

# **Democracy and the Challenges of Nation Building in Africa**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

My objective in this presentation, is not to tell all there is to know about democracy and the challenges of nation building in Africa. I doubt my competence to do that anyway. Rather, it is to identify the key issues and challenges, and provoke your thinking on how best to address them. It is meant to rekindle your interest and make you read more about these issues, reflect deeper and think smarter about these challenges, as well as work harder in your various ways as Africans to contribute to addressing them.

It is worthy of note, at the outset that, in the contemporary world, countries, which have successfully built a strong national identity, and are democratic, are also the most developed. In Sweden, Norway and Denmark, for example, citizens have a strong national identity, and their governance processes operate within a strong democratic framework; a combination of which has been facilitative of stable growth and socio-economic development, whatever global indices are used to measure this. The same thing can be said of many

Western European countries, from where the notion of “nation” and “nation-state” evolved; and the USA.

For colonially created African countries such as Nigeria both democracy and nation building have been desirable objectives worthy of pursuit; and have indeed been and are being pursued. But, it can be said that, for these countries, the inadequacies of democratic development and weaknesses in forging an overarching national identity, amidst a multiplicity of primordial identities, have been obstructive of stable economic growth and development. No wonder then, that all global indices of development, such as UNDP’s Human Development Index; Economist Democracy Index; Mo Ibrahim’s African Governance Index; Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index; and Electoral Integrity Project’s Electoral Integrity Perception Index; post-colonial African countries in particular, and other Third World post-colonial countries generally, rank very low in comparative and relative terms.

There is, in Africa, a very tenuous relationship between the democracy and nation building. The big question is: what accounts for, or explains this? Until and unless this is understood and properly addressed, stability of governance, and development would continue to suffer from obstruction.

Another major question that arises is: which should be of first priority? Is democracy a necessary and sufficient condition for building a nation-state, or is building a nation, with a strong national identity a necessary precondition for democratic development? If

this question has been settled, or is no longer relevant in the developed countries of Europe and North America, in underdeveloped or developing countries, such as ours in Africa, the jury is still out there.

Now, more than 50 years since colonial rule formally ended, African countries are still struggling with aspirations for democratic development and nation building.

What is clear, is that, colonial experiences and the legacies of colonialism in Africa have made both the pursuit of democracy and nation building very challenging.

Most African countries were hurriedly and arbitrarily constructed by colonial powers, as amalgamations of different, often irreconcilable, tribal and ethnic groupings. In many cases, mutually antagonistic communities in the pre-colonial times, which were put together as one “nation” by colonial conquest, had their ancient hostilities rekindled and manipulated, even exacerbated, by deliberate colonial policies.

In the post-colonial era, elected leaders pursued “nation-building” and “national integration” projects, with evident vigor, but shallow conceptualization, planning and execution. Either differences on account of diversity were subsumed or they are suppressed. Rather than unity in diversity, crass uniformity was often imposed, even where federalism was espoused.

No wonder that, now several decades after independence, our countries are neither fully democratic nor properly built up nations in the true sense of the concept. The governance institutions are feeble, and state systems are weak or have collapsed, and people are not integrated with an overriding common national identity.

We need to thoroughly interrogate the challenges of democratization and nation building in post-colonial African countries, and appropriately understanding the tenuous if not contradictory relationship between the two, if we are to maximize the benefits of both democratization and development in our countries in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Before addressing the substantive issues raised in this introduction, and the poser in the title, about the relationship between democracy and nation building, I briefly in the next section offer conceptual clarifications, to set a proper tone for the subsequent discourse.

### **Conceptualizing “Nation”, “Nation Building” and “Democracy”**

To meaningfully discuss “nation building”, an understanding of how “nation” is conceptualized is necessary.

#### **Defining Nation**

Quite often in the literature, the concepts of “country”, “state” and “nation” are used interchangeably. Conceptually however, while they do have some common or shared attributes, each has a distinguishing characteristic.

For example, a “country” is basically a sovereign political division territorially defined, with a central government and is distinguishable and independent from others. Geographically, the world is territorially divided into over 190 countries, each jealous of its sovereignty and proud of its heritage. A country necessarily has a state structure, but it may not necessarily be a “nation” in the conventional / classical definition of the concept.

On the other hand, a “state” is better conceptualized as the “governmental apparatus by which a nation rules itself”, reliant on its monopoly of the means of coercion. More radical Marxist definition of the state, is that it is “an instrument for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie [ruling class]” in a country. In this conceptualization, “state”, is not a structure, or an institutional framework, but rather is seen as an instrument used by the dominant class to achieve or actualize its objectives and interests.

