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## EXPANDING THE DEMOCRATIC SPACE IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

### ABSTRACT

*The Nigeria political landscape has undergone a series of transformations since independence in 1960. Nigeria spent most of her post independence years struggling with political, social, and economic upheavals. Repeated attempts to sustain and consolidate democratic government have faltered. The resurgence of ethnic and religious conflicts all over the country has once again fueled pessimism concerning not only the future of democracy in Nigeria, but also the existence of Nigeria as a political entity. The way the Nigerian government resolves these challenges will determine whether Nigeria's fledgling democracy is transient or sustainable and, more importantly, whether Nigeria disintegrates or reconfigures herself as a nation-state. This paper focuses on the role of civil society in sustaining Nigeria's democracy in terms of expanding the political space for popular participation. The main argument of this paper is that a weak civil society and non-democratic culture is to a large degree the product of political instability; conversely a vibrant civil society coupled with civility and social capital are the basic building blocks for democratic survival. Moreover, a vibrant civil society can champion government reforms, confront corruption, advocate respect for human rights, promote and defend democratic processes and institutions. One of our chances of achieving sustainable peace, economic development, and stable government in Nigeria is to give civil society a greater role in governance. As democracy spreads around the world, the realization is growing that a nation's political future, its economic strength, its national vitality and its very identity will be shaped by the creation of better, more transparent government in partnership with a vibrant civil society.*

### Introduction

In recent years, the concept of “democratic governance” has become increasingly prominent in development literature, and the buzzword “civil society” has become a key element of the post military discourse in the developing world. As increasing attention is paid to democratization, human rights, popular participation, regime stability, transparency, accountability, probity, privatization, deregulation and reducing the size of the state, the important role of civil society can no longer be ignored.

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The growing universal consensus on the relevance of civil society to the survival of democracy can be traced to phenomena ranging from the decline of the Western welfare state to the transformation of the former Soviet bloc to resistance against authoritarian regimes in the developing world. USAID has helped to bring the concept of civil society to the limelight of democratic discourse in the developing world. As Laurie Denton has noted,

*“Support for civil society is a core component of USAID’s democracy and governance agenda, reflecting a growing realization of the value of autonomous centers of social and economic power to democracy. Promoting accountable, participatory governance, these groups are essential to keeping emerging democracies moving in the right direction.”*

USAID shares this concern and is carrying out several projects in developing nations that are geared toward strengthening civil society. The 1996 Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) quadrennial global conference in Cairo, which focused on the theme “The Rise of Civil Society in the 21st Century”, underscored the significance of this new consensus on civil society when it argued that

*“many societies today are out of balance. Political systems, even so-called democracies, provide little opportunity for inclusive citizen participation.” To ICA, “culture—those shared understandings, values, patterns, symbols, and stories that build community and provide a context for decisions—needs to be re-empowered if a more people centered, sustainable society is to emerge from the present situation.”*

Democratization in Nigeria has not benefited from this new consensus on civil society. Post-colonial statism and the protracted years of military dictatorship have provided a scant basis for the aggregation of private interests and the attenuation of state authority. As a consequence, corruption has become widespread in the Nigerian system. When civil society functions well, it can champion government reforms, confront corruption, advocate respect for human rights, and promote and defend democratic processes and institutions. In an attempt to explain why the concept of civil society is vital for sustaining Nigeria’s nascent democracy, and in seeking to forecast future democratic developments, we will ask these fundamental questions pertinent to the role of civil society in democratic consolidation: (i) Which civil society and how does it consolidate democracy? (ii) What is the relationship between civil society and the state? And (iii) is the present civil society in Nigeria capable of sustaining democracy? These questions relate to long-standing debates about Nigeria’s quest for the ever-elusive goal of attaining a true democratic culture. One of my main arguments in this paper is that the consolidation of democracy requires a balanced relationship between civil society and the state. Linz and Stefan (1996) arguing along the same lines, have written the following:

