RE-EVALUATING THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHIES OF PLATO AND WIREDU FOR THE MAXIMISATION OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Critics of liberal democracy, such as Plato and Wiredu, often frown at the principle of majority rule, suggesting that democracy is a mere utopia that can never be realised in practice. This paper assesses Nigeria's lingering crises of democratic leadership and national development. It critically evaluated the postulations of Plato and Wiredu and found them to be based on the regret that democracy is not a magic wand that can resolve all standing political and social problems. Due to protracted military incursion into politics and its attendant abuse of power, the Nigerian electorates have evolved to view democracy as mere ability to participate in elections, after which they may return home to sleep. To this end, the paper re-examined the tenets of liberal democracy, and found that for democracy to work, it must be internalized as a way of life and politics that demands critical and strategic thinking, planning, vigilance, and active participation. It then set forth some philosophical tools that can assist in resolving the shortfalls of democratic leadership in Nigeria.
Keywords: Consensus, liberal democracy, majoritarianism, philosophy, Wiredu

Introduction

The concept of *democracy* has lost its specific connotation in ambiguity, both as a result of the fact that it can be applied across contexts, and because it is appealing and irresistible to social and political theorists (Irele, 1998a). The democratic label, having become but a cliché in modern political theory, is used even by despots and monarchs to characterise their regimes (Talbott, 2005). A UNESCO survey carried out back in 1962 had virtually all countries of the world claiming to be democratic (Irele, 1998b). The resulting proliferation of the meanings of democracy (socialist democracy; organic democracy; guided democracy; high democracies; and others) has, thus, prompted some analysts to argue that no real democracies exist, and that the difference between democratic systems of government and nondemocratic ones is merely that of degree, not of kind (Hook, 1977). With this idea of degree of democratic governance, we find ourselves duly confronted by the fact that while democracy has considerably advanced in most of the developed or industrialised world, Africa is only beginning to "experiment".

Democracy has been restored to the Nigerian state since 1999; but not much has changed in terms of social and economic development (Adah and Abasilim, 2015). Each incoming government appears to fare worse than the preceding ones in these indices. Corruption has only escalated; the prices of essential commodities have shot through the roof, as inflation reaches a record high; the disgruntled citizenry has become even more deeply divided along ethnic, religious and political lines; and the economy has yet to show signs of bringing in returns commensurate with the amounts of money that have been poured into its various sectors in all the years. Clearly, times are hard. Yet political scheming continues, unruffled. Why has democracy seemed not to make Nigeria better? Is this failure traceable to the nature of democracy? What, if anything, can philosophy offer in this regard?

This paper re-evaluates the famous arguments of Plato and Kwasi Wiredu against liberal democracy, in order to address the crises of democratic leadership and social development in Nigeria, and stipulate how philosophy can contribute in resolving these issues. The paper argues that democracy is effective only if there is commitment to nation building and sincerity of purpose by both the leaders and the led. Subscribing neither to the view that democracy is absolutely idealistic, nor to the view that there is only a relative difference between democratic and nondemocratic systems, the paper explores and delineates the ways in which liberal democracy may be maximised in Nigeria, for good governance and national development.

Nature of democracy

Laski (1931:76) argues that the basis of democratic development is in equality: "the demand that the system of power be erected upon the similarities and not the differences between men." This understanding is hinged on the overarching argument that legitimate members of the state are equal in having a say on how governance may be effectively discharged. The right to

happiness, he notes, is inherent in humans; and any system which denies this right cannot be morally justified. For Kohn (1944:182), democracy "is the rule of the people" themselves, as opposed to the imposition of alien rulers. Democracy is a form of government, but, more fundamentally, a way of life, the latter being the grounding for the former. As a way of life, it is "based upon the fundamental assumption of the equality of all individuals and of their equal right to life, liberty (including the liberty of thought and expression), and the pursuit of happiness".