Now, a classical or conventional definition of a “nation” is a group of people who share the same culture, history, traditions, language or ethnicity. A nation is said to be a “stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, ethnicity, or psychological make-up, manifested in a common culture. It is a cultural-political community that has become conscious of its autonomy, unity and particular interests” ( Stephenson 2005. [which are often defined as “national interests”])

It is a later, relatively more recent, conceptualization that sees a nation as denoting people living in the same country under the same government, but not necessarily sharing common history, language and ethnicity.

Types of nations/ nation-states:

There are said to be two types of nations, or nation-states in the contemporary world. Ethnic nations and civic nations. The first category is those with common ethno-linguistic origins, ancestry, history, values, belief, culture and traditions. Examples: Swedish in Sweden, Norwegians in Norway, Danish / Danes in Denmark, and Germans in Germany. While the latter, civic nations, is illustrated by France, a nation, which originates from a pact, not just on account of ethnic origins and also Italy. By conquest and/or pact, United Kingdom is country and now nation-state, with originally 4 nations: England (of English), Wales (of the Welsh), Scotland (for the Scotts) and Ireland (Northern for the Irish).

Civic nations are those that successfully, substantially, overtime, fused and blended peoples of originally different linguistic, ethno-religious, history, culture and ancestry, at least into for long accepting a common national identity. In France and Italy, for example, this was essentially achieved by deliberate state policies of homogenization, characterized by policies “with the aim of building commonality among the population and “forming” what they determined to be ‘Frenchmen’ and ‘Italians’” (Alesina and Reich 2015: 2). These types or categories of nation-states, became the

models and reference points for post-colonial countries in Africa, largely on account of them being the colonial masters.

### Nation Building

As Stephenson (2005) has observed, “Nation – building is a normative concept that means different things to different people.” For example, some see it as the historical evolutionary act of ‘forming a nation’. Others perceive it as a process of creating a common national identity where none existed previously, as in the case of after war and conquest, or as in the efforts of “nationalists” to turn post-colonial countries at independence into cohesive “nation-states” with citizenship of the colonially created, but now “independent” country as the over-riding national identity. Yet another meaning, of more recent origin, assumes that “Nation-building programs are those in which dysfunctional or unstable or ‘failed states’ or economies are given assistance in the development of governmental infrastructure, civil society, dispute resolution mechanisms, as well as economic assistance, in order to increase stability” (Stephenson 2005).

Alesina and Reich have defined nation building “as a process which leads to the formation of countries in which the citizens feel a sufficient amount of commonality of interests, goals and preferences so that they do not wish to separate from each other” (2015: 2).

The concept of nation building signifies efforts to construct a national identity tied to citizenship of a sovereign state/country; an identity, which is then viewed as the superior and most important of all the

multiple identities that people in a country may have. Thus, nation building is about turning people within a sovereign state as conscious citizens, proud of their country, obedient to a body of national laws often codified in a Constitution and other forms of legislation, committed to their country's progress as well as its protection and defense, and ready to recognize others as citizens of equal stature, regardless of other differences, such as of ethnic or linguistic background, race or religion.

Nation building is a process that evolves over time and is consolidated by effective leadership that is passionately national in orientation, rather than subservient to primordial affiliations. As Gambari has observed, "nations are built by exemplary men and women and sustained by institutions that promote good governance and socio-economic development" (2008). It can be added that nations are built by courageous, selfless and visionary leaders or nationalists who have a vision of a one, united, integrated community as citizens of a given country with a common purpose.

Nation building is a slow process, which evolves with incremental positive changes in the construction of a single national identity. It requires resilience, persistence and consistency. As the experience of the USA clearly shows, it is a process that can begin to yield dividends only in about 100 years of determined effort, in spite of threats of, and attempts at, disintegration.

Now, in the African context, nation building is used to refer to efforts of leaders of newly independent nation-states to redefine the



populace with a single identity, of citizenship, regardless of ethnic, religious and other identities, so that they assume a coherent national identity. Thus, nation building can be defined as the striving for constructing or defining a national identity using the machinery and power of the state. It is said to be aimed at “unification of people with the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run”. Also, it is about developing a cohesive national community through governmental programs and policies for “national unity” or “national integration” amidst complex diversity and multiplicity of contending identities. These are manifested in a variety of public enlightenment programs, military conscription, and major social infrastructure projects, to foster social harmony and economic growth.