*“At best, civil society can destroy a nondemocratic regime. However, a full democratic transition, and especially democratic consolidation, must involve the state... It is important to stress not only the distinctiveness of civil society and the state, but also their complementarity...”*

The more central thesis here holds that a weak civil society or non-democratic culture is to a large degree the product of political instability; conversely, a vibrant civil society coupled with civility and social capital are the basic building blocks for democratic survival. This paper will try to demonstrate that embed in the idea of an effective state is an effective civil society. The relationship between civil society and the state was necessarily symbiotic. Civil society cannot function without the state, and the state could not realize its potential completeness and universality without a properly constituted and functioning civil society.

### **Framework of Analysis**

The conflict perspective of social movement will be utilize to analyze the emergence and role of the civil society movement in expanding political space and consequently consolidate democracy in Nigeria. This theory conceives social movements including civil society groups as special interest groups or collectivities that attempt to gain benefits for individuals, groups or communities; produce social reforms on a number of issues which also includes politics as well as gain entry into the established structures of society.

### **Conceptualization**

#### **Civil society**

In seeking to explain the meaning of civil society in theoretical and practical terms, as well as their relevance to African reality, an attempt will be made here to go beyond the normative definition in the abstract world of politics and economics to embrace the empirical definition in the real world. This involves viewing civil society from a historical perspective. It is only through an examination of history that one can fully understand the current environment within which civil society dwells and its implications for democratic governance.

In the line of argument Peter Lewis postulated that the emergence of civil society is inextricably linked to the interrelated changes in the modern-legal-rational state, the economy and forms of social organizations. The idea of civil society came as a way of facilitating the growth of private enterprise, and to help ensure that the state does not suffocate the economy. The middle class that emerged out of the success of capitalism serves as a counter-hegemonic force on state power (1992).

According to a 1997 report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, “Many elements of civil society can work to reduce hatred and violence and to encourage attitudes of concerns, social responsibility and mutual aid within and between groups. In difficult economic and political transitions, the organizations of civil society are of crucial importance in alleviating the dangers of mass violence.” Civil society’s importance, according to Keane, “stems from the growing realization that a stable democracy rests not only on properly functioning elections and institutions but also on the more elusive ‘civic’ qualities in society.”

**Contrary to the** praises above, Hegel was extraordinarily critical of the supposed contribution of civil society to the success of democracy. Hegel viewed civil society as a source of conflict that can spill over into the larger society. His argument is supported by the premise that not every organization in civil society works for the success of democracy; some actually work to undermine democracy. Nigeria’s primary civil society organizations—the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), The Oduduwa People’s Congress (OPC) are cases in point.

For the purpose of this study, civil society will be defined in collaboration with Larry Diamond who conceived it as “the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules.” Diamond’s conception is further enriched by his characterization of an organized civil society as:

- i. A check against excesses of government;
- ii. An accelerator of participation and skills of various segment of society;
- iii. An alternative to political parties;
- iv. A promoter of bargaining power of interest groups;
- v. A mitigator of fundamentalist extremists and maximalists and provider of alternatives for negotiation on a multifaceted society; and
- vi. A field of leadership recruitment. (also in Nwosu, 2006)

Consequently, this study’s conceptual point of departure in respect of civil society is the believe that the civil society should consist of nationally based and democratically oriented groups; in corroboration with Jega (2007: 252), the paper is of the view that civil society groups “...should promote and defend the

constitution and the rule of law, take steps to enhance the integrity and efficacy of the democratic political institutions and processes; and assist in the development of a viable democratic culture”.

## **Democracy**

Democracy has become a popular concept in every contemporary discourse. It is now a word that resonates in people’s minds and springs from their lips as they struggle for freedom and for a better way of life. In its Greek understanding, the term democracy originally referred to the right of the citizens of the Greek City states to participate directly in the act of governance. The word ‘democracy’ is known to have been coined from two Greek words: demos (the people) and Kratos (rule) which simply means people’s rule. It is an institution of governance which envisages a popular government as practiced in ancient Greece.

