

**A REVIEW OF**  
**REFLECTIONS ON A DECADE OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN NIGERIA**

edited by  
Professor Lai Olurode

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**Reflections on a decade of democratization in Nigeria** is a collection of carefully researched papers edited by Professor Lai Olurode, a Sociology Professor and presently a National Commissioner of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). It is gratifying to note that the 254 page book is supported by the Fredrick Ebert Stiftung, a German foundation that has remained engaged with the diverse struggles to expand Nigeria's democratic space. A reading of the book provides convincing evidence that the collection of scholars who contributed to this book ranks among the most critical and analytical minds who can easily pass as the best interpreters of Nigeria's social and political realities from their different disciplines of law, sociology, political science and the humanities.

It is instructive to note that as damning and as pessimistic as the conclusions drawn appear to be, the authors are cautious by recognizing that democratization itself is an unfolding drama resulting from a complex mix of external and domestic forces the outcome of which cannot be determined a priori. While the conclusions they seem to draw are consistent with the experience of most struggling democracies which oscillates between tendencies of democratic consolidation on the one hand and authoritarian reversals on the other, the recognition that it is essentially a process suggests that possibilities for consolidation exist if the critical stakeholders remain engaged. Indeed, the indeterminate nature of Nigeria's democratic experiment is captured by the contributors in the mix experience, for instance, of successive democratic elections though lacking in credibility, and, at the same time, the modicum of legitimacy of electoral democracy expressed in the absence of clamour for return to military rule. That this is the case despite the frequent involvement of the military in containing crisis as revealed by Azeez Olaniyan's reflection on the military does suggest that democracy is increasingly becoming the only game in town.

What appears as damaging evidence for Nigeria's democracy is the failure of democracy to meet the materials aspirations of the Nigerian people alongside evidence of tension in the polity among the different levels and branches of government as well as the various constituent elements of the Nigerian

federation. Of these concerns, the most critical is the popular expectation that democracy would overcome poverty, deprivation and want, and above all create democratic citizens. What the authors fail to problematise, in my considered opinion, is the very nature of the liberal democratic project. The critical question is: even if all the challenges of “procedural” democracy are addressed can liberal democracy and its economic ideological correlate, neo-liberalism meaningfully address the problems of poverty, unemployment and want?

Although not a direct response to this philosophical question, Lai Olurode’s chapter on “Citizenship” brings into bold relief, the failure of democracy to guarantee meaningful political participation to the citizenry. The major point that he makes, based on array of evidence that include, among others, abridged rights to form political associations, absence of internal democracy in political parties, negation of preference aggregation and absence of improved material conditions for the people bring us face to face with the episodic history of our democracy well captured by the notion of “democracy deficits”.

The issues raised by Lai Olurode at largely theoretical and indicative levels find amplification in the contribution crafted by Layi Erinsho that examines the performance of the social sectors: health, education and housing. The critical perspective offered, though fails to problematise liberal democracy as a project, nevertheless draws attention to the stifling impact of neo-liberalism and the systematic disengagement of the state from the provision of social welfare and services. Consequently, the lot of Nigerians in the context of declining social services is the lack of access to basic social needs and meeting the MDGs which the Nigerian state has committed to. But if one has any doubt that neo-liberalism reduces the possibility of sustained pro-poor policies and people-centred development, the contribution of Isaac Nwaogugu which evaluates the country’s macroeconomic performance during the period under consideration puts the matter beyond reasonable doubt.

My general impression is that **Reflections on a Decade of Democratization in Nigeria** is that it squarely addresses the critical stakeholders in Nigeria’s electoral democracy: functionaries in the executive and the legislature at all levels, civil society organizations, citizens and donors. In so doing, theoretical, historical and comparative insights are offered and firmly anchored on a number of policy prescriptions. I will try to illustrate with some of the contributions in the book. Take, for example, Adele Jinadu’s penetrating insights into the politics of budget which has been at the root of perennial disagreements between the executive and the legislatures at both national and state levels. Jinadu provides a rare insight into the political dynamics underlying the principles of separation of power as modified by the theory of mixed governments or checks and balances. He makes the point, and, quite pungently that both executive and legislative functionaries tend to ignore the fact that separation of powers is anchored on cooperation, complementarity and mutuality of the three branches of government that makes it more appropriate to capture the dynamics more as diffusion of powers and functions rather than a rigid separation of powers.

The perennial disagreements between the executive and legislative branches of government over appropriation laws is explained in terms of inherited tradition of executive dominance despite the inherent pre-eminence of the legislature in the constitutional allocation of responsibilities. Lack of capacity, knowledge and information of budget issues which is even more acute with sub-national

legislatures makes executive dominance more real. However, faced with pressures from their constituents and “concerned with their re-election chances, federal and state legislators may become vocal and uncompromising advocates of the inclusion of funds not provided for in the draft budgets for projects in their constituencies, although they risk the prospects, in so doing, of the president or governor, based on their power of patronage and control over the party machinery, to ensure that they are not renominated by the party for their opposition to executive branch bills” (p.36). The conclusion he draws is quite resounding. If the legislature is to play its role in terms of budgetary responsibilities, other legislative, oversight and investigatory powers, it must work to reverse the legacy of its underdevelopment relative to the executive by building critical capacities and expertise on the budget.

