

Local Governance and Politics of Inclusiveness in a Democracy

Temidayo David OLADIPO, PhD,

Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Contemporary models of democracy are at best representative in nature as a result of the size of the modern state. This has the unfortunate side effect of ostracising the people, whose opportunity to actively participate in governance is reduced to the period of elections, thereby minimising harnessing the regular contributions of the people to democratic consolidation. Thus, there is the need to fashion out ways through which the contributions of the people can be garnered towards strengthening the developmental outcomes of democracy. The argument pursued in this paper is that the local government should be restructured in such a way that it will put governance in the hands of the people, thus returning to the original intention of democracy, as was obtained in its cradle Athens. This is possible at the local government level because the population therein is limited when compared to that of the state. Thus, this paper uses Nigeria as a case study to argue for the need to have smaller political institutions able to better accommodate the participation of the people. It is pointed out that the local government as we have it in Nigeria presently is dysfunctional as a result of the interference of the state and federal governments in the affairs of the local government. This has to be addressed leading to the devolution of more powers to the local government in Nigeria.

Keywords: Local Government, Local Governance, Politics, Inclusiveness, Democracy

Introduction

Democracy and local governance share the same goal- putting governance in the hands of the people. The Gettysburg's speech of Abraham Lincoln succinctly captures the essence of the conceptualisation of democracy as government of the people, by the people, for the people. Conceived this way, democracy revolves around the people. Remove the people and there is no democracy. Democracy celebrates the wisdom of all and strives towards an ideal that includes everybody in governance. It believes that every individual has something good to contribute to the governance of shared political space and that through collective efforts and contributions the common good is better secured, improved and promoted. However, while democracy has this lofty ideal, a major issue is that, as a result of the size of modern states, participation is delegated. Thus, in reality, a few people end up being hired and empowered to play active roles in day-to-day running of a democracy. The unfortunate thing is that delegates do not always fulfil the wishes of the electorates, nor even stand by their campaign promises, through which they won votes of electorates, where the election is fair and free. This necessitates the need to seek ways to put power in the hands of the people themselves so that they can be involved, if not in the day-to-day running of the polity, at least by making constant periodic contributions, which shape policies and such that the people's participation is not restricted to times of elections alone.

As for local governance,¹ the aim of the local government is directed at ensuring decentralisation of governmental functions to the citizenry by ensuring that people at the grassroots not only benefit from governance but also participate in it. The justification for this tier of government is that "governmental business is effective and better performed, when it is executed from bottom up" (Oke, 2021:209). The strength of this justification is that it recognises that people understand more what they have helped create and operate, thereby giving more effort to secure its success. In Nigeria's case, the creation of the local government is expected to aid justice. The expectation is that the local government will "promote distributive justice in the sense that it will

help spread federal resources and developmental projects, more evenly among territorial communities in the federation” (Peter, 2014:200). In addition, it is a tier of government that is closest to the people, compared to government at the state and federal levels. This enables it to access direct information from people regarding their needs, aspirations and expectations, and to respond to emergencies swiftly when they arise (Oke, 2021). It is also instructive to note that the local government is set up to brew talents which may then go on to participate in state and national politics, taking with them the vital lessons learnt at the local government level.

My contention in this chapter is that if emphasis is directed towards enhancing participation at the local government level there will be greater inclusion of the people in democratic governance and decision-making. This act will ultimately translate to the people acting as checks and balances on the government and thereby enabling good governance. The benefit of enhancing participation through local government is that we will be close to the Athenian conception of direct democracy. A major reason why direct democracy has been impossible is because the population of modern states does not permit harvesting of the inputs of everyone. However, with the local government becoming the centre of participation in governance, people will be able to directly make contributions. In pursuance of the aim of this chapter, it is divided into three parts. The first deals with an attempt to conceptualise democracy as a rule that includes ordinary people in decision-making for if democracy is government by the people, the only way to move towards this ideal is to have effective political institutions in small units that can harness the contributions of the people. Using Nigeria as a case study, the second section reflects on why the local government as it is presently constituted is unable to serve as a pivot of good governance, political inclusion and thus development. The third section presents arguments that aim at showing why the local government should be strengthened to aid good governance through politics of inclusion of the populace in decision-making.

