

ROUSSEAU'S GENERAL WILL AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: A HERMENEUTIC STUDY

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Abstract

Man's basic need is his well-being. For this very reason, several political systems: monarchy, dictatorship, military rule, tyranny, democracy, etc., have been tried, tested, and found wanting in one way or the other. But of all these systems, the one less problematic and more promising, regarding the attainment of man's well-being through governance, is democracy. However, this work argues that this "conventional wisdom" about democracy can be challenged if the performance of any republic in Nigeria is critically assessed. It emphasizes the desirability of democracy, but also posits that democracy as practiced in Nigeria has not brought about the much-desired development and progress. Nigeria's attempt to practice representative democracy in all the republics has been a monumental failure. Ours is a political system whose voice is the voice of democracy and whose hand is the hand of autocracy. This work, thus, is an attempt to diagnose the protracted problems of democracy in Nigeria and attempt a treatment with some deductions drawn from Rousseau's doctrine of the "General will". By this, a hermeneutic approach to Rousseau's doctrine of the general will provides a therapy to democratic practices in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democracy, General Will, Nigeria, Rousseau.

Introduction

There is no doubt that democracy has been acclaimed and widely accepted to be the best system of government across the globe. It has also been widely criticized by many writers to contain two principles, namely: liberty and equality. The leprosy eating democracy in Nigeria does not only involve these twin principles (liberty and equality), but also reflects what John Odey said in his attempt to describe Nigeria's democratic situation, "it is the Governors and ministers who are now

earnestly asking Obasanjo to continue to rule us without our consent and this does not seem to do justice to that freedom which is the hallmark of democracy”.¹

Most of the more stable democracies in the world today, namely: United States of America, France, Switzerland, Britain, Canada, to mention but few, laid their foundations via ideas of political re-construction of great political philosophers. Worthy of mention here is the idea that led to the French Revolution which was primarily carried out to fight against arbitrary rule, and which Rousseau’s political thought as encapsulated in his doctrine of the General Will played a vital role. As Sidgwick writes:

The revolutionary doctrine rests on two or more simple principles: that men are by nature free and equal, that the rights of government must be based on some compact freely entered into by these equal and independent individuals, and that the nature of the compact is such that the individual becomes part of the sovereign people which has the inalienable right of determining its own constitution and legislation. These points are all found, for instance, in the declaration of the rights of man (1789), the charter of the French Revolution; they are taken straight from Rousseau.²

Rousseau demonstrated that “Will”, not force, is the basis of the state, and that government depends on the consent of the governed. Appadorai explained that: “Rousseau’s idea that sovereign community was logically the only lawmaker has the direct effect of stimulating direct legislation by the people through the referendum and initiative.”³ We are, however, not arguing that Nigeria should move on with the French style, but will definitely have a lot to gain if she strives to allow the will of the state to prevail in all her democratic dealings. Rousseau’s doctrine of the General Will, as contained in the social contract, will no doubt help to reduce (if not wipe out) the extreme individualism and the political godfatherism which are the twin factors that have eaten deep into Nigeria’s democratic process. Godfrey Onah is in agreement with this idea when he wrote that, “the so-called Nigeria democracy, is at best pluralistic dictatorships in which selfish and unscrupulous tyrants ride on the shoulders of the people in order to defend only their personal interests and those of their political cronies and clubs”⁴

¹ J. O. Odey, “Democracy: Our Lofty Dreams and Crazy Ambitions”, (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2002),

² H. Sidgwick, “The Development of European Polity” cited in A. Appadorai, *The Substance of Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968),

³ Appadorai, *The Substance of Politics*, 28.

⁴ G.I. Onah, “Africa and the Illusion of Democracy” in *Democracy and Responsible Governance in Africa*, ed. J. O. Oguejiofor (Enugu: Delta Publishers, 2004), 283.

It is the conviction of Rousseau that the problem of social contract is not simply to find a form of association which will protect the individuals and goods of each member, “but also to find an association in which each member will still obey himself and remain as free as before.”⁵ Rousseau stated the essence of the social contract cum the General Will, thus: “each of us put in common his person and his whole power under the supreme direction of the General Will and in turn we receive every member as an indivisible part of the whole.”⁶ The General Will he referred to is the will of the sovereign, where the sovereign stands for the total number of citizens of a given society. Such being the case, the General will of the sovereign is the single will, which reflects the sum of the wills of all the individual citizens. J. I. Omoregbe captures this when he noted that “sovereignty is nothing but the exercise of the General will.”⁷

Interestingly, the thoughts espoused by Rousseau, especially the use he made of the General Will have some affinity within the twin principles of democracy as clearly enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, section 14(1) which declares that “the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be a state based on the principles of democracy and social justice.”⁸ Similarly, section 14 (29) declares also that “sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria from whom government through this constitution derived all its powers and authority.”⁹ And section 14 (26) has it that “the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government.”¹⁰ Thus, taking into cognizance the fact that Rousseau is convinced that the General Will is infallible, directed towards the common good, and guarantees individual’s freedom, equality of all, and that democracy is also interested in securing the individual freedom and equality, and popular sovereignty, it is clear indication that Rousseau’s General Will will be relevant in enhancing democratic culture in Nigeria.

Fascinatingly, when we reflect on the fact that these principles are enshrined in the constitution and yet crippled, it becomes imperative to wholly articulate the importance/ relevance of Rousseau’s doctrine of the General will to democracy in Nigeria. The rationale for this work, therefore, is to bring to the fore the relevance of the doctrine of the General Will to the practice of democracy in Nigeria.

⁵ J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* Trans. H.J Tozer, (N.p.: Words Worth Editions, 1998), 14

⁶ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 14.

