

Demagogues and the Challenge of Democratic Politics in Nigeria

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Abstract—This article interrogates the question of leadership in the context of the antidemocratic tendencies of Africa's political leaders. The African continent has continued to struggle behind other continents of the world as a result of the failure of leadership to address the political and socio-economic challenges of the continent. Thus, bedevilled with the challenges of development, the African continent is in need of people-centred leadership. However, as the continent struggles to overcome its political and development predicaments, it is stuck in the dystopia of demagoguery that promises nothing but apocalyptic future for its teeming population. Thus, despite the enormous resources available in Africa, leadership failures have made progress difficult to achieve. At the centre of this leadership failure are demagogues: a set of leaders who have influence over a large number of people but take advantage of that influence to undermine democracy and good governance. Citing various examples across Africa, the article describes how demagogues, especially in democratic countries, have become the problem of the African continent in its quest to achieve democratic progress, development and peaceful progress.

Keywords—Africa, demagogue, good governance, democracy, leadership.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE Athenian democracy inspired and remains a central source of inspiration for modern political thought [1]-[4] because it represents the political ideals of human rights, equality among citizens, rule of law and justice, and the opportunity for people to determine their socioeconomic destiny by choosing whom they entrust with the authority to allocate their collective resources for communal prosperity and progress. Thus, in modern politics, it is considered an aberration (and in some cases sanctionable) for a country to operate a political system that is non-democratic because of the tyranny and dehumanizing features of non-democratic systems of governance. Hence, in accordance with the globally accepted politics of democracy, African countries have come to accept democratic governance as the accepted political system for attaining good governance and development for its people [5]. Unfortunately, however, the practice of democracy in Africa has been bedevilled by the Machiavellian disposition of African political elites who are

herein referred to as demagogues [6], [7]. A demagogue is a leader in a political system that uses foul means, including wealth, violence, intimidation, deceit and other deleterious means to exploit the fears, emotions, prejudices, ignorance and weaknesses of the masses with the goal of gaining political power, sustaining power and promotion of political motives for personal or group interests. Thus, democracy, as we experience it in many African countries today bears close resemblance with features that [8] associates with fascism, including despotism and plutocratic elitism. Demagogues use all resources at their disposal, whether negative or positive, ranging from funds to violence to intimidation to wilful deception in courting votes and seeking to expand their “mass basis.”

The idea of democracy has always brought about excitements and apprehensions wherever it exists as a system or form of government. Excitement because it is, expectedly, the solution to the tyranny, misrule and injustice of one (or minority) over another (the majority) in any society, and apprehensions because of the derisive manoeuvring and conspicuous failings associated with the practice of democracy [9]. Thus, even though democracy should mean the form of government in which the people rule themselves either directly or through freely and fairly elected representatives, it has been rightly emphasized that “not every nation that calls itself a democracy allows the people to rule” [10]. South Korea represents a paradigm of a “democracy” that the people do not rule. By name, the country is called “The Democratic People's Republic of Korea”, yet it does not allow for opposition political parties, free elections and democratic accountability, press freedom, rule of law and other democratic essentials that probably informed the formation of the name. In Zimbabwe also, democracy has presented them no choice of leadership except the ZANUPF headed by President Robert Mugabe. The same experience is true in Cameroun where Paul Biya and his party, Cameroonian People's Democratic Movement (RDPC), hold sway. In some countries, especially in Africa, where democracy continue to suffer political blasphemy in the hands of its supposed ‘political priests’, many citizens have had to sacrifice their lives in the fight to enforce true democracy in their countries. This is especially true for countries like Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Sudan, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and many more that have engaged and continue to engage antidemocratic elements and forces to enthrone authentic democracy that survives and thrives on the principle of popular sovereignty (that political power derives from the people) and its expected dividends of securing the rights of the

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people to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (which is the very purpose of government). Unfortunately, however, the lip service that political leaders pay to adhering to the spirit and letter of democratic ideals has been largely responsible for the crises nations have (and continue) to encounter in the quest to establish truly democratic states where popular sovereignty knows no bounds in terms of freedom of the people to form political parties that will advance their goals, persuasion of fellow citizens through a free press and media, vote for candidates of their choice without being deprived or victimized for doing so, and that the votes of the electorates will count and be respected by all stakeholders.

