



E-DEMOCRACY AS A PANACEA FOR ENHANCED CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: *This paper explores the desirability and feasibility of e-Democracy in Nigeria. It assesses the challenges, opportunities and risks of implementing e-Democracy, its impact on the societies and economies in Nigeria in light of the global and domestic challenges and demands confronting Nigeria in the 21st century. The paper observes e-democracy is largely dependent of the growth of ICT, which is still at its lowest ebb in the country. It notes that if the appropriate infrastructure is made available to implement e-democracy, it will arouse the interest of the populace in governance, increase the number of voters, and enhance transparency, probity and accountability, and participation in governance as well as help stabilize the nascent democracy. The paper concludes that e-democracy offer great opportunities for the promotion of good governance and ensuring the effectiveness of democracy in Nigeria.*

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the ability of citizens to participate in online democracy is a key issue for governments in the developing nations because of its attendant benefits. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) facilities support the establishment of electronic interaction between citizens and the various organs of government. Towards this, a variety of efforts have been made, and many systems have been developed, but few attempts have been made to combine more than one mode of access for e-Democracy system.

The dawn of e-democracy is changing the way people interact with government and politicians. Across the world, people are using the Internet in new ways to get information, use services and participate in democracy. And while it's not happening as quickly as many visionaries predicted, discussions and practical use of e-democratic tools is reaching critical mass. Information is the building block of e-democracy. Theoretically, this makes sense. A major driving force of the e-democratic movement is to make democracy, government and the political process more open for everyone to provide everyone with a chance to participate.

In Nigeria, e-democracy and ICTs application in electoral process is at infancy stage where emphasis is gear towards providing public information and services, promoting citizen participation, building trust between government and citizens, etc. However, much has not been done to protect the integrity of our elections.

This paper examines the meaning and development of e-democracy, the importance and the challenges in Nigeria. It also take a critical look at the march towards e-democracy in Nigeria.

THE MEANING AND DEVELOPMENT

E-democracy is an emerging phenomenon that makes it possible for ICT to be used in the formulation of policies and liberation of democracy (Stahl, 2005). Put differently, it is a technology-based mechanism enabling people to effectively participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, livelihood and lifestyles. E-democracy is the use of ICTs for ordinary individuals to participate in policy and decision-making, which will have an impact on their future and that of their children's. An example of e-democracy is e-Voting, which is defined as the use of ICTs in the voting process. E-democracy or simply electronic democracy is a new form of democracy that is enhanced by e-government. It takes



advanced ICT, network and relevant technologies such as the Internet to improve democratic processes within a democratic nation. It is seen as the computerization of political communication, process and policymaking with the intent of enhancing and increasing citizen participation in the policy and decision-making processes of government via a variety of activities (Guo, 2011). These activities include and not limited to voting (i.e. e-voting) electoral campaigns, communication exchange, participation, consultation, public opinion polling, etc. the reasons for the development of e-democracy has been political democratization trend, abuse of democratic representative system, citizens' desire of partaking in political affairs, development of social economy, advanced ICTs (Zovatto, and Payne, 2003).

According to the definition of the Council of Europe, E-Democracy is "the support and enhancement of democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes by means of ICT". E-Democracy initiatives enable and encourage citizens to take part in decision-making processes like elections, petitions, consultations and referenda. The use of ICTs can lead to long-term cost reductions and efficiency gains, more transparency and accountability. Furthermore, the quality of decision-making can be improved. The fact that E-Democracy is limited neither to a certain type nor to specific stages in the development of democracy makes it applicable in developing countries.

E-democracy has been adopted in most industrialised societies like, United States, Canada, etc. This has ensured greater citizen participation and effective governance. The existence of full e-democracy requires all citizens to register. Singapore is the classic example. This small country developed its e-government very rapidly. Singapore's government portal eCitizen has provided inspiration for many e-government services around the world. Singapore was the first country in the world which used the Internet to conduct a population census. But at the same time the administrative structures demand registration of all citizens and keep the public under rigid control. If a citizen does not turn up at the polls, his or her name will be struck from the register and his or her right as a citizen to vote lost (eCitizen, 2001).