The overbearing role of the executive linked to situation of extreme centralization of power and resources has remained a key challenge in Nigeria’s democracy; it is at the root of the growing culture of impunity and lack of respect for the rule of law. Taking as his point of departure the warning that civil rule does not necessarily equal democratic rule, Akin Oyeboade provides an epigrammatic account of “executive lawlessness” in Nigeria. However, it was the imperial presidency of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria’s former military ruler who returned to the presidency between 1999 – 2007 that he takes to the cleaners. The suffocating impact his rule on other branches of government especially the judiciary, withholding funds belonging to Lagos state local governments, and the desperate efforts to extend his tenure beyond 2007, among others, are well captured in his account.

One would have thought that a clear difference would be registered with the emergence of President Umaru Yar’adua whose mantra was the rule of law. But the failure to fix the power problem, the flowering of corruption as exemplified in the Halliburton bribe, the half-hearted approach to the reform of the electoral process and lack of remarkable progress in the attainment of the MDGs undermined the effectiveness of the Yaradu’a presidency. While the premise of the verdict on the performance of Yar’adu’a cannot be challenged in its entirety, it would have appeared to be more objective if due recognition has been given to his amnesty initiative in the Niger Delta, which though has lost some steam has nevertheless created a window of opportunity for progress in the region.

However, there is a very important sense in which the contribution of Dhikru Yagboyaju deepens the conversation on the issue of over bearing executive power earlier raised Akin Oyeboade, but focuses more on its dire consequences for intra-governmental relations. The contribution draws attention to the implication of over bearing power of the executive, rooted in patronage politics on executive-legislature relationship. The gale of impeachments at state level and the threats of impeachment that characterized executive/legislative relationships at the national level have their roots in the relative weakness of the legislature.

The reflections under review also covers the arena of Nigeria’s external relations and foreign policy where Irene Pogason, using the linkage theory, explores the dynamic relationships between the domestic imperative of peace, economic progress and social welfare and the choices and decisions made by the political leadership during the first decade of restoration of democratic rule. Irene draws our attention to what appears to be a shift by proclamation from Afro-centred foreign policy to a global-centred one, but in practice essentially centred on Africa and the West African sub-region. The key

highlights of Nigeria's foreign policy are correctly identifying as including shuttle diplomacy for debt relief, foreign investments, recovery of stolen public wealth and repositioning the country within the community of nations; leadership role in the engagement with the forum of developed nations under the aegis of the G8; the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) initiative and the accompanying African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM); and conflict resolution initiatives in the West African sub-region – Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra-Leone, Liberia and Equatorial Guinea. Irene concludes, after highlighting the key developments in the Yar'adu'a era which includes a shift from "economic diplomacy" to "citizens diplomacy" and using such a diplomacy to support his 7-point agenda, that good governance and purposeful leadership hold the lever in making foreign policy relevant in the search for answers to domestic economic and social problem.

It is to the credit of the authors and the editor of this book that attempts have been made to explore the diverse experiences of Nigeria with the democratic experience including the inability of democratic politics to radically alter previous patterns of state-society relations. Adeyinka Aderinto and Akeem Akinwale offer helpful insights into the underlying causes and manifestation of conflicts that have appeared to discredit the libertarian environment provided by democratization. This is evident in the way in which spate of conflict and violence in the Niger Delta, the Middle Belt and the numerous cases that are election-related that have severely undermined national security. While they justifiably make a strong case for peace-building and constitutional amendment to amend constitutional provisions such as indigeneity, they fail to clearly articulate how democratic virtues and values can be used in the management of diversity.

But these conflicts we are well reminded are driven by underlying material scarcity and the struggle for survival. As a matter of fact these conflicts are fueled by perception of injustice and the structural distortions that are built into Nigeria's federal system. It is in this regard that I find particularly instructive the observation of Thomas Mättig in the concluding chapter where he argues that the unfinished process of nation-building shows federalism's ugly face. Federalism, he says, "becomes not a level of checks and balances and one of minority protection, but rather an instrument to control access to resources to be squandered in another arbitrary network" (p246).

To conclude, **Reflections on a Decade of Democratization in Nigeria** cannot be found wanting on account of a lack of theoretical depth in virtually all the contributions with all the nuances surrounding the key concepts well articulated. Nor can the contributions be said to have suffered deficits on accounts of illustrations and empirical evidence. Even issues like social science concerns with methodology and objectivity are at the back of the mind of the contributors reading Lai Olurode's compelling introduction to the volume. But we can suggest what we consider missing in the book: a chapter that captures the dilemma of electoral politics, reflections on gender inequity in the electoral process and some reflections on the party system would have provided a more complete picture. Similarly, one would have expected a chapter that attempts in a condensed manner the critical pathways to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. And then a few cases of typographical errors and incomplete sentences and formulation that tended to mar smooth reading here and there. Otherwise, the timing of the publication of this book and its public presentation are wonderful coincidences considering the improved and credible outcome of the 2011 elections which provides opportunity for

stakeholders in Nigeria's electoral democracy to reflect on lessons for the future. To these stakeholders, this book is a compulsory reading.