



CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN SUSTAINING DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: Various socioeconomic and political developments in Nigeria have necessitated avalanche of interventions of several civil society organizations (CSOs) with which they would sustain democratic practices by ensuring moral values, fundamental human rights protection, transparency and rule of law. In the daily administration of government, CSOs are seen as instruments of solution to numerous societal problems that have deprived citizens of the dividends of democracy such as neglect, insecurity, oppression and exploitation. This study focuses on the exploration of how CSOs have contributed towards sustaining democracy in Nigeria. The study is geared towards revealing the challenges that militate against the efforts of CSOs towards the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. Qualitative method is adopted for this study, while secondary materials from books, journals, newspapers, and internet sources are utilized in accessing information. Descriptive method is used in the analysis of the sourced information. Liberal theory is deployed in the analysis of the study, as it displays the interconnectedness existing among different sectors of the society. Our findings revealed that CSOs are yet to be acknowledged as a genuine force in democratic Nigerian society. There is, also, lack of a well-structured institutional framework to support more collaboration between governmental and CSOs. The study concludes that CSOs have vital areas of contributions in the society, and are needed for Nigeria's democratic sustenance. It is recommended that the autonomy of CSOs should be promoted to enable them perform successfully towards democratic sustenance through their policy formulation and implementation, monitoring and supervision in the society.

Keywords: Civil Society Organizations; Democracy; Government; Rule of Law; Sustenance

Introduction

Nigeria's civil society organizations face a number of challenges as they work to strengthen democracy. When it became clear that the state was unable to provide development-leading activists with what was expected of it, the donor community began to push for the state's role to be reduced and to place more emphasis on civil society, which provided a potential alternative structure. The foundation of CSOs can be traced to the period of 1960s to the 1980s. (Adamu et al, 2020). However, the majority of civil societies in activity have developed and changed from being avenues for ethnic wars against exclusion and protests over wealth control to avenues for advocating democratic practices, and resistance against abuse of power in office (Popoola, 2020).

Civil societies have actually evolved into arenas for violent conflict with the state and other groups (U N, 2018).

The inception of democracy in Nigeria brought with it increased level of regional or community based civil society movements, with keen interest in securing their separate interest. Some of these regionally based CSOs are the Ijaw National Congress (INC), Afenifere, Ohaneze Ndigbo, Arewa Consultative Forum, Middle Belt Forum, and Bayelsa Youth Federation of Nigeria (BYFN), Egbe Afenifere, Odua People's Congress (OPC), Igbo People Council and Ndigbo Liberation Movement (Abari, 2013:13). Most notably among other CSOs that also emerged after 1999 are; Youths Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA) and the Association for a Better Nigeria (ABN). They were instrumental in stifling popular resistance to authoritarian government. These groups acted as being more powerful to prodemocracy NGOs like the Transition Monitoring Group, Constitutional Rights Project, and Civil Liberties Organization, all of whom received dubious amounts of funding from foreign aid. State-run media also publicized them (Matthew, 2021).

Examining this time period from the perspective of civil society and civil society organizations (CSOs) is particularly fascinating because civil society is crucial to easing the effects of the pandemic on society as a whole and to containing the virus. The perseverance and strength of the civil sector are also put to the test by adversity. Whether we define civil society broadly or focus on structured civil society organizations, these times of crises indicate the sectors' willingness and capacity to make sacrifices, volunteer, and help the weak and disadvantaged (Kover, 2021, 1).

It has been misunderstood to refer to means of withdrawal to the sphere of social life when discussing the civil societies' efforts to strengthen democracy in Nigeria. Given this, it is understandable why their actions and battles have made them a target of animosity on the part of the authorities. Because of this, attaining the goals of civil society organizations has been significantly troubled by environmental and other problems. This was particularly common in Nigeria during the military rule.

