

Political Participation as a Catalyst for National Development in a Democratic Society

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Abstract

Political participation refers to the direct or indirect involvement of the citizens of a country in the governance of their country. Political participation can be broadly divided into two, namely, conventional and unconventional political participation. Conventional political participation is concerned with one's involvement in political campaign, public hearing, recall, referendum, running for public office, voting in elections etc. while unconventional political participation has to do with one's involvement in public protests, civil disobedience, political debates, community development, strike action, etc. political participation being an important paradoxical and delicate political theory, obliges individuals to form and support a given government or the implementation of a given policy based on certain grounds. It also obliges the same people to dissolve any government or oppose the implementation of any policy based on certain grounds too. This work attempts to show that political participation is an agent that provokes or speeds up significant change or action in development since it is only through conventional and unconventional political participation that one can influence the decisions, policies and other activities of the government for the good of the people. Without political participation, there can be no meaningful development in any country. This truth is evident / obvious in most contemporary societies especially in Africa where many countries are underdeveloped. This underdevelopment in some countries are due to marginalization of the people from active political participation and some time apathy on the side of the people towards political participation as this makes the leaders to do whatever they like since no one questions them. But with active political participation of the people, they will be able to demand for what is due to them in terms of development which will include both human and infrastructural development. Where the government fails to provide development, it is still through active political participation that the people will be able to change such a bad government and replace it with a good one. This change can either come through voting such government out during election or by revolution.

Keywords: Political Participation, Democracy, Development, Society and Revolution.

1. Introduction

Many countries are faced with the problem of national development. In a democratic society, both the leaders and the people are collectively responsible for this problem of national development, while the leaders can be blamed for not adhering to the main objective of democracy, which is the prioritization of the 'common good' over personal interest, which in turn is made manifest in national development. The people on the other hand, receive the greater share of the blame for their lack of interest in political participation, this apathy on the side of the people gives the leaders room to do whatever they want, however they want it and whenever want it, since nobody questions their policies and actions.

It is only through active and popular political participation that the people can checkmate the activities of the leaders and re-direct their minds towards the pursuance of common good as against private interest, so as to enhance national development.

Political participation is seen as a panacea for development in a democratic society because, it makes policies legitimate, as it makes people to have a sense of belonging and can lay claim of ownership of such policies. It is through political participation that the citizens partake in the governance of their country, by so doing, they are able to make input in the decisions and policies of the government, applaud a government that is doing well and condemn/oppose a bad government or even remove such government.

Through political participation citizens form and support a given government or the implementation of any policy based on certain grounds. The purpose of participation of citizens in the policy making arrangement is to create sense of belonging and awareness necessary for the sustainability of policy despite the nature of such policy, consolidate democracy and engender good governance.

The importance of political participation to national development cannot be overemphasized as there cannot be genuine development in any democratic society that does not encourage political participation. Emphasizing the need for political participation, Dare and Olukemi argued that:

Since most people desire economic development and the physical improvement of their infrastructure and environments, responsive government will be such that seeks and promotes

economic development. On its own, good governance depicts the degree to which institutions of a particular country (such as executive, legislature or judiciary) and process (such as the role of political parties in election) are transparent, accountable to the people and allow them to freely participate in decisions that affect their lives (803).

This is simply because good governance must indeed democratize the process of decision making in a way to guarantee the involvement of the groups for which decisions are being made. For example, wealthy creation programme can only be potent and sustainable only if the affected group is involved at all levels of decision making process (Arowolo and Aluko 83).

2. Political Participation, National Development, Democracy: Conceptual Clarification

Political Participation

Political participation refers to the direct or indirect involvement of citizens in the governance of their country. Political participation can be broadly divided into two groups, namely, conventional and unconventional political participation. Conventional political participation is concerned with one's involvement in political campaign, public hearing, recall, referendum, running for public office, voting in elections among others. While unconventional political participation has to do with one's involvement in public protests, civil disobedience, political debates, community development, strike action among others.

