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# State and Democratization in Nigeria

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The article interrogates the relationship between democratization and people power in Nigeria. It argues that the broadening of the Nigerian public sphere has not led to reciprocal development of democratic principles and practice. As civilian rule reigns and economic growth is reported, Nigeria's democratization is fraught with many challenges. Democratization remains questionable in Nigeria; it is rudimentary and distorted by irregularities. These have had implications for national development and human securities as the poverty level worsens and acclaimed economic growth and "democratic dividends" fail to enhance Nigerians' quality of life. The trivialization of democratization raises critical questions about its state and relevance to Nigerians and the Nigerian state. Is Nigeria democratizing or de-democratizing? How does the democratization process bring the Nigerian people closer to state (power)? How has it helped their developmental quests? The article contends that Nigeria's democratization process is indeed on trial. As Ake argues, Nigerian state democratization does not only trivialize the essence of democracy—it also continues to reverse the democratization process. Against this background, the article concludes that the democratization process in Nigeria requires elite political will and people's consciousness to advance to the next stage for better democratic consolidated and economic development relevant to Nigerians.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Democratization, Nigeria, State

## INTRODUCTION

The post–Cold War era brought about many significant changes to the international system. While one is quick to think of these changes in light of the developments in central and Eastern Europe, where the disintegration of the defunct Soviet Union into 14 states was followed by the collapse of many communist regimes and the turning of these states to Western liberal policies, there are other significant changes in other parts of the world, including Africa,

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worth interrogating. For Africa, the triumph of the West did not only bring about the adoption of Western-oriented economic reforms, it also brought with it political transitions in the form of the adoption of liberal democracy—being one of, if not the most, popular mode of democratic governance in the world that aimed at bringing about political stability, security, peace, and much desired development. This is with a view to recovering Africa from the lost decades and development crises of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Third, or fourth, wave democracy,<sup>2</sup> where a large number of states returned to democratic rule, found its way once again to Nigeria in 1999.

By democratizing, the Nigerian state and people anticipate political stability and the resolution of its developmental challenges that pervaded earlier military administrations.<sup>3</sup> It would be recalled that the first and second republics failed, while the third attempt at restoring democracy failed to materialize after the Babangida regime annulled the 1993 general elections and the rumored Abacha self-serving transition agenda died prematurely with him in 1998. The annulment of the June 12, 1993, general elections, popularly referred to as the freest and fairest in the annals of Nigeria's electoral history, led to public protests, national outrages, and international opprobrium, which finally led to Babangida's exit and the introduction of an interim national government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan. The travails of this misnomer paved the way for another Nigerian military ruler, General Sanni Abacha. His sudden death in 1998 truncated his self-succession plan as the sole candidate of the five extant political parties (the five leprous fingers). This thus paved the way for Abubakar's transition program in 1998.

Pre-1999 agitation for democracy can be placed in the suffocation and sufferings of Nigerians under military rule. About 30 years of military rule had robbed them of their fundamental human rights, particularly those concerning freedom of speech, expression, choice, association, and qualitative lives, making advocacy for civilian rule more vociferous in the immediate pre- and post-1990s period. While this is not to say that the previous civilian regimes had lived up to their expectations, the agitation for civilian rule rests on the assumption that a worst civilian rule inheres quality service to the people. This is more so because by adopting democracy, the state would have attuned itself to liberal principles that focus on the individuals (the people) within the state from which its strength and power are supposed to emanate. That way, democratization would accommodate the Nigerian populations and enhance their ability to contribute to decision-making processes within the Nigerian state. In other words, democracy, it was assumed, would automatically raise the bar for state administrators by placing the power with the masses. Unfortunately, one and a half decades of democratization is yet to empower Nigerians politically and economically. Worse still, Nigerians have been exploited, oppressed, and manipulated by their ruling elite, while their power to contribute to

their governance has been hijacked or undermined through ruling elite structures.

External actors also played important roles in Nigeria's democratization process. For them, Nigeria, especially its credential as a regional hegemon whose country and future mattered to the outside world,<sup>4</sup> experienced the involvement of foreign actors in its democratization process. There are international actors that contributed to the democratization in Nigeria. In this sense, foreign states, international organizations, NGOs and civil society organizations, and so on played crucial roles in restoring civilian rule in Nigeria. At both the internal and external levels, it is safe to argue that their involvement in the promotion of democracy rests on the proposition that democracy promotes peace, security, and prosperity that all rational states should seek.<sup>5</sup>

As of 1999, when Nigeria embraced democratic rule, it became one of the oldest to democratize in Africa. Thirty out of 53 states had already democratized as early as the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> In response to these pressures, the Nigerian state returned to a liberal democratic system patterned after the United States. With about 15 years of Nigeria's return to democracy, scholars have debated the state of Nigeria's democratization. Optimists argue that periodic elections and transitions from one civilian administration to another and economic growth are indicators that Nigeria's democracy is on course. It is only a matter of time before Nigeria consolidates its democracy. Skeptics<sup>7</sup> and critics<sup>8</sup> of Nigeria's democratization fear that the democratization processes in Nigeria may be cut short, trivialized, or damaged by the Nigerian state democratization process given how it is being pursued. It is crucial to interrogate elements that give credence to this assertion. More importantly, one should ask about the state of democratization in the Nigerian state: Does the Nigerian state democratization process hold any hope for sustainability and consolidation? Are there benefits to the Nigerian people now and in the future for democratizing? Or are they merely being priced out?<sup>9</sup> Do internal and external actors play important roles in all of these?