⁷ J.I. Omoregbe, *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy*, (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Pub.1991), 55.

⁸ *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, 1999, Lagos: Federal Government Press, 1999.

⁹ *The Constitution*, 1999.

¹⁰ *The Constitution*, 1999.

Conceptualizing General Will and Democracy

For the purpose of a better understanding of our enquiry, it is needful to explain in sharp focus some terms, especially as they form active expressions in this work. The terms that will be considered/ conceptualized here are: General Will and democracy.

General Will

The General Will is central to Rousseau's program of political construction. As Judith Shklar famously remarked, "it conveys everything he most wanted to say."¹¹ The most famous definition of General Will comes in the social contract: "from these same particular wills, one takes away the pluses and minuses which cancel each other out, what is left as the sum of the differences is the General will."¹² The General Will secures the goals of the state, the common good, and the lack of dangerous extreme individualism. Rousseau grounded legitimate society in the General will such that both are founded upon a strict principle of egalitarianism. Rousseau's aim in placing the people under the authority of the General Will is not to defeat or replace justice, but to make justice to be binding on persons so that no one may violate its principles with immunity or economic power.

In his masterpiece, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau laid the foundations for the emergence of civil society and the basis for popular sovereignty in government. He affirms that democracy is the form of government by which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole. It is the conviction of Rousseau then that men should participate actively in their government. He stressed that participatory democracy is essential for the realization of the common good for which the state was originally formed. This common good is ensured in the liberty and equality of the right of the people to control their destiny in a state where they belong. It behoves any democratic government to ensure and guarantee the freedom of the individuals as one of the main objectives of a social and political system. Freedom is an inalienable right of the individual, thus, Rousseau deduced that "man is born free".¹³ Therefore, in the state of Rousseau, the people must exercise this freedom.

Consequently, as the state works hard to preserve the freedom and liberty of its people, Rousseau opines that the people have to be trained to be patriotic, loyal and devoted to the state. They should be made to follow the General Will by removing all personal considerations in their deliberations and considering those things that promote the common good. "What this different interest has in common is what forms the social bond, and if there were not some points on which all

¹¹Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 10.

¹²Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 10.

¹³Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 10.

interests agree no society could exist.”¹⁴ Accordingly, Rousseau agrees that the general voice is always right and always tends to the public advantage. Therefore, all the people, for him, must work to ensure that their individual wills conform to the general will, arguing that:

it is in obeying the general will that the individual gains his freedom, whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body; which means nothing else than that he shall be forced to be free.¹⁵

In “Rousseau and the General Will”, David Lay Williams opines that Rousseau’s principles of political right can be best described as a reformulation of Hobbes’ conception of the social contract. He stressed that what contributes to the conflicting interpretations of Rousseau can be attributed to different understanding of the relative priority and relationship of two central concepts in his writings, one of which, he argues, is the general will, which he said is the “conventional substitute for natural law or transcendent ideas”.¹⁶ Accordingly, David argues that the General Will as formulated by Rousseau has a good intention, hence it is “grounded on nothing more than the consent and functions as the first principle of all legitimate political societies”.¹⁷ He, however, stressed that it would be foolish to dismiss the importance of the general will to Rousseau’s political philosophy and political societies, since it is the bed-rock on which Rousseau built his social contract. Thus, he views the “General Will as the true impetus of his Social Contract”.¹⁸ This contract, concludes David, is designed explicitly to counter Hobbesian absolutism and his brutish Leviathan with a morally grounded social contract and egalitarian state.

In “Singing Democracy: Music and Politics in Rousseau’s Thought”, Julia Simon argues that democratic theory of the eighteenth century, particularly Rousseau’s, is suffused with the idealism and lack of pragmatism that make it both inversely compelling and frustrating, and argues thus: “yet this theory continues to inspire democratic practice and political debates even more than 200 years after its writing”.¹⁹ On how the General Will is to be determined, Julia argues that the “musical analogy provides some interesting possibilities for understanding the

¹⁴Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 29.

¹⁵Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 18.

¹⁶Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 12.

¹⁷L.W. David, “Rousseau and the General Will” in *Journal of History of Ideas* Vol.66, No.3, ed. Donald R. Kelly, (Baltimore: Hopkins University Press, 2000), 384.

¹⁸L.W. David, “Rousseau and the General Will”, 384.

¹⁹L.W. David, “Rousseau and the General Will”, 384.

nature of this absolute”.²⁰ The General Will, argues Julia, functions as a relative absolute in Rousseau’s political theory in much the same way that tuning functions for musical performance. Julia further stresses that the tuning standard and the idea of the common good or public interest are both absolute with the conduct of the individual involved in collective endeavour, but relative in so far as they are changeable with respect to context. In Rousseau’s democratic republic, the same kind of adjustments ought to be taking place; people should come together to vote on a piece of legislation on a common course of action, bearing in mind the common interest. Corroborating the above view, Julia has this to say “...the individuals ought to listen to one another and check their own conception of the public interest against those expressed by others in the assembly, as with tuning and intonation and the constant minute adjustments that musical performance requires, the democratic deliberations ideally entail constant adjustment based on listening to the voice of others”²¹ thus, Julia concludes, that in a singing democracy, “all individual voices are heard and the voice of the community sings”.²²

According to Mark S. Cladis, in his article, “Rousseau and Eighteenth Century Moral philosophy”, argues that Rousseau, through his General Will, provided mutual love, consent and togetherness among the individual and the public. Corroborating the above view, he has this to say, “in voting on the General Will, the individual, is to consult his own moral conscience with the public good being the object of the vote”.²³ On the non-alienation of the individual in the formulation of the General Will, Mark asserts that “without the cultivation of a private will, the individual cannot assist the public in its search for the General Will, but once the general will has been established, the private will must be subordinate to it and indeed, the individual must will that subordination”.²⁴ Thus, Mark views the General Will as not being absolute. Hence, it gives room for private life, via the “individual voluntary submission of his particular will for the sake of the General Will, which represents their long-term efforts at self-love”.²⁵ He, however, concludes that Rousseau, via the General Will, struggled to protect the political body from strife and its members from oppression”.²⁶ In a “Possible Explanation of the General Will”, Patrick Riley argues for the impartial nature of the General

²⁰S. Julia, “Singing Democracy: Music and Politics in Rousseau” in ed. Donald, R. Kelly, Op. Cit. Vol.65, No.3, 433.

