**THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF NIGERIA, 1983-2007\***

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**\*Please do not cite as the paper is under research**

This study examines the activities of civil society from 1983 to 2007 in the Nigerian democratization whose effective transition took off in 1999 by highlighting how military authoritarian regimes faced their undaunted challenges in the hands of civil society organizations. In order to do this, this work makes exposition of three military regimes starting from 1983 to 1998. The outcome of this exercise shows how military regimes played a role in their own demise by triggering the violent reaction of civil society organizations through various factors that rooted during the regimes. These factors combined with their influence on civil society organizations are referred to as dynamics of civil society which are traced over time through the method of process-tracing. This paper, in highlighting the role of civil society, adopts process tracing method which enables us to answer the main research question. The understanding of civil society and its dynamism is anchored on various theories, namely relative deprivation, resource mobilization, polyarchy, social capital and modernization. The study, thus, argues that changes in the dynamics of civil society influenced revolutions and subsequent democratization in Nigeria. In the course of this argument, the paper pinpoints on how civil society rescues Nigeria when the political class and all the democratic structures have been virtually rendered redundant.

**Keywords:** Civil society, Authoritarian regimes, Democratization, Nigeria, Revolution

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3. **INTRODUCTION**
4. **Research Background**

The meaningful discussion of democracy in Nigerian political trajectory dates back to 1999 when power was transferred from a nearly two decades of military authoritarian regimes to civilian government. However, the actual stage for this historic event was set in 1993 when the first widely-believed free and fair presidential elections was annulled. The period between 1983-1999 referred to as the “second phase” of military authoritarian regimes in Nigeria (Osaghae, 1998) heavily tested and taxed the patience of the Nigerians. However, this interregnum of authoritarian regimes which started in 1983 was put in violent check starting from 1993 (Chuks, 2015; Mgba, 2015; Osaghae, 1998) and its total demise in 1999 when the transfer of power to elected civilian regimes took off.

For the emergency of nascent democracy in Nigeria in 1999, various actors, elites and non-elites, contributed to the pace of democratization, but the requisite for reforms in terms of political pressure and power lies solely in the domain of civil society (Diamond, 1997). Falode, 2016, notes that the ever- present military ruling in its second phase (1983-1998) which blatantly undermined basic democratic rights coupled with the ineffective political party provided a fertile but challenged opportunity for the civil society groups to interfere positively in the democratization process in Nigeria. This historic experience of military authoritarian regimes which appeared to be invincible initially and the role of civil society not only in their collapse but also in the democratic journey deserves attention and therefore needs to be explored. Generally, the Civil Society is considered as a driving force, which led to the falls of the authoritarian regimes. The central task of this paper, thus, is to examine the role of the Civil Society in the processes of democratization.

1. **Research Questions**

**The main research question:**

* To what extent and how the changes in the dynamics of the Civil Society influenced the revolutions and the subsequent processes of democratization in Nigeria?

**Other supporting questions:**

* Which Civil Society Organizations helped the most in the entrenchment of transition to democracy and the subsequent process of democratization?
* What kind of media fired the flame of the revolutions which culminated in the process of transition?
* And lastly how education becomes a tool of civil society before and after the transition?

1. **Research Objectives**

* To identify and analyze the social, political and economic factors that influence civil society’s role before and after the transition;
* To underscore the impact of education and social media and networks in the democratization process in Nigeria;
* To highlight the major Civil Society Organizations and their specific roles on the revolutions which put an end to nearly-two decades of authoritarian regimes.

1. **Main Contributions**

This present work will contribute to the body of literature by:

* codifying in one document the various factors triggered by authoritarian regimes which set the pace for civil society on the path of democratization;
* by tracing these factors over time in the thick of authoritarian regimes before transition and post-transition till 2007, which is the perimeter set for the study;
* by adding to the currently existing literature on the topic the data generated from the study;
* by lightly resolving the divergent views surrounding the topic in Nigeria context irrespective of some shortcomings which arise from co-optation of segments of civil society;
* and lastly, through the adoption of process tracing method in exploring civil society vis-à-vis democratization in Nigeria context.

1. **Methodology**

The primary method chosen to answer the research question is the process-tracing method. The focus of this method is on causal mechanisms by using in-depth single case study. Process-tracing, as a tool of causal inference, paves way for the understanding of the processes through which the causes bring about the occurrence of the outcomes (Beach,2018). This will ensure the adequate grasping of the whole process within a stretch of time which is the target of process-tracing (Collier, 2011). As this study is largely premised on the identification and analysis of factors that triggered the civil society and influenced its role, this method enables us to trace those factors over time using extant theories. The potency of this method, in this regard, is underscored by Hall, 2006 that “the strength of this method rests on the multiplicity of the observations” within a case being studied. Also, it is underscored by Maxwell, 2004 as well that process-tracing has “distinct advantage of identifying the influence of contextual factors that can’t be statistically or experimentally controlled.”

