



THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Civil society organisations have played a major role in the restoration of not only democracy in Nigeria, but they have also acted as a vanguard in ensuring good governance, even during the military regimes. With the return to democratic government in Nigeria in 1999, it was due to their pressure on the military government. In assessing the role of CSO in the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. The paper adopted the structural-Functional analysis of Branslow Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown (1920s). It employed a secondary method of data collection and analysed the data contextually. In the findings, the paper realised that CSOs have done so much in the institutionalisation of democracy in Nigeria in the current dispensation. There is a lack of unity among different CSOs, and their financial base is weak. As a result, they are sometimes tempted to resort to the government for financial support, and some of their members seek government appointments. Therefore, making them weak in holding the government accountable in discharging its responsibility. The paper therefore recommends synergy among CSOs and the ability to improve their financial capacity to enhance their independence.

Keywords: Civil Society, Activism Democracy, Democratic Consolidation

Introduction

In general, the efficacy of civil society in transition depended greatly on the scope of involvement of its various constituents and their ability to reconcile conflicting interests. Where participation was restricted to only a few constituents, as in transition by cooptation and military-engineered transition, where incumbent regimes and selected opposition groups were the main actors, the ability of civil society to play its role maximally was constrained. The problem was that fundamental problems, which precipitated transition-authoritarian and non-accountable rulership, exclusion and marginalisation of large segments of the citizenry from state power and resources, competing identities and contested citizenship, corrupt and nonperforming governments, economic hardship, declining standards of living, and so on, were in danger of not being properly addressed. The prospect for a successful transition and eventual consolidation was brighter where the scope of participation was wide enough to allow all contesting interests to be articulated and addressed by civil society constituents; this increased the chances of legitimacy for the ensuing democracy, which is a prerequisite for consolidation.

Osaghae further clarified that the actual role of civil society in democratisation depended on the mode of transition. He classified the modes of transition in Africa into the national conference as happened in Benin, Gabon, Togo, Zaire, and Congo (South Africa also had a pseudo-national conference transition through the long-drawn-out and encompassing constitutional talks); military disengagement as occurred in Nigeria, Ghana, and Burkina Faso as well as plural elections with or



without regime as was the case in Cape Verde, Malawi, Zambia (Osaghae, 1997). He further classified these modes of transition into forced transition, negotiated transition, and voluntary transition.

Osaghae noted that by 1994, when many dictators and authoritarian regimes had been unseated in Africa, there was a celebration of the dawn of democracy in several parts of the continent. But by mid-1996, all that euphoria, just like the euphoria of independence in the 1960s, seemed to have given way to despair. Countries like Zambia and Kenya that had supposedly completed a process of democratic transition were, for all practical purposes, back to Square One. They were back to repressive and arbitrary rule, weak watchdog and overseeing institutions, corruption and prebendalism. and mismanagement. Even the supposedly multiparty systems were fast giving way to one-party dominant systems. which could yet be the prelude to full-fledged single-party systems.

Osaghae blamed the crumbling of the democratisation project on the incompleteness of the civil society-led democratic transitions, particularly their tendency to take the essence of democratisation to be leadership and regime change as well as multiparty rule and, in the process, left the question of rule setting for the public domain. According to him, constitutionalism. The resolution of the contradictory centrifugal and centripetal forces, and the transformation of the state, which are critical for democratic consolidation, were virtually ignored, thereby giving the new men of power a blank cheque to relapse into old authoritarian ways.

On methodology, this paper adopts the structural-Functional analysis by Branislow Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown (1920s). Structural-Functionalism is an interdisciplinary theory that was brought into the field of political science and the field of anthropology in the 20th century. Its main focus is on the diversity of the societal structures performing various functions for the good and harmony of society. The paper adopts the secondary method of data collection. The data collected were analysed contextually to ensure validity.

The Evolution of Civil Societies in Nigeria

Conceptually, the term civil society collectively refers to people who organise to participate in governance, using their own power to strengthen democracy and the rule of law. Ritzer (2008) sees the term CSO as a positive descriptive term and defines it as “citizens, associating neither for power nor for profit, are the third sector of society, complementing government and business, and they are the people who constitute civil society organisations”. CSOs can encompass grass-roots organisations, citizens’ movements, trade unions, cooperatives, NGOs, and other ways in which citizens associate for non-politically partisan and non-profit motives. They are not necessarily formal or registered. Ritzer looks at the political economy of the modern society in three basic sectors: state, business, and a third sector defined by citizen self-organisation. The state’s distinctive competence is the legitimate use of coercion. The business sector’s competence is market exchange, and the third sector’s competence is private choice for the public good. Citizens mobilise through values they share with other citizens and through shared commitment to action with other citizens. Holloway further states that it is taken as given that CSOs can do things which neither of the other national development sectors, the government, nor the corporate sector can do on their own. Bratton (1998) defines CSOs as “the population of groups formed for collective purposes primarily outside of the state and marketplace”. It is also defined as “the total of those organisations and networks which lie outside the formal state apparatus” (Source Book, 2000).

The common denominator in the above conceptualisations, according to Fidelis (2015), is their emphasis on the fact that civil society operates outside the state, and this means that civil society must be independent. For James (2022), Civil society is “the totality of self-initiating and self-regulating



organisations, peacefully pursuing a common interest, advocating a common cause, or expressing a common passion; respecting the right of others to do the same; and maintaining their relative autonomy vis-a-vis the state, the family, the temple, and the market.” According to Diamond (1994, p.5), Civil society is the:

The realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by the legal order or set of shared rules ... It involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable. It is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state.

As with the earlier definitions, Diamond also stressed the autonomous and voluntary nature of CSOs. Deriving from this, Fidelis (2015, p.336) conceived of civil society as “stakeholding, non-governmental agencies, institutions and groups within a state, having the ability to influence certain decisions, policies and activities of either government or other groups within the state”.