Democracy as Inclusion of the People in Governance

One of the critical factors affecting democracy in practice in Africa is that its conceptualisation reduces it to the election of candidates into political offices. The problem with this conception in Africa can be drawn out. First, there is the rigging of elections with candidates believing that once that hurdle is scaled through, and they emerge winners, then there is no more power in the hands of the electorates. Attached to this is the various forms of electoral violence witnessed across states in Africa; and the fact that the people are ignored until the next period of election. Second, this conception of democracy fails to see the importance of values and norms as well as having functional institutions as part of democracy. Thus, while today many countries across Africa conduct periodic elections, yet the dividends of democracy in terms of freedom of choice, emancipation from the shackles of poverty, and having sustainable development are lacking in many African countries. The core of the problem is that a conception that equates democracy to elections fails to realise that democracy is more than election of candidates. The values and norms that should accompany the institutions and practices of democracy are ignored. In fact the so-called elections are done to fulfil all righteousness with the deployment of many immoral and illegal means towards attaining the end of winning.

In the opinion of Schumpeter, a democracy is a system of government with institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions whereby individuals acquire the power to decide by means of competitive struggle for people's vote. While shedding further light on the definition, Schumpeter posits,

according to the view we have taken, democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms “people” and “rule.” Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or

refusing the men who are to rule them. But since they might decide this also in entirely undemocratic ways, we have had to narrow our definition by adding a further criterion identifying the democratic method, viz., free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate (Schumpeter, 2003:284-285).

This definition of Schumpeter merely reduces democracy to competition for political power by those who seek to rule. Although this is important, it is not all there is to democracy. Defining democracy as a means of conferring power on would-be leaders presupposes a lot. First, it presupposes a just society, where the voice of the electorate is decisive in choosing who indeed will govern, or as Wole Soyinka puts it, where there is “electoral justice” (Soyinka, 2005:40). Second, such a definition presupposes that all adults, who have attained voting age, will indeed vote. But the situation in quite a number of democracies is that apathy has resulted in a situation in which “the governments that usually emerge from so-called elections are minority governments; *their* government, in many cases, not *our* government” (Oladipo, 2009:44). This is so because, in the long run, the ratio of those who end up doing the voting in comparison to the ratio of those who should have voted is massive. Third, this definition presupposes that there is an appreciable level of both political and economic freedom in the state, such that the material conditions of the people do not debar them from choosing freely. Fourth, it is important to emphasise that the quality of election in itself matters; otherwise Saddam Hussein's Iraq would qualify as a democracy as much as America's.²

What has been said about the role of election in a democracy above is not to discredit the crucial role that the electoral process plays in a democracy. Rather, what is being canvassed is that defining democracy merely as a process whereby those who will govern are decided merely reduces democracy to one of its many crucial components. For instance, apart from electing the officials of governance in a democracy, an important component of democracy is the decision-making process itself. This process must take into consideration the views of the people whom the decisions will affect. Oladipo couched this point in the following words:

...people should be able to exercise their freedom of choice between candidates and programmes. But we do know that the election of candidates into public offices is not all there is to governance. More than this is “the very process of governing itself,” that is, the decision-making process. One of the ways of ensuring that this process is people-oriented or serves the common good is to ensure that the views of people are reflected in decisions (Oladipo:49).

To achieve this lofty ideal, it is important that the people constantly have a voice in issues affecting them through referendums. Appadorai's definition of democracy is, for this reason, apt. According to him, “a state may... be termed a democracy if it provides institutions for the expression and, in the last analysis, the supremacy of the popular will on basic questions of social direction and policy” (Appadorai, 1975:137). However, apart from harvesting ideas regarding policies as Appadorai suggests, one way through which democracy can be strengthened is to have the state in smaller units such that people can indeed make direct contributions and directly participate in governance through these smaller sections of society.

