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ASSIGNMENT

CITIZENS ROLES IN A DEMOCRACY

The people in the democracy have a collective right to choose their governmental, political and electoral systems as part of self-determination. They also have the right to take part in their government through elections to determine who will legitimately occupy the government offices. These precepts are included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in modern constitutions around the world. They also capture the foundation for the famous formulation that democratic government is “of the people, by the people and for the people” which means that: government belongs to the people; governmental processes belong to the people; and elections belong to the people. There is no democracy without the engagement of the people therefore engagement is both a right and a responsibility of citizens in establishing, developing and sustaining democracy. Citizen engagement pursues economic, social, cultural and political development, including the provision of opportunity, resources, services and security.

The term citizen has a political meaning that implies a certain type of relationship between the people and the government. Citizens have a set of rights and responsibilities including the right to participate in decisions that affect public welfare. This participation is necessary and also a fundamental way to empower citizens. To be a citizen means to enjoy certain liberties and rights. The state provides the rights and liberties to enable them to develop their potentialities and lead the good life.

Citizenship of a state may be acquired either by birth or by naturalization. A man becomes a citizen of a particular state if his parents are citizens of that state or if he is born within the territory of that state. Citizenship determined by the place of birth is fundamental in the laws of most countries. Turner (1997:176) opines that citizenship is a formal legal identity that the individual person inherits through collection of legal rights and obligations, controlling access to the scarce political, economic, and cultural resources of the society.

Citizenship can be divided into: civil citizenship, political citizenship, and social citizenship. Civil citizenship refers to the rights necessary to protect individual liberty e.g. freedom of speech, justice, etc. Political citizenship is associated with participation in the democratic exercise of political power, either as a member of a political community e.g. a voter or as an individual elected by the members of such community e.g. a politician. Social citizenship includes the claims that citizens ought to have access to those resources that allow them to live a civilized existence in accordance with the standards prevailing in society.

Rights can be defined as a privilege granted by law upon a person or a group. The individual’s rights and liberties are groundwork of the state since it exists to enable men to live and develop fully. Rights enable the citizens to engage in the activities of the government. It also entails some duties and responsibilities on the part of every citizen. Important civil rights in the constitution includes: the right to life, the right to work, right to freedom of religion, right to education, etc.

Etymologically, the word ‘democracy’ is derived from the Greek word ‘demos’ meaning people and ‘kratos’ meaning rule, i.e., ‘rule by the people’. Abraham Lincoln, former American president, perceived democracy as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. According to him, democracy is a government of the people when it is designed to represent the common will of the citizenry within a state, it is a government by the people when its ideological undercurrents is grounded in the people’s culture, and it is a government which is for the people when the power employed by the custodians of the state business emanates from and resides in the collective mandate of the people. The state exists to serve the individual and provide the conditions which make a full and happy life possible. The features that can be deduced from the various definitions of democracy are: the fundamental rights of the citizens is guaranteed, independent and impartial judiciary, existence of rule of law, freedom of press and periodic election that is free and fair.

As the state provides rights and liberties, all citizens have duties and responsibilities to the state. Democracy requires an investment of time and hard work therefore the government of the people demands constant vigilance and support by the people. Democratic citizens know that they must bear the burden of responsibility for their society if they are to benefit from its protection of their rights. The responsibilities citizens are expected to perform in a democracy are: a citizen in a democracy should have the duty to vote, a citizen should be willing to pay taxes since without taxes to fund a democratic government there would be no democracy, a good citizen must have a duty to obey the law, a good citizen must refrain from uttering destructive criticisms but must be prepared to offer constructive alternatives to government policies, a good citizen must refrain from interference with the rights of other members of the community and he or she must support public education in every way possible through the payment of taxes, through local volunteer efforts, etc.

In conclusion, democracy is a system of government where the citizens directly elect the government by voting. It is considered as the best form of government in the modern era as it allows citizens to exercise and enjoy many rights and it gives them responsibilities at the same time. There would probably be no democracy without the co-operation and commitment of citizens. Citizens must be aware of their rights and responsibilities as without awareness among the citizens, a government may turn into a tyranny.