²¹S. Julia, “Singing Democracy: Music and Politics in Rousseau”, 443.

²²S. Julia, “Singing Democracy: Music and Politics in Rousseau”, 445.

²³S. Julia, “Singing Democracy: Music and Politics in Rousseau”, 454.

²⁴S.C. Mark, “Rousseau and Eighteenth Century Moral Philosophy” in Journal of Religious Ethicised. Dian, M. Yeager, (Washington DC,2000), 246.

²⁵S.C. Mark, “Rousseau and Eighteenth Century Moral Philosophy”, 246.

²⁶S.C. Mark, “Rousseau and Eighteenth Century Moral Philosophy”, 247.

Will. He opines that the general will is preferable to the will of all, because... “it secures the more “ancient” goals of the state, morality, the common good, and the lack of dangerously extreme individualism”²⁷ by securing consent, particularly in an era where people are more prone to seek their individual goals at the expense of more universal ones.

On the contrary, Arthur Meltzer, in *The Natural Goodness of Man*, argues that the General Will represents great to the state. Mezler says that “Rousseau recognizes different talents in individuals and holds that people ought to be treated differently according to these different talents”.²⁸ Melzer is right to note that this constitutes recognition of inequality. And it is also true by virtue of the legislator’s superior talents; he should have a position of power not entrusted to inferiors. This principle of inequality is Rousseau’s idea of justice, according to Meltzer. Rousseau, however, does not base his society on this supposed principle of justice; he instead grounded legitimate society in the General Will. The General Will, according to Meltzer, is founded upon a strict principle of egalitarianism and hence injustice. “First, it requires the superior few to be ruled and led by laws made by the inferior multitude. And second, it makes the superior fit into the narrow mold of what is good for the inferior”.²⁹ For him, this is the embodiment of Rousseauan injustice. If Rousseau favors the General Will, then, “it is most certainly not as the embodiment of justice but rather as a hard headed and practical replacement for it”.³⁰ This understanding of the General Will, however, rests upon some challengeable assumptions. First, while it is correct to say that Rousseau recognizes certain natural inequalities, this is irrelevant to the principle of equality he endorses by virtue of the General Will. There are two principles of inequality at work here: talents and equality of rights; the equality established in the social contract is the equality of right, these are two different notions of equality, and it is important not to conflate them. In line with this, Rousseau says, “from whatever side one traces one’s way back to the same conclusion: namely, that all commit themselves under the same conditions and must enjoy all the same rights”.³¹ The equality imposed upon citizens is mere legal equality. All are equally subject to the laws, regardless of their natural inequalities.

²⁷S.C. Mark, “Rousseau and Eighteenth Century Moral Philosophy”, 247.

²⁸L. Patrick, “Possible Explanation of the General Will” in *American Political Science Review*, 64, 1970, 88.

²⁹L. Patrick, “Possible Explanation of the General Will” in *American Political Science Review*, 64, 1970, 88.

³⁰A.M. Meltzer, “The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau’s Thought”, in *American Political Science Review* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1990), 156, 157.

³¹A.M. Meltzer, “The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau’s Thought”, 157.

In another of his work titled “Rousseau’s Moral Realism: Replacing Natural Law with the General Will”, Arthur Meltzer also argues that “the purpose of the doctrine Rousseau elaborates in the *Social Contract* is essentially the same as Hobbes”.³² This view is argued on the grounds that the general will is a positive or arbitrary standard, functioning as the principle of Rousseau’s constructive political program. Yet the vision of Rousseau, as a Hobbesian, merits skepticism. While he employs a social contract, as does Hobbes, he explicitly rejects traditional forms of positivism. “What is right and conformable to order is such by the nature of things, and independently of human conventions”.³³ Thus, “the General Will is grounded on nothing more than consent and functions as the first principle of all legitimate political societies”.³⁴

Against the backdrop of Arthur Mezler’s views, Appadorai, in his book, *The Substance of Politics*, argues that “Rousseau’s Social Contract can be viewed as the fusion of the premises and temper of Hobbes with the conclusions of Locke’s”.³⁵ And to buttress further, he asserts that “Rousseau did not agree with Hobbes that the government was absolute, he made the government dependent upon the people and thereby accepted in essentials, the conclusion of Locke”.³⁶ Appadorai, however, vindicated Rousseau when he observed that “the importance of Rousseau in political thought has already been indicated. His theory served as the bases for democracy and the justification for revolutions against arbitrary rule”.³⁷

Adrian Osuagwu, in “Natural Law and Democracy in Nigeria”, opines that Rousseau’s General Will laid the foundation for modern democracy. In his words, “his most important contribution to the evolution of modern democracy is his concept of popular sovereignty encapsulated in the General Will”.³⁸ Joseph I. Omoregbe, in his book *Social – Political Philosophy and International Relations*, argues that the development of popular sovereignty, especially in its modern form, owes its credence to Rousseau. To buttress further, he has this to say:

The will of the people is the General Will” which must guide all governmental Policies and actions. The government is elected by the people to implement their will-then General Will, since the people are the sovereign, then the government

³²Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 15.