Realising the importance of people's participation in governance, *The Official Handbook on Local Government Reforms in Nigeria* (1976:1) expressly requests that the Federal and State Governments should “ensure through devolution of functions to these [local] councils and through active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiatives and response to local needs and conditions are maximised.” Thus, the local government in Nigeria is in principle anchored on the need to have active participation of the people in governance, especially at the local level. However, this has not been the case.

For democracy to be strong there must be a shift from seeing democracy as elections to seeing it as citizen's continuous active participation in government. It is through this participation that citizens can influence government and shape public policies and constantly ensure that government performs. Continuous participation of the people in governance is to be encouraged because even their participation during elections is at best "a passive but constructive response to government actions" (Bowman and Kearney, 2012:70). Being passive, responding to government actions through elections alone makes elected administrations to get away with just anything, especially in Africa. Only active involvement of citizens in governance can address this issue. Conceiving democracy as active participation of the people in governance has an advantage and it is that it encourages citizens to not see government as a distant entity but one in which they themselves have roles to play in by seeking to constantly influence policies, even if they had not voted the present administration in, or had not voted at all. It is important to note that active participation of citizens during the tenure of a leader can help mitigate what is known in democracy as the tyranny of the majority by reshuffling the class called "majority" around issues while an elected administration is still in office.

The Dysfunctional Nature of Governance at the Local Level in Nigeria

A major dysfunction with the way the local government system in Nigeria is operated is that it is hijacked by the state and federal governments. As such, even the governance is not local. This, therefore, obliterates the fundamental belief informing the setting up of local government, which is that the people get to choose their political leader at the local level. The people choosing their leaders rather than being appointed for them from the other tiers of government is the distinction between local administration and local government. Local government is "that unit of administration with defined territory, powers and administrative authority with relative autonomy which administrative authority could be elected or appointed exclusively by the people." The implication of this definition is that an essential requirement for any system that seeks to qualify as a local government is that the people have chosen its political leadership. Where this minimum requirement is not obtained, what we have is local administration. Local Administration is "administration of local communities by utilising local agents appointed by and responsible to an external agent which could be state, regional/provincial authority or national government" (Bello-Imam 2015:4). A lot of local governments in Nigeria are mere local governments in name; they are mainly operated as local administrations. Indeed what obtains contradicts the expectation about local government which is that it is an avenue for self-government at the local level with its affairs resting exclusively in the hands of the people/citizens of the areas (Oke 2021:210). This is so because a lot of time, sole administrators are appointed for these local governments. When this situation is not the case, and an election is conducted, the election is hardly free and fair. Elections at the local government level have become mere selections, with the ruling party at the state level ensuring that only its party candidates get elected to the seats of power in the local governments within the state. This, a lot of time, has resulted in many opposition parties pulling out of elections. If a candidate from another party emerges as winner, such local government is starved of funds, and cooperation of the state, until its elected officials decamp to the ruling party. Second, these so-called local governments lack autonomy. Defining the local government, Oke (2021:210) holds that the local government has the following characteristics: officials that are elected, a legal entity, autonomy from the state and federal governments, independence from other tiers of government in the discharge of its duties. In Nigeria, there is constitutional provision to guarantee these features, however, in spite of constitutional provisions specifying the powers of each tier of government in Nigeria, local governments suffer from lack of autonomy. Oke captures the situation in the following words: "in spite of the constitutional provisions towards autonomous local government

in the country, local governments are far from being autonomous as they are still largely tied to the apron strings of the other levels/tiers of government especially the state governments, which in most cases view local government as a significant unit to be controlled and administered by it” (Oke 2021:214). Apart from political meddlesomeness into the affairs of local government, there is also fiscal interloping through the appropriation of the provisions of Section 162, subsection 6 of the 1999 Constitution, which empowers the state government to set up State and Local Government Joint Account, an account into which allocations to the local government council is paid.