As Obi noted, the background of the delegitimization of military rule, the crisis at the Nigerian state, economic decline, and the high expectations—locally and externally—pose very serious challenges to the newly won democracy and the future of the country. Either way, democratic consolidation or regression carries very heavy costs that hinge on Nigeria's survival.<sup>10</sup> Against this background, this study examines the role of the state, actors, and their instrumentalities in the Nigerian democratization experience. The next section provides a conceptual examination of state and democratization in an attempt to put in proper perspectives the actors and processes that gave birth to democratization in Nigeria. The following section situates the Nigerian democratic experience within local and international contexts within which “choiceless democracy” or “virtual or managed democracy” became an imperative.<sup>11</sup> Last,

the study attempts to raise key issues as well as the contradictions inherent in Nigeria's democratization before making a conclusion.

## **A CONCEPTUAL REFLECTION ON THE STATE AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN NIGERIA**

Nigeria's democracy, its democratization process, and the challenges democratization is fraught with in Nigeria are incomprehensible without an understanding of the Nigerian state within which the various interests jostling for the soul (and power) of the state intermingle. On this basis, it is apposite to conceptualize the state, situate the Nigerian state within the context of what a state is, and state the roles and functions that a state plays while establishing the linkage between the Nigerian state and democratization.

Generally, a state is the governmental and political authority or organization of a country. It is usually classified as possessing features that include authority, sovereignty, people, territory, and operating under a law. According to O'Donnel,<sup>12</sup> states are interwoven in complex and different ways with their respective societies. This embeddedness entails, on the one hand, that the line between the state and its society is blurred, while on the other hand, it means that the characteristics of each state and each society heavily influence the characteristics of what democracy will be in such a state. A state is a combination of state apparatus, or the public sector, or the aggregate of public bureaucracies. The state is a set of social relations that establishes a certain order and, ultimately, backs it with a centralized coercive guarantee over a given territory. O'Donnel argues that newly democratic states, or what other scholars describe as polyarchical democratic states,<sup>13</sup> suffer from three dimensional issues. These are the crises of the state as a set of bureaucracies capable of discharging their duties with reasonable efficacy; the effectiveness of its law; and the plausibility of the claim that the state agencies normally orient their decisions in terms of some conception of the public good. These challenges are experienced, however, in the mist of the state's desire to transform and contribute its quota to national development within itself. Within these challenges, a state still exercises its power and authority over its people. There are many actors within a state that drive a state's activities. While these actors relate with the state in varying degrees, Azarya points out that the state is an organization and a singular, often most powerful force within society.<sup>14</sup> It is distinguished from the myriad of other actors in seeking predominance over them and in aiming to institute binding rules regarding activities of these other organizations.<sup>15</sup> The various actors, however, relate with the state in ways that enable them to influence and determine decisions and actions of a state. This is more so in a state such as Nigeria where the control of a state is considered politically gratifying and economically rewarding. Drawing from the opinion

that the state itself is an abstraction whose operational activities come into force from the rule by a political party, monarchy, or any other authority that drives government machinery, gaining state attention is crucial to influencing it to achieve one's purpose. It further goes without saying that a state cannot by itself express its power and authority without the agents that form government officials, and susceptible to influences, from within and without such states.

The origin of the state is traceable to the seventeenth-century period of industrial revolution. The writings of contractarians such as John Locke, J. J. Rousseau, and Thomas Hobbes readily come to mind in this regard. These philosophers rationalized the need for the authority and power of the state given the nature of a stateless society that was brutish, nasty, wicked, and short. All are engaged in a competition for survival, resulting in wars where there were no respectable authorities to oversee their affairs. Not only did their writings crave for order and orderliness in the Europeans societies, their writings (particularly Locke) reflect, at that time, the wish that European societies should respect the property rights of individuals. Individuals who owned property and who had rights to state power through their rights to vote and be voted for ended up as owners and controllers of the state, usually referred to as the aristocrats or ruling class. However, the formation of these ordered societies did not result in peace in Europe as these societies or city-states engaged in series of conflicts that culminated in the Thirty Years' War between 1618 and 1648, the precursor to the Westphalian Treaty of 1648. The origin of the modern state system in international relations is traceable to this treaty as new states emerged and related with one another on the basis of equality. The import of all of this to this article is that state creation is at a cost to the people, the transfer of their power to a ruling group referred to as the government of the state, which also has the authority to use such power on their behalf. Although this ruling group, or individual in the monarch as well, is subject to personal idiosyncrasies and biases, the ruling group claims its decisions are in the interests of the majority—hence the justification of brutality and high-handedness by draconian and dictatorial rulers on their citizens as a protection of the rights of the state that is more sacrosanct than that of the citizens. The steady and incremental transformations in (Western as well as) European societies and states have gradually blurred prioritizing the desires of the ruling elite over the ruled in most of these societies over the years. It could be said that the atomization of the societies and the promotion of individualized liberty and freedom set the rules and regulations in place for the protection and preservation of individuals by the state. There is, however, a sense in linking the prioritization of the state, which is seen as supreme, with the liberal democracy in Nigeria that places a premium on the state and its survival than the people that constitute the state.