According to Benn (1967:339), democracy is a "representative government, that is, government by persons whom the people elect and thereby authorise to govern them." This presupposes the people's right to choose or reject a candidate for representation, as well as the representatives' responsibility to the electorate, their readiness to justify their actions before the people, and attend to the needs of the people, thereby retaining their goodwill, as they submit themselves for re-election. Kerwin (1967) draws some parallels between the principles on which the democratic order is built and religious thought, for example: the (God-given) dignity and freedom of the human person; the equality of all men and women (before God); and the rights of the human person as created in God's image. To these, Matravers (2004) adds the legal/moral responsibility of humans for willful acts. Hook (1977:685) characterises democracy as "A form of government in which the majority decisions of government—or the direction of policy behind these decisions—rests directly or indirectly on the freely given consent of a majority of the adults governed."

Here, the idea of "majority" is to be taken in the sense that since unanimity among humans about matters of great and common interest is often difficult, in order to move forward, the majority opinion principle—taking into account the inviolable right of all those concerned—is the only one that makes democracy a viable alternative to tyranny. Sartori (1968:120) identifies the benefit of democracy as being "to minimise arbitrary and tyrannical rule and to maximise a pattern of civility rooted in respect and justice for each man and woman—in short, to achieve a humane polity." From this brief consideration, the ability of citizens to freely make contributions to governance is stressed and upheld as the fundamental feature of democracy. Hence, it is absurd to characterise just any type of government as democratic.

Watkins (1972: 215) makes the following distinctions: *direct democracy*, which is the ancient Athens democracy whereby every grown-up and legitimate male citizen directly participated in decision-making; *representative* democracy is the type wherein legislative rights are exercised by the citizens through duly elected representatives. The *social* or *economic* variant is a political or social arrangement focused on minimising social and economic differences arising from unequal distribution of private property. In *liberal* or *constitutional* democracy, which is also representative, the powers of the majority are exercised within the framework of a constitution, designed to guarantee the inclusion of the minority in the enjoyment of individual or collective rights, such as freedoms of speech, association and religion. These types of democracy are not mutually exclusive; the aim of this distinction is merely to point out certain features, which are crystalised under the title of "liberal democracy", and defined as:

A system of government in which the people rule themselves either directly or indirectly through chosen officials, but in either case subject to constitutional restraints on the power of the majority (Dickerson & Flanagan, 1988:158f.).

According to Philips Shivery, "it is a state in which all fully qualified citizens vote at regular intervals to choose, among alternative candidates the people who will be in charge of setting [the] state's policies" (cited in Adentuji, 2003: 135). This makes democracy a two-way traffic, in which the citizens, obeying the laws promulgated by the constituted authorities, also exercise some authority over the government, as they are informed and carried along in its policies.

Liberal democracy is, therefore, based on the following operating principles: *equality of political rights*, which ensures that each person has the right to vote, run for office, serve on juries, and speak on public issues. *Majority rule* is the normal working principle of decision-making in democracy, logically derivable from the prior principle of political equality. Enacted in the spirit of the rule of law, it is used in most modern democracies in the process of constitutional amendment, on the assumption that the fundamental laws of the state are so important that they should not be altered by a simple majority (Dickerson & Flanagan, 1988). *Political participation* refers to the fact that democratic institutions are founded on mass participation, whereby everyone participates to some degree. Meaningful participation is possible only if political freedom prevails. Freedom is meaningful only if it extends to those who think differently from those in authority.

Political freedom includes the right to criticise the misguided policies of the government, to form associations, and to vote and be voted for. It may be difficult to defend democracy on critical grounds, but these ideals—though not the same things as democracy—are the defining characteristics of democracy, such that to the extent that a system exhibits or has these ideals, then to that extent will it be called a democratic system (Irele, 1998b). With the emergence of a theory of human rights beginning in the 17th century, and its explicit formulation by John Locke, the way was definitely prepared for a conception of democracy in which the principle of majority rule was a necessary, even though not a sufficient, condition. In all, freedom on the part of the citizenry is the factor which determines the efficiency of any democracy. Since democracy deems the power of the citizenry in policy decisions indispensable, L.S. Amery dared to rephrase Abraham Lincoln's famous dictum about democracy as follows: "government of the people, by the people, [and] with the people" (cited in Onoja, 2003:61).