Added to this is that the myriad of challenges confronting the local government renders it incapable of rendering the functions intended for the local government and more than this hinders it from harnessing the contributions of the people at the grassroots for development purposes and for participation in governance. This defeats the expectations set forth in the Development Theory of the Local Government, which propounds that local governments exist for furthering development of the grassroots. Development in this sense should not be conceived in terms of advancement of physical infrastructures alone, it should also mean the promotion of ideals of good governance and democratic values. As Ake rightly points out, “...some element of democracy is an important aspect of what it means to be developed. Some components of democracy, especially the rule of law, the consent of the governed, accountability and transparency are now accepted as being defining elements of political development” (Ake, 2000:76). For the local government in Nigeria to live up to its expectation as being a major anchor of development, devolution of powers and resources to it will not just be in the constitution, it will have to be obtained in reality. Devolution will ensure that the local government is able to make its own laws, rules and regulations; formulate, execute and evaluate its own plans and recruit the right hands that will make it perform (Oke, 2021). This is the only way to ensure its independence from other tiers of government and remove all obstacles hindering it from discharging its duties.

A major dysfunction of the operation of the local government is the relegation of the crucial role that traditional institutions have to play in strengthening local governance. This critical institution that the people readily have a mastery of and which does not suffer from the two publics' divide (cf Ekeh, 1975) of “we” and “they”, which bedevils many colonialism-imposed institutions, has been relegated to the background so much so that it has no constitutional backing. *The Official Handbook on Local Government Reforms in Nigeria* (1976:1) expressly expects the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, seeing them as being crucial to local initiatives and responses to local needs. So, in actual fact, the Local Government is expected to harvest the input of the traditional institutions of the people. For centuries before colonialism, these institutions were instrumental in meeting the needs of the people. In the north, there was the emirate system with native treasury, appointed district and village heads, a functioning judiciary and an emir sitting on the affairs of the emirate. In the South-West, mainly made up of the Yoruba people, the Oba is at the helm of political affairs, with the town's chiefs' council, king makers and secret society checking and balancing the Oba. Established in this part of the country is an administrative network which reaches down to the village level, and a judicial system. Administration in the South-East was decentralised and age groups played prominent roles in carrying out political decisions (Ola and Tonwe, 2009).

The position of most scholars of local government is that, prior to the advent of the colonialists, these traditional institutions can be regarded as the local governments. However, this position is not without contention because these traditional institutions in their original state had no higher cadres of governance like the state and federal tiers of government to which they report as does local government in our present understanding. Nevertheless, these traditional institutions in pre-colonial eon developed appropriate policies, created order and generated revenues to meet the

needs of their communities as part of the discharge of their functions (Ola and Tonwe, 2005:174).

The advent of the colonialists incapacitated the traditional institutions to some extent. Although, lack of personnel and funds made the British to adopt indirect rule in governing the country, yet certain policies inhibited the traditional institutions from functioning as they used to. In the South-East, the attempt to introduce warrant chiefs that will perform some of the perceived roles being performed by traditional institutions in other parts of the country led to certain upheavals. Needless to say that other challenges arose because the platforms of the traditional institutions were not really ones that emerging local elites could participate with. Consequently, review of the roles of the traditional institution, during colonial era and post-independence period led, over the years, to decline in official duties expected of them. This was anchored on the argument that “the institution of traditional rulership was in direct conflict with democratic ideals as the system was personalised and ascriptive” (Ola and Tonwe, 2005:174). So as it is, traditional institutions merely have political influence rather than political powers in the political structure of Nigeria. These institutions at best merely perform ceremonial or advisory roles. However, despite the various challenges, one can contend that traditional institutions have critical links with the people, and at the same time the people have deep understanding of them and ways through which they can be checked. It will thus be worthwhile to integrate them into the existing structures of governance. This will enable them to coordinate the delivery of key services to the people, over whom they bear rule. Truth is some form of service can be targeted to the grassroots through these institutions.