Some significant Campaign for Democracy participants "had sold out by reaching out to Abacha in the hunt for a solution to the quandary of the annulled election". Kukah (1999) endorsed this happening and described it as "co-option, incorporation, and rejection". This did not only cause the CSOs to fall apart but also showed the potential for compromise in a divided and politicized civil society. The politicization and inaction of the National Association of Nigeria (NANS) and the National Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN) are typical instances of organizations that formerly gave the civil society a resounding voice in the fight for democracy and justice.

Conceptual Framework Civil Society Organizations

Civil society organizations are frequently described as a collection of groups that are not owned or controlled by the government and they do not have interest in profit making but what will benefit their members and others in their society with good reference to cultural, political, scientific, religious, or philanthropic considerations." These non-profit organizations are typically run independently of any government. The full spectrum of organizations and organized groups that are voluntary, state-free, and at least somewhat self-sufficient is referred to as civil society. Of course, this includes non-governmental organizations; think tanks, universities, independent media, and social and religious organizations are a few examples. Individuals can benefit from some autonomy and protection from authoritarian and hegemonic tendencies thanks to civil society organizations, which are a collection of varied interest groups and social organizations state group.

According to Sule et al (2021) in the modern era, the term "civil society" refers to nonprofit and individual self-help groups, institutions, and agencies that have been recognized as key tools for advancing democracy, good governance, civil rights, and democratization. Similarly, Azis (2018), the notion of civil society organization is essential to both human growth and progress in general. However, it is crucial to note that the growing influence of civil society in development has called into question the fundamental notion of mainstream development, which places the state at the center and places a heavy emphasis on infrastructure development. Fundamentally, the

character of post-democratization politics and democratic transitions is also significantly influenced by civil society.

Democratic Sustenance

According to Ogbe et al. (2020), maintaining democracy is done by defending and advancing people's right to vote, as well as democratic values and culture. It is the process of promoting all parts of democracy and fostering a positive democratic environment for the benefit of the present generation and the next to come (Abdulsalam, 2020; EU, 2022; Moldavanova et al 2023) have emphasized that for full protection of human rights to be achieved, civil society is both a necessary component of functioning democracies and essential but unreasonable limitations on the space available to civil society organizations harm the implementation of international human rights norms. While democratization may precede socioeconomic development, such systems may initially be fragile and encounter difficulties in sustaining liberal democracy but civil societies have been seen giving their voice in such situations. Civil society organizations are in favor of the rule of law, individual freedom of expression, and other groups' rights to exist under a democratic system of governance. Although civil society organizations are permitted to interact with political parties and the government, they must uphold their independence and refrain from striving for political influence.

The strives for political influence and its outcome in our today's society have remained as part of emerging issues that exist. According to the Britannica Dictionary (n.d.), emerging denotes something that is brand-new, noticeable, and gaining power or popularity: becoming well-known or established. The new creation, development, strength or popularity change, or lack thereof, in the global political system can be described as emerging issues. The degree of globalization has had an impact on both positive and bad aspects of current society as different issues (positive and negative) have continued to develop. The feelings of the effects of the rising society's issues have become part of the burdens of citizens.

These issues result in growing food and energy costs, joblessness and poverty, social changes, democracy, health issues, and corruption, leading to the call for a systemic solution. This is a chance to concentrate on civil society issues that have been gathering pace on both a national and international level, as well as human rights issues and environmental worries like flooding and climate change. Thus, different nations, through their respective civil society organizations' works with international allies, offer solutions to global/national crises by using knowledge and resources from different world cultures. These are made feasible as a result of awareness of global events, culture, economics, environmental concerns, politics, problems, and ever-emerging solutions. Despite the aforementioned, the society in which we now live is transforming quickly. This is an outcome of socio-economic improvement, especially due to modern technologies that impact people's relationship with one another.