At the centre of the controversies surrounding the practice of democracy in most parts of the developing world is the demagogue. That is a leader or leaders of the people who have influence over a large number of people in a political territory and uses that commanding influence over the people to advance their personal interests by affecting a deep devotion to the interests of the masses [11]. A demagogue is fundamentally, therefore, a man or woman of the common people who inspires overwhelming passion or emotional reactions among the people. Also, a demagogue defies order (including democratic norms) and always has the people willing to champion revolts aimed at either seizing power or maintaining power without commitment to democratic path or ideals.

Noting that democracy was not indestructible, [12] warned that there was no in-built historical guarantee for the survival of democracy against the ever present and preying influence of the enemies of democracy, who are on the rise, and even commentators and panjandrams partially sympathetic to it are openly cynical about claims that it is the most desirable political model for all the people of the world. This sort of warning is not unconnected with the tragedy of today's democracy under the control of self-styled democrats who have altered the idea of democracy almost beyond recognition [13].

II. THE RISE OF DEMAGOGUES: A HISTORICAL INSIGHT

History presents us with endless list of how the slack (or outright failings) of democracy has always resulted in the rise and 'successes' of demagogues [5], [14]. The failure of Weimar Republic to address insecurity, unemployment, and the worldwide economic depression in the early 1930s was largely responsible for the emergence and rise of Adolf Hitler of Germany, and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (or Nazi party). Before the economic depression struck, the Nazis were practically unknown, winning only 3 percent of the vote to the Reichstag (German parliament) in elections in 1924. In the 1932 elections, the Nazis won 33 percent of the votes, more than any other party. In January 1933 Hitler was appointed chancellor, the head of the German government, and many Germans believed that they had found a saviour for their nation.

Benito Mussolini of Italy took advantage of the failing economy in his country as Italy was plagued with

unemployment, inflation, riots, strikes, and brigandage, with Fascism, like Nazism in Germany, promising relief and progress for the masses [5], [9]. In Venezuela, the government of President Caldera failed to bring economic respite to the people, and instead, poverty, inflation, highhandedness and intolerance for opposition became the order of the day, experiences that were antithetical to the practice of democracy with immediate consequences of falling standard of living, widespread discontent with the representative democratic system in Venezuela. The result was the emergence of a demagogue in Hugo Chavez whose party, the Fifth Republic Movement (which later merged to form the United Socialist Party of Venezuela in 2007).

In Cuba, Fidel Castro emerged a demagogue in response to the unpopular and corrupt rule of a dictator, Fulgencio Batista, whose reign brought to Cuba widespread poverty, corruption, unemployment and the application of brutal measures to perpetuate his hold on power [9]. Thus, from Stalin and Lenin of Russia, Koki Hirota of Japan, Chiang Kai-shek of China, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Mahadmehijad of Iran, Kim Il Sung of North Korea, Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Evo Morales of Bolivia, Daniel Toroiticharap Moi of Kenya, Bashar Al Assad of Syria, etc., etc. demagogues have existed in all countries, at one time or the other, and in all types of governments, including monarchy, military and democracy [9].

In Thailand, where the 2001 presidential election brought Thaksin Shinawatra in what remains the largest mandate in Thai history, democracy suffered serious setback that finally resulted in the overthrow of the government in a coup as the major beneficiary of democracy, Thaksin Shinawatra, engaged in antidemocratic practices that included intimidation and killing of opposition figures, enacted policies that weakened democratic institutions, subverted press freedom and undermined the rule of law. These actions enraged the citizens and the international community, and so the people, including those who had voted for him, led by the middle class protested and revolted to the extent of paralyzing Bangkok. And, unsurprisingly, in 2006, a year after he had won reelection in 2005, Thaksin Shinawatra was overthrown in a military coup. The positive reaction from Thais was expected as "young, middle-class Thais, who a generation ago had fought against military rulers, were engaged in a love-in with the troops, snapping photos of soldiers posted throughout Bangkok like they were celebrities" [15].