Although the reality in much of the Western world today sets the state as a machinery existing for the preservation of rights, the same cannot be totally

said of the Nigerian state. The history of the Nigerian state is a history of slavery and colonialism brought on the settlers of the current state of Nigeria by the European colonizers over 500 years ago. The creation of the state followed a forceful amalgamation of diverse groups and settlements into one in 1914 after the colonizers had annexed the Lagos colony in 1861. And unlike other societies where nationalism, simply defined as the patriotic commitment to one's nation-state, preceded the state, the state preceded the nation in Nigeria. Prior to independence, it was seen that the desire to rule and replace the white colonialists was far more important to the then-nationalists than commitment to the nation. It would, however, appear that the social contract that underpinned the nationalist struggles unraveled within the first decade of independence, while the political elite lapsed into authoritarianism as a strategy for which they aimed to monopolize state power in the name of national unity and development. Furthermore, the Nigerian state, being a more pluralistic society, fell into serious ethnic and tribal conflicts over the control of the state and its resources. Starting on this footing hindered the integration of the state and set artificially created boundaries among the ethnic groups, which remain on a perpetual collision course with one another. But again, as the state progresses in the administration of its activities, some of the ruling elite class across the countries high social, political, and economic strata began to find areas of intersection that have forced them into an alliance of convenience, that is, having a relationship that helps to sustain their grip on power while they temporarily bury their differences. In other words, the postcolonial Nigerian state ruling elite developed a relationship that can enable them control of the state, and they use such power for primordial interests when it serves their interest, but appeal to sentimental attachments that bring about discord when this is not guaranteed. This informal elite collaboration has weakened the state and strengthened the elite, who do everything to win state power and control the resources of the state. As a rule, the formal state apparatus has been weakened in the postcolonial Nigerian state in terms of structure, resources, and performance throughout the post-independence period. The legitimacy and authority of a leader has, to a great extent, been a function of the efficiency of the patrimonial network he or she controls. Thus, the distinction between objective, collective state interests, on the one hand, and the leader's/regime's subjective, private interests, on the other, is blurred. Nigeria often shows a hybrid political system in which the customs and patterns of patrimonialism prevail alongside modern state features. The characteristic feature of neopatrimonialism is thus the incorporation of a patrimonial logic into bureaucratic institutions.<sup>16</sup>

Critical to understanding the state is the question of who controls it. Goran Hyden argues that much emphasis is placed on the fact that the control of the state in Africa is exercised not by an independent and assertive domestic class of capitalists but by a "comprador" or bureaucratic bourgeoisie, which uses its control of the state to feather its own nest with the help of access to public funds



and granting access to natural resources by its partners.<sup>17</sup> It should be pointed out, as Sosa Santos argues, citing Becker and Sklar, that a new social class arising from relations between the administrative sector of the state and the large private or privatized companies is in place. This new class is composed of local and international arms. The local branch, the national bourgeoisie, is a broad social category that encompasses the entrepreneurial elite, company directors, high-ranking state officials, and influential political and professional leaders. In spite of their heterogeneity, these different groups constitute a class, according to the authors, because its members, despite the diversity of their parochial interests, share a common situation of socioeconomic privilege and a common class interest in the relations of political power and social control that are intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production.<sup>18</sup>

