# RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP IN A DEMOCRACY-ORIENTED SOCIETY

## D. A. ABDULRAHMAN

## Abstract

The idea and practise of democracy originated in the Greek city states which were essentially tribal/provincial states. Increasing social complexity has led to the modification of the full democracy as practised by the Greeks and has resulted in what today is known as liberal democracy. While liberal democracy may not be perfect, its ideals are the very ideals that form the bedrock of Greek democracy i.e. the ideals of freedom, liberty and equality. Although several factors promotive of democracy have been identified, this paper argues that the most important factor is responsible citizenship. The paper then identifies factors necessary for the enthronement of a regime of responsible citizenship, are, therefore, of sustainable democracy, in Nigeria.

## Introduction

Any serious discussion this day begins and/or ends, implicitly or explicitly, with democracy. This is so whether the discussion is about the minimum wage, the prices of commodities, the real or imagined marginalisation of one group or the other, the introduction of sharia, inter-ethnic/religious conflicts, whether we have achieved or are still transiting to democracy, etc. After decades of military dictatorships and a successful transition to an elected government, democracy has, thus, become the *master frame* of our time. In this paper master frame, means a shared normative or moral life-worldly knowiedge which "makes possible the perception, experience and interpretation of the social and the natural world, and thus *structures action and communication*". (Strydom, 1999:73), emphasis added). While political independence, development, the oil boom, and military dictatorship and authoritarianism structured action and communication in the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s respectively, the buzzword today is democracy.

The current popularity of the concept and practice of democracy is attributable to a number of factors. These factors include the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ascendance of the United States as the sole super power in the world, the dismal performance and collapse of one-party rule, the disenchantment with military

dictatorships all over the world and the general expectation that democracy will usher in freedom and development—a ~~Nigeria is discussed vis-à-vis existing prevailing realities~~.

## Democracy

But what is democracy? In an earlier paper Abdulrahman (1996), argued, following Ake (1992), that democracy has a precise meaning or definition. Ake is worth quoting at length:

> For a political concept, the meaning of democracy is uncharacteristically precise. Democracy means popular power, rule by the demos. – (This) remains the classic definition of democracy, rephrased with poignant simplicity by a famous American as "government of the people, by the people, for the people". The problem is not, and never has been determining what democracy means, but the contradictions of people's responses to its perceived implication for their power and their interests: (Ake, 1992:1).

The paper further explained that the core element of democracy as invented and practised by the Greeks was active participation by the people in taking decisions on all matters of public interest. The only categories of people excluded from participation were the slaves, the insane and the minor.

However, it was not only the Greeks who practiced democracy. Our own people did and, in some places, still do. In a research conducted sometime in 1995, some colleagues and I studied two communities. The first was a small agricultural community of about eighty people. Whenever there was any matter of public interest, the Baale would ask everyone, except children and women who were completely dependent on their husbands, to assemble. Discussions would be held and decisions would be taken only after a consensus had been reached, regardless of how long it took to reach a consensus.

The second community was a semi-urban community of about 25,000 people. Here, occupational differentiation was relatively more pronounced although most of the people were full time farmers and the salaried workers also combined farming with their other jobs.

The community had evolved a unique democratic structure made up of three principal organs. These were (1) the traditional council, (2) the Egbe Atunluse (Town Improvement Association) which was made up of two representatives from each of the nineteen compounds in the town and (3) the Progressive Union which was open to all indigenes irrespective of age, sex, occupation, etc.

The traditional council consisted of the Chief and the six high chiefs. It met every market day. Matters to be discussed could be initiated by the Chief, the council members or could be brought by the Atunluse or the Progressive Union. The council took decisions on the

basis of consensus regardless of the time it took to reach consensus.

The Atunluse demonstrated practically the equality of each of the nineteen compounds in the town. Each had two representatives and only these representatives could attend its meetings. It served as an organ not only for discussing community problems but also for collecting lévies, disseminating information and enforcing community sanctions.

