

Civil Society and Democracy Development in Africa

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Abstract: Civil society can be described as a crucial agent for promoting democracy and development in the developing nations such as African countries. This seminar paper examines the role of civil society in democracy development in Africa. The problem underpinning the study is the overwhelming reliance that many citizens have on the civil society for result oriented democracy and development in Africa as compared with the civil society roles in developed nations. However, civil society in Africa are surrounded by challenges such as: hostile political environment, inadequate internal- funding, selfishness of the civil society themselves, siding with governments and host of other criticism faced by the civil society. The paper adopted qualitative research method in conducting the study among four African countries namely; Botswana, Uganda, Ghana and Nigeria as the sample states. The general objective of the study is to examine the contribution of Civil Society in the development of democracy in Africa and same specific objectives in the sampled countries. The research found out that the civil society in Botswana and Uganda were operating under hostile political environments, characterized as weak and as such had low contributions to democracy development in their countries. It was further established that the civil society (CS) in Ghana recorded applaud able achievements in democracy development, similarly the CS in Nigeria. The paper recommends that the CS in Africa should unite in their activities against any repression, and resist every attempt by the government to cause division amongst their ranks. They should explore more internal funding and avoid over reliance on foreign donors for evading external controls. The CS should also prioritize the public demands over and above their personal egocentrism, which shall promote objectivity in critiquing the policies/programs of government, and not serve as working tools to the opposition parties. They should operate within the spheres of the constitutional provision so as to respect rule of law.

Key Words: Civil society, Democracy, Democracy development and Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Despite increased importance and value, the civil society organizations (CSOs) in the developing world have lagged behind than their counterparts in the developed world in terms of performing expected functions and providing checks and balances to the central governments (Kansiime, 2019). This may attributed to the fact that CSOs do not have the enabling political environment to operate as most African countries had a history of colonization, militarization, dictatorship and immature democratic leaderships as the case may be. Other factors that may be attributed to CSOs poor performance are lack autonomous funding, lack of respect for rule of law and human rights as well as compromise by some the CSOs to be alliance with some political elites at the expense of their member and the citizenry.

Focus on civil society and state relations are a recent development in African politics. It can actually be traced to the 60s - 80s when it was realized that the state failed to deliver what was expected of it, that is, development. Activists and to some extent, the donor community started to advocate for the shrinkage of the role of the state and focus on civil society which offered a possible alternative structure outside the over-burdened and ineffective state. Despite this stride, the neglect of the role of civil society in political discourse has also been evident in some African countries (Somolekae, 1998).

Studies by different scholars have shown that the rate of development of nations, particularly in the area of political, social, economic and technological spheres, is a function of the way they are organized in terms of governmental systems, the existence of vibrant non-governmental organizations – civil society (CS), and the overall political culture that is prevalent in such a country and Nigeria is no exception and Ikelegbe, 2009), (Gbrevbie, 2013)

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

There are various perceptions regarding the existence, activities and operations of CSOs in most African countries in recent times. Mention is often made of CSOs in political, economic, and social discourse. The CSOs are often expected to facilitate good governance, formidable economic policies as well as relevant social intervention programs by democratic governments.

However, the Civil Society (CS) are often accused of low performance, siding with governments, self-centeredness, search for foreign donors and compromise even in matters that may affect overall wellbeing of their members and the citizenry.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The general objective of this paper is to examine the contribution of Civil Society in the development of democracy in Africa, other specific objectives include:

- To examine the role of CS in democracy development in Botswana
- To examine the role of CS in democracy development in Uganda
- To examine the role of CS in democracy development in Ghana
- To examine the role of CS in democracy development in Nigeria

4. RESEARCH QUESTION:

The central question that this paper therefore seeks to address is to what extent have CS aided democracy development in selected African countries?

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The research obtains relevant data in non-numerical form, it adopts content analysis derived from similar works. The choice of the qualitative research design was informed by the need to explore the perspectives, thoughts and perceptions of some relevant stakeholders such as specialist in the area of CSOs and democracy. This paper therefore utilizes secondary data obtained from journals, seminar papers, magazines and newspapers were researched.

5.1 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

The paper has as part of its major concepts; civil society, democracy and democratic governance as enshrined in the title of the paper that require conceptual clarifications within the context of this work.

Civil Society

The concept of civil society, like other concepts in the social science, lacks a single, precise and universally acceptable definition. This situation may not be unconnected with the fact that most definitions actually reflect the political background and experience of those defining the concept. It has become one of the catchwords in discussions of democracy and governance in Africa. Though understood differently by different users, civil society (CS) is being used in this paper to refer to the realm of “voluntary self-generating and organized non-state organizations” (Molutsi, 1995).