Accordingly, O. P. Gauba gave a lucid clarification of the concept of political participation in his *An Introduction to Political Theory* when he explains that:

In short, political participation denotes the active involvement of individuals and groups in the governmental processes affecting their lives. In other words, when citizens themselves play an active role in the process of formulation and decisions, their activity is called political participation. Conventional mode of political participation includes voting, standing for office, campaigning for a political party or contributing to the management of a public park ... interestingly an act of opposition or public protest also involves political participation. For example, signing a petition, attending a peaceful demonstration, joining a protest march ... etc. come within the preview of participation ... they are the manifestation of a strong awareness of public interest (445).

Subject to the foregoing analysis and citation, one discovers that political participation is an important paradoxical and delicate political theory. The theory obliges individuals to form and support a given government or the implementation of a given policy base on certain grounds.

National Development: The word 'national' refers to a whole nation. Anything national concerns the whole nation. In *Ruper Emersons* view "the nation is a community of people who feel that they belong together in the double sense that they share deeply significant elements of a common heritage and that they have a destiny for the future (pp. 95-96).

Development on the other hand refers to growth or changes into a better and advanced form. Hence, development is the qualitative and quantitative improvement in the material, emotional and spiritual conditions of human existence which must be sustainable and realizable in ways that are consistent with the protection of human dignity (Efemini, 01). From the above explanation, National development therefore refers to the growth and changes into better by the nation. This growth or change involves economic, social, political, infrastructural and human development. Using *Udoidem's* view it is germane to instance the combination and the highlighting of both economic, social, political and technological observable indices like reduction of the level of absolute poverty, improvement in literacy, health services, housing condition and political consciousness of the people etc. when some scholars want to talk about national development (110). In addition to the above infrastructural development as cited by *Udoidem*, human development is also very important in national development because it is actually human development that sustains infrastructural development.

Democracy: The etymology of the word 'democracy' is from the Greek words 'demos'→ the mob, a people etc. and 'kratein' to rule thus a ruling by the people (Demokratic). Democracy in the 5th century BC was used by *Herodotus* as a rule by the people, which was characterized by equality before the law. This equality emphasized here demonstrates the very character of democracy, which brings it down to the common man. No wonder then why people conceive of democracy as the best system of government since it appears to orchestrate freedom and independence. This was made clearer by *St. Augustine*, who insisted, according to *Millar* "That by Law of nature, man has no right over man seeing that his power stoops short at things and animals men have of themselves logically only the right to command themselves and no human being can of himself impose any authority on others" (*Millar* 205). No doubt, man's dire need for freedom necessitates the desire for democracy; a system where everyone is free to express himself /herself without fear of punishment.

Accordingly, democracy is said to be practiced where political authority is used for the good of the masses in a polity. It was based on this principle that *Pericles* of Athens explained the Athenian constitution saying that it is

called democracy because power is in the hands not of the minority but of the whole people ... (Hutchins, 216 quoted in Okoye, C. A. 99).

Democracy is characterized by individual empowerment whether economic, political, social or religious. In a sense, the intrinsic freedom governing democracy makes it possible for individuals to participate freely and actively in the developmental process be it religious, economic etc. Democracy is expected to lead the people to prosperity and socio-political excellence. Democracy in sum could be said to be best described by Abraham Lincoln as "the government of the people by the people and for the people" (Lincoln 421).

Political Participation as a Linchpin of Democracy: J. S Mill insists on the active participation of the common man in the very major decision making of the state. Public offices also must be made open for the masses to join; to say the least; the people have the authority over their representatives who are servants to them (*Utilitarianism, on Liberty and Consideration of the Representative Government*, 122). Many scholars like Mill emphasize popular participation for a system to be qualified as democratic. The electorate reserves the supremacy of power. These culminate in the respect of rule of law and human right, which represent a typical of democracy. If we speak of democracy, then we must be ready to accept the fact that the power and even the sovereignty reside on the people. If this is the case the people reserves the right to alter or abolish any government that becomes destructive or that goes against the will of the people so as to ensure their safety and happiness. This removal can take any form. To be precise, John Locke in his *Treatise of Government* advocated for revolution in a situation where any government begins to act outside the favour of the people. Often, revolutions appear to be the very last resort to the problems created by a particular democratic system.