Government

Keman (2011) has given four different perceptions of government, Government, first and foremost, is the act of exerting some level of control over others. The second point is that organized rule requires government. Third, it describes a group of persons tasked with exercising authority. Fourth, government is the system used to run a specific civilization. In a similar vein, any institutional environment's dominating component is government. In terms of pursuing collective action, government encompasses both the direct and indirect roles played by formal institutions of local government and governmental hierarchy, as well as those played by informal norms, networks, community organizations, and neighborhood associations. In this conception, the government (the public sector) is mostly involved and usually plays a crucial role, but other sectors, such as non-profit organizations, foundations, civic elite organizations, business leadership organizations, labor unions, social service organizations, and the inter-organizational collaboration among these various groups, may also perform crucial role. The process of economic development is fundamentally influenced by the government. Providing public goods and services is

one way that the government contributes to the economy. According to Chukwudi et al. (2019), it is the responsibility of the government to provide social stability, which lessens CSOs' concerns as they support sustainable democracy.

Liberal Theory

Liberal theory is adopted for this study. The proponents of this theory as submitted by Dodds (2012) are John Stuart Mill (1806–73) and Harriet Taylor (later Mill) (1807–58). The International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), African Union (AU), and other liberal institutions are currently promoting liberalism, which evolved with the demise of feudalism and communism and the victory of capitalism. These organizations believe that the existence of civil society encourages responsibility, openness, and caution in governance, which deepens democracy. Currently, liberal institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), African Union (AU), and others are supporting liberalism, which emerged when capitalism triumphed over communism and feudalism. According to these organizations, the existence of civil society fosters accountability, transparency, and prudence in governance, which strengthens democracy (Fadakinte 2013).

In this work, CSOs have been the vanguard of peace, advocates of freedom, fighters for justice in the society. Nigerian society has different types of crises embedded and occasionally springing out from it which civil society organizations have swayed in to assist towards finding solutions to. According to liberals, civil society is essential to the development of a violent free democratic society in any country that practices democracy, particularly in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria. This is because civil society promotes unrestricted freedom, tolerance, and equity as well as freedom of expression and association. This circumstance provides the populace with excellent opportunity to take advantage of and contribute to a sustainable democracy.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach where data were gathered from secondary resources such as; books, journals, newspapers, and online sources that are fit for academic research. Descriptive method of analysis is also used in the discussion. The theoretical framework of analysis of the study is liberal theory, which highlights the connections between various societal segments and the relationship between civil society organisations and the government in every society. The conclusion is drawn from the analysis followed by recommendations.

CSOs in our Contemporary Society

CSOs are known to be responsive when militating issues affect the people. Recently, flooding that caused havoc in Nigeria prompted calls by civil society group organization and other stakeholders. They directed calls on the Nigerian Federal government to declare state of emergence on flood in Nigeria. Such groups are Eziodu initiative for sustainable Environmental (EISE-NGO) ActionAid, Christian Aid Plan, International and Care International (Osahon et al, 2022 & James, 2022). Similarly, CSOs raised alarm over the sufferings of the Nigerian masses because of Naira scarcity. They cried out that the hardship may affect citizens' participation and possible low turnout in 2023 election, and increased vote buying and selling. Aiming to prevent vote-trading on Election Day is the current Naira redesign policy and the limited supply of legal money which may even be simpler for voters to give up their votes in exchange for the scarce cash because of the ongoing misery it has brought (Abdullahi, 2023).

Civil Society Organisations did not just watch the irregularities that occurred during the recently concluded 2023 general elections but waded into the situation to seek clarity for the benefit of the political rights of the masses. Infractions in the conduct of the general election 2023 have been reported, and a coalition of civil society organization (CSOs) has demanded a comprehensive inquiry (Adebowale-Tambe, 2023). Across the world today, CSOs have championed critical responsibilities of social welfare, service providers, humanitarian care, socio-economic upgrade, political involvement, human resource development, human rights protection, productivity

development, democratic development, and good governance (Williams et al, 2022). CSOs have over the years supported government good policies that is aimed at making the socio-economic system work better. In this light, CSOs have supported the efforts of Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) in change to new naira notes and placement of limit maximum daily and weekly withdrawals. CSOs like the Conference of Nigeria Political Parties (CNPP) and the Coalition of National Civil Society Organisations (CNCOS) have given their support to CBN on their policy of cash withdrawal limit and awareness creation that naira redesign and the cash withdrawal limits were not targeted at any individual but instead to tackle some politicians who had plans to deploy stolen wealth for 2023 elections (Jimoh, 2022).