Towards Devolution of Powers and Strengthening of Local Governance in Nigeria

There is a need to reposition the local government in Nigeria to fulfil its mandates. Part of that mandate, apart from bringing development to the grassroots, is encouraging local participation in politics, and the improvement of the civic culture, such that it translates to active political participation at the national level. While the country boasts of being a federal system of government, the truth is that over the years, especially with the influence of military rule, there have been more centralising forces at play than forces of federalism. To curb this, there must be a return to true federalism. Accompanying federalism is the need for decentralisation of power and resources to the states and local governments from the federal government. Decentralisation is a means of creating an enabling environment for development and promotion of accountability. It is important for the mobilisation of resources and a crucial factor that allows people in the management of their own affairs (Enemuo, 1999). Unfortunately, the many years of military rule in Nigeria was instrumental in promoting centralised government that usurped the powers of the states and local governments, and ultimately caused the states to have an overbearing influence on the local governments. This development did not just abrogate the rights of the lower levels in the federal system to make decisions of their own accord, it suppressed innovations which looked inward at the state and local levels to raise funds and address peculiar problems. The result is the over-dependence on “federal allocation.”

Therefore, the first thing to do in strengthening the local government in Nigeria is addressing the vestiges of military rule (cf Oladipo, 2016) which affected the devolution of powers and resources to lower levels in the structure of the Nigerian state. A major part of this exercise is allowing local governments to innovate and keep larger parts of the proceeds of such innovations. Innovation is stifled because most local governments have to, through a system of remittance to the state and federal governments, give up whatever is generated in the hope of making contribution to a sharing formula that favours other local governments generating paltry funds. However, local governments can be challenged to generate more funds for their own operations if they have more powers over spending these funds for local needs. The laziness in generating funds arises from two issues: one, the expectation that some money will come from the federal account; two, the fact that funds generated locally cannot be utilised freely as desired by the local government without

interference from higher tiers of government. Allowing local governments to have greater control of funds they generate can lead to competition and indeed development.

As presently constituted, the centre is too attractive. Deemphasising it will make other tiers of government have good people venture into politics at lower levels, especially at local government level. One way through which this can be done is to ensure that financial inducements which attract politicians to national politics is reconfigured to attract good hands to the local government for indeed it is not only dearth of good workers that embattles the local government as a result of poor pay, there is also the inability of the local government to attract politicians that are capable of innovating regarding the series of problems confronting the local government and making it profitable.

The import of this is that the local government needs to be repositioned to be the nucleus of governance in Nigeria. The first justification for this is that it is closer to the people. If achieved, it can deliver more governance goodies to the people directly. The second justification is that as a smaller unit the people can have direct access to it and thus be more involved in the administration of the government and in scrutinising it. There is no gainsaying that part of the problem of politics in Nigeria is apathy. People are increasingly distrusting government and consequently distancing themselves from anything politics. In fact the percentage of people who register to vote and those who eventually vote point to the disinterestedness of the people in elections and in politics generally. Getting them to be more active at the local level can encourage them to participate more in politics and governance. A good way to achieve this is to make the local government more viable as a tier of government in Nigeria. This is important because the local government offers a platform through which the people can directly contribute to good governance. They can make suggestions about what needs to be done to serve them better. In addition, they can provide oversight over government functions, since the government in question is smaller and closer, compared to other levels of government. **Notes:**

1. Oke (2021) rightly holds that local governance is the prerogative of the local government. As conceived in this chapter, local governance is seen as governance taking place at the rural level.
2. Saddam Hussein during his regime in Iraq, before he was displaced by America, was acclaimed to have won the elections he conducted to validate his rulership with as much as 99% of the votes cast.

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