3. Some problem of political participation:

- i. **Culture and Religion:** Culture and religion are intertwined, hence the need to discuss the two together as one of the problems affecting political participation. For instance Muslims exhibit a Muslim related culture in everything including politics, likewise other religions. Some religions/cultures forbid certain category of people from political participation and even partaking in other social activities. This prohibition is sometimes based on sex, age etc. for instance, the Muslim doctrine of puda system (i.e. the seclusion of women), forbids women from participating in social and political activities.
- ii. **Violence and Insecurity:** Violence is an act against an individual or group, with the intent to cause injury or death. The major violence that affects political participation is electoral violence which is very common in Africa.

Electoral violence refers to the use of force by political parties or their supporters to intimidate opponents which can result to seizures of political power by the use of undemocratic means, such as force. Electoral violence takes man many steps backwards and even beyond the original state of man (i.e. the state of nature) to a state of war because according to John Locke: "force or a declared design of force upon the person of another...is the state of war..."(2nd treatise, 19). Some times, violence is used to intimidate opponents not to even express their choices of candidates for political position in free open and transparent atmosphere. The effects or consequences of electoral violence range from constituting a major threat to national security, instills fear and causes low participation in elections by eligible voters and consequently casts doubt on the credibility of the purported 'elected leader's before the eyes of the local and international community. Similarly, it could affect the respect from the governed and this could further affect the general acceptability of the popularity of the government, amounts to stealing of genuine mandate from the voters, diminishes good governance and makes the people's hopes and expectations dashed, and finally, it hinders or does away with public accountability by the so-called elected officers.

Delivering a paper on "Nigeria: Electoral Violence and National Security", the onetime Inspector General of police, Tafa A. Balogun notes that:

Electoral violence could in conjunction with other prevailing factors lead to anarchy and ultimately to political instability. The result has been that political opponents are either intimidated or outrightly killed or injured (<http://www.aceprotect.org/accessibility-info>. (10/03/2015).

The situation as indicated above by Balogun scares people to even come out during election to vote not to talk of contesting any election, given the risk involved due to violence and insecurity.

- iii. **Gender Inequality:** Attention is always on women whenever gender inequality is considered as a problem of political participation. This is because many factors hinder women, from active political participation especially in Africa. Some of such factors include: tradition, marriage, reproductive roles, lack of confidence, insecurity, money politics, education etc. considering marriage as an example, many married women are being restricted by their husbands from active political participation for fear of loosing their wives to other politicians due to the misconception that most women politicians are wayward. Also other family responsibilities like child birth, child upbringing and other domestic activities hinder women from active political participation.

iv. **Political socialization:** Political socialization is an endless thing and it involves the transmission of a people's groups or society's political culture from generation to generation. It is a developmental process through which persons acquire political orientations and patterns of behaviour. Political socialization starts from childhood. Having identified political socialization as the transmission of political culture from one generation to another, if one must investigate the interplay of politics and socialization in political participation, the best place to commence is from the area of political culture which according to Almond and Verba, "is a people's predominant beliefs, attitudes, values, ideals, sentiments and evaluations about the political system" (150).

So one's participation in the political system is conditioned or influenced by the inherent political culture in the system. Some countries no doubt have more participatory culture than others, in which case they are more enthusiastic and proud in their institutions and are more effective in the role they play.

Political culture per se does not account for political participation, but, when this culture is transmitted through the process of socialization, it can then affect political participation. For instance, a child who is socialized in the culture of political thuggery, acrimonious rivalry, political assassinations and political contest fraught with election rigging and vituperations will tend to develop negatively or entirely discouraged participation.