The Progressive Union was open to all indigenes regardless of age, sex, socio-economic status and place of residence. It met twice a year and served as an umbrella body for all other associations which must register with it. Its elections were by open ballot and its decisions were taken on the basis of majority vote. These two examples illustrate the two forms of democracy that have evolved in the course of human history — i.e. — the full or direct democracy (as practised by the Greeks and the small community mentioned earlier) and what is today known as liberal representative democracy.

It is worthy of note that the Greek city-states were largely tribal/provincial states. There was neither a highly complex division of labour nor a highly centralized political organization embracing many different tribes. The Greek economy was itself essentially an agricultural economy (Barness, 1948).

As I pointed out in the earlier paper (Abdulrahman, 1996), the spread of industrial capitalism and the attendant increase in urban living and social complexity resulted in the modification of the full democracy as practised by the Greeks. In other words, "a political arrangement had to be fashioned out which would make the views of the people, as expressed through their representatives, the basis for taking decisions on matters of public interest. This, then, was the origin of party politics and electoral competition which seem to define liberal (representative) democracy as we know it today" (Abdulrahman, 1996:131-132).

## Arguments Against Liberal Democracy

Several arguments have been adduced against liberal representative democracy. It is not true democracy because it discriminates against the poor, the illiterate and women. The poor and the illiterate cannot organise politically, make intelligent choices between competing alternatives or counter the propaganda of the rich (Bande, n.d.; Pateman, 1980; Jessop, 1978, and Therborn, 1977). In addition, it does not give the electorate any control over their elected representatives and, therefore, does not truly represent the wish(es) of the electorate. Toffler expresses this argument forcefully as follows:

> *Representative government does not change the underlying structure of power. No where do the people exercise control. Election merely provides the illusion of equality and exercise of power. Elections are no more than reassurance rituals. Election takes place inter-*

mittently but the exercise of influence by the elites goes on uninterruptedly. Everywhere the gap between the represent-atives and the represented widens. (Toffler, 1989:77).

The second major argument against liberal democracy is that it unduly emphasizes formal rather than substantive equality and, more importantly, political or civil as against economic and social rights. According to Ake, the kind of democracy that the down-trodden masses of Africa deserve is:

> ... a social democracy which goes beyond abstract political rights and takes concrete economic and social rights seriously, ... democracy of empowerment which invests heavily in the upliftment of ordinary people so that they can participate effectively in governance and be more competitive in promoting their material interests (Ake, 1994:21).

The third major argument is that the whole notion of liberal democracy and the attendant ideas of equality, liberty, electoral competition, etc, are specifically western and incompatible with non-western cultural values and norms. Samuel Huttington argued thus:

> "Western ideas of individualism, liberalism constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy... often have very little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures. Western efforts to propagate such ideas produce instead a reaction against human rights imperialism' and a reaffirmation of indigenous values....", (Huntington, 1993, quoted in 'The Economist', 1998:10).

## Response to the Arguments

As strong as the foregoing arguments appear to be, it seems that the critics have confused the workings of liberal democracy in some particular countries, (notably Britain and the U.S.) with the content of liberal democracy per se. The value content of liberal democracy embodies those very ideals which formed the cornerstone of Greek democracy – i.e. – liberty, freedom and equality. In other words, liberal democracy goes beyond party politics and electoral competition. Indeed, a country may not operate a multiparty system but its citizens may still enjoy full political and civil rights as the experience of Japan has shown. Also, while it is true that liberal democracy as practised in Britain and America has not substantially addressed the social inequalities existing in these countries, the same cannot be said of the Nordic countries as well as France, all of which place greater emphasis on equality and socio-economic justice than on liberty.

Secondly, the critics seem to take democracy as an end rather than a means or a method for arriving at an end.