Egypt presents the world with another striking illustration of how politicians who take advantage of their democratic gains to undermine democratic ideals contribute immensely to the fall of democracy in their countries, and the consequent relevance and ascendancy of demagogues. Following the popular revolt that dethroned Mubarak, and subsequently brought in Mohammed Morsi as the democratically elected president of Egypt, people expected the newly and first democratic president of Egypt would tread on the path of civility and rule of law in administering the nation [15]. However, instead of bringing democratic ideals to bear through his actions, he sought to change the constitution in a

manner that will make him more of a dictator than a democratically elected president. He undermined the rule of law, jailed journalists and took steps that pitched religion against religion, the military against the government, and the result was the aggressive revolt against the regime which eventually resulted in the overthrow of his government [6]. Thus, it will be apt to argue that elected democratic leaders, especially in the third world nations, have always been the cause, albeit, the major casualties, of the emergence of demagogues [16]. This paradox of democratic practice, but reality of political behaviour can best be understood from the thoughts of [9] when he noted that “experience has demonstrated that, even under the best form of government, those entrusted with power have, if given time and opportunity, perverted it into tyranny.” Furthermore, the sit-tight syndrome among African leaders has been a major source of concern for the survival of democracy in the continent. For instance, among the longest serving presidents in the world are African presidents. For example, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea has been in office since 1979 (about 36 years); José Eduardo dos Santos of the Republic of Angola has also been in office since 1979; Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe who has been president since 1980 [9]. Thus, it is an inevitable responsibility of all stakeholders in the democratic project of Africa to build strong democratic institutions that will make it nearly impossible for demagogues to emerge, survive and thrive in the country. These democratic institutions include the Judiciary, Independent Electoral Commission, free press/media, constitutional government, among others.

Sadly, every demagogue claims to be for the people. According to [9], “The will of the nation” is one of the phrases most generally abused by demagogues of every age. For instance, in the ongoing crisis in Burundi which was triggered by the decision of President Nkurunziza to run for a third term as against the spirit and letter of the country’s Machiavellian method, the embattled president has dismissed the protest against him, arguing that “99.9%” of the people of Burundi were in support of his regime.

The tactics for demagogues in power is to silence dissenting voices from the scene by enacting or influencing the enactment of laws that perpetuates his or her political interest. An example of this strategy was the recent decision by the Venezuelan parliament that allowed the president to rule by decree [19].

III. TYPOLOGY OF DEMAGOGUES

There are two kinds of demagogues: the demagogue in power and the demagogue seeking power. Of these two kinds, the demagogue in power is the more dangerous because it uses state apparatus and the paraphernalia of office to further his or her political goal by intimidating and harassing opposition leaders and their followers [9]. They could use their incumbent power to create their rules, and in some cases, change the constitution to achieve their political objectives. On the other hand, the demagogues seeking power undermine constitutional authorities, and may create their own state

within the state [13].

Whether soft or hard, ‘in power’ or seeking power, minor or major, demagogues rank among history’s most fascinating figures, command large followership and are devotedly revered by their fanatical supporters. Similarly, [9] stressed that all demagogues are threats to genuine democracy, and that many will debate about labelling a particular demagogue as “destructive” or “beneficial” because of their personal biases toward the system being threatened by the demagogue. Thus, a leader of the people in whatever context that threatens or undermines democratic values is more or less of a demagogue and can range from a minor to a major threat to democracy.

The Economic Commission for Africa has emphasized the importance of strengthening democratic institutions to ensure the survival and thriving of democracy in Africa [19]. Indeed, the countries of Africa must ensure the survival and deepening of democracy by building and strengthening all the democratic institutions.

IV. DEMAGOGUES: THE CASE OF NIGERIA

The political arrangements in Nigeria create a favourable platform for demagogues and demagoguery to thrive [19]. Economically, the people have been so impoverished to the point that they can do just anything in exchange for a demagogue’s pot of porridge [20]. Ethnic agitations have also created the enabling environment for demagogues to manipulate people to subvert democratic norms and ideals using ethnic sentiments to intimidate and threaten any person or group that was considered a threat to their ethnic, though often undemocratic, agenda. Thus, the devaluation of democracy in Nigeria cannot escape the narratives of poverty, gross inequality, ethnic and religious bigotry and massive corruption which have corrupted the true meaning and practice of democracy [17].

The political elites in Nigeria that parade themselves as democrats are nothing but democratic opportunists who embraced democracy for what they stand to gain from it. These “homegrown dictators” [18] seldom subscribe to the culture and principles of democracy when their ambitions are at risk.

Because State power is tantamount to economic power [17], the political elites in Nigeria have turned political competition, even in democracy, into hostilities, where the winner takes all and assumes emperorship, not only over their political rivals, but over the people.