Generally, unhealthy political culture discourages political participation. In Nigeria for instance the annulment of the June 12, 1993 general election has produced a lot of apathy to political activities in Nigeria. A lot of people still find it hard to believe in the sincerity of any transition programme in Nigeria. This has succeeded in reducing active political participation including voting in an election.

v. **Wealth and Godfatherism:** Godfatherism is a form of patron-client relationship in the political setting. It is a social problem. It has resulted in political insecurity and violence which are threatening participatory democracy, peace, political stability and consolidation of democracy. Former governor Chimaroke Nnamani of Enugu State of Nigeria, defines political godfather from his own personal experience as: an impervious guardian figure who provided the life line and direction to the godson, perceived to a life of total submission, subservience and protection of the oracular personality located in the large, material frame of opulence, affluence and decisiveness, that is if not ruthless ... strictly, the godfather is simply a self-seeking individual out there to use the government for his own purpose. (5-6).

The political godfathers build an array of loyalists around them and use their influence, which is often tied to monetary considerations, to manipulate the rest of the society. They use their influence to block the participation of others in politics. The godfathers are political gatekeepers they dictate who participates in politics and under what conditions. The role of such people is highly injurious to the advancement of popular, participatory democracy.

4. Political participation: A Catalyst for National Development in a Democratic Society

The Democratic society came into existence through political participation, and the existence, survival and development of such society can only be possible through political participation. For without authentic political participation, good, leadership and good followship; the political society cannot and will never attain a meaningful and sustainable development. In order words, political participation is the creator, as well as the major determinant of the successful commitment of the government to meaningful development.

As earlier stated, political participation encompasses the many activities used by citizens to influence the election of political leaders or the policies they pursue. Such activities include: voting during election, contesting for political positions, taking part in public protest, civil disobedience, political debates, community development and strike action, signing a petition etc.

Considering voting in an election, voting is a cornerstone of democracy which enables the citizens to choose their leaders, it also gives them the opportunity to change a bad government by voting against the leaders of such government. Voting gives the citizens opportunity to be heard and to have a say in important issues that affect their community. Voting is an opportunity given to citizens to change what they don't like and bring about what they like. Voting brings development as the thought of election makes the leaders to work hard so as to avoid being voted out.

Contesting election gives the contestant/candidate opportunity to contribute to the development of the society if he or she wins. On the other hands, it gives the electorates the opportunity to vote for the best candidate of their choice. When many people contest for the same political position, there is always variety of choices for the electorates to make and the possibility of the best candidate winning in a free and fair election is high.

Referendum is very useful, in national development as it gives the citizens opportunity to partake in making and implementation of policies that concerns them through voting for or against such policies as the case may be. There are two types of referenda namely the legislative referendum whereby the legislature refers a

measure to the voters for their approval, and the popular referendum, a measure that appears on the ballot as result of voter petition drive. Popular referendum allows voters to approve or repeal an act of the legislature. If the legislature passes a law that voters do not approve of, they may gather signatures to demand a popular vote on the law. Once enough signatures are gathered and verified, the new law appears on the ballot for popular vote. During the time between passage and popular vote, the law may not take effect.

Recall and impeachment are other measures that the citizens use to checkmate bad leaders. Recall is a procedure that allows the citizens to remove and replace a public official before the end of a term of office, through recall, the citizens are able to remove an erring public officer, this is usually done by an election. An example is the recall of California Governor-Gray Davis and his replacement with Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2003. Impeachment on the other hand, is usually a legal process carried out by the legislature. This is because, in democracy, sovereignty lies with the people and not with the leaders. Hence, "The people are sovereign and they reserve the right to remove any government that fails to perform its duties properly" (Omogegbe 120).