In Nigeria, as earlier indicated, the colonial government dictated the pace of the administration until October 1960, when there was the initial transition from colonialists to indigenous administrators. Six years after the transition, the military had forcefully found their way into the state and its apparatus, running the affairs of the state using military decrees. From 1966 to 1999, civilian rule was given a chance only briefly, from 1979 to 1983. During these years, the various coalitions of the postcolonial hegemonic political class have more or less violently claimed state power without regard to rules, considerations of equity, or social justice, much less the will of the people. Transitions seem to provide breaks during which the political networks of power take stock, revise their strategies, recruit fresh blood, form new coalitions, and jostle for positions of advantage before launching themselves into new political battles for the monopoly of (state) power.<sup>19</sup> The Nigerian state, therefore, becomes an environment where class interests determine the possession of state power, thus making interests at the center less patriotic and more selfish and self-serving. Even under a democracy where a state is expected to be responsible to its society and citizens,<sup>20</sup> especially in delivering public goods, given that democratic authorities are more inclined to advancing this objective and being one of the most important reasons for the agitation for democracy in Africa,<sup>21</sup> democratic transition has fallen short of this objective. In addition, although democracy is itself not intrinsic, Momoh and Ake have shown that various actors within a state desire the instrumentality of democratic rule for vary selfish reasons. Therefore, it can be safely argued that in all of the administrations in place in Nigeria, selfish interests have prevailed in making the principle or policy in practice the expected standard. From all of the above, the Nigerian state can be understood from three points of view. First, it exists as a weak state whose power lies with the ruling elite that takes over its power. Second, the state thrives on rent seeking and lives by prebendalism, without which the center will become unattractive to all the ruling elites for buccaneer purposes. Third, it is more susceptible to exogenous Western and capitalist

influences than the interests of its Nigerian people. These three points are useful in delving into the explanation on the power of the elite, the process of democratization within the international system, and the weaknesses of the Nigerian state democratization.

Democratization literally means the process of transferring control of state power to citizens within a democracy. It is the “movement from the dominance of state-society relations by one institution which we refer to as “monocracy,” to a polycentric structured society.”<sup>22</sup> Democratization also means that the process of democratic transition is the process of transition establishing, strengthening, or extending the principles, mechanisms, and institutions that define a democratic regime. The process of democratization is a process of being a democratic regime where the principles of pluralism and multiparty system, popular participation in the political process, rule of law, respect for human rights, equality of access to all citizens and groups to state power and resources, constitutionalism, or respect for the rules of the game all reign supreme.<sup>23</sup> The essential attributes of democratic transition include formal aspects such as constitutional rule and the operation of a multiparty system, but also a more profound sociopolitical transformation that allows freely elected rulers and the majority of the civil population to impose their supremacy over the ruling oligarchies of the military, ethno-regional blocs, or the nomenclature. Transitions rightly became processes of transformation, in which the majority impose their will on the ruling elite: military and civilian, whose overpoliticization of social life, and zero-sum struggles conspire to create a near-permanent paralysis of the democratic and nation-state project in Nigeria.<sup>24</sup> Democratic transitions in Nigeria have so far been more apparent than real, more illusory than concrete. Furthermore, for the Nigerian state, democratization remains an arena of competition between forces of the *ancien regime* that ruled and controlled through autocratic means and those with democratic aspirations. The next section examines the international context of democratization in Nigeria.

## THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS AND CONTEXTS OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN NIGERIA

This section tries to contextualize the international dimensions within which democratization became the norm and standard of administration in Nigeria. It investigates how democracy became the global rule for the Nigerian state, why this was so, and how Nigeria responded to this global norm or requirement. This is particularly worth interrogating because it laid the foundation for Nigeria’s democratization and the nature and form of its democracy. This is more so as the interests around the global concerns for the importation of democracy into Nigeria took little interest in the form, rather than the

attention it paid to the content of (liberal) democracy as obtainable in most developed countries. This remains the very foundation of the challenges and crises with democratization in Nigeria. Thus it takes the article to the international dimensions within which Nigeria followed through the democratization process—highlighting the roles, interests, and involvements of external states, institutions, and other actors, mostly of Western origin and orientation, in Nigeria.

The Nigerian state and its democratization process have been of interest to the international community not for casual reasons. Nigeria, being the largest black nation in the world, was a colony of the British and home to one of the most important mineral resources, crude oil, for which many international actors are interested. The presence of oil in Nigeria, in particular, and the size of the population are twin key important factors making Nigeria relevant to the international scene. Oil is a source of energy for many industrial nations. It is, in fact, a vital interest of the United States' national interest to secure energy sources. The population has large potential for manufacturers whose finished products find their way to the huge Nigerian market. It is against this backdrop that scholars are of the view that the promotion of certain sacrosanct national interests guides foreign interference(s) in Nigeria's democracy. The presence of these international actors in the economic activities of Nigeria is not exclusive of their involvement in Nigeria's political happenings. Moreover, Nigerian leadership under Sanni Abacha had grown into an international pariah status that made explicit external intervention necessary. Unchecked, the Abacha regime could truncate the activities of many multinational companies and jeopardize their countries' interests in Nigeria.

It is within the external influence that the adoption of the kind of government Nigeria embraced falls. Although this may be subtle and not easily noticeable, it had two major corollaries. First, it was the foundation that prepared the ground for Western-oriented ideological policies that followed after the state adopted democracy. Second, and most significantly, it was the adoption of the kind of democracy that uprooted the foundation of the African type of democracy where the collective social sense offered a form of political participation that was different from and superior to that offered by liberal democracy; this was because the African notion of participation did not rest on the "assumption of individualism or conflicting interests, but on the social nature of human beings."<sup>25</sup> In this regard, Nigeria, which traditionally operated its monarchical state structures, had been made to adopt the Western liberal system of administration represented by the Westminster or parliamentary system of government, which lasted till 1966, and the presidential system since 1979—of course, with the exception of the military interregnums.

