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CITIZENS ROLE IN A DEMOCRACY

Democracy cannot exist without the engagement of the citizen thereby making sovereignty resides in and flow from the people in a democracy. Engagement in this concept means the right and responsibility of a citizen in establishing, developing, and sustaining democracy. For democracy to deliver, citizens must become informed about issues that can improve their lives. Barriers to citizen participation should be removed whether they are based on gender, race, ethnicity, religious, age, etc to achieve democracy. As a citizen, one must understand ideas about citizenship, politics and government.

Politically, citizen means a certain type of relationship between the people and the government. Citizens have a set of rights and responsibilities. Citizenship of a state may be acquired either by birth or by naturalization. The one determined by the place of birth is fundamental in the laws of most countries. According to Turner (1997:176), citizenship is a formed legal identity that the individual person inherits through a collection of legal rights and obligation, controlling access to the scarce political, economic and cultural resources of society. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria also defined citizenship in three ways.

Citizenship is divided into civil citizenship, political citizenship and social citizenship. Civil citizenship refers to the rights necessary to protect individual liberty; political citizenship is associated with participation in the democratic exercise of political power either as a member of a political community or as an individual elected by the members of such community; and social citizenship embodies the claim 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. Glover (2004:18) proposed three dimensions of active citizenship. They are; 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.

Individual’s rights and liberties are the groundwork of the state since it exists to enable men to live and develop fully. These rights are not absolute since they are limited by the rights of other citizen in the state. A right can defined as a privilege or prerogative conferred by law upon a person or a group. Important civil rights are right to work, right of association, etc.

The concept of democracy originated from Ancient Greece where in the city states, citizens were free to meet frequently in assemblies which had the power to make laws. The Greek democracy was a limited institution in that it excluded laborers, slaves and aliens from exercising political rights. Abraham Lincoln, former American President, perceived democracy as the government of the people, by the people and the people. His definition signifies that democracy is a government of the people when it 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 mandate of the people, the states and countries where the arrangements, constitutions and practices and the workings of the government are such that the individuals and his rights, freedoms and worth are ensured and guaranteed are usually referred to as democracies. The features of democracy include; the fundamental rights of the citizen is guaranteed, independent and impartial judiciary, existence of rule of law, freedom of press, periodic election that is free and fair.

Democratic citizens recognize that they not only have fights, they have responsibilities. A government of the people demands constant vigilance and support by the people, hence, citizens are therefore expected to perform the following responsibilities in a democracy; duty to vote, payment of taxes, obedience of law, refraining from uttering destructive criticisms etc.