

## **THE IMPERATIVE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LITERACY FOR SUSTENANCE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA**

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### ***Abstract***

Developing democracies are typically among the world's most corrupt and politically unequal countries where participation in government has become the exclusive right of a few elites. Many, like Nigeria, lack the strong and effective political institutions required to support democratic consolidation and economic development. However, as experience has shown, it is not easy to establish such institutions in Nigeria because of the low level of political engagement and literacy. Research has shown that community-driven development and civic education programs have struggled to encourage broad-based political engagement in the country. Similarly, political information and interventions in the country have failed to increase political engagement as many Nigerians, particularly the youth, remain apolitical and, therefore, outside the key decision-making processes. This attitude is dangerous for democracy sustenance because civic engagement in the political process and electoral participation are necessary for the prosperity of democracy. This attitude, however, is not a happenchance; it is fueled by citizens' disappointment and frustration with the pattern of government inaction and corruption that have characterised political governance since independence. Because of this, the citizens feel there is no benefit in dedicating their valuable time and resources to political actions that yield little or no dividends. To ensure that democracy survives in Nigeria, the paper recommends, among other things, strict adherence to constitutional provisions, especially in the conduct of elections, youth empowerment through innovative and catalytic projects to inform public policy-making, training them as effective leaders, extending access to justice and fairness in the political system and eliminating corruption that will ensure that national resources are used for the common good.

**Keywords:** Political participation, political literacy, democratic sustenance

## **Introduction**

According to Ogu (viii), democracy is the best form of government suited to allowing people to live in dignity and freedom whose overriding objective is to promote liberty, entrench freedom in acknowledgement of the natural tendencies of men to dominate others and domesticate power for the benefit of the people. The importance of democracy underscores the international community's effort through the 1997 Universal Declaration on Democracy to promote democracy worldwide. The declaration describes democracy as an ideal and goal that is based on common values shared by people throughout the world community, irrespective of cultural, social, and economic differences. Oke (312-313) affirms the opportunity democracy provides to participate in decision-making in all political processes. It follows the principles laid down by political philosophers such as John Locke in abhorring arbitrariness and authoritarianism, elevating the powers of the governed and protecting human rights such as the right to liberty, property and others. Democracy extols equality, popular sovereignty, majority rule and protection of minority rights, popular consensus on fundamental national issues and periodic elections involving the free choice of candidates. It confers on all citizens of voting age the right to participate in decision-making.

While the democratic process refers to all the activities that cumulate in the enthronement of a democratic regime, political participation implies the involvement of all citizens in the democratic process and other political affairs of the country. It includes the various mechanisms through which the public expresses their views on the affairs of the country; it enables them to influence the decision of the government and confers authority and legitimacy on the government of the day. One of the significant indicators of democracy is election, and elections have meaning for most people only in a democratic context because they lead to the choice of decision-makers by the majority of the citizens (Ogu 100). However, while democracy and elections are inextricably linked, democracy goes beyond the opportunity of election. For democracy to be sustainable, it has to be liberal and participatory (Arowolo and Aluko 798).

Political participation includes many other ways, other than voting, that citizens can get involved in the affairs of the country. Such ways include campaigning and lobbying for their interests, being members of political parties, attending civil and political meetings, protesting and civil disobedience, forming social movements (movements such as the Obidients, Kwankwasiya, etc.), forming and belonging to nongovernmental organizations or civil society and demanding accountability, transparency and openness in the governance of the society. These activities influence the politics and governance of the state and, therefore, constitute the bulk of political participation.

Political literacy, synonymous with political education, is an essential tool for political socialization, which is a process through which the citizens get to learn the norms necessary for involvement and participation in the affairs of the country. Bernard Crick and Alex Potter developed the idea in their 1978 book *Political Education and Political Literacy*. The book defines political literacy as "where a person has the knowledge, skills and attitudes to allow them to both understand and know how to engage in public events and debates." Understanding conceptual knowledge and facts helps develop citizen competence. This enables people to practice skills, participate in political reasoning, and take action with others to

address political problems through active citizenship. Thus, when people learn and are educated about their rights and responsibilities, they become full members of society, ready to participate in and contribute to the development of the nation. These necessary norms, knowledge, skills, values and guiding standards can neither be learned nor appreciated without a good measure of literacy. A person who is illiterate about his rights as a citizen will not know when such rights have been violated and will not know the measures to take to seek redress. Such a person will not be informed about issues and will always be manipulated by the government. Political education empowers a person with the knowledge and attitude he needs to make informed decisions that will sustain his membership in the state.