As Schumpeter has succinctly expressed it, "Democracy is a political method, ....a certain type of institutional arrangement for arriving at political – legislative and administrative – decisions and hence incapable of being an end in itself...." (Schumpter, 1943:272). This suggests that while the goal is effective and meaningful participation, the design of the institutional mechanism and the result produced will vary across both times and places.

Thirdly, liberal democracy incorporates ideals and values which are not specifically western but which are universally human – i.e. – values which are as western as they are African, Hausa, Yoruba, Islamic, Hinduist, etc, etc. It would appear that the right to life, liberty, justice, freedom, etc, are not any more western than they are Islamic, Igbo, Tiv or Japanese. All societies or cultures value peace, order, stability, progress, economic well-being, social justice and ecological stability in the same way that they all abhor poverty, social injustice, environmental degradation, alienation and ill-health. These common values and concern for common problems tie us to our fellow human beings. To say therefore, that values of equality, justice, freedom, liberty, etc, are western is to say that other cultures are less than human or humane.

In addition, no culture is monolithic. Within Western societies themselves, the issue and place of rights and freedoms are still subjects of heated debates. There are Americans, Muslims, Buddhists, Asians, etc who champion the values of freedom, liberty, equality, etc, just as there are those who argue for the restriction of those rights and freedoms. In general, as the Economist has noted:

*It tends to be the people in power who use Islamic or Asian values to justify political repression and restrictions of rights, and it tends to be the people they are oppressing who appeal to the outside world to uphold those rights (The Economist, December 5, 1998:10).*

Finally, the logic of industrialism points to the fact that it is no longer possible to return to the direct democracy of the Greek city states except in very small and/or indigenous communities. Or, perhaps, in the technological society of the future in which, according to Toffler (1980), every one will have access to a television set, a computer, a phone, etc, and people could sit in their rooms and have discussions with other members of their community as if they are all engaged in a face-to-face interaction.

However, that society is still light years away particularly for us in this part of the world whose immediate concern is how to sustain democracy and make it work.

## Factors Promotive of Democracy

Several scholars have identified factors which they consider necessary for the institutionalization and effective functioning of a democratic system. For Almond and Coleman (1971) these factors include a high level of urbanization, widespread literacy, a high

level of industrialization, extensive communication network, a high level of social and geographical mobility and high level of per-capital incomes. For Schumpeter (1943), the requisite factors include an adequate number of high quality people who are ready to make politics their career and to serve, a well-trained bureaucracy of good standing and tradition, voluntary subordination of individuals and groups, and "a large measure of tolerance for differences of opinions" (pp.289-295). For Huttington, (1965) education, urbanization, growing literacy and increased communication are necessary while for others, social consensus (Lipset, 1959) and a civic culture (Almond and Verba, 1980) are prerequisites.

There have been heated debates as regards whether some or all of these factors are causes, concomitants or effects of democracy. This debate need not detain us. Rather, I would like to argue that the most important factor promotive of democracy is responsible citizenship. This is certainly not to deny the importance of industrialization, institutions, constitutions, etc, but to emphasize that the functionality and effectiveness of these other factors, and indeed of democracy, depends entirely on the ability and willingness of the citizens to make them function and effective. To paraphrase Katz and Kahn (1966) – scholars of complex organizations – the most important input into a democracy project consist of people as responsible citizens. The inputs of and returns to the citizens constitute the major determinant, not only of the level of effectiveness of the functioning of democracy but of the very existence of democracy itself.

## Responsible Citizenship

The legal definition of citizenship is not our focus in this paper but it is pertinent to begin from there. The Nigerian Constitutions of 1979 and 1999 recognize three categories of citizens – i.e. – citizens by birth, citizens by registration and citizens by naturalization. In the first category are persons born in or outside of Nigeria whose parents or grandparents are citizens of Nigeria or belong to communities indigenous to Nigeria while the second and third categories include these who have chosen to be domiciled in Nigeria and are of good character (among other conditions).

The dictionary definitions of citizen and citizenship come closer to the focus of this paper. According to the Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary, a citizen is "an inhabitant of a city" or "a member of a state" while citizenship is "a state of being or of having rights and duties of a citizen".