Fidelis (2015) explained that Africa’s “nascent” civil societies were portrayed as the prime movers in the democratisation process in the 1990s. However, with the establishment of democratic governments in Africa, especially in Nigeria, it seemed the expectations about the role and capacity of these civil society organisations to promote governance reform and foster democratic deepening have been underestimated. He explained that civil society is not only the engine of the transition to democracy in Nigeria and elsewhere, but also equally crucial to the vitality of democracy. Akinboye & Oloruntoba (2007) observed that the nurturing of civil society is widely perceived as the most effective means of controlling repeated abuses of state power, holding rulers accountable to their citizens and establishing the foundations for durable democratic government. He proposed that “a vibrant civil society is probably more essential for consolidating and maintaining democracy than for initiating it”.

Situating the role of civil society in the democratisation process in Nigeria, Gbodi (2001, p.3) stated that their roles and contributions have occurred in different phases and so cannot be generalised. According to him, their role from 1985 to 1999 centred on the campaign for immediate disengagement of the military from the political space and the restoration of democracy in the country. Civil society (under the military) was successful in accomplishing the above objective; however, the role changed to that of deepening democratic practices from 1999, and because the Nigerian civil society is yet to change its campaign strategy from militant to a proactive method, it is presently experiencing difficulties in its interaction with “democratic governments”. Gbodi further argued that the above challenge has impacted negatively on the role and contributions of the sector to the “second phase” of the democratisation process in the country.

Analysing the evolution of civil society in the democratisation process in Nigeria, Fidelis asserted that the civil society in Nigeria relative to that of other third-world countries differs sharply in terms of its evolution from that of the Western world. This, according to him, has tended to shape its actions, objectives or goals. While in Western society, civil society grew out of necessities, that is to say, it grew out of the expansion of the state, which was occasioned by the complexities of governmental role in everyday affairs; third-world civil society came about as a result of dissatisfaction with state policies. In fact, most scholars and political commentators have tended to trace the evolution and subsequent proliferation of civil society groups to the high-handedness witnessed by the masses during military dictatorship in Nigeria, as in other third-world nations (Ikubaje, 2011). For this reason,



civil society actors in Nigeria have been in the vanguard of the democratic struggle, especially immediately after Independence in 1960.

Before independence, civil society actors emanating from political change and ending colonial rule were already in place; however, tenuous in Nigeria. Many of the early civil society groups in the pre-independence era re-emerged in the 1990s as democratic activists. In fact, some of the most strident pro-democracy activists against continued military rule before the election of President Obasanjo in 1999, including Anthony Enahoro of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), comprised the 1950s pro-independence nationalists (Aborisade and Mundt, 2002). Thus, the contemporary, pro-democracy movement in Nigeria has its roots in the early pre-independence days. First among these various groups was a trans-national organisation known as the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), led by some intellectuals under the leadership of a Ghanaian Lawyer, Casely Hayford. Its main objective was uniting the four British West African Countries-Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, now Ghana, and Nigeria in their demand for self-determination. Some scholars believed that despite the colonialist opposite reaction to the demands of these groups, they were successful in their bid, because in 1922, the establishment of a new legislature with the elective principle was made by the Governor, Sir Hugh Clifford, in Nigeria, a major request of the group. In short, it may not be wrong for one to conclude that the pre-colonial civil society came into existence mainly to fight off what they perceived to be an unprecedented oppression of the black race, and more specifically against the Nigerian masses by the colonial masters.

As independence loomed on the horizon of the Nigerian state, a barrage of religious, peasant, communal, student, women, and labour groups permeated the Nigerian civil space. The explosion of civil society activity was further galvanised because of the repressive post-independence military rulers, as well as the feeling of non-reprisal from the colonial regime and other regional events that stirred citizens into democratic action. Some of Nigeria's most prominent civil society organisations, like the Nigerian Union of Teachers, the Nigerian Bar Association, the Nigerian Society of Engineers, the Nigerian Medical Association, and the Pharmaceutical Society of Nigeria, were all founded before independence and were patterned after similar European civil society actors (Aborisade and Mundt, 2002). After independence, new professional associations became deeply entrenched in the country, with CSOs such as the Nigerian Union of Journalists and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (Aborisade and Mundt, 2002). However, trade union CSOs like the Nigerian Labour Congress and the Nigerian Bar Association became the most active of pro-democracy CSOs. Membership in a professional association was largely a status symbol and admission into a class-oriented brotherhood (Lucas, 1994).

By the early 1990s in Nigeria, many new civil society organisations were established for the specific purpose of defending the rights of citizens and extending the frontiers of political rights and freedoms throughout the country (Bangura and Beckman, 1992). During this period, Nigeria experienced not only an exponential growth in the area of human rights and social activism, but also a growth in the area of personal freedoms. These emerged to coordinate the struggle for civil liberties (Aborisade and Mundt, 2002).

The establishment of the Campaign for Democracy (CD) became the quintessential pro-democracy, civil society organisation. The CD is an „umbrella“ organisation that advocates processes and procedures, human rights, and addresses social ills throughout Nigeria. Some of the “constituent bodies” under the umbrella include the National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Women in Nigeria (WIN) and the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ). The authoritarian regime of General Muhammadu Buhari provided the



grounds for the various groups and associations to forge a common front in confronting the excesses of that regime. In the particular case of Decree No.2 of 1984, which stipulated detention of people without trial, and the application of that decree to the arrest, trial, and sentencing of Nduka Irabor and Tunde Thompson (Journalists with the Guardian Newspaper), the refusal of the state to listen to pleas for leniency by various groups watered the seed of resistance by civil society groups in Nigeria. This accentuated the quest for self-preservation in an increasingly harsh political climate and crisis-ridden economy, as well as the realisation by this enlightened corps of Nigerian professionals to establish a cross-associational alliance to retain social relevance.

