

BY INAM WILSON\*

# DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL LIFE IN NIGERIA

## VICTOR E. DIKE

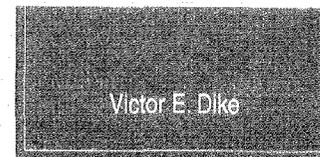
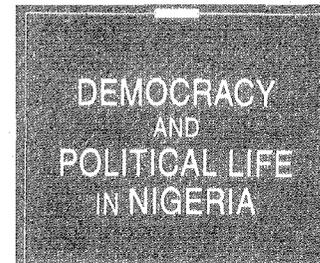
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Victor Dike's *Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria* is a well-researched treatise which attempts to draw a connection between Nigeria's chequered political history and her present economic trajectory. Dike easily traveled back in time - in his analysis of Nigeria's political life and culture - to the "emergence" of Nigeria in 1914 to explain why Nigeria is today facing numerous sociopolitical and economic challenges, such as weak economy, corruption, electoral distortion, poor state of education, rising unemployment, poverty, crime and social unrest. The book could not have come at a better time than this as Nigeria will be hoping during the 2007 general elections to make a success of her second attempt at a civilian to civilian transition.

As a Nigerian based in the United States and an adjunct assistant professor at the National University California, USA, Victor Dike has brought his personal and academic exposure to bear on every strand of the 18 chapters of the book which no doubt will be a veritable reference resource for students, teachers, policy-makers, politicians and general readers who are interested in understanding the paradox called Nigeria.

*Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria* is a 418-page book, written with the reader in mind in simple, direct and unpretentious style that makes for easy reading. The unending notes and references provided for every chapter lends credence and authority to the ideas and views expressed in the book.

From the start the preface sets the tone for the rest of the book. It mostly paints a picture of Nigeria as a failed State whose economy is prostrate, not responding to economic principles and in Dike's judgment, the past military and civilian leaders should be held responsible for this situation. He attempts to posit solutions for this parlous state of affairs and suggests as a first step, the restructuring of Nigeria into a true federal and



democratic State. He further stressed the need for a paradigm shift, visionary leadership and doing away with political traders and contractors who presently populate and manage political parties in government throughout the four corners of Nigeria.

In the author's own words: "*Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria* outlines the underlying factors for this development [i.e. the nation's hampered economic development and political democratisation process] and recommends solution".

### **An Overview of the Issues in Discourse**

Chapter one is introductory and gives a general overview of the issues discussed in the book. In this chapter, Dike considers the issue of the struggle for political power over the people and raised questions like: what is the correct relationship of the individual to society? What is the connection between individual freedom and political authority? His answer to these questions is that while in organised and truly democratic societies the locus of power is the people, in Nigeria power belongs to the politicians because votes do not count.

The author also considers the issue of politics and political life in Nigeria and posits that democracy is more than voting. Elections are necessary, but not sufficient condition for enduring democracy. As regards political life, he advances the position that political life involves more than a struggle for power among competing interests but involves issues such as equality, rights, freedom, legitimacy, obligation, justice, and among other things peace. He decries the present Nigerian party politics which is not issue-based as political parties are not formed on ideological basis but on regional and ethnic sentiments, hence the prevalence of undemocratic practices like zoning, election frauds, killing of political opponents, and blatant disregard for laid down rules, electoral laws and the constitution.

He concludes chapter one with an advice to politicians to change their 'do-or-die' attitude and focus their collective energies on improving

the economy without which true democracy will be unachievable.

### **Nigeria's Political History**

In chapter two of *Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria*, Dike lays bare the true story of Nigeria by giving an expose of the formation of Nigeria, the struggle for political independence, the politics of creation of states, constitutional developments and military interference in politics and governance. He concludes the chapter by noting that an effective constitution is vital in a democratic political process. In his view, the ruling elites have misused and abused their political power because of lack of effective checks and balances in the system.

### **Political Democracy and Ideology**

The third chapter of the book offers a conceptual clarification of the word "democracy" in the context it is used in the book as the word has "exhibited great flux and change over time" both in theory and in practice. The clarification became imperative as fraudulent and autocratic civil rules also lay claim to being a democracy.