In Nigeria, however, one of the key challenges facing the development of democracy is the lack of political participation by all citizens. Since the return to civil rule in 1999, many Nigerians, particularly the youth, have not been actively involved and engaged in the democratic process. Due to entrenched systemic and institutional policies, they have been locked out of the system. In some instances, the money needed to prosecute elections is outrageously high that many youths cannot afford; there is also the age barrier for certain elective positions and corruption and bad governance orchestrated by the political leaders that leave many youths disillusioned and uninterested in politics. This paper therefore seeks to examine the importance of political participation and political literacy of citizens to the sustenance of democracy. It clarifies the meaning of key concepts such as political participation and political literacy. It examines the extent and level of political participation in Nigeria and the factors that have hindered the full realization of these noble political values.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The following theories underpin the work:

1. Elite theory
2. Democratic participant theory

**The Elite Theory:** This theory was popularized by Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) and Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941) and is aimed at philosophically explaining the role of leadership in governance as it affects public policy including all socio-economic and political matters. The theory holds that it is essential to understand the role of elites who dominate the formal institutions of the state and determine the process of governance and decision-making processes. It holds that the elites are the decision-makers in the society whose powers are not subject to control by any other body in the society. According to Dowse and Hughes (243), the theory is premised on the following assumptions:

1. Society consists of two categories: the selected few, who are capable and, therefore, have the right to supreme leadership, and the vast masses of people who desire to be ruled.
2. That the majority of human beings are apathetic, indolent and slavishly uninformed about what goes on in the administrative system and permanently incapable of self-government. That is, the elite decides on the structure, the personnel and the process of public policies of the administrative system;

3. Hence, the structure, substance and output of the administrative system may be viewed as the preferences and values of the governing elite.

The elite theory postulates that public policy reflects not the demands and interests of the masses but rather the values and preferences of the elite. The elite is fewer in number; in fact, there are just a few individuals who wield power and hold leading and strategic positions in society. The masses just obey and are guided, controlled and governed by the few. Ikelegbe (201) posits that many of the elites do not hold formal or legal authority but rather stay behind, influencing decisions and policy actions. They dictate who gets what, when and how. This is what makes the masses unable to challenge the authoritative position of the elite, that which informs the elites' reflection of policy and its processes.

**Democratic Participant Theory:** The theory is a modification of the social responsibility theory (Johnson and Johnson 103) propounded in 1987 by Dennis McQuail, which proposes that the media should be democratized in order to be able to support the expression of the views and opinions of all citizens in respect of governance, leadership and stewardship of leaders in public governance. In other words, the theory advocates accessibility by all and sundry (Asemah, 106). The theory emphasizes the need for equal and unhindered access, popular participation, and plurality in ownership and access to the media. Every individual, regardless of class, sex or position, should be able to access the media. Participation in governance and decision-making should not be the exclusive preserve of a few but for all citizens. Access to the media enables everyone to air their views about what is happening in society.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

**Political participation:** it can be loosely defined as citizens' activities affecting politics. Ever since Pericles' famous funeral speech (431 BCE), politicians and scholars have stressed democracy's unique character by emphasizing the role of ordinary citizens in the affairs of the state. According to Uhlaner (114), it refers to voluntary activities undertaken by the mass public to influence public policy, either directly or by affecting the selection of persons who make policies. These activities include voting in elections, helping a political campaign, donating money to a candidate or cause, contacting officials, petitioning, protesting, and working with other people on issues. Huntington and Nelson (350) are of the view that political participation means activities by private citizens designed to influence government decision-making. It is more or less an activity that expresses an individual's political will. Political participation is relevant for any political system. Still, it is an indispensable feature of democracy, for where few take part in decisions, there is little democracy and the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is (Verba and Nie 45). Thus, the extent and scope of political participation are significant, perhaps even more decisive criteria for assessing the quality and strength of democracy.

**Political literacy/education:** scholars across the social sciences have used political education and literacy interchangeably, and so in this paper, we shall follow the same route. Denver and Hands (279) conceived them as the knowledge and understanding of political issues which enable people to perform their roles as citizens effectively. Similarly, Galston (224) conceived

political education as the potential for informed participation in political activities. Annette (7) argued that political education is education that is based on the study of politics for the purpose of encouraging civic participation, as well as the development of virtues and political knowledge through the provision of opportunity for service learning or active learning in the community.

As previously noted, political education is used here interchangeably with literacy to mean the transmission and acquisition of political knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for informed participation in the political process. A politically educated citizen is a citizen who has acquired the basic political knowledge and awareness that enhances the citizen's involvement in conventional political activities. One can glean from the above that political participation includes a broad range of activities through which people develop and express their opinions on the world and how it is governed and try to take part in and shape the decisions that affect their lives.