Nigeria was further buried in the Western liberal style as it switched from the Westminster style to the presidential system after the military, in 1979, following state creation, local government reforms, formation of a constituent

assembly and the drafting of the 1979 constitution, formation of political parties and rolling out of electoral guidelines, formation of the electoral body, election tribunal, the judiciary, the code of conduct bureau, had conducted a militarily supervised general election and eventually handed over power to the first executive president of the country. All these are a clear departure from the Nigerian—nay, African—democracy that was about the African people. Because this symbolizes an attempt to practice the Western-oriented democracy that has brought peace and prosperity to the American people, it failed to put the local content of African democracy in at. At best, it only badly mixed the local content with the imported democratic tenets. Since this was the order of the day, Nigerian legislators and other government officials have also taken to developing themselves in the act and skills of governance in a presidential system. Most of them have found their way to American universities, where they study politics, government, law, and other related disciplines, while others were put under government arrangements to understudy the presidential system and its practices in the United States. Members of the states' Houses of Assemblies and of the National Assembly have particularly embarked on trips to the United States to learn some legislative principles.

At the core level, direct state involvement, particularly from the United States and its Western allies, is noticeable in many areas. During the Cold War, even though these powers had vested interest in Nigeria at that time, scant regard was paid to the system of government and how the Nigerian state ran its affairs. This is more so in a world that is understood as consisting equal state actors that operate under Article 2 of the United Nations' principle of nonintervention in the internal affairs of other states. But much more than the position of the UN Charter that restricted interference in a state's internal affairs, the Cold War environment had placed developing countries such as Nigeria at a position of choice for which alliance with any of the blocs were based on where 'their bread is better buttered.' This was a kind of strength for weak state governments without much interference by the powerful blocs in their internal affairs. Earning a good relationship with any of the weak states in the world at that time was one of the priorities of the powerful blocs who put less attention on the internal dynamics of the developing states. The rivalry between these ideological camps symbolizes the desire by each of them to expand its bloc's ideology and dominance over the others in the international system. However, events of the 1980s—in particular, the debt crisis in most developing countries—following the prior experience of the West in the Arab oil crisis of 1973 led to a review of the roles and functions of developing countries' states and government. In most of the views of the West, many things were not right with the states and governments in developing countries. The state was demonized and rejected for its profligacy and wastefulness, a consequence of which was serious debt crisis in the 1980s. In addition, the rivalry between the United

States and the defunct USSR had dwindled given the Soviet Union's undertaking of a gradual reformation, restructuring, and opening up (*perestroika* and *glasnost*). After Soviet disintegration, US supremacy was upheld and its presence and influence felt more strongly in developing states such as Nigeria at the end of the decade.

The post-Cold War era reconfigured the nature of the international system. Many definitions of global concerns emerged with new meanings and priorities, and the global agenda became set by the dominant and unipolar power. This development has political and economic implications for the world, especially on the issues that take center stage in the global agenda. These issues are subsumed, however, in the post-Cold War neoliberalism, where values are measured in terms of individual rights. All states that have economically—and, by extension, politically—failed were made to adopt these liberal conceptions of development couched in economic adjustments and political reforms or transition to democracy. According to Obi, the need to adjust to the reality of post-Cold War neoliberal conditionalities of “multipartyism, human rights, transparency, accountability and good governance” made the hegemonic political class to seek the adoption of the democratic platform to legitimize its monopoly of power.<sup>26</sup>

It is, however, not the Western states alone that intervened in Nigeria's democratic experience. As the United States and its Western allies handed down these political conditionalities, there were other “partners-in-progress” that were willing to establish the tenets of democracy and rule of law, respect for human rights and individual freedoms, and preservation of liberal democratic values under the rubric of the neoliberal ideological reforms in Nigeria. These are the international financial institutions, international organizations, donor organizations, and NGOs. Some of these organizations were accredited agents of the West. These agents, like the Western states stated earlier, castigated the state and condemned it to perpetual withdrawal from involvement in economic activities. According to Shivji, for the World Bank, one of the two Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs), with the other being the International Monetary Fund, the villain of the declining economic performance in Africa—and, indeed, Nigeria—was the state. It was corrupt and dictatorial—it had no capacity to manage the economy and allocate resources rationally, it was bloated with bureaucracy, and nepotism was its mode of operation. The BWIs would not bail out the crisis-ridden economies unless the governments adopted structural adjustment programs to get stabilization fundamentals right.<sup>27</sup> As these institutions got involved, they also created “neoliberal offensive” structures spread under democracy whose foundation were in the economic conditionalities offered to the Nigerian state by the West and their institutions. Shivji points out that political conditionalities—multiparty democracy, good governance, human rights, among others—were added to economic conditionalities by these institutions. Decision making and policy making slipped

out of the hands of African states as the West financed policy and governance consultants in their thousands to produce policy blueprints, poverty reduction strategies, and manuals on good governance.<sup>28</sup>