When General Ibrahim Babangida came on stage as a successor to General Buhari, he appeared as if he had respect for human rights. He released political prisoners imprisoned by his predecessor and gave a commitment to return the country to civilian rule. However, the notorious Decree 2 was not abrogated. Rather, it was strengthened to permit the detention of persons for renewable periods of six months at a time. The economic crisis of the 1980s continued unabated, and General Babangida subjected the issue of the IMF loan to a national debate on whether or not Nigeria should accept the loan from the International Monetary Fund. As Kelegbe (2003) observes, the IMF debate provided an occasion for associational life to blossom. Various groups, including professionals, students, market women, religious organisations, trade unions, roadside mechanics, associations, and a host of others, took advantage of the opportunity that it offered to air their views and canvass support for their opinions on the question of IMF participation in Nigeria's economic reconstruction efforts. The state made a spirited effort to weaken the opposition, made up largely of these civil associations, through co-optations, threats, and intimidation because of their resistance to the market reform, which had successfully decimated the middle class and caused massive misery in the land (Osaghe, 1997).

Consequently, the structural adjustment programme of General Ibrahim Babangida served by default to hasten, reinforce, and intensify the radicalisation of professional associations, which began during the Buhari regime. The annulment of the June 12 presidential elections of 1993 further ignited a fire of opposition against the military rule of General Babangida. Labour, students, and other professional associations mobilised against the criminal act, and despite the use of force by the state, including the killing of protesters on the streets of Lagos, General Babangida was forced to step aside in August 1993. The pressure from this group of people on his successor, Chief Ernest Shonekan, made it impossible for the Interim National Government to last more than 83 days in office. General Sani Abacha took over government at the height of the agitation for the revalidation of the June 12 presidential election, believed to have been won by the late businessman, late Chief M.K.O Abiola. However, as General Abacha reneged and clung tenaciously to power, the civil society organisations went to the trenches again. This time, with the formation of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), this incorporates different pro-democracy organisations, with operational bases in Europe and the United States of America (Omordia & Krunke, 2007).

Fidelis (2015) argued that despite the massive use of the state apparatus of coercion, including state killings, false allegations of coup plots, and compulsory exile for many of the leading figures, the civil society organisations maintained a sustained pressure on the discredited, suppressive, and blood thirsty regime until the sudden death of General Sani Abacha on June 8, 1998. He surmised that it was in response to that pressure that Abacha's successor, General Abdusalami Abubakar, fast-tracked the transition to civil rule, which produced Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the second Executive President of Nigeria on May 29, 1999.



About the contributions of civil society organisations to the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria, scholars pointed out that to their credit, the CSOs have made some notable contributions, which include their opposition to the third term agenda of then President Olusegun Obasanjo who attempted to insert an elongation clause in the constitution to ensure his continued stay in office beyond the original provision for two four-year tenures for an elected president. Even though Obasanjo at the time did not make any categorical statement regarding his intention to elongate his tenure, the actions and utterances of his aides, which he did not refute, were strong enough indicators of his intent to extend his tenure (Saliu & Muhammad, 2007, p. 535).

The civil society also rose to the occasion to demand the recognition of the then Vice President Goodluck Jonathan as the Acting President when Late President Umaru Musa Yar,adua was indisposed and was away to Saudi Arabia on medical treatment between November 2009 and March 2010. Civil rights organisations such as the Save Nigeria Group and Enough is Enough Group actually seized the initiative, mobilised, and marched on the National Assembly to demand a resolution that would give due recognition to the vice president as acting president. This led to the adoption of the now-popular “Doctrine of Necessity” by the National Assembly on February 9, 2010 (Ojo, 2011). The Senate based its resolution to declare Jonathan as the Acting President on the Doctrine of Necessity.

According to the then Senate President, David Mark, “a rigid and inflexible interpretation will not only stifle the spirit and intendment of the Constitution, but will also affront the doctrine of necessity. The doctrine of necessity requires that we do what is necessary when faced with a situation that was not contemplated by the Constitution. And that is precisely what we have done today. In doing so, we have also maintained the sanctity of our Constitution as the ultimate law of the land” (Saliu & Mohammad, 2007). There is no doubt that the history of Nigerian democracy with regard to the doctrine of necessity invoked by the Nigerian Senate at that trying moment cannot be written without a prominent place assigned to the role of the CSOs (Fidelis, 2015).

The CSOs were also very active in the push for electoral reforms, especially following the 2007 general election that was roundly discredited by both local and international observers. This is why it has been reported that perhaps one of the unforgettable efforts of the CSOs in the consolidation of Nigeria’s democracy was the unflinching support they gave to the Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Committee (ERC), inaugurated on August 28, 2007, by the late President Yar’Adua. CSOs submitted tonnes of memoranda to the ERC offering suggestions on how Nigeria can break the chain of its electoral debacle. Indeed, a significant number of the 22-member ERC were drawn from the civil society groups. They helped in analysing the challenges of Nigeria’s previous elections as well as charting the way forward. During the constitutional and electoral reform public hearings, CSOs were there in good numbers to present memoranda. This led to a better legal framework for elections that Nigeria currently has (Ojo, 2011).

The contributions of CSOs in electioneering activities also deserve prominent mention. They embarked on a series of advocacy to mobilise the citizens and encourage them to actively participate in the voter registration exercises that preceded the elections. Coming together under the umbrella-Domestic Election Observation Groups (the group which included the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Labour Monitoring Team (LMT), Women Environmental Programme (WEP), Muslim League for Accountability (MULAC), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD); Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), Alliance for Credible Elections, Citizens Forum for Constitutional Reform (CFCR) and the Electoral



Reform Network, ERN); deployed approximately 50,000 trained election monitors throughout the country during the 2007 general election (Akinboye & Oloruntoba, 2007, p. 14-15).

In addition, CSOs played a prominent role in ensuring the credibility of the widely acclaimed 2011 elections through vigorous voter education using both traditional and social media for their campaigns. They also established the Nigeria Civil Society Election Situation Room, a broad platform of civil society groups in Nigeria that collaborated to provide a more effective response to electoral fraud and violence, the key threats to the country's electoral process. The Nigeria Civil Society Election Situation Room was to later evolve and become the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (the Situation Room). The word "Election" was dropped from its name to reflect a wider focus extending to other governance issues and concerns.