**2. Preliminary Literature Review**

The relation of civil society to democratization has always been a herculean task. This actually stems from its vagueness. While some notable scholars purport its positive correlation to the entrenchment and durability of democracy, some assert its destructive inclination. Among the former are found Diamond, 1994; Edward, 2011; Lordanov, 2013; and Warren, 2011 who are all trying to establish the potency of civil society in line with democracy. As for the latter, we found, among other scholars, Berman, 1997; Encarnacion, 2000; and Ndegwa, 1996 who argue to the contrary as it is well established by Berman, 1997 that the waning of democracy and the growth of the Nazi party was as a result of active participation of citizens in civil society. These dichotomous views reflected in the Nigerian political trajectories. Civil society enjoyed different and disparate conceptions in Nigeria among scholars in academic setting. This was the case because civil society was surrounded by a vague manifestation. While some segments of civil society strove hard towards the liberation of Nigeria from the shackle of military authoritarian regimes and from their accompanied human rights abuse (Abah and Tanko, 2016; Falode, 2015), the others, such as Association of Better Nigeria (Osaghae,1998), hampered the prospect of democratization through their open activities that championed the consolidation of the military regimes.

Notwithstanding this phenomenon, it is widely acknowledged how civil society has impacted positively on democratization in Nigeria as it became more potent in fighting for democracy in the period covered in this research than in any other period in Nigeria’s political trajectories (Alemika, 2003; Ikelegbe, 2013). This same acknowledgement is found in the works of those scholars who studied civil society activities in relation to democratization in Nigeria. “The civil society was in the vanguard of the democratic struggle” and that “In Nigeria, civil society held on to the struggle for civil rights and democratization in spite of widespread state repression, and finally made speedy democratization and rapprochement imperative …” (Ikelegbe, 2001). Falode, 2016 notes that without the important roles played by the Civil Society Groups, the reality of Nigerian Fourth Republic would have been an illusion. While this study is not disputed the positive role of civil society in democratization, rather it is what the research aims to establish, it is intended to bridge the gap left unfilled in the previous works by tracing over time how the military regimes metamorphosed into civilian elected governments through the activities of civil society.

**3. Overview of Military Authoritarian Regimes (1983-1998)**

All Military governments are the staunch oppositions of democracy, because they all operate on the platform of “lawless autocracy” as Nwabueze, 1994 describes their operation. This period referred to as “second phase of Military rule” emerged with incomparable authoritarianism not experienced before, since Nigeria attained her independence on October 1, 1960 (Osaghae, 1998). Three chains of authoritarian rulers (Buhari, 1983-1985; Babangida, 1985-1993; and Abacha, 1993-1998) who dominated the political scene, are looked into in order to provide a strong background in which civil society operated and to highlight how it influenced the course of democratization in Nigeria.

The first of this military ruler, General Buhari, came to power on 31 December 1983 which led to the collapse of the second republic that was inaugurated in 1979 (Akintola, 2002). This regime used its agenda of economic recovery as a justification for wanton violation of human rights and as a pretext to prevent any discussion on the issue of transition to democracy. In his inaugural address to the nation, General Buhari made a declaration that “the intervention of the armed forces was to arrest the imminent catastrophe which would have been the inevitable result of the course being charted by the politicians” (Buhari, 1984 cited in Osaghae, 1998). This imminent catastrophe was taken to be economic problem upon he claimed often that no transition to democracy would be initiated until economic prosperity has been achieved (Osaghae, 1998).

In order to actualize his economic agenda, various decrees were enacted in conjunction with the introduction of the deflationary austerity regime (Osaghae, 1998). This measure directly touched upon the lives of Nigerian in various fronts not only in terms of the further decline of standard of living as the regime was unable to improve the economy as promised but also in terms of the virtual absence of civil liberties and political rights. This is well-represented by Graf, 1988 when he notes that, “Arbitrary arrest, torture, and indeterminate detention were widely practiced, and this systematic brutality which Nigeria had hitherto largely been spared under military rule – entailed breaking suspects skulls during interrogation…”

It was in this atmosphere characterized by decline in living conditions coupled with the outright violations of human rights that another coup was staged on 27 August 1985 by General Babangida. He immediately justified his palace coup by making reference to the prevailing unbearable conditions under the ousted regime. Among the identified and articulated shortcomings or flaws of the ousted regimes are: flagrant abuse of human rights, lack of move to initiate the transition process, the exacerbating economic situation, abuse of power, iron-handedness of National Security Organization, among others (Osaghae, 1998). Initially, the regime embarked on series of liberalization policies starting with repealing of virtually all draconian decrees of the former regimes through the mass release of political and civil prisoners that were jailed without trial. Likewise, he reinstated all the proscribed associations and worked towards the review of the cases of human rights abuse under the last regime (Akintola, 2002).