### **History of Democratic Governance in Nigeria**

Nigeria became independent on October 1, 1960. The period between this date and January 15, 1966, when the first military coup took place, is generally referred to as the First Republic. However, the country only became a Republic on October 1, 1963. As Ogu (xi) pointed out, at independence, Nigeria had all the features of a democratic state. Other African countries saw it as a hope for democracy on the continent. However, the hope was dashed as Nigeria struggled through several military coups, culminating in a military rule that lasted for thirteen years before the Second Republic began on October 1, 1979, with the inauguration of the Shehu Shagari government. The second Republic was short-lived as the military struck again on December 31, 1983, thereby starting a second wave of military rule that only ended briefly with the aborted Third Republic in 1992. The military would again strike in 1993 through General Sani Abacha, who died in office in June 1993, forcing a change in government with Abdulsalam Abubakar taking over. General Abubakar engineered a transition programme that led to the inauguration of President Olusegun Obasanjo as civilian president on May 29, 1999.

So many factors have been fingered as being responsible for the failure of the many attempts at consolidating democracy in the country. Some of them include ethnically based federal regions with uneven sizes and power, which is perhaps the single most significant factor that led to the collapse of the First Republic; ethno-regional political parties and the emotive association between parties and regions; the fear of ethnic dominance of the Igbo and Yoruba in the South against the mainly Muslim North (Ogu 62-63), corruption of the political elites/leaders, marginalization of governance by a few elites and the low participation of the generality of the masses. However, Nigeria's democracy was severely weakened by the civil war of 1967-1970 and the centralization of power during the military era. The conflict helped concentrate oil revenues in the hands of military officials and seeded a powerful, wealthy and often corrupt military elite. The dictatorships militarized Nigeria's political space and disrupted the flourishing of democratic institutions and culture.



### **The level of Political Participation in Nigeria**

As Falade (19) noted, the political stability and development of any political system is a function of the awareness of the citizens in civic and political matters. In Nigeria, however, there is a low level of political participation among Nigerians. Many Nigerians are indifferent to political matters. According to data obtained from INEC, voters' turnout in national elections has declined from a high of 69% in 2003 to an abysmal low of 29% in 2023. This apathy is mainly attributed to the declining confidence of most Nigerians in the electoral process due primarily to lack of transparency in elections, election violence and the noncommittal of politicians to their campaign promises.

The consequence of this, Fabiyi (583) noted, is the inability of the Nigerian masses to have a link between their state of underdevelopment and their non-participation in the electoral process. This is why Falade (121) concluded that the Nigerian political culture has not given rise to the entrenchment and sustenance of true democracy. Arowolo and Aluko (801) decried the low level of women's participation in Nigerian politics. In any given society, women's full, active and effective participation in politics and decision-making is a matter of human rights, inclusive growth, and sustainable development. Given that Nigeria has ratified many international conventions and protocols on women's rights and gender equality, the low level of women's representation in government and decision-making bodies is a violation of their fundamental democratic rights. The ugly situation is a breach of the National Gender Policy and INEC's Gender policy, which promotes women's participation in the political and electoral process. Women are not the only group marginalized and excluded from the political process; people living with disabilities and the youth are among other groups that have been denied effective participation. They are often systematically marginalized and often overlooked or excluded from positions as political candidates.

### **Political Participation, Literacy and Democracy Sustenance: a nexus**

Political participation and literacy are fundamental for the effective functioning and survival of any political system. They help promote inclusivity and a sense of belonging, as well as inculcate political values and orientation in people. Political literacy is a means of role-playing; it provides citizens with the crucial ability necessary for political participation or the performance of critical political roles in society. It helps to establish discipline within the political community. Political literacy is at the heart of good citizenship teaching, which brings political education, thinking and action together in the curriculum.

Education that fosters literacy is a universal human right; it is a means of achieving other human rights and an empowering social and economic tool. Through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international community agreed that everyone has a right to education. Every society transmits its habits of mind, social norms, culture and ideals from one generation to the next. There is a direct connection between education and democratic values; in democratic societies, educational content and practice support habits of democratic governance. This educational transmission process is vital in a democracy because effective democracies are dynamic, evolving forms of government that demand independent thinking by the citizenry. The opportunity for positive social and political change rests in citizens' hands.

However, despite the guarantee of fundamental human rights and liberties in Nigerian constitutions since independence, the nation's democratic development has been hampered by military interventions. This has negated the promotion and protection of democratic values and freedoms in Nigeria. As a result, poor human rights records have remained a fact of the Nigerian democratic system due to a weak orientation and appreciation of human rights provisions and the measures to safeguard and enforce them. It is against this development that the Federal Government of Nigeria (2004) observed that literacy can be used to effect changes in the attitude and orientation of the citizens, particularly the aspects of political participation and human rights. Similarly, UNESCO's Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy (1995) provides that education must prepare citizens to cope with difficult and uncertain situations and fit them for personal autonomy and responsibility within the political system. It is only in democracies that popular participation and respect for citizens' rights are guaranteed, which in turn leads to the prosperity of democracy.