Although in a modern State the direct participation of all the people in the government of the state is impossible, the concept of democracy still emphasizes the rule of the people, in that sovereign power is exercised by the people but now indirectly through a system of representation. The people chose their representatives who then govern in their name. In a democracy, power resides in the people and belongs to the people. In a democracy, the people own the government, and not government owning the people. A democracy is thus distinguished from a Monarchy (the rule of a Monarch) or Aristocracy (the rule of a privileged class) or an Oligarchy (the rule of a junta). While making a comparative examination of the three perverted forms of government (Democracy, Oligarchy and Tyranny), Aristotle described democracy as the most tolerable in contrast to oligarchy and tyranny.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **The Contributions of Civil Society Groups in Expanding the Democratic Space in Nigeria**

Contrary to the Eurocentric perspective that, “Africa has no history.” Which sees Africa as an ahistorical and underdeveloped world, entirely enslaved to the natural mind (Sedogo,1998). By implication, African societies lack the “divine will” to create any vibrant civil society. Here, we believed that the dominant idea clashes with reality: the state and some elements of vibrant civil organizing actually existed in Africa. Recent studies has shown that “civil society exists as a fully formed construct in Africa as in Europe, and the driving force of democratization as everywhere, is the contention between the civil society and the state” Mamdani (2002:13).

Nigeria like other African states has a long and strong tradition of civil society, which represents the diverse and pluralistic nature of Nigerian society. Nigeria's history of struggle and resistance was primarily led by civil society groups. In fact, their formation and activities date back to the colonial period when different groups, sometimes locally and territorially based, and at other times transcending clan and "tribal" boundaries, became part of the nationalist protest against the repressive colonial state. The imbalance between state and civil society does indeed persist in contemporary African states, including Nigeria. The colonial state was conceived, nurtured, and sustained in violence (Kukah, 1998). It was absolutist, and either excluded politics altogether or viewed it in terms of administration ( Bayart, 1986). The civil society of the colonial state consisted of the few enfranchised or privileged colonists and settlers, with enfranchisement based on such factors as income, education, and urban residency. The 1922 Clifford's constitution in Nigeria introduced the elective principle based on limited franchise, based on similar conditions. Peasants in the colonial state were not accorded these civic privileges (Mamdani, 2002). The civil society aimed to circumvent pressures that could create social instability. But some who were excluded from the political space occasionally challenged the colonial state. Particularly instructive was the women's riot in 1929 at Aba in Southeastern Nigeria. This incident and other episodic eruptions of the peasantry suggest the presence of civil organizing in Nigeria even before independence. The colonial state retained its absolutist and undemocratic character, despite the few civil protests leaving only limited participatory space for civil society.

The postcolonial state that emerged at independence retained some of the features of the colonial order. Postcolonial Nigeria thus limits the participatory latitude of civil society, especially on critical issues of democracy and governance. As in the colonial order, the postcolonial order controls significant economic resources, means of production and wealth accumulation thereby making the state an arena for intolerance, war-like, zero-sum competition for political power. State power offers opportunity for embezzlement. This consequently resulted in the common quest to personalize public power and make the state unduly coercive. Personalizing state power brings about the client-patron relationship between state officials and their loyalists. Supporters of incumbent governments are usually rewarded with bonuses such as contracts, gifts, and public appointments, whereas the opposition suffers in neglect. Moreover, prolonged military

rule, accounting for over 30 years of Nigeria's post independence history, has resulted in the systematic closure of the political space.

The suspension of constitutional rule, the centralization of political power, and the denial of the basic rights and freedoms of citizens led to the emergence of all kinds of associational life that stood up to successive military governments. The economic failure of the 1980s and the introduction of orthodox structural adjustment policies (SAP), also aided the emergence of several other civic organisations, ranging from human rights organisations and professional associations to business and mutual self-help associations thriving across the country, both urban and rural. Following this, labour organisations, student associations, and the media provided a strong leadership and organised protests against unpopular policies.