CSOs have contributed significantly to the fight against insecurity in Nigeria, both locally and internationally. The "third sector" or civil society organizations (CSOs) have grown into enormous tools for societal peace, development, and stability. They are able to take action to address pressing issues impacting a community through partnerships and collaborations, especially in places where the government's hand could not have reached. In contemporary society, fighting terrorism is among the sectors where CSOs have impacted greatly. Through methods such as awareness, demonization, motivation, assessment, rehabilitation, collaboration, indoctrination, and coordination, they assist in eliminating the threat of terrorism (Wara, 2020). CSOs play crucial roles in the social accountability process by monitoring the impacts of policies especially on how they promote equality and public education and also the efficacy of those policies (Wara, 2020).

The CSOs Action Coalition on Education for All (CSACEFA) is a partnership of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and faith-based organizations (FBOs) tackling issues related to education in Nigeria. In order to form the alliance, forty (40) NGOs working in the field of education banded together before the World Education Summit in Dakar in April 2000. CSACEFA created a set of key positions and participated in the Dakar Summit to support the call for high-quality education for all (Oradi, 2019)

CSOs have expressed disappointment over the incessant ASUU strike which has caused a lot of nefarious acts among our Nigeria youths especially those kept at home by ASUU strike. CSOs often engage in near contacts with different communities as part of the channels in linking parents, students as it concerns quality delivery and progress (Sorensen, 2020).

Challenges of Civil Society in the Promotion and Sustenance of Democracy in Nigeria

There are deficiencies in experience, experience, and organizational discipline. There was discord among the groups since many civil society movements in Nigeria were formed by people with little prior knowledge of organizational dynamics and discipline. He gave reasons for the outcome pointing out how their inception was internally contradictory because there was no clear goal or purpose, making it an "all-comers job" that lacked coordination (Kukah, 1999).

Another significant obstacle for Nigeria's civic societies is funding. They are not obviously intended to carry out a locally developed democratic project for the Nigerian society because they are heavily motivated and supported by international donor organizations and governments. Donors support a number of civil society actors, including networks and organizations, by improving their strength, offering them access to news, ensuring their partake in policy discussions, protecting citizen engagement, and focus on the broader policy environment. This shows a shift toward more country ownership of services that were formerly supported by donors and is due to changes in the development environment, as well as improvements in financial situation or the achievement of disease burden thresholds (McDonough, et al, 2020).

Due to funding issues, some CSOs were unable to oppose the authoritarian beliefs of the government. The democratic features of civil society and their capacity to foster and strengthen democracy in Nigeria have been called into doubt as a result of this development. As a result, there are important queries about civil societies'

capacity to contribute to the advancement of democratic governance and ensure its irreversibility. Evidence of the manipulation of CSOs by some powerful groups in the corporate sector may be found in the civil society's failure to oppose or support the unpopular National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) strike action over the payment of fuel subsidies. (Akogba et al, 2022). It is against the interests of the people and goes against their democratic principles for civil societies to have sided with the oil cabal that is robbing the nation dry.

Furthermore, by developing a new political and economic culture in Africa, civic societies have failed to modernize their methods of operation. Maintaining conservatism cannot guarantee sustainable development in any society (Devex, 2022). Governments have a tendency to be the primary source of information and guidance for civil societies, giving them an advantage over them on delicate matters. The inadequate structural and organizational foundations of the majority of civil society organizations are to be blamed for this outcome. All of these have relevant effect on their ability to ascertain popular sentiment and respond to it in a way that would support the democratic course.