Democracy upholds the ideals of freedom, free and fair competition, popular and meaningful participation, responsiveness, transparency, and accountability. It guarantees the right to challenge arbitrary and unfavourable government policies, the right to agitate for and uphold citizens' rights and interests, press freedom and opinions, free access to information about government policies, actions, and decisions, and the freedom to own private property. On the other hand, the political aspect of literacy is a set of practices and activities designed to equip citizens to participate actively in democratic life, assuming and exercising their rights and responsibilities in society. Political literacy enables people to look beyond their interests and participate in deliberations that promote and safeguard the rights of the public. These ideals are needed for the growth and sustenance of democracy.

Political literacy fortifies democratic governance. Democratic governance thrives better in a politically socialized environment where human rights are recognized and respected. However, what we have witnessed in Nigeria is a violation of the rights of the people and repression of legitimate opposition to government misrule. This is why Achebe (16) lamented that ineffective political leadership is the bane of political and economic development in Nigeria. It is the place of political literacy to expose, sensitize and inculcate democratic principles and values as a measure of actively restoring good democratic governance in Nigeria. Diamond (25) posited that only in a climate of true political and civil freedom can a country achieve the absolute conditions for development, responsible government, that is, a government that is committed to the advancement of the public good rather than the private interests of its officials and their families and cronies.

## **Conclusion**

Given its history and current trajectory, democracy is essential to the survival of the Nigerian nation. Military government was not more just, accountable, or efficient than democracy, nor was it less corrupt. Democracy has not yet delivered a considerable uplift in the living standards of most Nigerians. Still, it remains the only system of government that offers the hope of reconciling the extraordinary plurality of religious, ethnic, and political traditions of its large population. It is the only system of government which can create a fair society without resorting to oppression or the exclusion of considerable parts of the population. It is also

essential for the rest of Africa for democracy to survive in Nigeria. Half of West Africans are Nigerians, and if democracy were to fail there, it would have enormous implications for the rest of the continent and the world. Thus, whatever needs to be done to ensure the sustenance of democracy must be considered worthy and timely, too.

### **Recommendations**

If democracy is to be sustained in Nigeria, the following measures aimed at promoting political participation and literacy among Nigerians should be taken:

1. **Public awareness campaigns and sensitization workshops:** Currently, political literacy is missing from our schools, thereby depriving young people of this vital education. Democratic engagement and political literacy are mutually related. We cannot expect a high level of critical engagement in democracy without first ensuring those who can vote are informed of their democratic rights and responsibilities. The National Orientation Agency (NOA), in collaboration with the various local government councils and civil society organizations, should regularly organize these campaigns about changes to the voting system to ensure that every eligible voter can continue to access his democratic rights. It is only when a person knows what he ought to know that he can participate in the political process.
2. **Commitment to election campaign promises and good governance:** The non-committal of politicians to their campaign promises, which endangers good governance, is one reason behind the reluctance of many Nigerians to get involved in politics. Political leaders in Nigeria have become notorious for failure to make a clear separation between what is public and what is private, hence always diverting public resources for private gain. Hence, this paper recommends that politicians commit to good governance by demonstrating accountability, openness and transparency. This helps to build trust between those who make decisions, those who implement them and the population at large (Ogu and Ezebuoro 270).
3. **Poverty reduction and provision of social support for the politically marginalized:** The high poverty rate in Nigeria means that many Nigerians cannot participate in politics. Thus, to ensure the active and full participation of all citizens, poverty, especially of the politically marginalized, must be addressed through the provision of economic empowerment programmes and social support services. The Not Too Young To Run Bill, signed into law by former president Buhari in 2018, is one of such services. Political parties can reserve a certain number of elective positions for social groups such as women, the youth, people with disabilities and so on. In addition, payment for expression of intent and nomination forms can be waived for such groups. This will create a level playing field for all and thus encourage full participation.
4. **Elimination of gender discrimination, promotion of equality and dignity of all:** Given the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society, which confers more rights and opportunities on men and deprives women of the same, women find it increasingly difficult to get into politics and participate in the decision-making process of the country. In some societies,



women are still traditionally seen as just homemakers whose roles and functions do not extend that. In a male-dominated world, women are only to be seen but not heard, and that affects their full political participation. In view of this, this paper recommends commitment and enforcement of the National Gender Policy (NGP), which provides for the allocation of 35% of all appointments in the public sector to women. A situation where women constitute less than 10% of the membership of the National Assembly and Federal Executive Council (FEC) does not promote democracy sustenance in Nigeria.

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