Civil society functions that are believed to be desirably applied in all societies which include: protection of citizens’ lives, property and freedoms; monitoring activities of the state, the central powers and the state apparatus; advocacy through articulation of interests of the citizens; socialization through practicing values and attitudes of democracy; intermediation and facilitation between state and citizens; building communities through voluntary interactions that build a bond between members of the society and service delivery in social service sector (Edwards 2009; World Bank 2003; SIDA 2005).

Orji (2004) sees civil society as organized activities by group of individuals essentially out to perform certain services with a view to influencing the government in its policies and programmes for the improvement of society.

Ikelegbe (2005) refers to civil society as essentially participatory, broad-based and self-governing formation engaged in shaping public affairs, public policy and governance. He points out that civil society is an instrument, a means by which the citizens engage the state, in different struggles, challenges and contestations.

Democracy

Literally, democracy means “rule by the people”. The term is derived from the Greek *dēmokratīā*, which was coined from *dēmos* (“people”) and *kratos* (“rule”) in the middle of the 5th century BC to denote the political systems then existing in some Greek city-states (Encyclopaedia Britannica

In *Polyarchy*, Dahl (1971) identified eight criteria in defining democracy: the right to vote; the right to be elected; the right of political leaders to compete for support and votes; elections that are free and fair; freedom of association; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; and institutions that depend on votes and other expressions of preference.

Democracy means a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1828)

Democracy Development

Somolekae, (1998) opines that for democracy to be described as developed and consolidated, the following seven (7) conditions shall be fulfilled:

Responsive and participatory democracy

In a democracy, the government is responsive to popular will. It appreciates the fact that it is there to serve the people, and thus has to be responsive and sensitive to their views on issues of major concern to them. By and large the regime should make all attempts to ensure that people have an input in whatever decisions are made.

Respects for human rights

Respects for human rights should be ensured most preferably, these rights and freedoms have to be enshrined in the constitution and such a constitution has to be respected by the regime.

Existence of civil society

Civil Society has to have the space and freedom (i.e. legal and political space), to exist and to organize freely without fear of discrimination.

Rule of law

There has to be rule of law, decisions of the courts have to be respected even in situations where they have decided against the state.

Free and fair elections

Free and fair elections have to be held periodically. This period has to be provided for in the constitution to ensure that no one, can or will decide otherwise. In a democracy, the will of the people should form the basis to govern. Elections are one important mechanism through which this will is expressed in a democracy.

Effective opposition

Presence of a viable and effective opposition. A democracy without an effective opposition is a weak democracy.

Free and independent press

A free and independent press must be part and parcel of any democracy. Otherwise the checks and balances necessary within such a system will be lacking, and where they are lacking, corruption becomes the order of the day, and human rights abuses get trampled upon.

Najam (2000) suggests that the condition listed above could be achieved through monitoring, advocacy, innovation, provision of services, and capacity building which the civil society have to facilitate with a view to ensuring democracy development in their respective states and Africa at large.

5.2 THE ROLES CIVIL SOCIETY IN DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT: THE EXPERIENCE OF SOME AFRICAN STATES

In the pursuit of the research objectives, it is relevant to examine the roles of civil society in the development of democracy in some selected African states as generated from the works of some scholars thus:

Botswana's Experience of Civil Society and Democracy Development

It was concluded that civil society in Botswana was weak in relation to the state and that civil society in general was primarily concerned with promoting the interests of their members and not so much with their relationship with the state (Somolekae 1998). Therefore, for many years, the state in Botswana projected the civil society organizations as the ideal castigating those who seek to influence policy. They were labeled either as promoting foreign interests, or as infiltrated by the opposition. The same study also noted another interesting feature of state-society relations in Botswana. The Botswana state has on a number of occasions initiated the formation of civil society organizations. This is common among farmer groups as well as civil service groups such as the Botswana Civil Service Association or the Botswana Teachers Union.

Uganda's Experience of Civil Society and Democracy Development

When the National Resistance Movement NRM came into power in 1986, efforts were directed towards finding new systems of articulation between state and civil society to restore those that were formerly unsuccessful in the post-colonial era (John and Camaroff, 1999). State partnership with CSOs has been followed at the central and local government levels particularly in public service delivery (Muhumuza, 2010) cited in Kansime (2019). It can be avidly argued that due to lack of resources, the government efforts had been complemented by CSOs. This complementarity was indeed tactfully and strategically necessary to instil confidence in the citizens by allowing operation of civil societies in state-building and national development.

