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CITIZENS ROLES IN A DEMOCRACY

Sovereignty resides in and flows from the people in a democracy. Precepts are embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in modern constitutions the world over. They capture the foundation for the formulation that democratic government is “of the people, by the people and for the people”. In essence, they mean that government belongs to the people; governmental process belongs to the people; and elections belongs to the people. There is no democracy without the engagement of the citizens. Engagement is thus both a right and a responsibility of citizens in establishing, developing and sustaining democracy. Transparency is a necessity for democracy. Barriers to citizen participation are multiple in every country. They are both subtle and obvious, small and formidable and based on numerous factors. For full citizenship to be achieved, we must remove these barriers, whether they are based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age or another status.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFFICATIONS

In other to enhance their meaning as used within the context of this paper, it is important to clarify a few concepts

Citizen/Citizenship: The term citizen has an inherently political meaning that implies a certain type of relationship between the people and government. Citizenship of a state may be acquired either by birth or by naturalisation. A man becomes a citizen a state if his parents are citizens of that state or if he is born within the territory of that state. The process by which an individual may voluntarily change his/her citizenship of a state to another state is called naturalisation. The condition in which naturalisation are conferred vary from country to country

Chapter 111, section 25: 1(a) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria defines citizenship as:

1. Every person born in Nigeria before the date of independence, either of whose parents or any of whose grandparents belongs or belonged to a community indigenous to Nigeria: provided that a person shall not become a citizen of Nigeria by virtue of this section if neither of his parents nor any of his grandparents was born in Nigeria
2. Every person born in Nigeria after the date of independence either of whose parents or any of whose grandparents is a citizen of Nigeria
3. Every person born outside Nigeria either of whose parents is a citizen of Nigeria

Citizenship can be perceived to be made up of, or be divided into civil citizenship, political citizenship. Civil citizenship refers to the rights necessary to protect individual liberty(eg freedom of speech, justice, the freedom to conclude valid contracts); political citizenship is associated with participation in the democratic exercise of political power, either as a member of a political party or as an individual elected by the members of such a community; and social citizenship embodies the claim that citizens ought to have access to those resources that allow them live a civilised existence in accordance with the standards prevailing in society.

However, as with so many concepts, citizenship does not have just one definition, it means different things to different people. For example, Brannan et. Al(2006:55) argue that the concept of citizenship holds that citizenship is not solely comprised of passive membership of a political entity, but that being active is an essential of being a citizen.

According to Glover (2004:18), who argues that there are three dimensions of active citizenship: ethical citizenship, integrative citizenship and educative citizenship. Ethical citizenship understands active participation in a collective strive towards the public good as an essential feature of citizenship. Integrative citizenship needs engagement in a wide sphere of participation that can go beyond formal political practices and institutions. Educative citizenship according to Dagger (1997) refers to the process that develops a moral, practical, and intellectual sense of self in individuals when they practice their citizenship.

CITIZENS’ RIGHTS

Right entails some duties and responsibilities on the part of every citizen. A right may therefore be defined as a privilege or prerogative conferred by law upon a person or a group. When a privilege is expressed within the framework of the constitution of a state, it becomes a civil right. Important civil rights accorded Nigerian citizens in its constitution includes; right to life, right to work, right to freedom of religion, right to education, right of association and right to freedom of speech, writing and publication among others.

DEMOCRACY

The word democracy is derived from the Greek word *’demos’* meaning people and *’kratos’* meaning rule that is ‘rule by the people’. The concept of democracy like other political concepts originated from Ancient Greece where in the city states, citizens were free to meet frequently in assemblies which had the power to make laws. Every citizen was expected to participate in the running of government. This is classified as a direct democracy.

The Greek democracy was a limited institution in that it excluded labourers, slaves and aliens from exercising political rights. The idea that all citizens, high and low, within the state are entitled to take part in the running of the affairs of their state was first advocated in England after the great Civil War of the seventeen century.

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 which is designed to represent the common will of the citizenry within a state and that is a government by the people when its ideological undercurrents is grounded in the people’s culture, also it is a government for the people when the power employed by the custodians of state business emanates from, and resides in the collective mandates of the people, the states and countries where the arrangements, constitutions and practices and the workings of the government are such that the individual’s rights, freedoms and worth are guaranteed and ensured.

What can be deduced from the various definitions of democracy are the following features:

1. The fundamental right of the citizen is guaranteed
2. Independent and impartial judiciary
3. Existence of rule of law
4. Freedom of press
5. Periodic election that is free and fair

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF A CITIZEN

Citizens are expected to perform the following responsibilities in a democracy

1. A citizen in a democracy must have the duty to vote.
2. A citizen should be willing to pay taxes, since without taxes to fund a democratic government, there would be no democracy.
3. A good citizen must have a duty to obey the law
4. A good citizen must refrain from uttering destructive criticisms but must be prepared to offer constructive alternatives to government policies
5. A good citizen must refrain from interference with the right of other members of the community. S(he) must not interfere with the properties of other persons.
6. S(he) must support public education in every way possible, through the payment of taxes, through local volunteer efforts, through according the system the respect to which it should be entitled etc