³³A.M. Meltzer, “Rousseau’s Moral Realism: Replacing Natural Law with the General Will” in *American Political Science Review*, 77, No.3, 1983, 636.

³⁴A.M. Meltzer, “Rousseau’s Moral Realism”, 637.

³⁵Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 37.

³⁶Appadorai, *The Substance of Politics*, 27.

³⁷Appadorai, *The Substance of Politics*, 28.

³⁸Adrian Osuagwu, “Natural Law and Democracy in Nigeria” in ed. G. A. Onuoha, *Perspective on Democracy, Rule of Law and Globalization*, (Aba: Fallon Pub., 2010), 62.

is the servant of the people with specific duty of carrying out the will of the people. Power belongs to the people who confer the power to rule on the government through “social contract” thus, the power of the government (the servant) comes from the people (the sovereign).³⁹

Corroborating the above view, H. R. Popkin and A. Stroll, in *Philosophy Made Simple*, argue that the government is nothing more than the executive agent of the general will, in which case, they are servants of the people. To buttress this point, they write:

If the secretary violates our trust, if he embezzles money, for instance, we can fire him; and if the government violates our trust by attempting to usurp our rightful authority, we can dismiss it, ultimately, the source of authority lies with the people who appoint the government. It is merely a means for carrying out their will.⁴⁰

The natural freedom and equality of all men imply that men cannot be governed, unless they give their consent. J.N. Egwummuo, in *Focus on Law and Jurisprudence*, argues that Rousseau, via his concept of General Will provided the bases for equality of rights and privileges, and served as the bedrock on which modern democracy is built. And to buttress this point, he asserts that “the contribution of Rousseau to the development of modern democracy cannot be overemphasized, he is aptly described as the father of the French Revolution”.⁴¹

C. A. Ogbuabor and E. L. Okiche, in their article “Sovereignty: Emerging Issues in Nigeria”, argue that Rousseau’s conception of man is that he is inherently good and the desire to act so seems to overwhelm self-interest. They stress that the General Will has a more liberal concept of sovereignty which fits the democratic concept of popular sovereignty. In light of the above, they succinctly argue that, “the General Will of man is antithetical to absolute sovereignty, i.e. the Sovereignty of the Law giver epitomized in the monarchical system or the contemporary tyrant in military government”.⁴²

However, from the intellectual excursions made so far on Rousseau’s General Will, it is obvious to note that Rousseau’s General Will served as the basis for true democracy and the justification of revolutions against arbitrary rule; that

³⁹J.I. Omoregbe, *Social and Political Philosophy and International Relations*, (Lagos: Jerd 2002), 32.

⁴⁰R.H. Popkin and A. Stroll, *Philosophy Made Simple*, (New York: Double Day, 1993), 730.

⁴¹J.N. Egwummuo, *Focus on Law and Jurisprudence*, (Enugu: Academic Pub., 2007), 52.

⁴²C.A. Ogbuabor, and E. L. Okiche, “Sovereignty: Emerging Issues in Nigeria” in ed. Onuoha, *Op. Cit*, 144.

the general will secures the goals of the state, the common good and lack of dangerously extreme individualism; that Rousseau's General Will is a guarantee to individual rights; namely, freedom and equality; that Rousseau's General Will is that in which sovereignty belongs to the people; and that the General Will is that which promotes and guarantees an impartial state. The General Will is that which provides consent and togetherness among the individuals in a state. It is the first principle of all legitimate society, and in Rousseau's democratic republic, everyone's voice is heard and the voice of the community (state) sings. Thus, we shall quickly conceptualize the second rider to this piece, to enable us establish a gap which forms the rationale for this work.

Conceptualizing Democracy and Nigeria's Democratic Experience

The term "democracy" has become hackneyed through constant usage. It has become a domestic word. Many people use the word without knowing its implications. Some have come to think of it as something to which people give lip or mind service, without using their minds to re-examine the term. It can be said that since Herodotus coined the word "*demokratia*", it has acquired diverse meanings, referring, as it has, to every different historical settings as well as to very different ideals. With the passing of time, both its denotative and connotative usage has changed. Presently, there is disagreement on the meaning, form and substance of the term 'democracy'. Mbaegbu laments that, "different people make use of the word democracy in their daily conversations, but ask them to define what they mean by democracy, they find it rather very difficult and elusive".⁴³

It is, however, difficult to state precisely what democracy means. In other words, a comprehensive definition of democracy is a conceptual and theoretical impossibility. Little wonder Ugumanim observed "when a word acquires a universally sacred character as has today the word democracy, I begin to wonder, whether, by all its attempts to mean, it still means anything at all".⁴⁴

However, despite the definitional problematique which engulfs the term, there is a modicum of consensus that the term is a derivative of the two Greek words '*demos*' meaning people and "*kratia*" meaning to rule. When combined "*demokratia*" means rule by the people. Democracy as practiced in ancient Greece was called direct or pure democracy. It was a democracy characterized by decision making directly by the people. Representation was not necessary because of its small size and population. No wonder, Copleston observes, "...it is only in a very

⁴³C.C. Mbaegbu, "Nigerian Democracy and the Nationality Question" in ed. Ike Odimegwu, *Nigerian Democracy and Global Democracy*, (Awka: Fab Educational Book, 2007), 55.