During 1980s and early 1990s, civil society played three important roles. **First**, it played a leading role in mobilizing the poor and their organisations against unpopular economic policies within the SAP framework. **Second**, the multiplicity of civic groups and associations including grassroots, community-based associations, and faith-based associations emerged providing assistance to their members and the poor, in the absence of a state based welfare systems. **Third**, and most importantly, civil society organisations have played a very critical role in the expansion of the political space. The role of civil society organisations, especially the pro-democracy and human rights groups in this regard, has gained legitimacy among citizens. The civil society gained such names as the watch-dog of the democratization process.

The growth and development of civil society in Nigeria has been intermittent. Once the assumed missions had been accomplished, civil society disintegrated or retreated into isolation, only to surge again when threats reappeared. Though the state has played an enormous role in the development of civil society in Nigeria through co-optation, manipulation, and oppression since independence in 1960, the present civil society groups in Nigeria can be categorized as follows:

**Professional Associations, Labour and Student Groups;** Examples of organisations that belong to this category include: the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Nigerian Society of Engineers (NSE), the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Nigerian Labour

Congress (NLC), the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). Although the primary objective of these groups is to advance their own professional interests, they are also involved in activities of more general interest to society.

**The Human Rights and Pro-Democracy Groups:** Civil society organisations in this category have a more recent history. Most of them emerged in response to the military regimes during the 1980s and the 1990s, and the gross human rights violations, as well as the systematic closure of the political space. There are numerous examples of organisations belonging to this group which can be identified as the ‘vanguard’ in the struggle against the military regimes in Nigeria. Some of the examples include the Civil Liberties Organisations (CLO), Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDHR), Constitutional Rights Project (CRP), and the League for Human Rights (LHR).

However, this broad category can be further divided in terms of their functions and orientation. For example, some of them are gender-based, dealing with issues of gender mainstreaming and women empowerment, including Women Aid Collective (WACOL), Gender and Development Action (GADA), Women’s Rights Advancement and Protection Action (WRAPA) and Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC). Other groups have emerged due to the collapse of the secular education sector. These groups are predominantly established by former academics and are research-driven, including the Development Policy Centre (DPC), the Centre for Development and Democracy, the African Centre for Democratic Governance (AFRIGOV), and the Centre for Research and Documentation (CRD).

**Primordial Groups:** Civil society organisations that fall into this category are those based on ethnic, regional, religious and sectarian identities. Though they may have the tendency to act in an ‘uncivil’ manner, in some cases, however, it is important to note that these groups are politically mobilized and socially constructed. In the context of the resurgence of identity politics in Nigeria, there are a number of ethnic based civic groups across Nigeria, which tend to predominate in the south-south geo-political zone where ethnic minority identity and environmental issues have encouraged the proliferation of civic groups and associations. There are also faith-based groups within the two main religious groups in the country, Islam and Christianity. The most prominent ones include the Jama’atu Nasril Islam (JNI), Federation of Muslim Women of Nigeria (FOMWAN), and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).



**Business Groups:** This broad category refers to civic groups that have proliferated within the organised business/private sector. They exist in key sectors of the economy, such as banking, manufacturing, agriculture, and petroleum. Examples include the Nigerian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (NCCI), Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN), National Association of Nigerian Farmers (NANF) and Employers Consultative Group (ECG). In general terms, these organisations have been very supportive of market reform policies of successive Nigerian governments.

**International NGOs:** It is also possible to distinguish between civic groups that are local and those which exist across national borders with their headquarters located in foreign countries. The CIVICUS CSI, 2007, indicates that experience in Nigeria since the return to democratic government in May 1999 shows that civic groups have established coalitions and networks which bring them together on issues of common interests. There had been several attempts at establishing formal CSO umbrellas, such as a National NGO Consultative Forum (NINCOF), and a National Association of Voluntary Development Organisations (NAVDO).