From a sociological point of view, citizenship is conceptualized in terms of a relationship between the nation-state and its individual members. For Somers, it is:

*A set of institutionally embedded social practices which are contingent upon and constituted by networks of relationships and political idioms that stress membership and universal rights and duties in a national community (1993:589).*

Waters defines citizenship more precisely as follows:

> Modern citizenship is a set of normative expectations speci-fying the relationship between the nation-state and its individual members which procedurally establish the rights and obligations -of members and a set of practices by which these expectations are realized (1989:160).

Implicit or explicit in all the sociological discussions of citizenship is the idea that citizenship involves both rights and duties on the part of both the state and the individual. My notion of responsible citizenship, therefore, is of a citizen who freely and consciously exercises, and indeed demands, his/her rights but also freely and consciously fulfills his/her obligations. This applies at the level of both the state as well as the individual. A state that governs unjustly i.e. discriminates against a religious or ethnic or social or political group loses the right to the group's obedience just as an individual or group who/which fails to fulfill his/her/its obligations loses the right to certain expectations (including the expectation of protection) from the state. Citizenship, thus, has a significant moral content. The diffusion of responsible citizenship is a *sine qua non* for both national democratic development and the development of the individual's social, political and moral maturity (Heater, 1990).

At the level of the individual the major attributes of responsible citizenship include the following:

(1)  loyalty – a feeling of emotional attachment to a particular object emanating from one's belief in the value of the object and involving a suppression of one's selfish feelings;

(2)  patriotism – a feeling of pride in one's country's achievements sublimated or tempered by a recognition of her shortcomings;

(3)  responsibility – a sense of responsibility to take positive and supportive actions such as acceptance of legal duties and moral obligations to the state and fellow citizens, political participation, orderly behaviour and display of self-control, honesty and integrity; and,

(4)  respect for procedural values – this includes respect of truth and reasoning, freedom, fairness and tolerance i.e. tolerance of opinions, values, religion, etc, that are different from one's own. In other words, the responsible citizen recognizes and respects other peoples' rights. (Heater, ibid, pp 195 – 202).

The list of the attributes of the responsible citizen can be extended ad infinitum. The essential point, however, is that the responsible citizen is civil or displays civility. Shills defines civility as follows;

*Civility is a belief which affirms the possibility of the common good ... Civility is a virtue expressed in action on behalf of the whole society, on behalf of the good of all the members of the society to which public liberties and representative institutions are integral. Civility is an attitude in individuals which recommends that consensus about the maintenance of the order of society should exist alongside the conflicts of interests and ideals. It restraints the exercise of power by the powerful and restraints obstruction and violence by those who do not have power but who wish to have it. Civility is on the side of authority and on the side of those over whom authority would rule. (E. Shills, 1980, quoted in Heater, 1990:202).*

A critical look at the Nigerian situation over the last decade or so will reveal a near absence of civility or responsible citizenship on the part of both the state and the citizens, the powerful and the powerless.

Perhaps because of the long period of military rule and/or other factors, the psyche of the average Nigerian has become militarized. The language we use even in ordinary conversation is one of aggression. The exercise of power by those in position of power became personalized. People were jailed or even killed as it suited the whims and caprices of the powerful or the well connected. The banning and unbanning of

politicians, the proscription of labour and student's unions, the restriction on legitimate demands for wage increases, the implementation of anti people policies, the consideration of self over and above all others, increasing rates of various sorts of crimes, inter ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, the insensitive award of N3.5 m furniture allowance to legislators, and even the recent levelling of Odi, the threat of declaring a state of emergency in Lagos and the untimely increase in the prices of petroleum products – all these are manifestations or vestiges of the absence or erosion of responsible citizenship in Nigeria..