Dike's definition of a true democracy is the "government by the people as a whole rather than by any section, class or interest within it". It also denotes:

*"...a system of government whereby the rights of the individual person – political, civil, economic (e.g. property rights), are respected and protected by the forces of government." ...political system*

*whereby the citizens determine their mode of rule directly through participation (direct democracy) or indirectly (representative democracy) by selecting government officials to whom they grant a mandate to rule. Democracy is a rule by the majority with respect and due consideration to the interest of the minority".*

In addition, liberty which Harold Laski classifies as including individual liberty, political liberty and economic liberty is fundamental to democracy.

Private liberty is the opportunity to exercise freedom of choice in those areas of personal security. Political liberty means the right of the individual to take part in the affairs of the state (nation) through the right to stand as candidate for election, freedom of speech, press and meeting. Economic liberty is the security and opportunity to find reasonable means of livelihood or subsistence.

Proceeding on the premise that every institution or organisation (business, political and human) has its values and beliefs or a "philosophical" and or an "ideological" base, Dike fires the question, what are the ideological make-ups of Nigeria's political parties and politicians? Without quibbling or prevaricating, his straight answer is that Nigerian politicians and their parties are not issues-based. Not one to mince words, the author further states that:

*"...political campaigns do not matter in Nigeria since politicians are not committed to*

*politics ideologically; many of them are opportunists at best. They often join the winning party, even if the philosophy of the party is contrary to their own personal views (for those who have)".*

He advises that the solutions to problems in societies often start, and should start, with an ideological base from which political issues can be worked out. Drawing inspiration from advanced and truly democratic societies, he advocates that the proper channel to political power should be for a politician to espouse a better ideology. Differences in ideology produce healthy political opposition which is good for democracy, but this is regrettably not the case in Nigeria. He admonishes that politics without a belief system breeds sociopolitical crisis, which is a threat to democracy.

In spite of his swipe of Nigerian democracy and politics, Dike concludes the chapter by admitting that democracy may not solve all the problems of Nigeria but it is better than the best military regime. Democratic systems have in-built mechanisms for correction and Dike places the responsibility for making democracy work squarely on the shoulders of the people rather than the leadership.

### **Enabling Conditions for Democracy in Nigeria**

The fourth chapter of *Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria* focuses on the environment necessary for a democratic political system to thrive. At one time, "a home grown

democracy" was our answer to legitimate questions raised regarding our democracy.

For modern democracy to survive, however, there are some basic credos which the author identifies as being essential and which basically may have affected Nigeria's chances at a workable democracy:

- **Education.** Some degree of literacy and social education is a *sine qua non* for democracy because an educated citizenry is an enlightened and vigilant electorate.
- **Timing.** A society has to be ready for democracy for it to succeed. Examples abound of nations that took on democracy prematurely and failed at it.
- **Virile Middle Class.** A growing and affluent middle class would mean the gradual establishment of an economic and social structure independent of the party state, which would in turn give rise to more demands for meaningful participation in the political process.
- **Political Culture and Social Progress.** The culture of a people is an agent of progress in that society.
- **Judiciary and the Mass Media.** Complete autonomy of the judiciary and unfettered but responsible exercise of press freedom are essential to safeguard democracy.

### **Other Impediments to Democracy**

In chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 of *Democracy and Political Life in*

*Nigeria*, Dike considers, respectively, issues relating to ethnicity and politics of religion, true federalism, direct democracy, corruption and the immunity clause which have in no small measure impeded democracy in Nigeria. His solution to the ethnic crisis is to restructure Nigeria into a true federal system [incorporating fiscal federalism], general education of the populace and the leaders and followers alike on the need to do away with selfishness, nepotism and opportunism. To improve direct and participatory democracy, he advises that money politics be discarded and politics should be for every one and not just for those who can afford it.

The author presents facts and figures to demonstrate that corruption has eaten deep into Nigeria's sociopolitical fabric and the malaise cuts across the nation's political class from top to bottom. As a result, many corrupt leaders have hidden under the immunity clauses in the Nigerian Constitution to avoid criminal prosecution. He posits that corruption affects national development as it could lead to reduction in the quality of goods and services available to the public, as well as reduction in local and foreign investment, economic growth and government expenditure choices.

To tame the monster called corruption, Dike suggests that the government of Nigeria must take its war against corruption seriously, because the diversion of scarce public resources into private pockets, which continues unabated, hinders national development and erodes the social and moral fabric of the nation.