⁴⁴B. Ugumanim, and M.A. Abua, "Democracy and the Dialectics of Mass Poverty: The Nigerian Experience" in ed. F.A. Uduigwomen, *SOPHIA*, Vol.8, No.2, 2006, 137.

small state that it would be possible, for the citizens to meet together periodically and to exercise their legislative functions”.⁴⁵ Due to this obvious reason, the population and size of modern states make it impossible to practice the Athenian democracy which was direct; all citizens were expected to participate during sovereign assembly. Instead, what we have in modern states is representative democracy. This modern brand of democracy affords the citizens the periodic opportunity to choose their representatives. Little wonder that Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Appadorai re-echoed it as “a government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representatives periodically elected by themselves”.⁴⁶ When we talk of participatory democracy, we are merely describing a kind of democracy which strives to create opportunities for all members of a political group to make meaningful contributions to decision making, and seeks to broaden the range of people who have access to such opportunities. In essence, participatory democracy is a system of direct popular rule in all areas of public life.

This does not mean that in participatory democracy, citizens must be consulted on every issue, as was the case in the Athenian democracy which was direct because of its size. But the participatory democracy enables the citizens the opportunity to critically influence governmental decision making; citizens are enabled to express their preference for a candidate through periodic and fair elections. “The exercise of the citizens, right to vote and be voted for is therefore pivotal to participatory democracy and to credible electoral process”.⁴⁷ By election, the wishes of the people are honored, refined and filtered, through responsible representatives. Thus, in a representative democracy, the role of election cannot be undermined. It is the starting point to develop democracy and to implement the political and socio-economic will of the people. If the process is undermined, then the whole system is destroyed and democracy does not exist. This point was echoed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights thus:

The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot or by equivalent free voting procedure.⁴⁸

As far as modern democracy is concerned, election remains the bedrock which representative democracy rests upon. The strict adherence to the rules of the game

⁴⁵F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol.6, (Great Britain: MPG, 2002), 95.

⁴⁶Appadorai, *The Substance of Politics*, 135.

⁴⁷Appadorai, *The Substance of Politics*, 135.

⁴⁸Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article, 21

allows it to flourish and its compromise is leprosy to any nation. The citizens must be given equal opportunity without any kind of intimidation, to periodically elect who will represent them either in the executive arm or in the legislative assembly. Affirming this, Banjoko noted that:

Representative democracy is a form of government in which all citizens are entitled not only to participation but also to equal participation. It is a government of all the citizens and on the basis of their political equality.⁴⁹

The hallmarks of democracy are political liberty, political equality, consensus of all concerned, rule of law, checks and balances, freedom of the press, peaceful assembly, etc. However, this conventional wisdom about democracy has in recent time been questioned and challenged in Nigerian and African situation, due to the imperfections observable in the practice of democracy. Thus, we shall now turn to see how truthful this claim is.

Regrettably, all of these conventional wisdom presupposed of democracy could be challenged if the performances during any of the republic in Nigeria are reviewed and subjected to critical scrutiny. Godfrey Onah summed up the result of his review in these words: "...the so called democracy is at best, pluralistic dictatorship in which selfish and unscrupulous tyrants ride on the shoulders of the people in order to defend only their selfish interest and those of their political cronies and clubs".⁵⁰ G. I Oginyi, in a swift reaction, affirms that "the democratization process in Nigeria since Independence has remained nascent in every republic, its practices and processes have remained strange and fresh and in most cases ended up in confusion and chaos, the 1993 June, 12 is a testimony of her democratic decay".⁵¹ However, the discourse on the political decay in Nigeria is something that one can talk about with instances, but when one is limited on the amount of words and pages like this piece, one is left with no option than to say what can be said and make references. Having seen the level of hostility shown to democratic principles in Nigeria, we shall quickly see how Rousseau's doctrine of the General Will can help ameliorate the democratic challenges in Nigeria.

⁴⁹O.O. Banjoko, *Universal Democracy: The Rule by All Parties*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2004), 21.

⁵⁰G. I. Onah, "Africa and the Illusion of Democracy", 283.

⁵¹G.I. Oginyi, "Rousseau's General Will and Democracy in Nigeria: A Hermeneutic Study", Unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, 2016, 4.

Relevance of Rousseau's General Will to Democracy in Nigeria

Nigeria's Quest for Good Governance

History is replete with accounts of why and how Nigeria's attempt at self-governance with a hope to usher in a new dawn since independence in 1960 has remained wishy washy. The 1914 amalgamation of Northern and the Southern protectorates saw the birth of Nigeria as a country. A region that has about one hundred and twenty million people, with different religions, languages and cultures were lumped together as one country, without due consultations with the people being contracted/merged. They were now to join hands to build an egalitarian Nigeria which, of course, she deserves, owing to the abundant human and natural resources therein. Unfortunately, this was a tall dream that never came true, as regions and ethnic groups battle for power in an undemocratic and unholy manner. Each region, ethnic group and individual only thinks of its selfish interest as against the common good which is the basis of states. This fierce struggle and battle left Nigeria bruised, battered, naked, raped and shattered. "Nigerian state is like a battered and bruised elephant staggering toward an abyss with the ground crumbling under its feet".⁵²

The consequences of this struggle for power among the ethnic groups are too numerous; the common good that held Nigerian ethnic groups are fought against by selfish individuals; ethnic loyalties are nursed and nurtured; and worst of all, the basis of Nigeria's unity is no longer considered, as people have lost hope in it. At present, governance has lost its human face and essence, and it is now a conduit-pipe through which the so-called leaders cut corners and steal as much as they can from the public treasury. A country that would have joined other stable democracies across the globe is being sacrificed on the altar of ethnic and selfish interests.