It can be seen, against the backdrop of the above, that Nigeria, in the spirit of the global moment, embraced democracy or, more precisely, liberal democracy. This has found acceptance within Nigeria's political elite and, perhaps more significantly, within the donor community and Western democracies that seek to connect the process to market-based economic reforms and development in developing countries. They also seek to globalize their own political culture and market ideology as part of the process of universal homogenization. Democracy in post-Cold War Africa has become the only game in town, with African countries and regional organizations investing resources and energy to enthrone and defend formal democracy. For example, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), and other regional organizations have institutionalized a policy of zero tolerance for military coups in Africa. In this regard, they have had cause to intervene in the political crises in Guinea Bissau, Sao Tomé and Príncipe, and Zimbabwe in an attempt to ensure that democracy is enthroned in these countries.<sup>29</sup>

Within the West African subregion, military regimes had been forced to either transfer power or transform into civilian themselves in a much similar manner. Sanni Abacha, it seemed, was set to replicate what other military rulers such as Ghana's J. J. Rawlings, Niger's Idris Derby, and Gambia's Yahyah Jahmeh had successfully done in the subregion. The strategy of the Abacha faction was to civilianize military dictatorship, by making the military president transfer power to himself, as an elected civilian president. This transformation from "uniform to suit" in the "Nigerian context was justified by the regimes' spin-doctors as home-grown democracy and to some extent a distance from western orchestrated democracy."<sup>30</sup> Not only did Abacha's democracy insult the sensibilities of Nigerians by being the only presidential candidate of the five political parties, it also tried to export democracy to other states in the subregion. Nigeria, which remained under the suffocating grip of a military dictator, embarked on the export of democracy in Sierra Leone in 1997. Nigeria's intervention, ironically to restore the democratically elected government of Tejan Kabbah that had been overthrown in a military coup, was at that time seen as a welcome development by the international community and, of course, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Nigeria was, however, condemned at home for giving what it never had. Till Nigeria itself returned to civilian rule, scholars questioned the rationale behind the restoration of democracy in other African states by an antidemocratic state.<sup>31</sup> The sudden death of Abacha in 1998, however, paved the way for a transition to civilian rule under Abdusalami Abubakar. With democracy in place in May 1999, Nigeria continued in its quest to export democracy to other West African countries even while the practice of democracy at home is just taking shape and in a rudimentary

state. It intervened and restored democracy in Togo in 2000, Sao Tome in 2003, and Côte d'Ivoire in 2010.

Thus, for the Nigerian state, there is more local concern by the people for democracy to deliver if democratization is to make political and economic sense. While it might be said that democratization cannot germinate, grow, and bear fruits just immediately as there are bound to be some fundamental teething problems in the democratization process, democratization—and thus democracy promotion—is a middle- to long-term endeavor, and (potential) rewards do not come quickly, even though costs are immediate.<sup>32</sup> It must be added, however, that how democracy can transform and contribute to society is not being given serious thought by the Nigerian ruling elite. As we highlighted above, democratization, which speaks to the process of transition from autocratic regimes to a multiparty arrangement comes with many responsibilities and features. While the vast majority of the African experience shows that the democratization process continues to take a toll on the people as the obsession with capturing government power (as distinct from state power) and resources by the political elite is intensified, there is a need to reconfigure ownership and control of the Nigerian state power vis-à-vis the share that belongs to the Nigerian people, especially against the background of a political transition in which economic power continued to reside outside the country.<sup>33</sup> Some of the challenges to the attainment of this aspiration are discussed in the next section.

## STATE AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN NIGERIA: ISSUES AND CONTRADICTIONS

As we have earlier shown, the democratization process in Nigeria did not begin with the Abdusalami Abubakar's transition program in 1998. However, unlike the previous regimes where dissents were silenced and dissenters were detained under trumped-up charges, the triumph of the "dovish" group within the military rank, which favored a measured form of liberal-democratic transition where the military would return to the barracks, restored civilian rule in Nigeria. Because the line between this group and the forces within and without Nigeria that advocated for democratization was blurred, it was easy for the transition process to sail swiftly and smoothly. The role external actors, particularly the West and their institutions, played, especially in the circumstances surrounding the death of MKO Abiola, make the point that these actors wished the transition to civil rule in Nigeria for capitalist interests plausible. As the elite that assumed the leadership of the state bask in the euphoria of democratization, the capitalist West remains perpetually glued to political and economic activities in Nigeria—handing down as they earlier did in the 1980s reform policies that would help open up the state and allow reforms



and capitalist expansionism in the Nigerian state. It is important to point out, therefore, that General Abdulsalami's transition needs to be understood in its fundamental basis as a hegemonic project directed at giving the Nigerian ruling class its "last chance" to reach a "working agreement" that would guarantee capitalist accumulation, without endangering the system or losing the confidence of its global partners or "foreign investors."<sup>34</sup>