Similarly, the passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, which was championed by CSOs, is a victory for Nigerian democracy. The Act stipulates that all institutions spending public funds will have to be open about their operations and expenditure, while citizens will have the right to access information about such activities. The FOI bill was first submitted to Nigeria's 4th National Assembly in 1999, when the country returned to democracy, but it did not make much progress. It returned to the legislative chambers in the 5th National Assembly in 2003 and was passed in the first quarter of 2007 by both chambers. However, President Olusegun Obasanjo vetoed it. It returned to both chambers of the 6th National Assembly in 2007 and was finally passed on 24 May 2011. (Sunday Trust, 5th June 2011) This success is chiefly attributed to the relentless efforts of the coalition of Nigerian civil society groups, who have long worked and advocated for the passage of the FOI Bill under the leadership of the Right to Know Movement, Media Rights Agenda (MRA), and the Open Society Justice Initiative. The significance of the inclusive joint workings of the CSOs is captured in the words of (2011) that "the signing of the FOI Bill into law is the clearest demonstration ever of the power of civil society working together to influence public policy and initiate reform in making government work for the people". (Sunday Trust, 5th June 2011).

Despite these notable achievements, the civil society in Nigeria has been bedevilled by a plethora of challenges that have tended to undermine its capacity to impact the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. Such challenges include, but are not limited to, inadequate funding, state co-optation, state antagonism, as well as lack of cooperation and unity among different civil society groupings.

Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Discussions on civil society and democratisation in Nigeria have tended to focus disproportionately on the period 1980s and 1990s, which is commonly associated with the so-called third wave of democratisation in Africa. But as Mgba (2015) has argued, such narratives fail to capture the historical dynamics that civil society has played in the past against the unpopular policies of the Nigerian state. In this way, Makumbe argued that:

while the political developments of the late 1980s and 1990s in most of sub-Saharan Africa have tended to give the impression that civil society in Africa is synonymous with anti-statism, the truth is that the African experience of civil society is focused on the people's struggles against despotic rulers, repressive regimes and governments that violated both individual and their collective rights (Makumbe, 1998, p. 305 cited in Mgba, 2015, p.182).

Corroborating this position, Ojo (2004) traced the origin of civil society in Nigeria to the colonial period, "when civil society bodies emerged to challenge the colonial state" (cited in Mgba, p.182). Ibrahim (2003, p. 29) reports that Nigeria has indeed "had a vibrant civil society in which the mass



media, trade and professional unions, students' associations, human and civil rights groups have been able to act as an effective counterweight against the state." Analysts noted that:

The struggle for expanding Nigeria's democratic space and the promotion of the welfare of ordinary Nigerians demonstrates "a wide spectrum of actors"- labour unions especially Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), and Trade Union Congress (TUC); professional associations such as Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), Campaign for Democracy (CD), National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), among others (Mgba, 2015, p.183).

They noted that these groups have been active in both the democratic struggle and in contesting the tendency towards absolutism and arbitrariness by the Nigerian state. In the words of Ikelegbe (2005, p.241), the civil society "has been an active mobilisational and agitational force in Nigeria's history and political development". While writing in respect of the broader African context, Bratton (1989, p.411) buttressed their capacity for mobilising popular support thus:

Far from being stunted in sub-Saharan Africa, it is often vibrant. While many pre-colonial cultures may have lacked states, they certainly did not lack civil society, in a broad sense of a bevy of institutions protecting collective interests... Africans invented forms of voluntary associations during the colonial period as a response to the disruptive impact of urbanisation and commercialisation... they gave collective shape to new occupational identities (peaceful movements, labour unions, professional associations). Many of these voluntary associations became explicitly political by giving voice, first to protest the indignities of colonial rule, and later, to the call for independence (Bratton, 1989, p.411).

Clearly, the struggle by civil society in Nigeria for democracy clearly predates the upheavals in Eastern Europe and the third wave of democracy in the late 1980s and 1990s. Also, the struggle for popular empowerment had been a continuing phenomenon since the immediate independence period, and such struggles have been reinforced "by the exploitative, hegemonic and dominant character of the state" (Mgba, 2015, p.183), which has been much similar to what obtained during colonial rule. Recalling the role of organised labour in popular struggles in Nigeria, Momoh (1996, p.163) stated that:

The emergence of organised labour and trade unionism in Nigeria by 1912 coincided with the emergence of the Nigerian state under colonial rule. Trade unionists took an active part in the nationalist struggles; some of them were either initiators or activists in the left-wing politics of Nigeria.

According to Tar (2009) buttressed that:

The Nigerian labour is a forerunner of socio-economic and pro-democracy struggles in Nigeria, providing the foundation for the efflorescence of civil society... The labour movement is often described as the 'veteran' of democratic struggles in the country. It spearheaded the struggles and endured stiff repression from the state, particularly in the early days of the struggle (1970s-1990s) when the state was under military control... Indeed, the history of the trade union movement in Nigeria and elsewhere is closely knit with the struggles for democratic values such as human rights, welfare, wages, and equal franchise (Tar, 2009, p.165).

Additionally, when General Ibrahim Babangida's military regime annulled the June 12, 1993 elections adjudged to be the freest and fairest elections in the annals of Nigeria's history, organised labour alongside other civil society groups mounted serious opposition to the regime's decision,



which brought the country to “a historic political stalemate”. The massive protests by civil society, including NLC, NUPENG, NBA, and other pro-democracy organisations, led not only to the “hurried” and “unceremonious exit of General Babangida from government.

Despite such glowing tributes to the historical antecedents of civil society in the democratic struggle in Nigeria, a dispassionate examination of their specific contributions to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria’s fourth republic tends to suggest that they have been less than effective.

Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic

Evaluating the performance of the civil society towards consolidating democracy in Nigeria’s fourth republic, Abah and Tanko (2016) stated that since 1999, they have advocated for the delivery of basic democracy dividends to the citizens but have had limited success. They have tried to do this through public protests, consultations, and media advocacy. They have also monitored the performances of elected representatives and attempted to hold them to account on some crucial national or local developmental. Citing the example of the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), he stated that the organisation has played an immense role in civic engagements, research, and documentation. And that, beyond these, it has also organised seminars and symposia for elected representatives, political parties, and members of the public on several issues bordering on democracy and development. In December 2012, the organisation also participated actively in street protests against the sudden removal of petroleum subsidy by Goodluck Jonathan’s administration, which imposed additional economic hardship on the citizenry (Abah and Tanko, 2016).

Similar to the CDD, the Save Nigeria Group, founded by Pastor Tunde Bakare of the Latter Rain Assembly, has also championed the demand for strict adherence to constitutionalism in Nigeria. During the protracted ill-health and eventual death of President Umaru Musa Ya’adua in 2009, the group through public demonstration in Lagos agitated for the immediate confirmation of the then Vice President, Goodluck Jonathan as the acting president given that the president was no longer able to discharge the duties of his high office and that the national life was suffering unduly due to the power vacuum that his prolonged absence had created. Also, in 2012, the group was also very vocal in its demand for the reversal of the removal of fuel subsidy by the Jonathan administration. Abah and Tanko observed that:

The group, along with other civil society groups like the Occupy Nigeria Group (ONG), Citizens for Good Governance (CGG), Arise for Change (AFC), and Women Arise for Change Initiatives (WACI) joined in one of the largest demonstrations in Lagos since June 12, 1993, to demand an end to the removal of fuel subsidy by the Nigerian Government. They demanded the revival of the nation’s moribund refineries and the fight against corruption, especially in the oil sector (Abah & Tanko, 2016, p. 17).

The civil society sector in Nigeria has also helped in the provision of basic economic and social services to Nigerians in both urban and rural areas. They provide soft loans and agricultural incentives to members of the public, provide employment opportunities, and basic social amenities like schools, clinics, pipe-borne water, and other essential services. Citing the activities of CSOs in Benue state, Abah and Tanko informed that in Makurdi, the state capital, the Women in Nigeria (WIN) provided soft loans to women. WIN also conducted business seminars and symposia for businesswomen in Makurdi on how to grow their businesses and to access loans. Also, in Kogi State, North-central Nigeria, some CSOs like the Akpanya Welfare Association (AWA), Justice, Peace and Development Mission (JPDM) helped to build and renovate schools, markets, and Primary health centres (Fidelis, 2015).



In the areas of elections, Fidelis (2015) observed that civil society has helped to promote and advocate for free, fair, and credible elections in Nigeria since 1999. They noted that in the build-up to the April 2015 elections in Nigeria, the civil society sector was involved in all the stages of preparations, voting, collations, and declarations of election results. The CSO Situation Room, a coalition of 60 local civil society organisations, was actively involved in the minute-by-minute observation and monitoring, and analysis of trends and events of the 2015 Presidential election.

They pointed to the inability of elected representatives to deliver on campaign promises despite receiving jumbo salaries and allowances as evidence of the failure of civil society to instil probity in the governance process, without which democracy cannot be consolidated. An example of such profligacy was the report by the former Central Bank of Nigeria Governor, Sanusi Lamido, to the effect that Nigeria spent over 25% of its annual budget on the National Assembly alone while the majority of the citizens lived in abject poverty (Uadiale, 2011). They further noted that Nigeria has continued to rank among the worst-performing countries in terms of the level of public corruption being experienced in the country. In the political sphere, corruption has become a major cankerworm in the country. Political corruption, especially at the state and local Government levels, is rife, but CSOs have not been able to actively confront this menace.

Civil society has not been able to legally confront corrupt politicians through citizen litigations. What is common in Nigeria is mere criticisms and comments on the pages of newspapers and magazines. More worrisome is the fact that some local Civil Society Organisations have, in certain grand corruption cases, staged public protests against the prosecution of high-profile individuals in the country. For instance, the former Governor of Bayelsa state, DSP Alamesigha, who was the executive governor between 1999 and 2006, was never challenged by any CSO until he was arrested in the UK. Although he dubiously manoeuvred the UK Metropolitan police and ran to Nigeria by disguising himself in female attire, he had never been tried since his return; in fact, he was later granted a state pardon by the immediate past president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan.

Similarly, the former governor of oil-rich Delta State, James Ibori, who is currently in jail in London, was accused of money laundering and abuse of public trust in Nigeria. However, when Nigerian law enforcement agents, particularly the anti-graft agency, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), made attempts to arrest and prosecute him in Nigeria, members of the law enforcement agents were confronted by his tribal and clannish association. Ijaw Youth Movement (IYM) resisted and engaged the police and EFCC officials in violent confrontations, claiming that their son had not done any wrong. With the numerous CSOs in Nigeria during this era of turmoil, none of them openly condemned the act through advocacy or legal means. James Ibori moved freely and even attempted to contest the 2007 presidential election until he was miraculously arrested, tried, and imprisoned in London by the Metropolitan police in the UK.

In the Nigerian oil sector, there have been excessive cases of corruption and abuse of public trust by managers of the industry and the political class. Nigeria's annual crude oil production averages 710 million barrels, with 2.36 trillion cubic feet of gas per year, of which 68.66 billion cubic feet (bct) is flared monthly, representing about 823.92 billion cubic feet (bct) annually. In monetary terms, Nigeria lost \$72 billion to gas flare (Ikubaje, 2011). More worrisome is the poor comatose state of Nigeria's four refineries located at Port Harcourt, Warri, and Kaduna. Established with an installed daily production capacity of 445,000 barrels, however, none of the refineries is presently functioning. Instead, Nigeria imports millions of barrels of refined fuel from other countries at exorbitant prices. This has led to incessant fuel price hikes and fuel scarcity in Nigeria, with an attendant increase in



household commodity prices and transport fares. Although oil has been the mainstay of the economy since the 1970s, the revenues generated have not been judiciously utilised due to corruption. For instance, between 1970 and 2005, oil contributed \$391.6 billion to the government, and the foreign exchange earnings from oil between these periods were valued at over \$593.6 billion.

