DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION: INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AND NIGERIA’S TRANSFORMATION AGENDA

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Abstract

From 1914 to date, Nigerian leaders had pursued diverse programmes and policies for the development of the country. As part of effort towards democratic consolidation and in view of the developmental challenges confronting the nation, Goodluck Jonathan upon his election in 2011 as the President of Nigeria came up with a programme and policy which he called the Transformation Agenda. This study examines the import of indigenous languages in the transformation agenda as a catalyst for democratic consolidation. In this study, efforts were made to examine the transformation agenda and how the use of indigenous languages can strengthen Nigeria’s democracy. This paper argues that the use of the indigenous languages is not only critical to the achievement of the transformation agenda but also as the most effective way to communicate the policy to ordinary Nigerians. The paper thus concludes that the transformation agenda will fail, if urgent attention is not given to the indigenous languages.

Keywords: Democracy, consolidation, Transformation Agenda, indigenous language

Introduction

African countries upon self-government came up with motley of developmental policies in order to better their society and improve the living conditions of their people. These policies were against the background that colonialism had not brought about a viable social, economic and political order. At the heart of democracy are the people. In fact, Abram Lincoln in his conception of democracy argued that democracy is the government of the people, for the people and by the people. Therefore, without the people there is no democracy. The people are supposed to have equal opportunity to participate and contribute in the decision making and administration of their country. Participation, in this sense goes beyond voting in elections, to include avenues for contributing to government policy (Abe, 2010; 182). In view of the centrality of people to the consolidation of democracy and development, the Goodluck Jonathan’s administration unfolded a development strategy called the Transformation Agenda that will last for four years (2011-2015).

The policy aims at deepening Nigeria’s democracy and improving on the crucial aspects of the Nigerian people. The question however, is to what extent has the transformation agenda engaged and enriched the people to participate actively and express themselves through their indigenous languages in the quest for democratic consolidation in Nigeria? Democracy in Nigeria is stifled at the level of language use; and this may well account for the innumerable problems that Nigeria faces today. There is no gainsaying the fact that the successful institutionalisation of an enduring and sustainable democracy in any polity depends to a large extent on a clear cut linguistic desideratum, which ensures unfettered flow of information and direct communication between the leaders and the led. (Ikara, 1982; cited in Agbedo, 2005).

Operationalization of concepts

In a bid to put things in right perspective, it is pertinent at this point to explain the appropriate meaning of certain concepts in this paper for proper understanding.

Transformation Agenda

Transformation agenda is the developmental strategy of President Goodluck Jonathan aim at bringing about a positive change in the life of Nigerian people. It is the blueprint of the Jonathan’s administration for the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria. The policy plans to deal with the problem of good governance, insecurity, power, poverty, unemployment, education, health care delivery, roads, etc. The transformation agenda is also tailored towards achieving the vision 20:2020 of the country. Nigeria is expected by the year 2020 to be among the top 20 largest economies in the world. The Projected financial burden of the Transformation Agenda shows that the total projected investment is N35.511.29 trillion. Out of this, government will contribute 57.10 percent or N20. 277.72 trillion, while the private sector share will be 42.9 percent or N15. 233.57 trillion (Emmanuel, 2012).
Indigenous languages

Indigenous languages are the tribal, native or local languages spoken in Nigeria. The language would be from linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Indigenous language are not necessarily national languages and the reverse is also true (http://en.wikipedia.org). There are about 400 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria, and only few of these languages have written form (Adeniyi and Rachael, 2006). Among these languages, three are considered as major by the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria. The major languages are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. It must be noted that these languages have acquired their majority status solely on the demographic strength of their speakers, and not because of any inherent qualities they possess that the other languages lack (Idem, 2002: 188). More than half of the Nigerian population are illiterate and live in the rural areas, and neither understands nor speaks English (Alyebo, 2012), the official language of Nigeria.

Indigenous languages according to Wallace (1996) set the mind positively in whatever endeavours being undertaken. Indigenous languages have proved to be very potent in creating a critical mass of real communication for substantial change (Burnay, 1997; cited in Oyetoro, 2007). It is to be noted that the promotion and protection of indigenous peoples’ language rights is part of cultural democracy (UNESCO, 2008).

Democracy

Democracy is a political system in which citizens participate actively not only in determining the kind of people that governs but the policy output of government (Mbachu, 1994:12). Democracy presupposes the total involvement of the citizens that cut across the diverse social strata in any given nation in the articulation and implementation of policies and programmes of government of the day (Agbedo, 2005: 20). Democracy belongs to the sphere of collective decision making. It embodies the ideal that such decisions, affecting the collective should be jointly taken by members and that they should each have equal rights to take part in such decisions. Democracy entails among other things fundamental rights and basic people’s freedom, equality before the law, mutual respect, dialogue, consensus, compromise, fair play, periodic, free and fair election, separation of powers, independent and impartial judiciary, accountability, majority rule, respect and safeguard of minority rights and popular citizen participation in decision making (Adeyemi, 2004; 163).

Democratic consolidation

Schedler (1998, 91-107) described democratic consolidation as originally meant to mean the challenge of making new democracies secure, of extending their life expectancy beyond the short term, of making them immune against the threat of authoritarian regression of building dams against eventual reverse waves. This means that democracy would only be consolidated if there is decrease in the activities and actions of a country towards breaking to a level that the assurance of having democracy forever is not questionable. Democratic consolidation is the complete adoption of democratic institutions, processes and values by the political class and the masses (Gunther, Diamandorous and Punle; 1995). This implies democratic consolidation could only occur when there is active participation, cooperation and understanding between the leaders and the led on how best to rule the country and where the fundamental rules and regulations of the land are strictly adhere to.