In terms of environment, the paper is concerned with the political context within which civil society groups operate. The political context in Nigeria has improved with the return of civilian rule that follows the constitutional framework. This provided new opportunities for political liberalization, and it removed the formal restrictions on the rights of citizens and their organisations.

### **Strategies of Civil Society Engagement**

Like their counterparts in other countries, civil society organizations in Nigeria, adopts the following conventional CSO campaign strategies among others:

- i. Lobbying
- ii. Direct Actions/ Demonstrations: such as rallies, strikes, boycotts, etc. for example, the Labour and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) organized a protest rally on Thursday 13th August 2009 to reject government neo-liberal policies of deregulation of the oil sector. Similarly on Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> march 2010, the NLC, TUC, JAF, ACE and other CSOs led a protest rally in Abuja for electoral

reform and the removal of the chairman of INEC. Human Rights: CSOs in Nigeria use the Human Rights Act, such as the right to life and liberty, freedom of expression, to further their cause.

- iii. Signing of Petitions
- iv. **Social Media:** The use of social media is helping campaigners to recruit members and communicate. Social media can take many different forms, including Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, etc.
- v. **Freedom of Information Legislation:** CSOs also seek to use the Freedom of Information legislation to request Government held information and receive it freely or at minimum cost.

In addition to exhibiting the pursuit of democracy, transparency in governance, tolerance, gender equity, poverty eradication and environmental sustainability as **values**, Recent studies such as the CIVICUS:CSI, 2007, AfroBarometer survey In Nigeria, 2005 and others show that CSOs in Nigeria have impacted in a number of areas including the tendency to influence public policy and the national budgeting process.

### **Problems Associated with Civil Society Activism in Nigeria**

Some of the main weaknesses or problems of CSOs in Nigeria include competition among CSOs for resources, diversity of representation, a need for capacity-building, low levels of awareness, illiteracy, limited capacity, and corruption in governance. Some of the major issue related to activities of CSO in Nigeria includes competition and conflict of interest, under-representation of poor and indigenous people, lack of adequate skills among CSOs, gap in civic education, lack of state support and partnership as well as the absence of environmental protection,

The overall focus of CSOs and interest of their promoters: The official focus may be dramatized and orchestrated to reflect populist concerns, while the ultimate goal is to achieve the personal, financial and socio-political interests of its founders/sponsors. Sometimes the subjective goals which dictate actual conduct and activities of a CSO may differ diametrically from the objective and official goals of the organization. Another major problem with civil organizing in Nigeria is its bases. Groups such as the Odua's People's Congress (OPC), Movement for Actualisation of Sovereign States of Biafra (MASSOB), and Boko Haram are not national in outlook. These groups are organised around ethnic and regional consequently succeeded in overheating the system at some points in history.

## Conclusion

The erstwhile understanding of governance as the exclusive domain of governments is fast weathering away. The expanding role civil society groups in the modern society have become so important that all governments find it necessary to consider. A weak civil society is more and more being considered as a signal for political and social instability while the existence of vibrant civil society is understood as an essential building block for democratic survival. The nature of interaction between the state and civil society defines the nature of the society. A state that overwhelms civil society is likely to be absolutist and repressive, whereas a civil society that overwhelms the state may tend toward creating anarchy. Therefore, we recommend a deliberate attempt by both parties to strike a balance.

## Recommendations

Though we believed that CSOs have played an important role in expanding the democratic space in Nigeria, there is the need CSOs pursue the review of numerous current development policies and activities of the state in order to make them more people oriented. It must also be realised that a civilian government does not necessarily mean a democratic government, and this has been one of the biggest challenges for CSOs in Nigeria. If civil society groups are to meet the challenges of democratisation and development, they must address a number of problems and constraints, including the creation of autonomous programmes as opposed to donor-driven programmes; cultivating democratic practices and values; intensifying networking and sharing of information within CSOs; improving internal governance mechanisms; and above all, exploring alternative funding sources.

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