In spite of these huge revenues, the economy has not grown, nor has the standard of living of Nigerians improved significantly. The lack of transparency and the existence of obsolete laws in the sector have created avenues for the perpetration of corruption. For instance, between 1999 and 2007, President Olusegun Obasanjo sold ten oil blocks without a proper bidding process to his political allies and business associates. This is made possible because of a lack of transparency, accountability, and the existence of archaic laws in the sector. For instance, the Petroleum Industry Act of 1969 gives the authority to allocate oil blocks in Nigeria to the Minister of Petroleum, who is under and answerable to the President. This explains why, since independence, the bidding process and allocation of oil blocks have been abused by the executive and bedevilled by corruption.

In 2004, it was reported that a former president of Nigeria awarded a \$ 1 billion oil block in the Niger Delta region to his wife's hairdresser (Business Times, October 31, 2004). Also, in 2007, the acting Director of Petroleum Resources (DPR), Mohammad Aliyu Sabo, testified before the National Assembly members on the cases of corruption in the awards and sales of oil blocks. The probe panel also discovered that Shell Plc had, in December 2003, paid \$210 million as a signature bonus to the Federal Government of Nigeria, but only the sum of \$1 million was reflected in the records. Earlier in 2003, the sum of \$2.5 million was paid for OPL 257 by Vintage Oil, but it was spent over five years before it was received on July 8, 2008.

In terms of public re-orientations and political enlightenment, and civic education, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Nigeria have not performed well. Nigeria is a populous country with thirty-six (36) states, and the Federal Capital territory, Abuja, and is further subdivided into seven hundred and seventy-four (774) Local Government Areas. With over 170 million people, less than 30% of these are literate, while over 75% reside in rural areas lacking access to basic social amenities. Although the majority of Nigerians are domiciled in rural areas, well-funded and articulate CSOs that can educate the masses and conduct civic education are mainly based in urban centres, mainly the FCT, and in states and local government capitals. The effects of this elitist character of CSO could be gleaned in the staggering proportions of invalid or blank votes, ethno-religious violence, and electoral fraud (Abah & Tanko, 2016).

Worthy of note is the issue of invalid/blank votes that has characterised successive presidential elections in Nigeria since 1999. For instance, in the 1999 presidential election, a total of 57,938,945 registered voters, the voter turnout was 30,280,052, while invalid/ blank votes stood at 29,848,441. Similarly, in the April 2003 presidential election, a total of 60,823,022 people were registered, while voter turnout was 42,018,735, and invalid/blank votes were 2,538,246. In addition, in the April 2007 presidential election, registered voters were 61,567,036, while invalid votes were over 8%. In 2011, invalid and blank votes were 1,259,506 (Vanguard Newspaper, April 23 2011).

Abah and Tanko argued that the preponderance of invalid votes in contemporary democratic experience of Nigeria, amidst the multiplicity of civil society groups, could be blamed on the passive role of many of the civil society groups and their failure to provide voter education as a means of consolidating the country's fledgling democracy. According to them, majority of the invalid votes are from rural areas where there are high rates of poverty and illiteracy, and with the exponential



growth in the number of CSOs and increased funding from foreign donor agencies, one would have been expected that the level of political awareness and civic education from civil society would help in no small measure to scale down the level of occurrence of invalid votes as well as electoral frauds. They thus blamed the state of affairs on the concentration of the activities of the civil society groups in the urban areas, where, in fact, their activities are less relevant given the relatively high level of awareness in those places when compared to the rural areas (Abah & Tanko, 2016).

Abah and Tanko further argued that since the emergence of the fourth republic in Nigeria, ethnic militia groups have negatively affected the delivery and pursuit of the dividends of good governance to the people. In contemporary Nigeria, ethnic militia groups like Odua Peoples' Congress, Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra, Egbesu Boys, Ombatse, Niger Delta Volunteer Force, Arewa People's Congress, and other clandestine socio-cultural associational groups have, by the manifestation of their activities, hindered democracy. They argued that from a liberal perspective, are classified as Civil Society Organisation and as such should aid the consolidation of democracy, but in fact, their ready resort to the use of violent methods has resulted in loss of lives and property in different parts of Nigeria work against democracy in Nigeria, and has even acted as disincentive for active participation in the electoral process by many innocent citizens who rightly fear for their safety. This is more so considering that some of these groups have actually been encouraging their supporters and sections of the public to boycott such elections, as they consider their sections of the country as not being under the sovereignty of the Nigerian state. In this light, Vaaseh (2010) argued that some civil society groups in Nigeria have stymied the growth and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Corroborating this position, Igbokwe-Ibeto, Ewuim, Anazodo, and Osawe (2014) reported that since 1999, the country has experienced some vibrant and robust associational life. New civil society organisations are springing up by the day in Nigeria. Notably among these are the Joint Action Front (JAF), the Save Nigeria Group, United Action for Democracy (UAD), Campaign for Democracy (CD), Trade Unions such as The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), and Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC), among others, have joined the fray. They continue to press for more democratic openings and to promote the sanctity of the rule of law. In some cases, civil society has challenged mismanagement and corruption in all branches of government, even where such organisations have not been the epitome of transparency and the rule of law. In the wake of the campaign for the return to civil rule, some publicly recognised progressive and pro-democracy activists were co-opted into joining the ruling military junta under General Babangida and Abacha and abandoned their pro-democracy constituency. Some are waiting in the wings to jump onto the moving train of the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) to enrich themselves (Igbokwe-Ibeto et al., 2014).