Public protest helps the citizens to oppose certain policies of the government that is not in the interest of the public. It is an attempt to stop a policy or practice that is not in the interest of the public. Public protest is used to demand a change of practice or policy by the government. It is an effective strategy against autocratic regimes and political repression. It relies on underlying support from the population. Public protest is a kind of negotiation tactics to extract concessions from a state or a corporation. Public protest may take the form of strike which is commonly used to leverage labor resources for higher wages or more benefits. Public protest has yielded many positive results in development. for instance the public protest against 100% fuel subsidy removal by the federal government of Nigeria, which resulted in reduction of the subsidy removal from 100% and the subsidy reinvestment programme (Surep), and host of other benefits. Also the, series of strike embarked upon by the Academic Staff Union of the University (ASUU), has yielded many developmental results like ongoing infrastructural development projects in many Nigerian universities, the establishment of Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) etc.

Civil disobedience is another form of political participation which functions as an act of subversion or opposition against the status quo and legal norm that is regarded as unjust by the public. It is always used as the last resort to oppose an unjust government. Ronald Dworking argues that whenever the law wrongly violates one's rights, then one has a right to civil disobedience, hence civil disobedience can be used to checkmate an unjust government and their policies. Civil disobedience is motivated by a genuine sense of the law being morally wrong.

Public debate is an important form of political participation which involves the citizens in the decision making process of their state. According to Reyhan Sunay,

Public debate is essentially a series of forums where people's opinions, interests and expectations are expressed on an issue that concerns the whole or part of the society. Active participation that will take place through such forums will be able to form a powerful ground for an understanding of efficient citizenship and a functioning democracy (powerful democracy). For such forms are primarily those that bear the traces of how people wish to be governed in the context of preference and expectations that have been voiced (34).

Sunay summarized the role of public debate in a democratic society, by such roles as outlined above, the citizens/public are able to control power abuse and corruption by the leaders through public debate. And when these ills are controlled through public debate, development will be enhanced/promoted.

Citizens participation in community development is another form of political participation which according to Spiegel "...is the process that can meaningfully tie program to people" (65).

Citizens can participate in community development by paying their taxes, making donations and volunteering oneself for community services. There are individual and group participation. Groups contribute to national development in many ways including building town halls giving scholarship to citizens, charity organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGO), Religious organizations etc. All the activities of these groups contribute in one way or the other in national development. This form of participation helps the individual or group to make desired change, as well as balance political activity.

In all, the role of political participation in national development cannot be over emphasized, it even transcends infrastructural development to include human development because when a citizen is actively involved in political participation, such a citizen is also improving himself or herself by getting the necessary information he or she needs to be well informed about the events, policies and governance of his society. A knowledgeable person is a developed person, since according to Omogegbe, "to talk of national development is to talk primarily of the development of the human person" (195). This development of the human person includes proper education, good orientation, right information etc which makes the individual to be useful and active in political participation and at the same time well equipped to make meaningful contribution an issues concerning national development which according to Ake, "Is the process of social transformation in which the people themselves are in charge" (01).

5. Conclusion

For there to be sustainable development in any democratic society, there has to be active and popular political participation of the citizens. Just like Martin Luther King, I believe that the prosperity of a country depends not on the abundance of its revenue or on the strength of its fortification, not on the beauty of its public building but it consists in the number of cultivated citizens, its men of character and enlightenment.

The people know what they want and how to go about it. Democracy makes it possible for policy choices to be subjected to the control of free and responsible citizens capable of holding government and state institutions accountable for their implementation. And this can only be done through active political participation of the citizens.

Lastly, democratic government is run through popular political participation because, political participation makes the people to be in total control of the government and society. It is through popular political participation that the citizen are able to elect a leader of their choice through voting, partake in the leadership by contesting and winning election, express their opinions, interest and expectations on issues that concern the society through public/political debate, approve or repeal an act of the legislature through referendum, oppose anti-public policies of the government through public protest, oppose and resist unjust laws through civil disobedience, substitute a bad government with a good one through recall, and contribute their own quota in national development through community development. When all these things are done properly, there will be good governance which in turn brings national development.

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