Similarly, in the African context, nationalists were those leaders who led movements and political parties which demanded and struggled for independence of the colonies, and who, on assumption of power, strove to “integrate” the different if not disparate communities, which the colonialists had brought together first as subjects, and then subsequently as citizens of these countries, which they created (See Mamdani 1996).

### Challenges of Nation Building

The processes of “national integration” espoused and pursued by many African nationalist leaders in the post-colonial period were basically impositions from above, in their haste to quickly turn their countries in to “nations” essentially in the image of their former colonial masters. Tribalism and ethnicity are seen as negative things,

which have to be abolished or suppressed. Given this, many strategies for forging "national unity" were essentially suppressive of freedom of association, etc. Having not been inclusive and not making haste slowly, many "nationalists" in government mostly failed in their "national integration" projects. They failed to either merge, or bridge the "two publics" created under colonialism (Ekeh 1975). Indeed, many, pursued governmental policies and project, which essentially favored their communities, or ethnic or religious groups, to the exclusion of those defined as "others". Politics, and governance, essentially became an "us" versus "them" phenomenon.

Gambari (2008), in analyzing the Nigerian situation, has identified five main challenges of nation building, which I believe are of general applicability to most African countries. I reproduce them here as follows:

1. "the challenge from our history; [what I call legacies of colonialism]
2. "the challenge of socio-economic inequalities;
3. "the challenges of an appropriate constitutional settlement;
4. "the challenges of building institutions of for democracy and development; and
5. "the challenge of leadership

In Africa, with conquest and colonial rule, in many countries, different "nations", with distinct pre-colonial national identities were merged into one nation. As Stephenson noted, "while historically in Europe, nation-building historically preceded state-building, in post-colonial states, state-building preceded nation-building. The

aftermath of colonialism led to the need for nation-building” (2005: 2). This reversing of historical trends on account of colonialism unleashed dire consequences for nation building programs and projects in post-colonial Africa.

The colonialist were, indeed, not serious or careful “nation builders”. Rather than making efforts to blend primordial identities into modern national identities, they on the contrary used them to advance the interests of colonialism. As Africans agitated for independence, and early political leaders or “nationalists” attempted to forge a sense of oneness and unity in struggles for independence, the colonialists in turn pursued strategies of divide and rule, to weaken the nationalists and prolong colonial rule. Tribe, ethnicity, religion and communalism were deployed and exploited. Evidences of these are spread all over the African continent in the jurisdictions of all colonial powers. One tribal or ethnic, or religious group is pitched against another, mobilizing mutual fears of domination and/or exploitation, and pushing them further apart. In short, as Mukwedeya has aptly observed, ethnocentrism was accentuated by colonialism, such that it “has in many ways proved to be the Achilles Heel of many African countries that have been plagued by post independence conflict, instability and civil war...” (2016: 5).

It can be observed, in addition, that as much as legacies of colonialism are explanatory factors for the obstruction of desirable nation building in African countries, bad leadership and bad governance in post-colonial African countries, and their negative consequences in terms of poverty, inequalities, exclusion and

marginalization, are also significant explanatory factors, which need to be addressed.

### Democracy and Democratization

To appropriately discuss understand the relationship between democracy and the challenges of nation building, it is also necessary to have a proper conceptualization of democracy.

Democracy can be defined as a system of government based on such universal principles and core values as:

1. basic rights and freedoms: right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness; freedom of expression, assembly, association, etc.
2. inclusive processes of representation: representative governance through periodic elections, which are free and fair and based on a multi-party system
3. protection of lives and property of citizens by a democratically elected government
4. rule of law: equality before the law; impartial adjudication of disputes by the courts; protection of the weak against the strong
5. Independence of the press as the “Fourth Estate of the Realm”.

Colonial powers introduced this, so-called liberal democratic system of government in their colonies, which obtained in varying forms in their own countries, and when they departed, they helped to sustain these as legacies of colonialism, perceived to be more modern and advanced than the pre-colonial political arrangements and

governance systems, which in contrast, are seen as primitive, not inclusive and authoritarian.

The processes by which a democratic form or system of government is introduced and nurtured, deepened and consolidated is defined as democratization (See Jega, et. al. 2002). Democratization is a continuous process of refinement of democratic processes, institutions and democratic practice in a country, as it gradually moves from being classified as an “authoritarian regime”, to becoming a “Hybrid democracy”, and then to a “Flawed democracy” and finally to joining the ranks of “Full democracies”, as per the classification of democracies used in the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit.