Igbokwe-Ibeto et al noted that this development in the civil society constituency has led to questioning the democratic credentials of civil society and its ability to midwife and deepen democracy in Africa. This accords with Gyimah-Baadi's (1996) observation that the ability of civil society to help deepen democratic governance and put it beyond reversal remains in serious doubt. Igbokwe-Ibeto argued that it would seem that some of the civil society organisations are not above manipulation by some powerful elements in the private sector. They noted that civil society has failed to innovate in its mode of operation by evolving a new political and economic culture in Africa. As such, there is the "tendency to copy not just the constitutions of democracy from the West, but also, and rather incongruously, its norms" (Gyimah-Baadi, 1998). Such practices as in the days of implementing modernisation precepts have failed to bring about political and economic stability to Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. Contemporary activities of civil society are bound to face a similar fate unless concrete efforts are made to change its *modus operandi* and *vivendi*.



Igbokwe-Ibeto et al (2014) further observed that civil society in Nigeria tends to be reactive rather than proactive in engaging the state on matters affecting the people and the polity. More often than not, civil society has tended to rely on government for information and direction, thereby giving the government a head start on sensitive issues. This may be pinned down to the weak structural and organisational bases of most civil society organisations. All these go a long way to affect their ability to gauge public opinion and react to it in ways that would favour the democratic course. According to them, in a political system dominated by brokerage politics, civil society is very much vulnerable to state repression and co-optation due to, in some cases, its dependence on government for funds and other logistic supports. The lack of financial autonomy of civil society compromises their independent approach to issues and ability to carry out long-term plans and programmes. This perhaps explains why they could not insist on a new socio-economic and political order in Nigeria before the return to civil rule. Also, with growing poverty in the land, members and the leadership of civil society are likely to capitulate in the face of the present economic realities that have pauperised the majority of the political and economic elites. The poverty question, therefore, is crucial to the roles civil society can play in democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Organisationally, most civil society organisations are weak. Most of their offices are located in urban centres, in make-shift buildings with hand-picked staff that lack the requisite skills and experiences to run such organisations. Failure of most civil societies to link up with social formations in the rural areas, as in the days of the nationalist struggle for independence in much of Africa, has deprived them of the support base they need to carry on a protracted and well-organised campaign for an egalitarian and democratic society. This makes most civil societies in Africa elitist and or personalised in nature and character. Consequently, the mobilisation orientation of these organisations is limited to urban centres and the elite, while important social forces in rural areas are neglected. Contrary to what the comparative literature has shown, most civil societies in Africa, unlike their counterparts in South America, have a shallow base. According to Ihonvbere (2000), this runs against popular opinion that civil society should be captured and incorporated into popular movements that can engage in political pedagogy that emphasises the process through which social identities, particularly among the poor in rural-urban centres, can be captured and used to establish new relations between excluded citizens and the state apparatus

Paradoxically, many civil society organisations lack the very democracy they are trying to promote or sell to the larger society. Substantially, internal democracy is almost absent in civil society as its members are treated as second-class citizens by their leaders/founders. Unless this abnormality is corrected and their internal operations subjected to the rule of law and separation of powers, particularly in the areas of the use of funds and recruitment and selection of their leaders, their contributions to the democratisation process could be vitiated. They concluded that with regard to the promotion of Nigeria's democratic agenda, the civil society has not been consistent and persistent in the face of intimidation and attack by government forces against their activities.

With particular focus on the 2019 general elections, Ihekoromadu, Salihu, and Ocholi (2020) observed that civil society organisations conducted numerous advocacy exercises to ensure the credibility of the election. According to them, support from CSOs strengthened the Independent National Electoral Commission's resolve to maintain a non-partisan status and reinforced its resolve to create a level playing field for all political parties and contestants in the political process. Some of the advocacy exercises embarked upon by CSOs in the build-up to the 2019 election, as identified by Ihekoromadu et al (2020), are illustrated in the table below.



Table 1: Advocacy Exercise Conducted by CSOs in Nigeria's 2019 General Election

S/No	Exercise
1	The CSOs provided a veritable interface with INEC, the security agencies and the populace
2	They effectively monitored the voters' registration exercise to enable the eligible electorate to exercise their franchise
3	Effectively monitored the display of voters' register for claims and objections between 6th and 12th November 2018
4	Monitored the clean-up of the register by INEC using the Automated Finger Print Identification System (AFIS)

Source : Ihekoromadu et al. (2020, p.137).

Despite these laudable interventions, though, Ihekoromadu et al (2020, p.138) noted that “there is observable laxity in CSOs' activism in recent years”. They cautioned that CSOs need to stir themselves out of their slumber and reignite the activism by which they are known if they hope to remain relevant in the process of democratic consolidation in the country.

In respect of the 2023 general election in Nigeria, Chukwudi and Ojo (2023) reported that in the build-up to the election, civil society groups such as ActionAid, Christian Aid, Plan International, and Care International, among others, vociferously (Osahon et al, 2022 & James, 2022). Similarly, CSOs condemned the scarcity of the national currency arising from the ill-timed change of currency by the federal government. They warned that the mass suffering being experienced due to the scarcity of the naira could undermine citizen participation and engender low turnout of voters in the election. They also argued that it could encourage weaponisation of poverty, whereby prospective voters would readily sell their votes to the highest bidder in a bid to survive the hardship (Abdullahi, 2023).

According to Chukwudi and Ojo (2023), following the election proper, the

Civil Society Organisations did not just watch the irregularities that occurred during the recently concluded 2023 general elections but waded (sic) into the situation to seek clarity for the benefit of the political rights of the masses. Infractions in the conduct of the general election 2023 have been reported, and a coalition of civil society organisations (CSOs) has demanded a comprehensive inquiry (Adebowale-Tambe, 2023, cited in Chukwudi & Ojo, 2023, p.24).

They further reported that civil society organisations (CSOs) have grown into enormous tools for societal peace, development, and stability, and that they have often taken proactive steps to address pressing issues affecting the welfare of the citizens, including issues of bad governance and lack of public accountability by public officials. They have also undertaken advocacy exercises aimed at curbing insecurity and have employed various methods in their attempts to eliminate threats posed by domestic terrorism, which has tended to undermine the peace and harmonious existence within the society (Chukwudi & Ojo, 2023). They surmised that overall, CSOs have played very crucial roles in the social accountability process through monitoring and evaluation of public policies and the impact of such policies in promoting equity and good governance towards the entrenchment of the democratic ethos in the country.