THE IMPORTANCE OF E-DEMOCRACY

In the 21st century, the ability of citizens to participate in online democracy is a key issue for governments in the developing nations because of its attendant benefits. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) facilities support the establishment of electronic



interaction between citizens and the various organs of government. Towards this, a variety of efforts have been made, and many systems have been developed, but few attempts have been made to combine more than one mode of access for e-Democracy system. The increase in information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially the Internet has been useful and yielded positive impacts in today's society. With e-democracy in particular, ICT can help build trust by engaging citizen in the policy process, promote open and responsible government and aid in preventing corruption.

E-democracy tools have shown their usefulness. Many countries, such UK, have testified the positive impacts of the ICT use for conducting effectively the democracy. With e-democracy tools, such as, e-mail, e-petition, e-consultation, e-forum, it's easy for human rights activists to denounce and alert the local, national and international community toward human rights violations and crimes committed. This helps decisions-maker to promptly take actions against crimes. E-democracy has landed high on the political agenda in the industrialised world. Large research efforts are made to clarify what role e-democracy plays and could play. E-democracy enables ordinary community members to determine their socio-economic course by enabling them to participate in decision and policy-making using ICTs at anytime and anywhere. It uses a bottom-up approach where participatory policy/decision making is the norm of the day and this ushers in a sense of ownership of the policies/decisions made. By allowing citizens to participate in the democratic processes using ICTs, citizens feel they own the policies that come out of government – citizen interaction and therefore buy-in to those policies.

E-democracy is to transform traditional democracy into a more efficient and productive process in responding to the needs and aspirations of the people. E-democracy expand the range of opportunities for citizens to contribute to the debates and discussions on public policies, checks and balances on governments' activities and abuses of power and authority. Through their websites policy think-tanks or NGOs may inform the public on various issues and policy options. In short, e-democracy facilitate the circulation of information, opinions, views and experiences, thus expanding the political arena and empowering the citizen to effectively participate at his/her own convenience and place in decisions which affect his/her life, livelihood and lifestyles. It will make politicians and bureaucrats more responsive to the needs and aspiration of the citizens, accountable and transparent,



accessible and 'people-friendly' (Mohiddin, 2002). E-democracy play a very positive role in the enhancement of accountability and transparency of those in positions of governance and service delivery, and in the mobilization and management of human and material resources for the promotion of human development and the alleviation of poverty.

E-Democracy is essentially about peoples' empowerment, effective participation in the decision-making processes, enhancing and ensuring accountability and transparency of those in positions of governance, be they politicians or bureaucrats.

DEMOCRACY REVISITED: THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

Democracy involves the opportunity to participate in decision making in the political process. It repudiates arbitrariness and authoritarianism. It extols the consent of the governed and it protects human personality and values (Oke, 2010; Ake, 1991). Democracy is a form of government in which the supreme power is held by the people under a free electoral system (Dunn 1994; Kurt 2007).

The popular conceptualization of democracy is that it is "a government of the people, by the people and for the people". According to Adegboye (2005) this definition presupposes a number of assumptions:

- Mass participation in elections and electioneering process;
- The larger percentage of the citizenry is involved in governance;
- The government is responsible to the people in all ramifications;
- People can "reject" an unpopular candidate through the ballot or by recall;
- Elections are usually free and fair;
- Citizens will always exercise their civic duty by voting during elections;
- The sanctity of the ballot will be respected.

If these assumptions are taken to be correct, then it is expected that significant proportions of eligible and registered voters will turn out to vote during elections and as well participate in the democratic process to ensure good governance.

Democracy goes beyond opportunity of election. Although, the centrality of elections to democratic process cannot be over-emphasised, democracy is not wholly centred on election. For democracy to evolve good governance, it must be liberal and participatory. In this sense, Liberal democracy entails not only free and fair elections in terms of voting administration, it requires a more comprehensive fairness of political competition embodied



in the concept of a just and open competition. In a liberal democracy, the electoral arena is open, and the playing field is reasonably level (Arowolo and Aluko, 2012). Thus, the concept of democracy is associated with the state. In general the motive force for democracy is the overwhelming power of the state, together with its possible use for social, economic and cultural progress, but also for domination, oppression, exploitation, inequality and injustice. Of all forms of power, state power alone can threaten life, wealth and freedom legally. As the repository of sovereignty, the state has ultimate power. It monopolizes the means of coercion to an extent that is unknown to sub-state or supra state community. Democracy is about how to establish this power, as well as how to use it for good rather than evil. In fact, there is no point in the struggle for democracy if power resources do not exist, especially if the state does not monopolize them.