According to Kansime (2019), a quite large number of civil society organizations are supported by donor groups especially from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries among others. "Their support towards democratization and development of the country should be applauded".

Ghana's Experience of Civil Society and Democracy Development

These groups (civil society) together with various student bodies organized a series of nationwide strikes and demonstrations in the name of democratization. However, negative official attitudes in Ghana in the early 1990s inhibited the growth of civil society in the country. The National Democratic Congress (NDC) government under J. J. Rawlings was openly hostile to organizations not under its control, especially if they are not apolitical (Gyimah-Boadi, 1997).

Nigeria's Experience of Civil Society and Democracy Development

The country was governed by the military between 1966 and 1979 and between 1983 and 1999. During these periods, the CS and professional organizations such as the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), Campaign for Democracy (CD), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) were at the forefront in the fight against military rule and for the restoration of democracy and democratic governance in Nigeria (Orji, 2004).

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:

Molutsi and Somolekae, (1994) asserted that "**civil society in Botswana was weak**" and they recorded very little achievements. They lack proper funding and consolidation from among themselves. They are being threatened and increasingly intimidated by political authorities especially when they challenge position of government on some policies or programs.

It was found out from the conclusion of Kansime (2019) that despite the weaknesses in **Uganda's civil society**, these organizations remain indispensable partners in the democratic dispensation. Although the state initially supported the evolution, growth, and development of the civil society, it is increasingly becoming clear that the state is rather uncomfortable with some civil society organizations especially those that advocate for political rights. The reality is that vis-à-vis the environment in the developed world, the environment in which the civil societies operate in Uganda is indisputably hostile. The State has sought to compromise some of them or intimidate them through legalistically narrowing their operational space. Therefore, the ideal concept of civil society is far from the reality in Uganda. The civil society in Uganda is characterized by weak trade unions, intrigue and leadership challenges, and lack of sustainable source of income which makes them perpetually reliant on donor funding, among others. This weakens them and limits them from championing of the Democracy Development.

It was further found out from the study of Botchway, (2018) which concludes that **Ghanaian CSOs** have over the years organized and mobilized people to monitor the country's elections, especially within the Fourth Republic and that their independent monitoring have helped in ensuring credibility of elections over the years.

In addition, CSOs in the country have played advocacy roles by stimulating public discussions of issues of national interests and concern and this has resultantly enhanced the capacity of citizens to appreciate policy dynamics in the country. As a matter of fact, CSOs have inculcated into the citizenry civic virtues and the principles of good governance and democracy in general. It is thus evident from the study that to a very large extent, CSOs are responsible for the prevailing culture of cooperation, relative tolerance, respect for the rule of law and consequently the mass participation of citizens in public affairs. Lastly, Botchway, (2018) argued in his study that the activities of CSOs in Ghana have indeed impacted positively on the country's efforts at consolidating her democracy.

Gberevbie, (2013) **focusing Nigeria** in his article established a relationship between democratic governance and development being anchored by civil society and showed that development is more likely to manifest in a society where democratic norms hold sway, such as popular participation in the elections of political leaders and involvement of the people either directly or through their elected representatives in decision-making, fundamental human rights,

freedom of the press and association, freedom of expression and curbing of all forms corruption in government as basis for a developed society.

6. CONCLUSION:

The civil society has played a prominent role in the promotion of democracy and good governance in Africa. This role includes the struggle for decolonization and demilitarization as well as promotion of rule of law, popular participation in policy making, and transparency in governance

(Orji, 2009). This is more evident especially in Ghana and Nigeria. However, from the foregoing findings, the CS in Botswana and Uganda operate under unfavourable political climate. Despite the hostility, CS are striving harder to attain the goal of promoting democracy and development.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS:

The CSOs are to achieve their goals of entrenching democratic norms for development in the different spheres of the African society there is the need for them to:

- Unite in their activities against any repression, and resist every attempt by the government to cause division amongst their ranks through the weapon of mass action or protest against undemocratic actions of the government.
- Explore more internal funding and avoid over reliance on foreign donors to evade external controls.
- Prioritize public/citizens' demands over and above their personal egocentrism.
- Be objective in critiquing the policies/programs of government, and not serve as working tools to the opposition parties.
- Operate within the spheres of the constitutional provision so as to respect rule of law, etc.

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