The key procedural feature of a liberal democratic system is periodic elections of representatives to the legislative and executive arms of government in a carefully planned process, which is supposed to be free and fair. Elections are organized for candidates fielded by competing political parties and pitched as opponents, with differing electoral agendas.

#### Challenges of Democratization

With conquest and colonization, western European countries tried to replicate the political and governance structures, institutions and processes at home, in their newly created African countries. Thus, western liberal democracy, was introduced, some would say imposed, in Africa.

Although democratic ideals, principles and values can be said to be universal and much more attuned to governance in modern nation-states, democratic praxis was introduced into African countries, such as Nigeria, haphazardly and on crooked K-legs.

Such values as popular participation, representation, are not alien to African cultures and traditions. But their modern structured attributes, which emanated from western countries, such as elections, political parties/candidate rivalries, etc., are alien to African cultures and traditions. And the colonialists who introduced them did not try to adapt them to African cultures and traditions; rather, they not only imposed them, but they also undermined their efficacy by manipulating identities of candidates, using multifarious divide and rule tactics, thereby pitching them in the electoral process literally as enemies. In this context, electoral politics gradually became the nemesis of nation building, as well as democracy in African post-colonial societies.

Hence, elections, political parties, etc., tended to exacerbate, widen and aggravate preexisting divisions and hostilities, especially based on pre-colonial primordial identities. The mobilization of primordial identities has created conflicts and instability in Africa's democratic development, subverting both democracy and economic growth and development.

Over time, elections tended to in general, and with few exceptions, be neither free nor fair, tremendously lacking in credibility and integrity. They became mere rituals of validating and legitimizing

fraudulently enthroned “democratically elected” governments and leaders, who though technically elected representatives, in practice are neither responsible nor responsive to the needs and aspirations of the electorate and the citizens (Jega 2017).

### **Democracy and the Challenges of Nation Building in Africa**

Democracy, properly entrenched and practiced, is catalytic of nation building. It can produce good leaders, who can be responsible and responsive to popular needs and aspirations of the citizens and who can pursue appropriate policies of strengthening national unity and socio-economic development. It is, when on the contrary, democracy is undermined, such that all its underlying principles and values are negated, and elections become merely ritualistic; that democracy poses challenges to nation building and, indeed, subverts the attainment of the desirable objectives of nation building.

We can entrench and deepen democracy in Africa and more properly build nations out of identity riven African countries by, first decisively addressing the legacies of colonialism; by having a crop of enlightened, selfless and nationalistic leaders, and then by nurturing and entrenching electoral integrity, which is a precondition for deepening democracy and responsible, or good democratic governance.

Electoral integrity is the foundation of good democratic governance and stable socio-economic development. It ensures a transparent process of electing people’s representatives into the legislative and executive organs of government. It minimizes divisive politics and

nurtures stability in the political process as well as in the governance system. And, it catalyzes responsible and responsible governance framework, which facilitates reasonable satisfaction of the needs and aspirations of citizens and general socio-economic development (Jega 2017).

Electoral integrity can be nurtured and entrenched through:

1. Adherence to the rule of law;
2. Guaranteeing and protecting rights of all citizens;
3. Independence of the Judiciary in entrenching the rule of law;
4. Independence, non-partisanship and impartiality of the election management bodies
5. Professional, non-partisan and effective security provisioning
6. Nurturing values upon which to build a national identity through education, enlightenment, even indoctrination

## **Conclusion**

Democracy, in way and manner in which we practice it, does pose several challenges to nation building in Africa. In the context of post-colonial African countries, democracy has tended to generate tensions and conflicts through intense competitive political parties in the electoral politics. In the contest for political power, politicians have tended to mobilize identities other than national identity, or indeed in place of the national identity of citizenship, to gain support, “win” elections and access power. This has resulted in creating and or widening divisions and inequalities in our countries, generating tensions and conflicts and creating instability, which constrain or obstruct progress, growth and development.



Thus, while, theoretically, democracy is supposed to be a political and governance system, which should catalyze nation building and stable development, in the ways in which we have operated it in African countries, has led to acute mobilization of identities other than citizenship, with dire negative consequences.

In the circumstances, as Obama recently observed, given the observable current backward slide on the impressive progress made by democracy since the 1990s, and the resurgence of authoritarianism and neo-populist politics globally, but especially in western Europe and the USA, “we’re going to have to worry about economics if we want to get democracy back on track” (2018). To my mind, we are also in addition going to have to worry about electoral integrity if we want to get both democracy and nation building back on track in Africa.

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