He advocates the amendment of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria to remove the immunity clause to enable corrupt politicians to be prosecuted, and recommends the introduction of an effective tax system that would require everyone to document each year his or her sources of income, to moderate greed and keep track of people's spending. Other suggestions for curbing corruption are proffered in chapter 8, one of which is a free press to report to the public on corrupt practices in the society.

### The Nigerian Economy

The writer dedicates chapters 9, 10, and 11 of his book - *Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria* - to the Nigerian economy. Picking through these three chapters, it is easy to spot the areas where Dike feels that Nigeria got it wrong. His approach is to provide a background to the problems of the economy and the way they have impacted on the lives of the people and the society in general.

Chapter 9 does a critical analysis of the state of the Nigerian economy with a view to determining whether there has been economic growth and development and scored it very low notwithstanding various high profile economic reforms in the past and "the drumbeats of economic reforms" by the present civilian administration. The criteria used for the assessment is whether these economic reforms have engendered:

- increase in Nigeria's capacity to generate more goods and services;
- sustained increase in the economic standard of living of

Nigerians; and

- improvement in the efficiency of resource use so that the same or greater output of goods and services is produced with smaller throughputs of natural, manufactured and human capital.

Dike identifies some of the reasons why Nigeria has failed to develop as it should despite the abundant human and natural resources at her disposal. Among the reasons given for the failure of the economy are: reliance on oil as the mainstay of the economy and the subsequent abandonment of agriculture; undue interference with the Nigerian currency through devaluation which makes import expensive, exports cheap and drives up inflation; low and unstable export capacity; dual exchange rate regime; unending hike in the prices of domestic petroleum products; poor execution of people-oriented programs; political instability and disregard for the rule of law; consistent mismanagement of resources; poor state of infrastructures that unnecessarily adds to the cost of doing business; poor state of the educational system; and the interference of international institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. Oh, and "corruption" which keeps turning up like a bad penny!

Going forward, the three "Critical Success Factors in Implementing a Country's Growth Strategy" that could get a derailed economy back on track - identified by Paul Collier of Oxford University and World Bank - deserves

mention. Collier noted that for Nigeria to carry out a successful economic reform it should:

- accept that something has indeed gone radically wrong with the economy and try to understand what is wrong;
- the leaders should accept that previous policies have been ruinous and that they have been strongly supported by those who gained from them; and
- the policy makers should focus on a few reforms that really matter and that will pay off quickly.

The economic problems mentioned in chapter 9 are discussed in greater details in chapter 10 (debt crisis and poverty in the land) and chapter 11 (dual exchange rate and inflation). Backing his case with statistics, Dike shows how the crippling debt servicing expenditure, inflation, and the different systems of exchange rate used over the years have contributed to the poor state of Nigeria's economy. For instance the dual exchange rate system which is supposed to have been scrapped is still in existence causing distortions (excess liquidity and high inflation) in the economy.

### Socioeconomic Restructuring

Chapter 12 of *Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria* discusses socioeconomic restructuring through privatisation and other reform programmes in Nigeria. Though Dike acknowledged the merits of the arguments canvassed by

protagonists who oppose privatisation of state-owned enterprises, his view remains that the benefits of privatisation to the broader population outweighs its problems, provided that the process of privatisation is transparent. Dike does not however think that the privatisation process has been transparent as there are "unending tales of corruption associated with the privatisation programme in Nigeria."

He also discusses the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) put in place by the current administration and which is widely touted to have the ability to remedy the macro and micro sectors of the economy. Dike identifies the four key areas of the NEEDS programme:

- the reform of government and its institutions;
- the growing of the private sector;
- the implementation of a social charter with the people; and
- value re-orientation.

The "economic growth blueprint" of the NEEDS document is designed to enable Nigeria to become a key player in the global economy. In spite of the bold objectives of the programme, the author raises serious questions as to its workability having regard to the fact that the basic infrastructures necessary to achieve these objectives are just not there. How, for instance, would the manufacturing industries run their plants without adequate and reasonably priced electricity.

Furthermore, how would the government plan effectively without reliable national data and statistics? Dike therefore advocates a holistic approach to socioeconomic restructuring.

