and contending with diverse problems of basic survival.

Since the return of civilian rule in 1999, our democracy has been insecure ranging from electoral malpractices to mysterious deaths of political office holders. Bad governance has contributed to the insecurity across the six geo-political zones in Nigeria. These problems individually and collectively have constituted threats to the peace, security and development of the country.

Insecurity

The security challenge that dissident groups such as Boko Haram, unknown Gun Men and IPOB pose to the state of Nigeria is better understood against existing evidence that even government officials and traditional rulers are not spared. We have read of kidnappings targeted against the executive, legislative, and the judicial branch of the government, and also their family members. This, unfortunately, has led to some of these officials relocating their families outside the geopolitical zone or outside the country, thereby leaving the civilian population at the mercy of the marauding gangs. This attitude is setting a dangerous trend as individuals might be forced to approach the issue of their security from the realist perspective and resort to self-help. This would of course immerse the zones into further security dilemma. While one is not saying that the security apparatus of the country is not doing anything in the zones, one is of the opinion that they are not doing enough.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design approach that made use of secondary sources of data collection such as textbooks, journals, newspapers, magazines, seminar papers, etc. It made use of content analysis.

Theoretical Framework For Analysing The Dilemma Of The Nigerian State

This study adopts Equity Theory as the most appropriate theory in analysing the dilemma of the Nigerian state. Equity theory was developed in the 1960s by J. Stacy Adams. A key tenet of the theory is equitable distribution of resources. Equity theory focuses on determining whether the distribution of resources is fair to all relational partners. It proposes that individuals who perceive themselves as either under-rewarded or over-rewarded will experience distress, and that this distress leads to efforts to restore equity within the relationship.

Equity theory consists of four propositions:

1. Individuals seek to maximize their outcomes (where outcomes are defined as rewards minus costs)
2. Groups can maximize collective rewards by developing acceptable systems for equitably apportioning rewards and costs among members. Systems of equity will evolve within groups, and members will attempt to induce other members to accept and adhere to these systems. The only way groups can induce members to equitably behave is by making it more profitable to behave equitably than inequitably. Thus, groups will generally reward members who treat others equitably and generally punish (increase the cost for) members who treat others inequitably.
3. When individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they become distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress individuals feel. According to equity theory, both the person who gets "too much" and the person who gets "too little" feel distressed. The person who gets too much may feel guilt or shame. The person who gets too little may feel angry or humiliated.
4. Individuals who perceive that they are in an inequitable relationship attempt to eliminate their distress by restoring equity. The greater the inequity, the more distress people feel and the more they try to restore equity (Walster, Traupmann and Walster, 1978).

According to Okoli, Equity theory is probably best expressed in the basic form, by the cliché of antiquity. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". In order words, it is the position that, to the extent they can, people are motivated to repay others, to behave toward others the way others behave towards them. If you treat others with kindness and respect, they will treat you likewise. Give them a hard time and they will intend to give you a hard time when they too have the opportunity. Most of the crises and calls for restructuring going on in Nigeria today is because some group of people felt that state creation, resources, recruitment and appointment are not equitably done. Therefore, to restore total peace and unity of the country, there shall be equity and fairness both in appointment, recruitment and resource distributions among various ethnic groups or regions in Nigeria. In the

southeast, the zone has been raising alarm of marginalization. Out of the six geopolitical zones, only Southeast has five states, other zones have six states except for the northeast that has seven states. The south-south is clamouring for resource reallocation formula as they feel cheated that their resources are used to develop other states. The west is demanding decongestion of their cities as a result of influx of people from the other states. The North is demanding for permanent leadership as they believe that they are born to rule with their population figures (Ushigiale, 2021).

In terms of service delivery, the level of productivity in within public organizations are very low (Odanwu, Agu, Ozo, Chinweike and Onwe, 2024). Workers feel that they are not been paid well. In case of disobedience to the rules, equity theory would tell us that employees were expressing a basic and situationally induced resentment against the organization, the regimentation, poor promotion prospects, boredom, and a somewhat authoritarian structure are inducing them to repay the organization for the baseless and indignities to which they have been subjected. Therefore, there is the need for overall reward system for organizations to perform better. There seems to be inequality that exists both in the institutional and structural framework of Nigeria, and the equity theory will help us in proposing an equity framework for Nigeria.