Against this background, the major and most critical contradiction of democratization to the Nigerian state speaks to the state failure thesis put forward by the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs). According to this group, the state should, as a matter of fact, disengage from public administration and in particular business activities where it has no business being in business. After returning to democracy, the state should focus on good governance, human rights, and accountability. The state under the democratic ambience should concentrate on how to restructure itself and address its barrage of political problems, while the business sector should take care of economic activities. How this is to be implemented is through the introduction of reforms. However, it is critical to argue that the false distinction the BWIs proclaim exists between politics to be governed by the state and economics to be left in the hand of the private sector does not exist. As a matter of fact, there exists an inextricable linkage between economics and politics. It can be said that the reform programs that have taken different forms—economic reforms and the transformation agenda—under the three civilian administrations have brought about only economic growth without development.

More so, the policies that put economic activities of the state out of the control of the state has only succeeded in paralyzing state economic bases where such has not already been emptied. It is crucial to add that the ownership of most of the infrastructure and service-providing organizations under government control that have now been privatized, deregulated, or commercialized under the government disengagement and reform policies have only further deprived the people of the benefits they enjoy from government—stripping them of some form of social security that the state provides through essential service provision. Consequently, under democratization the people have become more disempowered as a result of massive retrenchment, high rate of unemployment, infrastructural decadence, and lack of economic opportunities. In spite of this hardship, the state under the current democratic dispensation has withdrawn subsidy, which many argue was never on the commodity, on petroleum products and implemented privation policies in major sectors of the economy. It can be seen from the above that policy making, an important aspect of sovereignty, has been wrenched out of the hands of the African state, which is placed on the same level as other so-called stakeholders including foreign states, international financial institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and other actors.<sup>35</sup>



Within the Nigerian state, there has been a serious crisis with democratization. These include the presence of the military within the democratic ambiance; acrimonious and rancorous intra- and interparty activities among the political parties; money and godfather politics; electoral malpractices and irregularities; and politicians' habit of falsehood and perpetual failed promises. Apart from the fact that retired military officers have continued to play significant roles in Nigeria's democratization, civilians in power have regularly shown dictatorial inclination since the return to civilian rule in Nigeria using state military apparatus. Retired generals Olusegun Obasanjo, Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida, and Abdusalami Abubakar have continued to be key factors in Nigeria's democracy. Obasanjo had ruled for eight years, while Buhari is seeking a fourth bid to the presidency. These ex-military rulers have been made kingmakers patrons of their political parties. In July 2013, governors of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) paid visits to three retired generals in anticipation for their support in the forthcoming 2015 general elections. Earlier, the current president, Goodluck Jonathan, visited Obasanjo at his hilltop residence, where he claimed he had gone on a courtesy visit to his political godfather. He also embarked on a similar visit to Ibrahim Babangida. The major concern, however, is that the military style they use in relating with Nigerian democracy undermines democracy. Civilians who have had the opportunity to hold state power as president or governors often use the military and the police to enforce their wish as laws and regulations on Nigerians given the fact that the civilian administration has yet to be purged of erstwhile military tendencies. A ready example is the deployment of the military in the enforcement of house demolition in the name of urban renewal. The fact that some of these so-called renewal projects are abandoned and even unripe at the moment in Nigeria's democratic experience is not as important as the fact that the ruling elite hide under them to defraud the state of its wealth.

With the way political parties conduct their affairs, it is not difficult to assume that democratic principles that respect the wishes of the majority over the minority within parties, and in relations to the public, are yet to take root in Nigeria. In the political parties that formed transition in the post-Abubakar era, there is more evidence from the lack of ideological leanings of the political parties to believe that class character of the political elite meant that the transition was less about the transformation of power relations and more about giving a fresh lease on life to and stabilizing the hegemonic project of the Nigerian political elite.<sup>36</sup> Political parties have, rather than conduct elections, imposed candidates in the name of consensus on parties and the nation. Where primary elections are conducted, they are done in well-orchestrated forms that knock out "stubborn" aspirants and force political parties to the adoption of the candidates that serve the wishes of the power brokers within the party. This has been the pattern of selecting the presidential candidates of the PDP. Other parties have adopted the same approach at the state and local government

levels. The state has officially supported and supervised the subversion of the people's will for individual wishes where the wishes of the majority clash with those of the ruling and elitist minority, while party men and women who fall off the government's radar are dealt with by impeachment, trumped-up corruption charges, or deliberate acts of imposing order through a creation of disorder. While transition has therefore occurred at the presidential level three times, only the elections of 2011 have passed the benchmark set by international observers. This is not to say the election was totally free and fair, but it showed some level of improvement. However, there were reported cases of underage voting in the north, moneybag politics in the southern parts, and serious post-election conflicts and pockets of violence across Nigeria—thus contesting the free nature and fairness of the elections. Nevertheless, the elections were way better than previously conducted ones that were generally condemned locally and internationally. Tensions are, however, high ahead of the 2015 polls.