### Miscellany

*Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria* also features discussions on some ancillary issues in chapters 13 – 17 which add impetus to the main theme of the book. In chapter 13 the vexed issue of resource control and the challenges of nation building were discussed. The writer rightly situates the demand for resource control by Nigeria's littoral States within the larger context of the clamour for true fiscal federalism. This is because the federating units in a true federation own and control their resources and pay appropriate taxes to the centre.

In chapter 14, Dike discusses the neglect of vocational and technical education in Nigeria and sets an agenda for change. He submits that vocational and technical education in Nigeria should be competency driven and less theoretical. He advocates a reform of the secondary schools curriculum to include practical vocational and technical education.

Chapter 15 discusses globalisation, information technology and poor nations. The author advises that Nigeria should hasten up with its political democratisation, technological innovation and economic restructuring process to improve the living conditions of its

citizenry. It is only the knowledge-based economies [which Nigeria is not a part of] that are taking full advantage of the limitless opportunities that the internet and information technology offers. He stresses the fact that globalisation is no longer a matter of choice, that it is an integral part of the operating environment in the new millennium and Nigeria must brace up and catch up.

Managing National Security and Public Safety in Nigeria is the subject of discourse in chapter 16. Dike notes that Nigeria's security problems are mostly from within the country and such threats to national security have, in recent times, come from electoral fraud, political assassinations, ethnic militias, armed robbery, and lack of standards and maintenance culture which has rendered Nigerian airspace and products unsafe. Dike concludes the chapter by emphasising that national security and public safety are serious undertakings by any serious government, since a breakdown of law and order in any society will affect every other part of the economy.

Chapter 17 of the book waves goodbye to Military intervention in Nigerian politics and suggests ways of deterring future military incursions into politics in Nigeria. One suggestion is to bring military dictators to trial at the International Criminal Court in the model of Chile's trial of General Augusto Pinochet. However, the best antidote against

military intervention remains effective political leadership and good governance by the civil political class.

### **2007 General Elections as a Turning Point**

*Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria* was published at a time when the preparations for the 2007 general elections were already in top gear and not surprisingly, the 2007 elections and the future of democracy in Nigeria was the closing chapter (18) of the book. Dike terms the 2007 elections as the 'future of democracy in Nigeria', and he could not have been more correct!

Nigeria in the last seven years has been able to re-position itself as a force to be reckoned with and a successful transition to a new administration will consolidate this position. This is the second time that elections are being held in Nigeria to transit from one elected administration to another. The attempt to do this in 1983 was short-lived as the military intervened shortly after the commencement of the second term of the Shagari administration. Therefore all hands must be on deck to ensure a successful transition.

In this regard, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has a major role to play. 'Rigging' has been a scourge of elections in Nigeria. The elections of June 12, 1993 are widely thought to be the freest and fairest elections that Nigeria has ever held. The elections in 1999 and 2003 were fraught with accusations and counter-accusations of fraud, and the electoral body is generally always accused of complicity in the fraud.

To dispense its functions creditably, INEC must ensure that it does not allow itself to become a pawn in the battle among the political parties and the contestants for the soul of Nigeria. Dike does more than pay lip service to the idea of INEC conducting free and fair elections; a checklist of recommendations is also included in the book. The electorate in turn must remain vigilant and guard their franchise with jealousy. We owe it to ourselves and the future generations.

With the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria and its attendant benefits particularly to the poor in the society, maybe, just maybe, we might be able to forestall

the prediction of Dike in these words, "[g]iven the growing gap between the very rich and the very poor, one is forced to predict that the nation might witness a bloody revolution in the near future". God forbid!

### **Conclusions**

*Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria* is by all standards a lively, informative and educative book. Though it is easy to feel the activist in Dike when reading though, like a good commentator on the political landscape should, he did not stop at highlighting Nigeria's myriad of problems; he went on to suggest measures which could be taken, to at the very least ameliorate the situation.

*Democracy and Political Life in Nigeria* as admitted by Dike "is not a perfect book". So he should "be forgiven", as Durant advised, for the few typographical errors observed in the book. To be fair, Victor E. Dike has in no small measure advanced the frontiers of discourse on democracy, political life and economic growth and development not only in Nigeria but in Africa in general. ■

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