The majority of their offices are hand-picked employees who don't have the necessary qualifications and experience to manage such businesses, and they are housed in temporary structures in urban areas. Civil society organizations have faced a lot of difficulties in resolving ethnic, religious, and other types of conflicts in a way that is democratic. They have most times adopted protests that do not always end peacefully do to hijack by unruly individuals that are mainly youthful. Youths frequently turn into easy weapons for unrestrained disputes that endanger Nigeria's democracy and business life when poverty, unemployment, discontent, marginalization and abuse of fundamental human rights are visible. This is related to the problem of the citizenry's rising apathy with democratic and governmental issues brought on by the prevalent gap between those in authority and the populace, which must be closed.

CSOs are faced with the problem of creating new means of international cooperation that will enable common people to protect their interests and identities against strong, often impassable global forces (Gersham, 2000). Meanwhile, many CSOs do not possess the real democracy they are working to promote or sell to the wider society (Akogba et al, 2022). Faced with these obstacles, the CSOs in Nigeria require alternatives for it to deepen the duty of ensuring democracy is consolidated.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Given that the power of CSOs can have positive effects on the government and economy, it is obvious that civil societies have long been acknowledged as a genuine force in democratic society. Liberal theory rightly stated that the role of civil society comprises of encouragement of responsibility, openness, and caution in governance, which deepens democracy but Nigerian civil society organizations have remained inefficient in matching with those features as contained in Liberal theory. It is important to swiftly note that Nigeria's civil societies are underdeveloped and inefficient, thereby standing as the primary cause of this regrettable development in the lack of strong democratic culture, which can be explained by the nature and makeup of the post-colonial Nigerian State. It is also important to emphasize that Nigeria's long history of authoritarianism—from the military to civilians—has significantly hampered the development of civil society and a democratic culture. Although it is clear that civil society play a crucial role in contemporary democracy, public officials find it challenging to engage in discourse with them due to their aggressive demeanor.

In order for civil societies to function properly, it is crucial that they comprehend and agree with the idea that cooperation is a better strategy when dealing with a democratic administration. In order to achieve better performance, it is proposed that given the requirement for a local funding basis for civil society activities in

Nigeria, the right to access public finance for charitable purposes be guaranteed by legislation. There is a critical need for an institutional framework that is well-structured to support collaboration between governmental and civil society organizations. It is a popular saying that; “prevention is better than care”, in this light, CSOs need to champion sensitization of the general public in their political participation while they check on government as ‘watchdogs’. This strategy is better than planning for agitation and protests after the government has implemented an unfavorable policy that its implications remain unheard and unknown to the masses.

There is a positive relationship between unity and strength in every organization and that strength will be maximized once CSOs pull their efforts together as they pressure government over all aspects of public policies that need to have human face embedded in it. As previously stated, the civil society need to intensify their fight and demand decentralization and devolution of powers in the Nigerian federalism in order to challenge the federal system and ensure that they allocate resources fairly with distributive justice. Nigeria's civil society must work with its equivalents in the developed democracies in order to grow and assert itself. This collaboration with foreign counterparts would promote the development of civil society organizations' capacities that would undoubtedly help Nigeria to achieve good governance and consolidate its democratic system. Once more, for the sake of effective government, civil society organizations should work to comprehend, collect, and explain the needs of the populace. The gains of social collaboration would be subverted by a few to the disadvantage of the majority of the populace especially in countries where overzealous actors are not checked.

Lastly, there is great need for all civil society groups and the government to carry out their activities with the incorporation of the assumptions of Liberal theory in respect with responsibility, transparency and caution in governance, in order to deepen and consolidate democracy in Nigerian society which will eventually lead to assure improved socio-economic progress of Nigeria and the global democratic political system in general.

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