Chukwudi and Ojo, however, admitted that so far, the impact of the civil society in the consolidation of Nigeria's democracy has been limited by a myriad of challenges. Such challenges, according to them, include paucity of experienced personnel, lack of organisational discipline, infighting among



civil society groups, lack of a clear goal or purpose, resulting in what Kukah (1999) called an "all-comers job" which lacked coordination (Chukwudi & Ojo, 2023, p.25).

Another significant obstacle to the efficacy of civil society groups in Nigeria, according to Chukwudi and Ojo, is the problem of funding. They argued that the funding pattern of most CSOs in the country “are not obviously intended to carry out a locally developed democratic project for the Nigerian society because they are heavily motivated and supported by international donor organisations and governments” (Chukwudi & Ojo p.25). They further noted that “due to funding issues, some CSOs were unable to oppose the authoritarian beliefs of the government”, and that “the democratic features of civil society and their capacity to foster and strengthen democracy in Nigeria have been called into doubt as a result of this development” (Chukwudi & Ojo, 2023, p.27). They summed up that overall, “there are important queries about civil societies' capacity to contribute to the advancement of democratic governance and ensure its irreversibility” in Nigeria.

Table 2: Timelines of Selected Civil Societies and Grants Received from Foreign Donors

S/No	CLO	Year	Grant Received	Nature of Programme
1	Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Projects (SERAP)	2021 2020 2019 2019 2019 2016 2013 2011 2008	\$ 1, 1 00, 000, \$50,000, \$39,000, \$79,000, \$13,167 \$300,000 \$350,000 \$350,000 \$150,000	ACJA & other Covid-19 rpt G governance Corruption Accountability Transparency Human Rights Human Rights Human Rights
2	Nigerian Civil society Situation Room (NCSSR)	2014-2018	Unstated amount of grants	Training of election observers and monitoring, promoting issue-based campaign, voter education, collaboration with INEC
3	Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN)	2014 2016 2019	\$200.000 \$360.000 \$400.000	HR (1year) HR (3year) HR (2 year) All on human rights, civic education, publicity on accountability in 5 states in Niger-Delta

Source : Asogwa et al. (2023, p.109).

Drawing from the table above, Asogwa et al (2023) noted that one of the civil society organisations to have benefited handsomely from the foreign donors is the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Projects (SERAP). They explained that as an advocacy organisation, SERAP’s stated objective is to promote human rights, transparency, and accountability in governance through training, advocacy, research, and strategic litigation. From 2008 to 2021, SERAP received a total of \$3,142 167 from donor agencies like the MacArthur Foundation to promote and deepen of democratic ethos. These funds received have assisted them in conducting a detailed analysis of the Auditor General’s reports on federal appropriations to ministries, departments, and agencies. SERAP is also undertaking public interest litigation on the information gathered on asset recovery and procurement practices as appropriate, and translating reports into short, accessible formats for easier understanding. These grants also support SERAP to advocate for the Supreme Court to overturn its decision on section 396(7) of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA), which was nullified due to its inconsistency with the Nigerian constitution. The award is expected to strengthen transparency, promote accountability, and reduce corruption in Nigeria.



Other civil societies like the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room (NCSSR), which is an amalgamation of different kinds of NGOs in Nigeria for intercooperative activities, have also received various kinds of funding by foreign donors in the promotion of democracy in Nigeria. These were channelled into training in election observation and monitoring, promoting issue-based campaigns, voter education and collaboration with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in ensuring a free and fair election. In the 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria. There was a noticeable collaboration among the civil societies and their international partners in monitoring election results. Some of the NGOs that deployed their received donors in this exercise were Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), YIAGA Africa, and international monitoring groups including African Union (AU), European Union (EU), National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), and International Federation for Electoral Systems (IFES), and several others (Sule et al, 2021). The Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN) has also received an amount of \$960.000 US dollars from 2014 to 2021 from their international partners based in London, United Kingdom, in support of the defence of human rights, engagement in civic education, and accountability in governance. This is mostly observed in what the NGOs have done in both community mobilisation towards democratic acceptance and empowerment of the rural population (Asogwa et al., 2023) in their final deposition, Asogwa et al. (2023) surmised that:

as salesmen of contending cultures and the centre place for marketing ideas, civil society, rather than consolidating a democratic culture...has been inadvertently yielding to the donor demands, which is to propagate and fertilise the general public towards acceptance of the neoliberal path to development (Asogwa et al., 2023, p.74).

This, according to them, is without prejudice to the noble role played by the international donor agencies and multilateral organisations in stigmatising authoritarian regimes, which facilitated their demise in Africa. They nonetheless insisted that such an effort had not been enough. Taking the 2019 election as a referent, the election “the 2019 election simply demonstrated the perversity of election and hardly reflected people’s vote” (Asogwa et al., 2023, p.113). then concluded that “while Nigeria may have transitioned from military authoritarianism to a form of democracy, a whole lot more still needs to be done before democracy could be said to have been consolidated in the country” (Asogwa et al., 2023, p.113).

Conclusion/Recommendations

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are a vital instrument of democratic consolidation and good governance. They serve as watchdogs to government activities and demand accountability from the sitting government. They also provide a level playing ground to opposition political parties and prevent the political party in power from hijacking political activities during the electioneering process. However, their weak financial base sometimes prevents them from operating at the maximum level they are expected to operate. On the other hand, due to varying interests among the various CSOs, they sometimes lack the synergy to operate in unity. This paper therefore recommends, among other things, that:

1. CSOs should do everything possible, such as seeking foreign aid to boost their financing, to be completely independent and free from the government.
2. The CSOs should work in collaboration and unity. This will enable them to attract mutual benefits from each other and will help them to be firm whenever the issue of holding the government accountable arises.



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