Now, from the foregoing, the questions are; what can be done so as to cure Nigeria of this ailment and preserve it with its past glory, the benefit of the present and the hope of the future? Has Rousseau's doctrine of the General Will any remedy or cure to this problem? Thus, the answer to these questions is, of course, yes. One, Nigeria, though in a deplorable state, can still rise and attain the greatest height. "Nigeria is not beyond change. But only needs to discover leaders who have the will, the ability and the vision".⁵³ Secondly, Rousseau's doctrine of the General Will, as x-rayed in *The Social Contract*, has all it takes to cure Nigeria of this particular ailment. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau writes: "Each of us puts in

⁵²K. Maier, *This House has Fallen: Nigeria is in Crisis*, (New York: Penguin Book, 2011), 6.

⁵³C. Achebe, *The Trouble With Nigeria*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1983), 1.

common his person and his whole power under the supreme direction of the General Will, and in return, we receive every member as an indivisible part of the whole.”⁵⁴

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that Rousseau’s insistence is that, for a state to achieve its purpose, essence and aspirations of her people, individuals are bound by its very nature (contract) to submit self-interest, ethnic and regional interests and indeed “boycott all that is boycottable” and focus on things that will promote the common good. “What this different interests has in common is what forms the social bound, and if there were no some points on which all interest agree, no society could exists”.⁵⁵

It, however, behoves us as a nation to chart a new direction, by going back to the drawing board and revisit over history; as it is said that, he who does not know where rain started beating him will never know where it stopped. Though it can be argued that Nigerians were not fully consulted in the 1914 amalgamation on the conditions of the amalgamation as in the state of Rousseau, it however does not stop us now that we know that we are under one umbrella from coming together and charting a new direction, the condition of our togetherness. We have to transcend our differences and work for one and a better Nigeria. Ethnic group or not, it is very common, natural and normal. No nation in the world is without tribe, not even the stable democracies.

Therefore, we should come together and resolve within ourselves, like the people in the state of Rousseau who submitted their power and differences under the supreme direction of the General Will and in a collective agreement to submit our ethnic, religious and individual differences to make our democracy work for the common good of all. If we evolve a new Nigeria, it will help to preserve our ethnic identities, as our togetherness does not in any way deny our ethnic identities. “Unity does not deny our differences but it recognizes and appreciates it, thus, accommodates them to the satisfaction of all concerned”.⁵⁶ We need to discover a new means of national re-direction where, through the effective use of the General Will as x-rayed in *The Social Contract*, we resolve and cherish our differences. And also, we have to search our moral consciences and act with reason and not appetite, to understand that our main purpose of being together is not to struggle and tussle for regional, ethnic and selfish interests, but to promote a common good in the country at large. “Now, it is solely with regards to this common interest that a state should be governed”.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 15.

⁵⁵Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 29.

⁵⁶E.O. Ojukwu, *Because I Am Involved*, (Ibadan Spectrum Book, 1989), 19.

⁵⁷Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 25.

However, all Nigerians must not necessarily come together in one place, as that it is impossible, but through the delegates duly and sincerely elected by the different ethnic, religious and social groups that make up the country.

Dividends of Democracy

The term “dividends of democracy” has often been misused and misrepresented, especially in our contemporary Nigerian society. Our leaders often talk about dividends of democracy when they provide the masses with little or no infrastructural developments, social amenities, vehicles and even money, which most often, are given to people or regions considered “sacred”. It is, however, apposite to note that it is the duty of every government, be it autocracy, military, dictatorship, etc, to provide amenities to her citizenry. If that is the case, any government that provides infrastructural developments is democratic and hence it will be difficult to discern between democracy and other forms of governments as stated above. After all, most of the elephant projects, if you like, found today in Ebonyi state, for instance, were built during military regimes and yet they were not democratic. Therefore, dividends of democracy are not found in structures and infrastructural developments, but are anchored on these principles inherent in democracy. Thus, the beauty and dividends of democracy lie in the fact that in democracy, the people have a say on how they are to be governed, on who should govern and at what length. On the other hand, other forms of government may be providing social amenities and infrastructural developments and yet, the people will not have any say as to who governs them, how and why they are led.

The dividends of democracy are nothing but the virtues or principles of democracy, namely, freedom and equality of all the citizens in a society. For democracy to worth its name, *impso facto*, there must be no glaring inequalities, oppressed or suppressed class, injustice and extreme individualism. At this point, dividends of democracy are to be measured with how free and equal the individuals in a state are when it has to do with issues affecting the general public.

However, of all these dividends or virtues of democracy listed above, the question that immediately comes to mind is; how far has Nigeria’s leaders gone in ensuring that they guarantee these dividends of democracy to her citizenry? To this, we must say that, it is unfortunate that as old as our democracy is, it is still being referred to as a nascent democracy owing to massive rigging of elections, electoral violence, corruption, selfishness, regional and ethnic interest and several other qualities that mark the dark side of man. “Nigerians spend a good part of their lives trying to get the better of the government for their own benefit or that of their family, their village, or their region...it is as if they live in a criminally mismanaged corporation where the bosses are armed and have barricaded themselves inside the

company safe”.⁵⁸ It is a democracy whose voice is the voice of democracy and whose hand is the hand of autocracy; a democracy that is never led as professed.