Democracy and "majoritarianism"
The earliest documented objection to democracy probably comes from Plato, who, in *The Republic*, argued that the liberty or freedom inherent in democracy logically culminated in anarchy and tyranny. For him, wisdom, experience and training were necessary for leadership; but not every member of the *polis* possessed these qualities. Thus, the fact that democracy entailed that all (adult) citizens in the state were equal and free to participate, and have some say, on how they are governed almost automatically meant that there would be no order. There would be lack of respect (due to equality of citizenship) and disharmony (due to competing interests). In Plato's reckoning, democratic principles entailed that the young generations would hold no respect for the older ones, but with them struggle for a better life. The old on their part, for fear of being deemed authoritative or disagreeable, would be full of pleasantries and graciousness, thereby losing their self-worth or dignity. This freedom and liberty would, as for Plato... render the souls of the citizens so sensitive that they chafe at the slightest suggestion of servitude and will not endure it... (Plato's *Republic* [§ 563]; cited in Kerwin, 1967:745). Hence, Plato ranked democracy next to the least among the forms of government, privileging aristocracy, a rule by the *philosopher kings* well versed in the dispensation of justice.

Wiredu (1997), arguing from the opposite end of the spectrum, presumed that human interests could never be harmonised in such a way as to achieve consensus, as long as liberal democracy held sway. He decried the perennial crisis of leadership in Africa, which he saw as being fueled by the fact that liberal democracy thrived on the principle of "majoritarianism"—by which the ruling party perpetuated itself in power and harnessed state resources towards its own interests.

Through "majoritarianism", therefore, the minority would be pushed aside and remain permanently outside the corridors of power. "Majority" as a principle, Wiredu went on, was a far cry from traditional system of consensus, in which issues were largely resolved by appealing to a fairly reasonable cross-section of opinions. Liberal democracy was based on party system, in which voters subscribed to a particular political party not because they had studied it carefully and arrived at the reasoned conclusion that such a party had the right policies, but out of sheer sentiment. Since human beings were naturally selfish, how could the loyalty of the so-called representatives to the electorate be guaranteed? People would come along every now and then with all sorts of lofty promises and policies they intended to implement if only they got elected; when they got elected, they became absolutely corrupt, satisfying only their selfish interests, and running the government as if it was their personal enterprise. In conclusion, Wiredu called for a return to the consensual system of political administration, such as that of the traditional Akan people of Ghana, in which decisions were made by a "chief" and his council through wide consultations and deliberations.

What effects on the economy would we anticipate from an expansion of democracy, say in the form of an increase in electoral rights? One effect, characteristic of systems of one-person one-vote majority voting, according to Barro (2000), involves the pressure to enact redistributions of income from the rich to the poor. These redistributions may involve land reforms and various social-welfare programmes. Although the direct effects on income distribution may be desirable (because they are equalising), these programs tend to compromise property rights and reduce the incentives of people to work and invest. One kind of disincentive involves the transfers given to poor people in a democracy. Since the amount received typically falls as the person earns more income, the recipient is motivated to remain on welfare, or otherwise disengage from productive activity. Plato and Wiredu are the focus and guide of the discussion in this paper.

Plato and Wiredu: the case for liberal democracy

Plato's projection that democracy would inevitably slide into anarchy is fundamentally flawed on several fronts. For a start, Plato was too idealistic and purist in his thinking, and made a long list of near superhuman personality traits a leader must already possess before assuming office (Carel and Gamez, 2004). This naturally led him to submit that only the so-called philosopher-kings had what it took to lead a nation. There is, however, no clear evidence for such assumption. Second, Plato equated freedom inherent in democracy to its flagrant abuse that leads to anarchy. But there is a clear distinction between a thing and its possible misuse or abuse by self-seeking individuals (Odozor, 2015). Contrary to Plato's submissions, there is no *absolute* freedom in democracy. Democratic freedom only means freedom from oppression and freedom to actualise one's potentials in a way that does not interfere with the well-being and freedom of others with whom the citizen shares his or her social space. It is not surprising, then, that democracy has played such an important role in the advancement of human civilisation, and has, today, overtaken other forms of government in terms of spread, survival and preference.