Nigeria’s Democracy: Indigenous languages and the Transformation Agenda

Events since 1999 show that one of the essential pillars of sustainable democracy; popular empowerment and participation have constantly been compromised and violated (Idris, 2009). Active participation and the used of indigenous languages by the people have not been considered very important, which brought about the notion of it not having a serious implication for the success of the transformation agenda. Whereas Nigeria has not done well to promote and use its indigenous languages for effective transformation of the country, advanced countries of the world have achieved growth and development simply because they have always seen their indigenous languages as a tool for development, and have therefore made efforts in integrating it into their developmental strategy.

The disregard for the promotion and use of the indigenous languages came to fore when the African Union declared 2006 as the year for African languages, aimed at promoting the use of Africa’s indigenous languages. Paradoxically, Nigeria in the same year scrapped the institute for the study (promotion) of Nigerian languages at Aba in the name of “educational reforms.” All the developed and developing countries make use of their indigenous languages while most of the underdeveloped countries (with Africa contributing the highest number), do not make use of their indigenous languages (Iwuchukwu, 2008).

The consolidation of our democracy and development process cries for the development of our languages. How else do we expect to enhance popular
participation without addressing the role of the people in the whole process? How do we expect people to have confidence, accept and follow developmental programmes, if they feel alienated from the process of the programme’s inception and elaboration? (Mohochi, 2006). Every developmental strategy that is developed for a positive change in the life of the people should begin with the people. Previous attempt of developmental strategy have failed largely because of non-attention to this crucial consideration. An assessment of the transformation agenda shows an isolation of the Nigerian people in the conception of the policy. It is most unfortunate that a policy that will direct the course of government activities and have great impact in the life of the people did not seek for the participation and contribution of the Nigerian people in its conception! The policy was put together in the language (English) that most people do not understand. This linguistic arrangement remains antithetical to the noble tenets of participatory democracy as a political system. In contemporary Nigeria, the accident of colonialism and its concomitant linguistic imperialism produced an oasis of mental poverty-stricken neo-colonialists, and brainwashed ruling elite who holds on to the primacy of English, the colonial language to render the greatest majority of the population as inconsequential variables in the crucial art of governance (Agbedo, 2005).

The transformation agenda as a developmental strategy was a top-bottom approach in its conception and implementation! The committee for the conception, design and formulation of the policy was formally inaugurated on Thursday, February 17, 2011 and is composed as follows; Deputy Chairman, National Planning Commission (NPC) – Chairman, minister of finance, minister of transport, minister of agriculture, minister of Niger Delta and minister of works. Other members of the committee are minister of aviation, minister of FCT, chief economic adviser to the president, senior special assistant to the president on infrastructure and the special assistant to the President (Economic Matters) – Secretary (NPC, 2011).

The conception, design and implementation of the policy were particularly the idea of the leadership of the country to the exclusion of the people. There are two important implications of this state disconnectedness from their own people. First, it does not respond to the wishes of their own people. They also do not see any necessity for gauging or responding to public opinion. For this reason, government operate without caring for the impact of their policies on the public. They rely on force to get people to comply with government directives. As a result, the loyalty of the people to the state is weak (Olowu, 1994), and their confidence towards the democratic consolidation becomes low thereby giving room for general apathy and cynicism towards the transformation agenda. Since democracy from the views of Sawant (2000) and Onabajo (2004) is a government by debate and discussion of the people, then the people must be allow to be involve and contribute especially in their local languages in the transformation agenda. Unless and until this is done, the transformation agenda is bound to fail, like every other developmental strategy adopted in the past.

**Conclusion**

Efforts were made in this paper to examine the place of the indigenous languages in the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria, and how the Nigerian people were not active in terms of participation and contribution through their indigenous languages in the transformation agenda of President Goodluck Jonathan. The bringing of developmental policy formulation and implementation very closer to the people in terms of their involvement and contribution especially in their indigenous languages gives them the meaninging and better understanding of the policy, and a sense of contentment and fulfilment which therefore strengthen their indigenous culture, identity and socio-economic life which leads to the achievement of the development strategy (policy) and helps deepens democracy. The kind of democracy Nigeria needs is one that transcends top-bottom approach in developmental policy formulation and implementation but people enriched and engaged centred-policy, and one that reflects the culture of the people, and which put in a great deal on the development of their capacity to participate effectively in policy conception and implementation. There cannot be any effective policy formulation and implementation especially the one that impact greatly on the life of the Nigerian people without proper development and utilization of the indigenous languages. Ayebo posits that “the poor attention given to language by policy makers and implementers has usually predisposes such policies to failure”. He further said “language must be seen as the facilitator of any government policy”.

In view of the fact that majority of the Nigerian people are uninformed rural dwellers, which use only indigenous languages in their everyday interaction, therefore, government should urgently ensure that our indigenous languages should be integrated into our democracy through popular participation of the people in the democratic governance. This popular participation is what Adedeji (1997) refers to as the empowerment of the people to involve themselves in the regulating structures and in designing policies and
program that serve the interest of all, and contribute optimally to the development process. Tunde Babawale therefore argued that it has “become imperative for our government to encourage the development of our indigenous languages and improve their terminological competences in order to enhance greater civic participation and mobilization of the generality of our people behind the transformation agenda, because government can only communicate effectively in the languages that people understand”.

References