Solutions To The Dilemma Of Nigeria Statehood

National Identity

Since independence, Nigeria has suffered from bad leadership. Leadership in the country has always been driven through religious and regional manipulation. Our political leaders have always emerged along religious or ethnic lines. When Nigeria achieved independence from Great Britain in October 1960, it was a nation in name only. According to Hilal and Andy (2013) in the colonial era, the British adopted political and administrative policies of divide and rule that mobilized and manipulated the ethnic consciousness that eventually emerged from the violence of the colonial state. In order to combat nationalists and uphold colonial authority and power within the British enclave, the British policy of divide and conquer first embraced ethnicity and sectionalism. This made Nigeria to exist only as a political and legal entity, not as an effective and emotive identity. It was not a nation in the sense of community and common character. It was a state encompassing many ethnic nations, each claiming their own separate heritage, language, and culture. At independence, Nigeria's peoples for the most part had not yet come to think of themselves as Nigerians. Ethnic loyalty took precedence over national identity. The nation's people identified themselves primarily as Hausa-Fulani, Ibo, or Yoruba, for example. Their identity as Nigerians lay in the shadow of their tribal and parochial allegiances. Independent Nigeria emerged as a new political entity without a common history or common tradition. It had to build itself as a nation, while at the same time developing its powers as a state. The background of its federal form dimmed the prospects of both tasks. Therefore, since Nigeria comprises more than 250 ethnic groups, encouraging loyalty to the nation alongside local identities can help reduce conflict and promote cooperation. A stronger national identity will shift political competition away from ethnic loyalties toward issues such as economic development, education, healthcare, and security. It will encourage voters to assess candidates based on competence rather than ethnicity. National identity reinforces the principle that all Nigerians have equal rights and responsibilities under the law. It will help to reduce discrimination based on ethnic origin or state of birth.

True Federalism

The region that is now Nigeria was home to people from various empires, kingdoms, and cultures with various systems of administration long before British colonialists arrived. The Yorubas had a quasi-federal system with powers vested in the Obas and Kingmakers, the Igbos were acephalous (republican) with powers not vested in a single authority, and the Hausa-Fulani operated a centralised form of government vested in the Emir (Udokang, 2006). However, this changed due to the invasion and conquest by the British imperialists in the 19th century who changed the style of governance of a once self-accounting political system of the people (Ovwassa and Idowu, 2014). At the independence in 1960 and 1963 the constitutions provided for full implementation of Nigeria as a federation which made each region enjoyed full autonomy and freedom from central control (Alu, 2018). However, at the price of regional and ethnic autonomy, the military intervention strengthened unitary government. In accordance with its centralised command and authority system, the military practically destroyed

federalism by running Nigeria as a unitary state for more than 40 years (Ekwueme 2016). This means that every institution established by the military and the Nigerian state's constitutions have adhered to the previously outlined pattern. Till date, the way the country is currently run has become a significant barrier to political, economic, and administrative advancement. Therefore, in view of the country's rich multi-ethnicities, languages, religions and cultures, true federalism is a recommended instrument for peaceful co-existence and mutual flourishing. Federations have often been formed by the coming together of a number of established political communities which nevertheless wish to preserve their separate identities and, to some extent, their autonomy. As discussed above, the historical sovereignty of each member state, must be recognized and respected. As a political form, federalism requires the existence of two distinct levels of government, neither of which is legally subordinate to the other. This ensures, at least in theory that neither level of government can encroach on the powers of the other. A successful federal system is based on a compromise between unity and regional diversity, between the need for an effective central power and the need for checks or constraints on that power. Therefore, by decentralizing power, fostering economic growth, enhancing accountability, and enabling states to better address local needs, true federalism has the potential to solve many of Nigeria's long-standing problems. By true federalism, states would have greater control over the natural resources within their territories while contributing an agreed share of revenue to the federal government. This will encourage states to develop agriculture, mining, tourism, manufacturing, and other sectors rather than relying heavily on federal allocations. It will enable states to establish or exercise greater control over local policing and security structures. Security agencies that are familiar with local communities will respond more effectively to crime and conflict.