In a well-ordered democratic system, losing an election does not entail the loss of freedom for the minority; it only entails that the opposition party does not produce the principal officers of government, such as the president and the vice president. It does not, in fact, entail that the minority is kept out of the corridors of power. Not even in the Nigerian case study is this insinuation of Wiredu true. Rather, different political parties have members at the National Assembly, where important national policies are formulated. Also, losing an election does not mean that the interest of the minority is sidelined thereby (Gause, 2005). Rather, as long as the party in power pursues and implements policies that regard the national interest, rather than its own parochial, sectional interests, then the interest of the minority, as long as it runs consistent with the overarching national interest, would naturally be brought on board. The problem is that, in Nigeria, party and sectional interests are often placed above the national interest—a practice that has not enabled democracy to thrive and work for the nation.

Wiredu creates a phantom bifurcation between liberal democracy and his so-called consensual system, tacitly suggesting thereby that one has absolutely nothing to do with the other. But this is gratuitous. The whole essence of a truly democratic system, adequately conceptualised, is squarely hinged on consensus, which is arrived at once all stakeholders are truly focused on the common good. It is called democratic in the first place, because all the parties are, at least, supposed to have their interests represented, though only one of them must produce the president. But, in Nigeria, elected officials (and their supporters) tend to view their victory at the polls as an end in itself, and as compensation for all the trouble they took during their electioneering campaign. They see themselves as having "arrived" and their victory as a payback for all the expenses incurred by the candidate's party in order to acquire power. In Western democracies, electoral victory neither means that the winner has "finally arrived", nor that they can now do whatever they like. It rather signals the beginning of a lot of work, because it is huge responsibility placed on the shoulders of the winner: security of the lives and properties of the citizenry; maintenance of basic social amenities; provision of environment conducive for further social and economic development and progress; seeing to the general well-being of the citizenry, and the prevalence of justice. Winning an election puts the winners on their toes, as they must be awake and alive to innumerable and overwhelming responsibilities that come with the office. It is curious that Wiredu uses African countries, with their dysfunctional political systems, as examples of democratic governance, and rarely took a cue from some Western countries where democracy has achieved remarkable feat (Amuwo, 1997). Even in Wiredu's so-called consensual arrangement, as in Plato's gerontocratic society, mutual respect for fellow citizens and due regard for their interests are indispensable. Consensus is an end-product and can be attained only after the initial ingredients of democracy, such as mutual respect and tolerance for individual differences between citizens have been established. Yet Wiredu portrays consensus as something that just happens in the absence of democratic principles, given the inevitability of divergent social realities, such as people's individual circumstances, interests, opinions, belief systems and political leanings.

Again, like that of Plato, Wiredu's traditional polity of consensus is essentially gerontocratic. It is not for young blood, and only a certain class of people can emerge as the overall political authority, called the "chief". However, in modern liberal democracy, all the parties are equally poised to produce the president, who will then exercise authority on behalf of the rest of the citizens, across party lines. Thus, in democracy, what is crucial is that legitimate authority is exercised on behalf of the citizenry, as a whole; not primarily that

a certain political party (or the other) has produced the president and other principal officers, as is the case in Nigeria. Whether or not someone likes him or her, the elected president owes every citizen—including those of different political extractions—the obligation to formulate and implement policies that are beneficial to all. Democracy is justified solely on the grounds of equality of all citizens before the law and before one another—a factor utterly lacking in Nigeria and in Wiredu's traditional system, in which the chief could never be on a par with his subjects, not even with the members of his council. How, indeed, could Wiredu prefer traditional African leadership, wherein a chief rules for life, to liberal democracy, wherein a leader emerges every four years through elections, just because of "consensus"? This is absurd, seeing that consensus for its own sake is by far incommensurate with the benefits of self-determination and rule of law derivable from a democratic setting (Talbot, 2005).