Also, perhaps because of the lack of responsiveness to the yearnings of the people over the years, the brazen display of brutal authoritarianism, etc, the citizenry had on its part become extremely docile. Retired Major General Muhammad Buhari, a former head of state, describes this docility poignantly as follows:

*Considering the extremely poor conditions under which most Nigerians lived, they must be taken as one of the strongly – willed persons around the world. Nonetheless, these same people display astonishing docility evident by the little or no opposition to wrong policies, authoritarian rule and official thievery on a horrendous scale. It stricken the imagination of many an analyst to see the level of unbelievable passiveness in the face of injustice. (Buhari, 1998).*

## Conclusion

Given a situation of near anomie as described above, what then is the way forward? How can we enthrone a regime of responsible citizenship in Nigeria? This is indeed a complex and Herculean task involving several factors, only some of which can be touched upon in this paper.

The first task is that of national integration i.e. the creation of a Nigeria national identity for inspite of several years of political independence and attempts at nation building, there is as yet no Nigerian nation. In other words, the attempts to weld together the congerie of nations inhabiting the territory known as Nigeria has not been successful. In fact, the actions and pronouncements of those in government and leadership positions at various levels and times have often resulted, wittingly or unwittingly, in set backs for our nation building efforts. For example, the manipulation of ethnic and religion differences by the elite in their intense rivalry for power and privileges, the creation of states which paradoxically led to intense competition by territorial units for the share of national resources and discrimination against non-indigenes, the coups and counter-coups which have often assumed or been interpreted in ethnic terms, the annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections, the recent introduction of Sharia in some states of the federation – all these have not only contributed to the fragility of the nation – state but have also created internal distrust and dissention and made the achievement of national integration more difficult.

Yet, without a nation i.e. without successfully integrating the various nationalities in the country, neither responsible citizenship nor democracy will be attained or sustained. Indeed, it becomes superfluous to talk of citizenship when people's loyalty is to their ethnic and/or religious groups rather than the entity called Nigeria.

It must be pointed out, however, that national integration does not require the homogenization of cultures, ethnicity, religions, etc or that the Nigerian national identity suppresses all other identities and interests. Rather, what it entails is the preparedness of individuals and groups, particularly the significant political actors, to subordinate their other interests and identities to the national interest and identity. In other words, it entails that all actors in the polity become habituated to the fact that the Nigerian nation takes precedence over all other primordial attachments, interests and identities so much so that no one seriously contemplates secession.

Secondly, the achievement of national integration demands a certain type of leadership, a leadership that "epitomes the yearnings and cravings of his people for unity and self determination" (Okigbo, 1997, p.12). The leader must be someone with whom every section of the country can identify and someone who symbolizes and projects their hopes, dreams add aspirations.

Thirdly, there is an urgent need for the enunciation and institutionalization of

national ethics, values, principles, and ideology, whatever it is called. The principles or ideology will not only depict in a broad common sense manner the various goals we want, as a people, to achieve and the kind of society we want to build, but will also give direction and meaning to our corresponding individual and group activities. As Therbon has succinctly stated;

> *Ideological mobilization involves setting up a common agenda for a mass of people, i.e. summing up the dominant aspects of a situation, identifying the crucial targets), defining what is possible and how it is to be achieved (1980:116).*

A common ideological motivation will not only spur us individually and collectively towards the achievement of our common goals but will also be necessary for the achievement of national unity.

Fourthly, there is an urgent need for the reform of the Nigerian state which up to now has remained undemocratic. Its undemocratic character can be seen in its lack of transparency, accountability, efficiency, insensitivity to the yearnings, interests and welfare of the people and over-centralization (Akeredolu-Ale 1999). The poor performance of this over-centralized state overtime has been one of the major reasons for the erosion of responsible citizenship in Nigeria.

Fifthly, there is need to liberalize and democratize other governance or authority structures as well, especially, our schools and work organizations. As the various researches on civic culture have shown, the experience of democracy in the school and at work have a cumulative effect on political participation in particular, and responsible citizenship in general, later in life. Our work organizations and school systems should adopt a bottom-up rather than the current top-down approach to governance and the exercise of authority. In concrete terms, students and workers should as a rule participate in taking decisions on matters that affect their work and their lives.