Dahl (1989) identifies three elements that distinguish democracy from other forms of authoritarianism: the democratic process promotes individual and collective freedom, it promotes human development and the democratic process, though not perfect, as the best way by which people can protect and advance their common interests and goods.

While there is no universally accepted definition of “democracy”, equality and freedom have both been identified as important characteristics since ancient times. These principles are reflected in all citizens being equal before the law and having equal access to legislative process. In a representative democracy, every vote has equal weight, no unreasonable restriction can apply to anyone seeking to become a representative and the freedom of its citizens is secured by legitimized rights and liberties which are generally protected by a constitution. The creation of a democracy that is appropriate to Nigerian conditions is one of the challenges facing Africa in the 21st Century. It is because either democracy has not been working well, not clearly understood or somehow obstructed in its working appreciated that Nigeria has not been able to solve its serious economic and social problems. As e-Democracy is expected to transform and enhance the working of ‘traditional’ democracy, it would therefore be useful to briefly revisit democracy.

The practice of democracy in Nigeria over a decade ago has not yielded much needed good governance. This is because democracy is practiced in such a way that responsible and competent people are scared away. Scholars and keen observers have attempted at unraveling the factors militating against translating democracy into good governance.



Democracy in Nigeria has three unique features which include: insulation of economic matters from popular participation, manipulation and monopolisation of democratic process including the use of violence and electoral fraud to secure legitimacy and peripheral participation of citizens. Surface-level participation does not have far-reaching influence on the outcome of policy choices (Arowolo and Aluko, 2012).

Democracy in Nigeria since independence is practised with regard to subjective factors and primordial loyalty to one's place of birth, social connection and group affinity. The unfolding events in Nigeria evidently point to a departure from the guides of democratic ethos and ethics. Politics in Nigeria has been described as sectional politics where denial of rights takes priority in the distribution of and access to national resources. The segregated politics of the governments at all levels create primordial ethnic loyalties where groups jostle for the "national cake" in a way that could inhibit the continuity of the Nigerian State.

Democratic institutions in Nigeria are very fragile and are often unable to protect and promote sustainable democracy. Interregnum misrule of the military weakened the democratic institutions like judiciary and legislature. Flagrant disrespect for and disobedience to the constitution has become a feature that is conspicuous in Nigerian democratic experience, coupled with weak or lack of political will and capacity to punish electoral offenders. Other crises facing democracy and good governance in Nigeria include: dependent and weak judicial system; poverty and ignorance; corruption; citizenship, settlers/strangers crisis; absence of internal democracy in political parties; political intolerance and winner-takes-all syndrome; inexistent deep-rooted ideology in political parties; self-serving legislature and so on (Arowolo and Aluko, 2012).

CHALLENGES OF E-DEMOCRACY

The African countries themselves understand the importance of IT for developing, improving governance and exchanging information with the outside world. Till now the Internet has been used in Africa mainly as a communication (email) and information tool accessible only to information-rich people and users from abroad. At the moment television and radio are still the more democratic and open media and are used far more than the Internet in the region; the Internet affects the majority of the audience only indirectly as the information source for the traditional media.



The case for e-democracy risks, challenges and opportunities have to be viewed within the context of the needs and demands of Nigerians in a changed and rapidly changing world. Problems associated with e-voting are complicated and cannot be contained due to the technological complexities involved. However, Nigerian can embrace modern technologies embedded in e-democracy into its electoral process in a form that can be handled. By this, Nigerian traditional electoral system needs to be re-engineered by employing some basic relevant ICT tools that may help improve the quality of the existing democracy, make it more attractive and alleviate the problems of verification and identification- multiple registration and voting, rigging, etc (Isong and Ndwamato, 2013).