The concept of consensus alone raises a lot of issues. As Eze (1997) noted, consensus is just one of the essential components of the democratic institution, not all of it. Consensus is not even an end in itself, and makes no sense except it fosters a more democratic state of affairs. It is worthless without democracy, which suggests that consensus is at the service of democracy. In fact, political consensus is immoral without due cognizance for the common good. It is possible to derive consensus in a non-democratic setting—even in a dictatorship. For example, members of the council may be stampeded into agreeing to the dictates of Wiredu's "chief" out of fear of offending him and falling into disfavour with him, or simply out of admiration for him, or due to lack of adequate information on a given proposed policy. Hitler's dexterity in this particular regard was, perhaps, second to none. There was almost always a consensus in crucial decisions both in his cabinet and among the general German citizenry, who thought they saw in Hitler a social, moral and political reformer (Weikart, 2009). Thus, to achieve consensus all one needs is gather around oneself individuals who share one's exact same aspirations, which may or may not be consistent with the common good; and, of course, one needs some skill at rhetoric. All this suggests that consensus may well happen in the absence of democracy and that consensus has a wide spectrum of meanings, some of which have little to do with common good.

The consensual system, even as envisioned and glorified by Wiredu, would not necessarily be superior to liberal democracy. The ability to attain consensus, as

good a thing as it seems, does not, contrary to Wiredu's confidence, imply that the principle of political opposition or dissension is a bad thing. Political opposition plays a very crucial role in democracy. Without a credible opposition, democracy lapses into a unitary system, which is merely a euphemism for a dictatorial regime. To achieve consensus for its own sake without the critical stance furnished by good opposition, is, indeed, a bad thing for any polity. Dissenting opinions, as well as the ability to express them, are needed in the composition of polities, because they help to put the necessary checks and balances, to ensure that the ruling party does not act unilaterally. Opposition throws open all the perspectives to any issue of national interest, which may not be evident to those mandated to exercise state power and authority, whose sense of judgment may be skewed by sectional interests. Similarly, in a democratic setting, even the principle of "majoritarianism" which Wiredu treats with absolute contempt, is applied only as a last resort, not as the starting point of decision-making. It is not always possible—or easy—to achieve consensus. Consensus naturally takes a lot of time and energy, resources which may not be affordable if crucial decisions must be reached to avert imminent collapse of the social order. Suppose there is a deadline looming in the horizon, leaving the legislative arm of government little room for the luxury of politicking. Consensus is possible and practicable only if there is time to throw into decision-making, and the circumstances permit. Majoritarianism is simply a fall-back, a means of breaking the impasse when consensus cannot be achieved promptly. In any event, the percentage of people empowered by totalitarian or autocratic regimes pales in comparison to those freely empowered under the principle of majority rule (Talbot, 2005).

Wiredu's critique squarely presupposes that the majority is necessarily tyrannical or selfish, while minority opinion is, on the other hand, necessarily good and selfless. But to what extent is it inconceivable that the minority could sometimes be unreasonable by refusing to accede to a policy it well knows would enhance social progress and development, perhaps, out of sheer lack of moral and political will? Would it be a bad thing if the majoritarian principle prevailed in such a scenario? This is commonplace in Nigeria, where rancor and vindictiveness deter politicians from putting national interest above that of party and self, and to see anything good in their counterparts in other parties, for fear that such concession would place the other side in good public opinion. In Nigeria, politics feeds fat on the defamation of the character of rivals.

All these things show just how little Nigerian politicians and their supporters know the true object of politics, as explicitly understood and practised by the ancient Greeks, who saw the necessary connection between politics and morality. As noted by Ojukwu (2013:6): Politics is not just about politicians and formation of political parties.

Democracy, unlike other types of government, is not about any one individual, or group, in the state; it is rather about institutions that outlive people and continue to endure across generations. Perhaps more than other forms of government and due to its dynamic nature and willingness to improve itself through criticisms and self-appraisal, democracy has steadily advanced and made remarkable progress (Macionis and Plummer, 2005). Not only is it congruent with the natural human need for freedom, self-determination and self-actualisation, it is the extension of the scientific spirit to the realm of politics, as it furnishes the conditions conducive for the flourishing of thought, knowledge and initiative.