Independent Judiciary

Political influence and inadequate financial autonomy often result in underfunded courts, case backlogs, and delayed justice, contrary to the principle that "justice delayed is justice denied. Without judicial independence, court decisions may be influenced by the executive or powerful political actors rather than the law. This weakens public confidence in the legal system and undermines constitutional governance. Citizens cannot effectively enforce their constitutional rights when courts lack independence. An impartial judiciary is necessary to protect individuals from arbitrary actions of government (Odinkalu, 2025). The protection of the enumerated powers, in turn, presupposes some form of independent judicial review. Since a federal system will present conflicts among the member states and between the states and the national government. According to Norman (2017), Madison explained that "some ... tribunal is clearly essential to prevent an appeal to the sword and a dissolution of the compact," and the "decision is to be impartially made, according to their rules of the Constitution." In order words, the task of safeguarding federalism's structure must be entrusted, neither to the states nor the federal government, but rather to the courts, in the course of judicial review. Federalism's purpose is to enhance and protect the citizen's liberty and welfare. To that end, the federal government must be disabled from encroaching into the states jurisdiction and nobody but the courts can provide such restraint.

Accountability.

Representation and accountability go hand-in-hand: elected leaders are more likely to represent their constituents faithfully when they know they are held accountable for their actions. Accountability is impossible without transparent responsibility. Therefore, it is claimed that authority decentralization improves accountability because citizens are more likely to see the effects of government action at the local level and respond accordingly in the ballot box. Nigerian citizens face a key challenge in holding their political representatives accountable, since decentralization reforms tend to be partial in nature, leading to the involvement of multiple tiers of government in the provision of public goods. Under complete decentralization, voters can limit governments rent seeking by setting appropriate re-election incentives. The ability of voters to hold politicians accountable is lower under partial decentralization than under complete decentralization.

Decentralization of expenditure responsibilities from central to local governments is generally thought to increase overall government accountability by bringing the policymaking process closer to citizens. Decentralization of expenditure responsibilities from central to local levels of government is generally thought to mitigate the

problem by bringing the policymaking process closer to citizens and, hence, to increase overall government accountability.

The World Bank (2004), for example, has strongly advocated decentralization on the basis that it will help to solve corruption problems, especially in developing countries. The standard intuition that decentralization should be accountability-improving is consistent with theoretical models considering complete decentralization, i.e. the full transfer of a given expenditure responsibility from a higher level of government to a lower one.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's unity dilemma is not insurmountable, but it requires sincerity of purpose, visionary leadership, and collective commitment. True unity will not come from slogans or decrees but from deliberate efforts to build trust, justice, and inclusiveness. As the nation continues to navigate its diversity, only a genuine embrace of equality and shared destiny can transform Nigeria's pluralism from a source of division into a pillar of strength.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. This study recommends that strong national identification should be prioritised over ethnic, religious, and regional allegiances. Regardless of race or religion, citizens must have equal access to public services, political appointments, and employment opportunities. Media outlets must be urged to suppress hate speech and spread unifying ideas
2. The Nigerian Constitution should be amended to give states more authority, particularly in the areas of resource management, taxes, and policing. Giving states more authority over internally generated revenues while promoting equity and lowering an over-reliance on oil revenue should be encouraged.
3. Digital technology should be used to update Nigeria's legal system in order to increase its effectiveness and transparency. Judges should be appointed and promoted in an open and merit-based manner, and they should be shielded from intimidation and political meddling. This will reinforce constitutional order, resolve political disagreements equitably, and increase public trust in the legal system.
4. Anti-corruption organisations must be strengthened by ensuring their operational independence in order to decrease corruption, enhance service delivery, and boost public trust. Whistleblower protection, civic engagement, and information freedom should all promote citizen participation.

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