Unlike the former regime which relied largely on economic agenda, Babangida placed his regime on two basic transitions, namely political transition which commenced in 1989 and economic transition or liberalization with 1986 as its starting period (Richard, 2001). The simultaneous running of economic and political transitions was built on the belief that without the operation of market forces liberal democracy was an illusion (Osaghae, 1998). Unfortunately, the regime was unable to achieve any of these transitions. On the economic side, according to the world bank Report of 1991, Nigeria was classified as the thirteenth poorest country in the world, (Richard, 2001) and from a human deprivation index survey in 1991, the United Nations Development Programme arrived at a conclusion that Nigeria suffered from one of the worst records for human deprivation in the third world (Osaghae, 1998). On the issue of political transition, the regime wrought irreparable damage in Nigerian politics as the presidential election conducted on June 12, 1993 which was expected to successfully end his long tumultuous transition was finally annulled. The election was praised and estimated as the best of all elections conducted in Nigerian political history (Lewis, 1994).

Following the initial emplacement of laugh at the face of Nigerians, the regime set the pace of heavy repression, tyranny and crackdown on the populace which was higher in scope and intensity than the ousted regime of Buhari. This was resorted to when the civil society organizations and ordinary citizens rose in violent resistance to the appalling economic and political environment created by the regime. After the exchanges of opposition and counter opposition from various components of civil society and Babangida’s regime, Babangida finally resigned as president under various pressures, notably from the top echelon of the military, resulting in the demise of the long repressive ruling of the ‘the prince of the Niger’ (Amuta, 1992).

The inauguration of the Interim National Government (ING) on August 27, 1993 was meant basically to oversee two important functions: the organization of a fresh election and the running of the country’s affairs until a new civilian president was sworn in. However, this government was short-lived as it was toppled in another coup on 17 November 1993. Hence, this was the beginning of the third military regime headed by General Abacha. The regime of Abacha tried to build its legitimacy on two factors, external and internal. On the external factor, the reference was on the open invitations from various segments of the society which comprised political elites, intellectuals and the pro-democracy activists. This calling was, however, later proved to be a disaster when the regime started portraying its true authoritarian proclivities. This was underscored by Ihonvbere, 1996 when he posited that, “since none of these openly opposed the action taken against the ING, it could well be assumed that they directly and/or indirectly supported the coup, and such tacit approval was later to constrain their ability to oppose the military.”

The internal factor touched upon the efforts of the regime itself to build a popular base for its ruling. This factor was basically on the appointments and composition of the cabinet, and the part of the regime’s institutional changes. The composition of the cabinet featured with virtually all segments of society which included members of the two political parties; human rights and pro-democracy activists; various ministers under Babangida’s regime; members of the press; among others (Osaghae, 1998). This initial step, regarding the composition of the cabinet, appointments of the top officials and the institutional changes, could be regarded as the process towards placing the country on the path of democracy. This thought was proven faulted as the step was later used by the regime to make a transition from mere soft authoritarianism, known of all military regimes, to hard authoritarianism (Odinkalu, 1996).

The initial positive steps, notwithstanding, not even to mention the later reversal by the regime after it had consolidated its power, the regime faced with undaunting challenge from the public. The inherited political crisis and economic decline, that Abacha claimed he would address, remained as it was, even became worse. These perennial crises and decline sparked off the violent uprising of the civil society. As Osaghae, 1998 puts it, “for the ordinary peoples at the receiving end the quality of life worsened still further”, and this, he added, “in political terms, increased hardship further alienated the regime and strengthened opposition to it.”

**4. Description of the Dynamics of Civil Society**

The dynamics of Civil Society refers to civil society organizations and series of factors, namely economic deprivation, political environment, education, media and social capital, that influenced or shaped the course of actions of civil society during military regimes and afterwards. Combination of these factors tracing over time bring into a light the rationale behind various uprisings and the subsequent democratization. Few of these factors are briefly looked into in the following paragraphs.

On the factor of economic deprivation, different indicators, namely life expectancy at birth, gross national income per capita, rate of unemployment, poverty line and Gini coefficient, are investigated to account for the rationale behind civil society uprisings during the military regimes. Concretely, in 1995 towards the end of military regimes, poverty head count ratio at $1.90% a day per population was 63.5% while the Gini coefficient in the same year was 51.9 (World Bank, 2019).