Philosophy and the challenges of democracy
From the above, it is clear that Nigeria's social and political problems are man-made, or, at least, not inherent in democracy: ethnic discrimination (nepotism); lack of enlightenment; lack of the moral and political will to learn and improve; alien National Constitution; partisanship/divide and rule; unpreparedness for leadership and lack of vision; political "jobmanship"; politicisation of serious national issues; "national cake" syndrome; winner-takes-it-all mentality; lack of commitment and, therefore, no sense of patriotism, as well as official deception. Each of these is a direct result of the unwillingness to abide by the rule of law; which means that simple application of democratic principles would go a long way in resolving most of our current national problems. Is democracy, then, a perfect institution? Of course, it is not. There is no such thing as a *perfect* human institution. Every human institution is imbued with different sorts of limitations and imperfections. But democracy is amenable to improvement and refinement with time, as these limitations come to light with experience.

The first role for philosophy in the maximisation and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria is the critical role for which it is known. No country can make progress without being critical, by asking questions about how it is governed. For a country in which it is deemed distasteful to criticise the government, philosophy fosters a critical attitude so that both the government

and the masses may closely scrutinize and evaluate policies before implementation, to avoid unnecessary blunders and consequent policy somersault, which have become the hallmark of governance in Nigeria. Philosophy, like Law, creates awareness, among citizens, of the right to hold government officials accountable for their actions and inactions. This factor also prevents the opposition from indulging in mere negative criticisms, but more importantly, proffer constructive suggestions on critical national issues, bearing in mind that national development is in the interest of all. As critique of ideology, Philosophy also helps to sanitise the manifestoes and proposed policies of political parties, before and after their emergence as a government. If, and when, the Nigerian Constitution is reformed or reviewed, philosophers, like lawyers, must accord serious attention to the process by ensuring that a legitimate document is produced. The anticipated outcome of all this is "due compliance with internationally recognised standards of democracy" (Barro, 2000: par.16).

Philosophy assists in the provision of adequate democratic education: by inculcating in the citizenry the awareness that democracy is a way of life, not just a political theory, and by upholding the doctrines of separation of powers and observation of the rule of law, for example. The doctrine of the separation of powers is at the heart of democracy; it promotes checks and balances. This doctrine, which was propounded centuries ago and expounded on by eminent scholars and philosophers such as Aristotle, Montesquieu and John Locke, calls for a balance of power between the legislative, executive and judicial organs of government, ensuring that none of them exercises, controls or interferes with the functions of the other (Barro, 2000). Also, philosophy, by means of ethical tutoring, instills in citizens values such as tolerance, civility, social responsibility, and mutual respect, which depend on the political will of a nation. A written constitution, however well-constructed, is insufficient to guarantee this. For these values to gain a foothold, it is the responsibility of philosophers, as much as it is that of lawyers, to introduce and implement awareness programmes enhancing an understanding of democratic principles at the grassroots. This further exposes our political leaders to Professional Ethics, equipping them for competency in public office.

Philosophy has always been closely associated with the historical development of societies and their politics. The theories put up by philosophers down the centuries always reflected their social, cultural and economic milieu, without which it is often difficult, if not

impossible, to make sense of a philosopher's thinking and why anyone would make such a submission in the first place. That is why a good way to understand the history of the Western world, for instance, is, perhaps, to accompany such study with that of the intellectual development of that history, which always includes its philosophy, and vice versa.

Conclusion

It is evident that the well-known problems in the Nigerian democratic experience derive largely from lack of adequate enlightenment and commitment on the part of the stakeholders, not from democracy itself as a system of governance. Democracy is a delicate affair in that it has no small or half measure. One is either democratic, or one is not, as any infringement of the constitution is almost certain to disturb the social order in a democratic setting. Some basic indices must be found in a polity if it is to be deemed democratic: rule of law, equality before the law, democratic life-style, mutual respect, commitment to common good and the availability of basic freedoms of speech, of association, and of self-determination. Democracy is a human institution, which implies that it has its limitations; yet when placed side by side with other systems of government, the beauty of democracy leaves no one in doubt. One problem with dictators is that they have the power and, hence, the inclination to steal the nation's wealth without giving account to anyone (Barro, 2000; Ellis, 2005; Mesquita and Downs, 2005). As such, it cannot be plausibly held that autocracy, for instance, provides ideal economic incentives. In democracy, all stakeholders must promote extant democratic institutions, for civil society to flourish. As Gause (2005:69) says, "When it works, liberal democracy is the best form of government"; which entails that stakeholders must be vigilant and focused on getting it to work before it can do so.

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