In the face of these obvious problems, the questions are; what can be done to resurrect democracy in Nigeria and for Nigerians to begin to enjoy the dividends of democracy? Can Rousseau’s doctrine of General Will in any way help us to resolve these problems? Truth be told, Rousseau’s idea of the General Will is so rich in content that, with it, our problem of lack of freedom, equality, justice and fairness will be solved. In the opening page of his masterpiece, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau deduced, “Man is born free”.⁵⁹ And this freedom and equality are so sacrosanct that, the propelling force behind *The Social Contract* is to “find a form of association which may defend and protect the whole force of the community, the person and property of every associate, and by means of which each, coalescing with all, may nevertheless, obey himself and remain as free as before.”⁶⁰

Thus, freedom and equality are by the virtue of the General Will, inalienable rights of individuals in a state. It, however, behoves us and indeed our leaders not to allow self-imposition, corruption, selfishness, regional and ethnic interest that has marred and denied Nigerians for many years’ dividends of democracy. If we can allow all our democratic dealings under the supreme direction of the General Will, that is common good and the pronouncement of the laws, it will definitely guarantee us dividends of democracy; namely, freedom and equality. Rousseau’s purpose in placing the people under the authority of the General Will is not to defeat or replace justice. “It is rather, to enable justice and make it binding on all so that no one may violate its principles with immunity”.⁶¹ It is the conviction of Rousseau that all men, regardless of one’s status and position, are equal and free; even the so-called leaders are nothing but the executive agents of the General Will that has no other power except the one derived from the people.

Similarly, Nigerians need the power and will to elect their leaders through their conscience, without interference by any authority, and thus, elect good and responsible leaders who will be accountable to them. For, as Rousseau observed, “it is beyond dispute, and indeed, the fundamental maxim of all political right, that people have set up chiefs to protect their liberty, and not to enslave them”.⁶² This affirms the fact that Nigerians need real democrats who will govern them with character, wisdom, and proper implementations of the will of Nigerians after a proper and wide consultation.

⁵⁸Maier, K., xxiii.

⁵⁹Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 5.

⁶⁰Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 14.

⁶¹Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 17.

⁶²Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 17.

Furthermore, Rousseau's the General Will creates a moral and collective body, which is directed by the ethics that established the compact. This calls for moral consciousness in Nigeria so that the rights and privileges of others are respected. We should act with reason and not instinct, because justice demands that we do to others what we would like others do unto us. And Rousseau affirmed this, thus, "the passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces in man a very remarkable change, by substituting in his conduct ju for instinct, and by giving his actions the moral qualities they previously lacked".⁶³ It is, therefore, wrong and unjust for our leaders to siphon off public fund which they deposit in foreign banks at the expense of the masses. There must be both economic and political justice in our democratic dispensation. The General Will does not allow unequal distribution of the country's wealth as is the case in Nigeria: "by whatever path we return to our principle we always arrive at the same conclusion, that the social compact establishes among the citizens such an equality that they all pledge themselves under the same conditions and ought all to enjoy the same rights".⁶⁴

To cap it all, for the survival of democracy in Nigeria, those in the position of authority should learn to abhor the spirit of greed, selfishness, corruption, regional and ethnic interest, and begin to see themselves as servants and not masters. Rousseau summarized this thus: "The government is nothing but the executive agents of the General Will."⁶⁵ This *impso facto* shows that leaders are mere servants that are only there to implement the will of the governed, and when it is not done, it amounts to a breach of contract, which is revocable.

Rule of Law

The term "Rule of Law" is the utmost constitutional requirement of any society that wishes to grow democratically. No society can survive without the strict adherence to the principles of the rule of law. It is, indeed, the bedrock upon which stable democracies rest. It is through the arbiter of the law that individuals in a state and democracy in practice become secured and protected, without which it is said to be hollow and barren. "It is the springboard that consummates democracy".⁶⁶ "The wheels of democracy are oiled by rule of law".⁶⁷ The rule of law presupposes that the government and the governed must not only obey the laws but ensure that all they do agree with the law of the state. It emphasizes that the law is supreme and, of course, not a respecter of anybody, positions and status notwithstanding.

⁶³Rousseau, The Social Contract, 17.

⁶⁴Rousseau, The Social Contract, 33.

⁶⁵Rousseau, The Social Contract, 67.

⁶⁶M.N. Zaato, "Towards Nigeria Democratic Stability and the Rule of Law" in ed. Ike Odimegwu, Op. Cit, 283.

⁶⁷C.C. Mbaebu, "Nigerian Democracy and the Nationality Question", 59.

However, of all these qualities presupposed of rule of law, the question that should be asked is: How friendly have the leaders been to the principles of rule of law as a tool for the development and growth of democracy in Nigeria? It is painful, however, to say that Nigeria is a country under which the very person or persons who claim they are elected custodians of the law and the constitution of the country violate them with impunity. Odey regrettably captured it, thus:

It is the type of democracy which looks more or less like an organized robbery consortium. The chief actors in this robbery gang have converted leadership into a family affair where husband, wife, children, brothers, sisters, in-laws, political thugs and mindless praise singers have the last word and decide what happens and what does not happen.⁶⁸

Thus, a critical look at Nigeria's democratic scenario, at least from 1999-2015, shows that this principle of democracy is wounded and has been observed to be in breach and deception. Our legal institution and, indeed, other institutions necessary for the attainment of rule of law are in hostage and crippled because of overlapping functions. It is only in Nigeria that laws are made only for the poor and the less-privileged individuals. The sledge hammer of the law are not for the leaders and those of their political cronies and clubs; rather, it is for the poor Nigerians that are oppressed by this group of individuals to a point that they suffer social stigma, rejected and depressed. Ours is a law that has been raped and stripped naked by a few privileged individuals. Electoral laws are not followed by those who are in the echelon of power, but are made for the perceived political opponents.