In Nigeria, the premium for power is very high, making the appetite for power insatiable. Thus, in order to curtail this gluttonous appetite for power and all its associated drawbacks, the framers of the Nigerian constitution and other constitutions of the various democratic institutions, including those of political parties, set in place political arrangements that will artificially reduce marginalization of any group in the political arrangements of the country. Thus, in addition to the norm of “zoning” or rotational presidency which implies that the president of Nigeria should revolve between the North and South of Nigeria, it is a rule that the President and the Vice-President must not come from the same political zone, and that

all other key positions in the government structure be shared among the various geopolitical zones that make up the Federal Republic of Nigeria. However, these power-sharing arrangements seldom hold because power is too important for political actors to respect such artificially established arrangements when opportunities for more power arise [21], especially that in the Nigerian context, what guarantees any arrangements, including power-sharing arrangements, is power. So, if power has been misused, and thus abused, by demagogues to rewrite constitutions in pursuance of unpopular political ambitions, what else can power not be used to achieve in a society where all democratic institutions and other arms of government (the judiciary and legislature) derive their powers from the executive arm of government.

The nature of power struggle in Nigeria, especially in the Fourth Republic beginning from 1999, is a practical demonstration of the Hobbesian classic. The consequences are the hostilities that accompany electioneering campaigns, political assassinations, intimidation, threats and violence that are characteristic of pre-election and post-election periods.

The question is: why has the democratic structures and institutions in Nigeria not been able to curtail these authoritarian features in Nigeria's democracy? The answer is that the institutions are the creation of the demagogues, and the headship of the democratic institutions in Nigeria, often than not, are the appointees and/or collaborators of the demagogues in power [19]. For example, the head of the judiciary is appointed by the president; the head of the electoral commission is appointed (and summoned at will) by the president; and to a large extent, the president's men emerge as the leaders of the parliament. In this circumstance, what can the institutions do to tame the rapacious ambition of the demagogue in power, when the factor that determine their emergence is more of partisanship than moral distinction and competence.

In addition to the answer provided above, Nigerian political elites enjoy illegitimate immunity from prosecution by relevant agencies when they violate the law. So, the political elites endorse democratic legitimacy "without subjecting themselves to the notorious inconveniences of democratic practice" [20].

V. THE INSTRUMENTS USED BY DEMAGOGUES IN NIGERIA

1. Wealth: whereas the few elites in Nigeria live in affluence, largely derived from their unchallenged state-entenable corruption, the rest of the society is impoverished and subject to vulnerabilities associated with lack of the basic necessities of life, ranging from food, clothing, shelter and education, they become available and willing tools in the mode of political thugs. Also, the very poor people of Nigeria, whose poverty is a function of the avarice of the political elites, are induced with money, food, clothes, and other material needs to corrupt their sense of judgment as well as coarsen them to vote for candidate(s) they loathe. Essentially therefore, as argued by scholars, the elites take advantage of the poverty of the masses to achieve political goals [21]-[24].

2. Ethnicity: a major instrument in the hands of demagogues in Nigeria is ethnicity. It is instructive to note that Nigeria remains one of the most united plural societies, except for politics, that has survived both internally and externally imposed conflicts. A testament to this claim is the prevalent inter-ethnic marriages among the people of Nigeria. Unfortunately, however, politicians, in pursuing their political ambitions, undermine the unity among the various tribes and ethnic groups in Nigeria by projecting political marginalization of their ethnic group by another or more ethnic group and thus appealing to the ethnic sentiments of their people as a way of gaining support for political leadership. In some cases, the political elites have resorted to inciting the members of their ethnic nationalities to war. Key examples here includes the ethnic agitations by ethnic groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), Afenifere Renaissance Group (ARG), Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), et cetera in promoting purely political motives of their sponsors, whether they are their members or not.
3. Religion: Another major instrument in the hands of demagogues in promoting their selfish political interest which undermines democracy in Nigeria is religion. Again, like ethnicity, politicians take advantage of the religious sentiments of voters to manipulate vulnerable Nigerians to make democratic decisions that reflect religious prejudice. In fact, the manipulative power of religion on a sizeable population of Nigerians reflects the truism in Karl Marx's axiom that "religion is the opium of the masses."

VI. CONCLUSION

Democracy as a political nomenclature has been embraced by the African continent. However, if democracy must address the political and socioeconomic problems of Africa, it must be 'salvaged' from the deriding influence of demagogues, the political elites who take advantage of their wealth and political power to undermine fundamental democratic institutions and culture. To achieve this goal, the political elites must demonstrate patriotic commitment to adhering to the constitutions of their countries, show discipline and accountability in providing leadership as well refrain from corruption and religious and ethnic bigotry in the pursuance of their political ambitions.

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