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THE FAILURES OF THE CONSTITUTION

AFFECTING NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY :

A. The material promise of democracy, that is, the supposed correlation between democracy and improved standards of living, has yet to materialise for Nigerians in almost eleven unbroken years of ‘democracy’.

B. Even advertised abstract benefits like press freedom, human rights, the right to free political choice, and the right to make deliberative input in governance have all been denied Nigerians under this democracy. While we saw flickers of these benefits in the wake of military disengagement in 1999, today’s ‘democratic’ environment resembles the regimented, freedom-less days of military rule.

C. ‘Democracy’ has provided the perfect cover for corruption – massive corruption. ‘Democracy’ has – forgive the redundancy – democratised corruption. Under the military, corruption was a quasi-monopoly; it was tightly controlled by a small cohort. Under our ‘democracy,’ the need to cultivate political support and immunity means that the loot has to circulate. Democracy has also made corruption legitimate. In the days of the military, the zones of legal and illegal monetary appropriation were clearly demarcated, so we could tell easily when an act of corrupt self-enrichment had occurred. Not any more. Under our current ‘democratic’ practice, public officials steal legally. They only have to underwrite what they steal as a licit item in the budget bill. This can be done in a few choreographed, taxpayer-funded committee sittings and a hurried process of debate-less approval. Political office holders can even steal in anticipation, carefully documenting future thefts and including them as budgetary earmarks or exculpatory footnotes in legislations. And it’s all legal – and perfectly within the procedural norms of our ‘democracy.’ Where the law did not exist to legitimise the theft, our legislators have enacted or been goaded by executive carrots and sticks into enacting one-off bills to authorise acts of pillage deemed in the pecuniary interest of legislators and their executive partners. Democracy has licensed and unleashed novel evils on our country. Consider this: The Borno State House of Assembly recently passed a bill awarding stupendous severance perks worth tens of millions of naira annually to the governor and his deputy – for life! And it’s all legal and within the rules of our ‘democracy.’

D. The bill for this destructive ‘democracy’ is now being paid in the life and limbs of Nigerians. I’ll explain. A recent report confirmed what many Nigerians have suspected all along: Nigerian public office holders at all levels are the highest paid in the world. Together with their string of assistants and advisors (who also have their own paid advisors), our public officers gobble up at least half of our revenue and budgetary appropriations in legitimate rewards. And we have not accounted for the unbridled stealing that is now a legitimised staple of our patrimonial politics. Add that to the math and we may be talking of seventy percent of our revenue being spent on the maintenance of our ‘democratic’ personnel – on running our ‘democracy.’ This prohibitive overhead has left us with a smaller pool of funds than ever to invest in the things that matter to Nigerians: Roads, healthcare, school, water, electricity, and food. This odd financial state of low return on ‘democratic’ investment is unsustainable. Something has to give.

E. This ‘democracy’ has intensified our ethno-regional bickering while bequeathing an unfolding legacy of costly national political gridlocks. The quagmire occasioned by Yar’Adua’s health crisis is a perfect illustration. Try quantifying the financial and political cost of this long-running farce and you’ll see how expensive ‘democracy’ really is. A few weeks ago, the country teetered precariously because the ritualistic niceties of democracy stood in the way of pragmatic, decisive, patriotic action. This preference for process over productive outcomes is one reason why democracy is losing its appeal with many Nigerians. Most of our gridlocks are resolved quicker than the current one and at less political cost, but that is not much comfort either. For when routine political disagreements are settled, they often involve Ghana-must-go political solutions that are just as costly to Nigerians as prolonged impasses.

F. Elected officials often do not play by the rules that brought them to power; they seek instead to subvert laws and constitutions to secure longer tenures. Think Obasanjo, but also think Mamadou Tandja, Yahyah Jammeh, Yoweri Museveni, and many other African leaders whose fickle commitment to democracy has led them into tenure-extending adventures that have thrown their countries into costly political crises. The irritant for many Nigerians is that ‘democracy’ has been reduced in practice to – and accepted as being constituted by – only one of its many elements: †he ritualistic conduct of periodic, incumbent-rigged elections. Every other hyped benefit of democracy has eluded Nigerians.

G. In this ‘democracy’ every government action is conceived through the lens of politics, not of patriotism. Instead of asking if a policy or initiative is good for the Nigerian people elected officials ask if it would look good politically. Instead of asking how a policy might help Nigerians, officials ask how it would win them the next elections – how it would enrich campaign donors and party godfathers and how much it would generate for the election war chest. This permanent campaign culture is a costly drawback of democracy and has reached a head in the United States, the prototypical practitioner of the presidential system of government. The difference is that America ’s robust economy can absorb the cost; Nigeria ’s cannot.