Clearly, the military regimes heavily repressed and muzzled press freedom. Various tactics were employed ranging from the outright closure of the press, arrest and detention of journalists without trial, confiscation of copies of news release, among other measures (Akintola, 2002). As important as the media was to the regimes themselves in order to have a firm grip on the society, liberalization policies were introduced, notably during Babangida regime, and this introduction led to the proliferation of media of various types (Maringues, 2001). Hence, the media then became not only a tool in the hands of civil society organizations in fighting the military junta as well as in mobilizing the general populace for various uprisings, notably after the annulment of presidential election in 1993 but also a force championing the course of democratization (Jega, 2001).

The civil society organizations, concretely the human rights and pro-democracy segments, around which revolve the central thesis, played a vibrant role although the military authoritarian regimes embarked on various approaches to silence them. To put their undaunted posture succinctly, I cite Amuwo, 2001, who notes that, “the resilience and perseverance of the pro-democracy forces, with a tinge of providence, ensured that the Nigerian civil society had the last laugh.”

The dynamics of civil society depicts the fact that the combination of development in some factors and dissatisfaction in others underlied the demise of military authoritarian regimes in Nigeria, and through this episode, we can glean how this shaped the course of action taken by the civil society.

**5. Synopsis of Civil Society and Democratization in Nigeria**

The paradox of civil society organizations in Nigeria is that their proliferation and vibrancy were simultaneous with the increased intensity of crackdown and repression meted out upon them by military authoritarian regimes (Akinrinade, 2002). Preceding the emergence of human rights and pro-democracy groups in 1987 were professional organizations and the labour unions, especially the ones established by university lecturers and students, that actively kept the regime’s policies under close watch and debate (Odinkalu, 1996). Labour unions like the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), the Nigerian Medical Association and the National Association of Resident Doctors were the first groups to resist the military’s cruel behavior and its attendant economic hardship by embarking on strikes (Osaghae, 1998). There were a number of civil society organizations, namely trade unions, professional bodies, community organizations, labour unions, ethnic minority movements, student movements, church organizations, human right groups and pro-democracy groups. In the face of wholesale denial of rights, civil, economic and political, each of the above-mentioned organizations, though formed for different reasons, became unified under the agenda of human rights and the setting of the pace of democratization in Nigeria (Mustapha, 1996).

Generally, the chains of military authoritarian regimes from 1983 to 1998 faced undaunting challenges from various segment of civil society organizations despite the regimes’ high repression and heavy crackdown from military and police forces. Civil society succeeded in the actualization of a viable transition in Nigeria after series of aborted and botched transitions under Babangida and Abacha. The specific aspects of democratization in which the impact of civil society was enormously felt are: the conduction of successful election which finally led to the withdrawal of military from Nigerian politics; the drafting of constitution with explicit sections on civil liberties and political rights; and notably issues of minority ethnic groups which drastically foment a lot of political instabilities in the country were addressed.

Apart from the 1999 national, state and local government elections which were monitored effectively by the coalition of about 63 civil society organizations under the umbrella of Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) (Akintola, 2002), Nigeria has succeeded in having two elections conducted in 2003 and 2007 with effective monitoring, reporting of abuses and furnishing of timely recommendations by civil society groups. Also, civil society prevented the degeneration of Nigeria into a thick of authoritarian regimes with their quick and timely intervention. The case of ex-president Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) illustrated this intervention which resulted in his failed third term ambition. The civil society groups were able to prevail on National Assembly to ensure the constitution was not tampered with. The similar intervention of the civil society was noted in the event of late President Umar Yar’adua’s illness (2007-2010) that resulted in the application of the ‘*doctrine of necessity’* by the National Assembly (Makmis and Samuel, 2014).

By and large, the popularity and the entrenchment of some indispensable concepts, namely accountability, rule of law, democracy, transparency, human rights and due process, in Nigerian politics were credited to the civil society organizations (Falode, 2016).

**6. Anticipated Conclusion**

In Nigeria post-independent political trajectories, the most heinous of these periods was the period between 1983 and 1999. All instruments of repression unknown before this period were applied by the military regimes, and all these were taken place in the country where virtually all rights to political arena were denied the people. Likewise, the social and economic sectors were in total collapse. Despite the overwhelming of military operations, civil society associations participated actively in the deconsolidation of the military authoritarian regimes. They established a formidable opposition against Nigeria's military dictatorship at a time when the feebleness of the official political parties was apparent; when political class became shamelessly opportunistic, and when the co-optation of appreciable segments of the labour leadership and the press became the order of the day (Mustapha, 1996). Changes in some of its dynamics are likely to be responsible for this event. Hence, civil society organizations vibrancy during these eras depict them as inevitable resource that Nigeria needs to explore for sustaining democracy and good governance (Akintola, 2002).

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