Lack of skills for using some e-democracy tools is among major challenges in implementing e-democracy in some developing countries. Given the level of poverty, illiteracy, deficient scientific culture and poor connectivity in Nigeria, the vast majority of the people will be excluded from e-democracy. Yet the extension of e-democracy to many more people and not necessarily the majority---will be a very costly and risky proposition. Yet more, if no positive measures are taken e-Democracy is likely to consolidate and strengthen the role of the elites in the political processes, further marginalizing the poor and the illiterate. It may also facilitate the infiltration of business influence into Nigerian politics. With vested interests in domestic policy options, the business community is likely to use its technological leverage to disproportionately influence the decision-making by entering into the e-Democracy loop, either directly or through proxies (Mohiddin, 2002).

THE MARCH TOWARDS E-DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: WHAT NEED TO BE DONE?

Concerned with Nigeria's endemic dismal socio-economic and political conditions, disappointed with the workings of 'traditional' democracy, frustrated with the quality in service deliveries of the public sector, worried about the future of Nigeria in a rapidly globalizing world, and disenchanted with the prevailing political leadership in Nigeria, should the succeeding generation of Nigerian leaders welcome and promote the introduction of e-Democracy?

To be effective and sustainable in the long term, the usefulness of e-democracy must be explained to the people. Its objectives and costs need to be discussed and debated. Confronted with pressing domestic demands for the promotion of human development and



the alleviation of poverty in the face of inadequate resources, the opportunity costs for the implementation of e-democracy must be calculated, acknowledged and explained to the people.

The first step towards achieving e-democracy is successfully implementing e-government. E-government ushers in a paradigm where transparency in public institutions is achieved; enables ordinary citizens to access public information freely and conveniently; and encourages wider participation of citizens in their democratic endeavors. ICT use in governance may intrinsically change relationships in society, help to achieve real democratic means and even transform people's social and political consciousness. It is thus important that the benefits of e-democracy to the overall efforts in the promotion of human development and alleviation of poverty be fully understood by the people. Thus, in order to promote e-democracy in Nigeria there is the need for the image of government to be demystified.

Promotion of e-democracy will inevitably entail changes in the substance and style of politics, as well as in the manner in which government services are delivered. Thus both the politicians and bureaucrats are bound to be affected. The effectiveness of e-democracy will largely depend on the capability and responsiveness of those in charge of the governance processes, incumbent politicians and bureaucrats. It is they who will be responsible to popularize the concept, to put in place the necessary technological infrastructure and human resources to ensure the operational viability of e-democracy. The success of E-Democracy in Nigeria is highly related to governments' consideration and management.

The introduction of e-democracy policies in Nigeria can improve the quality of decision-making and strengthen the political process. However, the implementation of new technologies involves different risks and challenges that, while not accounted for, may lead to misuse. Risks can be avoided and challenges met by an extensive public discussion including all stakeholders as well as framing the country's specific vulnerabilities and referring to international standards and best practice. At the beginning of the implementation process of E-Democracy, an analysis of the feasibility and the political, technological, legal and social factors is recommended.



CONCLUSION

The world is transforming rapidly as the new technologies penetrate all spheres of our life. People have got new opportunities to get in contact and to communicate. There are many contradictory opinions and ideas about the role of new technologies in governance and democratization of society. Today's e-society benefits from ICT in various aspects of life ranging from getting ordinary public services to supporting everyday work. The impact of ICTs on democracy has been valuable. It can be used to enhance the democratic process - engage citizens or build trust with the government. Trust building with ICT can also be extended to election processes to promote its transparency.

It is important to note that without a digitally literate population, universal access to ICT and developing a culture of openness, the task of the democratization of society will not be realized. Real democracy is achievable only when all individuals take part in all aspects of political, social and economic life. The participation principle is pivotal to the concept of democracy and democratic governance. By providing people with better ways of disseminating information and knowledge, facilitating communication amongst themselves, and between themselves and those in governance positions, e-democracy is expected to strengthen and make democracy work more efficiently and effectively. E-Democracy thus offers great opportunities for the promotion of good governance and ensuring the effectiveness of democracy in Nigeria.

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