Sixthly, the family needs to be strengthened so as to perform its traditional function of socializing children to be responsible citizens of their communities. However, there is a problem here. The family structure itself is changing. In the past, wealth flew from the young to the old and adult members of the family had a great incentive to socialize their young. Today wealth flows from the old to the young. The adult members of the family have moved into the work places and the young to the school. The adult members have no great incentive to bring up the young as they once did and the young do not seem willing to take care of the old as was once the case. Children are abandoned morally, financially and psychologically. Hence, the increasing rate of cultism, hooliganism, prostitution, drug addiction, etc, among the youth. Perhaps a way out is to make payments in cash and in kind to families to induce them to socialize their young to become responsible citizens. Another way out perhaps is to take all the children away from their parents at a certain age and let

the state bear the responsibility for their socialization.

Finally, there is need for significant changes in the content of socialization itself. Of particular importance in this regard are our inter ethnic distrust, our time orientation, the high power distance that is characteristic of our various cultures and our collectivity orientation. While high power distance vitiates the growth of democracy because of its negative impact on the principle of equality and equal participation, the low level of inter ethnic/inter group trust and our collectivity orientation impact negatively on the development of responsible citizenship as far as the Nigerian nation is concerned, (Abdulrahman, 1996).

In conclusion, Nigeria is not yet a democracy but she aspires to be. To achieve this goal, certain structural and ideational changes are necessary. In other words, radical changes are needed in both the context and the content of our socialization practices. Certain national habits have to be developed, including allegiance to the country over its constituent parts as well as allegiance to the structural principles of the society. Without these, neither responsible citizenship nor a durable democracy can be achieved.

## Bibliography

Abdulrahman, D.A. (1996) The Interface of Culture and Democracy. *Ibom Journal of Social Issues* Vol.3, 1

Akeredolu-Ale, D. (1999) Nigerian Youth, Education and the National Reformation Agenda. EMPARC's Annual Lecture Series, No.5, September 1999.

Almond, G. And S. |Verba (1990) The Civic Culture Revisited, Boston: Little, Brown and Company

Bande. T.M. (n.d.) Democracy and Culture: A Preliminary Investigation.

Bande, T.M. and S.S. Muhammed (1999) Making Governments in Africa Transparent. A Research Report submitted to CAFRAD, Tangier, Morocco,

Buhari, Muhammad. (1998) "Leadership and Accountability in Period of Crisis". Fourth Annual Sir Ahmadu Bello Memorial Lecture, Arewa House, Kaduna, May 15,

Heater, D.B. (1990) *Citezenship: The Civic Ideal in World History, Politics and Education.* London and New York: Longman

The Economist (London) December 21st, 1996 and December 5th, 1998.

Katz, D. And R.L. Kahn (1966) *The Social Psychology of Organizations.* New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Okigbo, P. (1997) "Country, Nationalities and Nation State. Nigeria and the Dynamics of Nation Building." National War College, Nigeria, Graduation Lecture Series, No.2 July 24,

Papadopoulos, Y. (1995) Analysis of Functions and Dysfunction of Direct Democracy; Top-Down and Bottom-Up Perspectives. *Politics and Society*, 23, 4

Schumpeter, J. (1943): Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy London: George Allen and Unwin.

Somers, M.R. (1993) "Citizenship and the place of the Public Sphere, Law, Community and Political Culture in the Transition to Democracy." *ASR*, 1993, Vol.58

Strydom, P. "The Challenge of Responsibility for Sociology." *Current Sociology*. Vol 47 (3)). Sage.

Therborn, G. (1997) "The Rule of Capital and the Rise of Democracy." *New Left Review* No.103

Waters, M. (1989) "Citizenship and the Constitution of Structured Social Inequality." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*. xxx, 3 – 4