Consequent upon the aforementioned problems, the questions become: what can be done to purge Nigeria of these perceived problems? To what extent can Rousseau's idea of the General Will help in solving these problems? Despite the too many challenges facing us, especially as stated above, Achebe told us "to discover leaders who have the will, the ability and the vision."⁶⁹ Also, Rousseau's doctrine of the General will offers the solution thus:

By whatever path we return to our principle, we always arrive at the same conclusion, that the social compact establishes themselves among the same conditions and ought to enjoy the same rights. Thus, by the nature of the compact, every act of sovereignty, that is, every authentic act of the General will, binds or favors equally all the citizens; so that the sovereign knows only the body of the nation, and distinguishes none of those that compose it.⁷⁰

⁶⁸J.O. Odey, *The Lamentation of a Lost Generation*, Vol. 1, (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2005), 49.

⁶⁹C. Achebe, *The Trouble With Nigeria*, 1.

⁷⁰Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 33.

The General Will affirms the supremacy of the law of the land and does not spare anybody, positions and status notwithstanding. The moment the General will (law) has been established, all private wills must *impso facto* be subordinate to it, in that whoever refuses to obey the law must be forced to do so by the sovereign, that is the people in their legislative capacity. Rousseau affirms this when he observed that, “whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body politic”.⁷¹

It is over and above these ugly trends that Rousseau insists that the General Will, both in its formation and implementation, must not be compromised. Nigeria is not a personal property nor does it belong to a particular group of people, that it should be treated as such. It is the conviction of Rousseau that among every twelve, there must be Judas; that the people must rise against anyone who rises to truncate the General Will (law). Thus, in the face of this clear breach of the law by the leaders of Nigeria, it behoves all genuine democrats and, indeed, all patriotic Nigerians to come together to form a common front in order to stop this ugly trend and its perpetrators. It is pertinent to note that democracy, freedom and liberty are not given on a platter of gold by the oppressors; such was the conviction of Martin Luther King Jnr. It must *impso facto* be demanded by the oppressed. To this, it is a wakeup call for all democrats and lovers of humanity and good governance to come together and renew commitment to the enthronement of genuine democracy where rule of law will be strictly adhered to. Affirming the above view, Sunday Awoniyi submits:

I appeal to my generation of Nigerians, particularly those with public service experience who seem to be watching the unfolding events within explicable difference, to put their experiences at the disposal of this country by speaking up for correctness in governance. We owe this to the younger generations who have experienced nothing but decay and corruption in public life.⁷²

Achebe repeated and re-echoed the above views when he submitted that “if this conscious effort is not made, good leaders, like good money, will be driven out by bad”.⁷³

Rousseau, via his doctrine of the General Will, advocated for democracy, the one built on consent and rule of law, which was no doubt one of the things that made it possible for the enthronement of democracy in the French world. We are human beings bound to be treated equally and justly. The above, therefore, necessitates a desire to rise up and speak in one voice to the problem of lack and

⁷¹The Social Contract, 18.

⁷²National Interest, November 27, 2005, 23.

⁷³C. Achebe, The Trouble With Nigeria, 2.

disregard of rule of law and corruption. Franz Fanon did not mince words when he said that: “revolution, at the level of individuals, is a cleansing force, it frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair, it makes him fearless and so restores the respect for his right”.⁷⁴

However, upon the explicated views above, it is pertinent to note that we are not in any way supporting bloody and violent revolution as the head way to Nigerian problem, but it is the conviction of Rousseau and, indeed, democrats that the laws of the land should, be a true reflection of the will of the people, and when it is on the contrary, it is just for them to stand up and demand for it with an unshakable courage. To affirm this stance, Rousseau writes:

In order, then, that the social fact may not be a vain formula, it tacitly includes this engagement, which can alone give force to the others, that whoever refuses to obey the General will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body; which means nothing else than that he shall be forced to be free; for such is the condition which, uniting every citizen to his native land, guarantees him from all personal dependence, a condition that ensures the control and working of the political machine, and alone renders legitimate civil engagements, which, without it, would be absurd and tyrannical, and subject to the most enormous abuses.⁷⁵

From the backdrop above, it can be deduced that the legitimacy of any government or civil authority is predicated on the consent and the recognition of the law, or else it will be declared illegitimate and undemocratic. Thus, having realized that our democracy is at the crossroads, and that its future seems to be hinged on our ability to keep faith with the supremacy of the rule of law and respect for our constitution, it behoves us, the ordinary Nigerians, to rise up and demand that the right thing be done, that is, affirm the supremacy of the law, not minding whose ox is gored.

Conclusion

Despite the criticisms Rousseau’s doctrine of the General Will has incurred so far, it is hard to dispute the serious impact it has had on political philosophy and thought. No doubt, it contributed immensely to the foundation of modern democracy (popular sovereignty) and revolution against arbitrary rule. And the nature of the doctrine of the General Will brings to the fore the primary idea that civil society rests on the consent of the ruled (people), and not the contrary as in Nigeria. At least, if we adopt this point to Nigerian democracy, a shift from the ugly rule of cabals to that of the majority (the main tenet of viable democracy), greatness is not far from us. We can do this through free, fair, periodic and credible elections,

⁷⁴F. Fanon, *Black Skin White Mask*, (USA: Groove Press, 1967), 94.

⁷⁵Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 18.

and beyond this, we can also do it through opinion poll and referendum, and then checkmate these ugly trends of opportunists called leaders, who govern only for selfish interests as against the common interest which modern democracy demands. To cap it all, Rousseau brings to the fore this doctrine of the General Will to remind all governments of the human purposes, which the state can serve, and which alone can justify its existence. Hence, he wrote: "it is solely with regards to this common interest that the society should be governed".⁷⁶

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⁷⁶Rousseau, The Social Contract, 18.