Given these circumstances, it is difficult to speak of a democratization that respects the rights and privileges of the Nigerian people. According to Obi,

the evidence suggests that formal democracy has, since the initial euphoria of the early 1990's, progressively given way to the reduced participation of the people in politics. Increasingly, it is largely the same political elites and erstwhile dictators that have deodorized and repackaged themselves as "new democrats," backed by an international community keen to promote economic reforms on the continent, that have accumulated power over the political process. Their attitude towards democracy has been ambivalent and opportunistic. In most cases, the political class has sought to bend democratic institutions to personal ends. Some have attempted to change the constitution to prolong their stay in power or exclude strong rivals from the contesting against them in elections. With links to the state and by virtue of belonging to patrimonial networks of power, it is this wealthy elite that has the structures and resources to mobilise support and resources to contest for elections and win.<sup>37</sup>

It should be added that the problem is not with democracy itself as much as it is a fallout of the liberal democracy that Nigeria adopted. According to Ake, liberal democracy is different from the classic or Athenian notion of the rule of the people. Accordingly, it had become the rule of the bourgeoisie following the industrial revolution and, subsequently, had become the rule of the minority.<sup>38</sup> He argues that liberal democracy and the market shared the same values, creating a situation in which any real political participation was structured out of the process.<sup>39</sup> This view comes out in his argument that democracy had become trivialized by liberalism "to the extent that it is no longer threatening to those in power or demanding to anyone."<sup>40</sup> Nigeria has become an instrument of rule and control rather than emancipation and empowerment. Consequently, it has not provided the much-needed development and progress the people desire.

## CONCLUSION

The above study has examined state and democratization in Nigeria. It systematically illustrates the process of democratization after a long period of military rule in Nigeria. In doing this, the article paid some attention to the justification and origin of the modern state system as well as how the Nigerian state emerged as an authority and instrument of control by the ruling groups, which also have an international alliance, notably from the immediate post-colonial era till today. It was, however, revealed that the state, being a vortex of jostling interests for power and resources, became a cynosure of all and a center of influence by local and foreign actors whose desire to gain control of the state and influence its policies and to parochial ends deprive the people of the derivatives of democratization. To achieve these multiple and variegated interests, these actors have depended on different forms of contestations, but elite manipulations and alliance with external actors often prevail over popular opinions. A few minorities dominate the affairs of the state where politics was reduced to a zero-sum game in which the winners take everything and the losers also lose everything.<sup>41</sup> Power is often personalized and abused, reducing politics to the single-minded pursuit of the capture of state power.

This type of politics often leads to “political monolithism” (i.e., the privatization of power), the insecurity of those in power, and the lack of a developmental vision or intent on the part of leaders. A high premium was placed on the monopoly of power by a small group, to the exclusion of others defined in terms of ethnicity, religion, or region. While all of these fall under the rubric of liberal democracy, Ake argues that African democracy, which stresses a collective social sense, offers a form of political participation that was different from and superior to that offered by liberal democracy. In addition, the African notion of participation did not rest on the “assumption of individualism or conflicting interests, but on the social nature of human beings.”<sup>42</sup>

In spite of Nigeria’s democratization since 1999, the struggle for democracy in Nigeria has not ended. Over a decade of civilian rule has shown its advances, which remain very few and in the form of periodic elections, multiparty system, and civilian rule, and its limitations. While those in support of democratization in Nigeria may argue that it is too early to judge the current efforts in Nigeria, considering that it took the democracies of Europe and the United States centuries to advance, Nigeria’s history and socioeconomic realities should not be an attempt to replicate in teleological order a Western process of civilization and democratization. The challenge of democratization in Nigeria is not to tropicalize Western liberal democracy and its values for it to deliver to Nigerians, but it must consciously channel democratic rule toward the transfer of power to the Nigerian people. The challenge before the Nigerian state and its ruling elite is how to deepen democracy and to prevent it from regressing—not the one seeking legitimacy from the international community. Politics disemboweled of

its democratic content and that continues to exclude the Nigerian poor, who constitute the majority, will in the long run be as much of a threat to Nigeria as it would be to the international system. Does the above suggest a need for a third independence for the Nigerian people? Since the first and second liberation struggles against colonialism and dictatorship, respectively, have been won and lost, this might be necessary. The new concern under democratization is aimed at transforming the process whereby democracy brings about change from above to that which brings transformation from below. This has been the aspirations of the Nigerian people pursued with renewed strength that leaves the state with no choice other than that that respects the voice and choice of the people. Except this power of choice fully returns to the people and their voice(s) is regained and respected over their socioeconomic and political affairs, current democratization process in Nigeria may remain, by all intents and purposes, rudimentary, cosmetics and artificial.

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