

# Parliamentarism or Presidentialism and Democratic Practice: Which way for Nigeria?

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## **Abstract**

*Government is the determinate agent of the State designed to express the will of the State aimed at satisfying the interests of the people. The system of government adopted by nations of the world, to accomplish this task could vary, including the Parliamentary and Presidential systems. Ultimately, the required end-result is the satisfaction of the interest of the citizens which is the essence of democratic practice. These popular systems of government have been used differently by nations of the world and have obtained good governance but why is this not the case with Nigeria which has experienced the use of both systems? This study set out to identify the cause of this anomaly, whether in terms of the system type or its implementation. The methodology adopted is majorly qualitative but with an objective analysis of key issues and processes relating to the systems of government. The results of this study will be useful to political leaders in government globally but particularly in developing countries of the world as well as scholars of public administration. Findings revealed that nothing was wrong with either of the two systems of government but rather the will to effectively implement the tenets of either, was defective. Some recommendations were posited to create a hopeful future of success in governance in Nigeria, even with the current presidential system.*

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**Keywords:** *Parliamentary system, Presidential system, Government, The State and Good governance.*

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## **Introduction**

Parliamentarism and Presidentialism are different systems of democratic practice adopted by nations, by choice, in the process of administering their respective states. While other forms of system could exist globally, these two constitute the broad umbrella within which many countries of the world operate.

The Parliamentary system of government is that democratic type where the Executive organ is dependent on the Legislature. The Executive has its source in the legislature and is also responsible to it. It is called parliamentary because its power is vested in the parliament (Legislature). The political party that wins most seats either singly or in coalition with other parties of the legislature, forms government. It then chooses a leader who is the Prime Minister or Chancellor as the Head of Government. The Prime Minister is responsible to the parliament

though however not totally to the disregard of the people because they will have a ‘say’ on the re-election day. The Head of State or President in this system is a titular head as he is not in custody of any political powers.

While there exists different types of parliamentary system of government, two broad types are commonly in practice, namely, Constitutional monarchies which is the type operated in Great Britain and Parliamentary republics, as is found in Ireland. Normally in this system, the position of Head of State is distinguished from that of Head of Government. As an advantage, this divided power structure is deemed to forestall the likelihood of autocracy. However, depending on the nation concerned, there could be modifications of the features. For instance, in South Africa, operating the parliamentary system, the Head of Government is also the Head of State.

There are also models of the operation of the system worldwide. To Lijphart (1999), there are two major types namely, Westminster and Consensus models. The Westminster type which is mostly applicable to the members of the Commonwealth of Nations, adopts the use of more plenary sessions than of committees. An example of this is Great Britain. The Consensus model however adopts the use of more committee sessions than plenary with an example being Spain.

It is worthy of note that with the formation of government by the political party in the majority, the next political party automatically becomes the ‘party in opposition’. This is to serve as a check on the ruling party and put it on its ‘toes’.

Presidential system of government is that democratic type where the executive is separate from the legislature. The President and members of the legislature are voted for, directly by the people. Depending on the electoral system adopted by the country, the elected President becomes both the Head of State and Head of Government. He is dominant but still requires a majority to pull through

his policies in government. To forestall tyranny or autocracy, the principles of ‘Separation of Powers’ as well as ‘Checks and Balance’ are critically required in the Presidential system. This is what Baron de Montesquieu (1748) refers to as *trias politica*. While separation of powers ensures that each of the organs of government has its designated area of influence namely, Legislature for formulating laws, Executive for implementing laws and Judiciary for interpreting laws, likewise, each organ has an oversight function over the others so as to avoid *ultra vires* actions.

There is allowance for countries to vary the features of this Presidential system in their operation. For instance, while the titles of Prime Minister and Premier are normally used in parliamentary system, in South Korea where presidential system is adopted, these two titles are employed but they still report to the President. While some countries adopt the nonmenclature of Ministers, some use Secretaries of State within the same presidential system.

It is worthy of note that while the Prime Minister can be removed from office with a vote of ‘No Confidence’ by the Parliament in the Parliamentary system, the President can be removed from office by the Legislature through impeachment. Also, while critics state that a major disadvantage in the Parliamentary system is the fact that there is likely to be the loss of better hands as Prime Minister as he/she is only appointed from the Ministers of the ruling party, for Presidentialism, it is also posited that it could still end up being highly expensive or autocratic.

Democratic practice exists as a combination of several actions and principles which ensures that the government in place responds to the needs of the people over and beyond just the exercise of voting (Ayoade, 1998). It encompasses free and fair elections, respect for majority rule and minority rights and generally engaging people in local decision-making affecting their quality of life. There should be free access to information, operation of civil service groups as well as monitoring of governmental action to ensure accountability and forestall abuse of process (Adamolekun, 1971).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The basic essence of research is to diagnose the likely cause(s) of a problem and seek possible panacea for it, thereby bridging perceived gap in knowledge (Popoola, 1999).

In this paper, while the system of government is the Independent variable, the Dependent variable is how democratic governance can be achieved with Nigeria as a test case. It is clear that a concept is worth its name to the extent that the sense behind it, the innate connotation is fulfilled. Whether it is a settled concept whereby its existence and what it means is agreeable to all or contested concept whereby its existence is agreeable to all but what it connotes has varied meanings, it should still fulfill its purpose.

The parliamentary system of government is operated by different countries in the world including Gt. Britain and it works well. In the same vein, the presidential system of government is operated by other countries of the world including the United States of America and it is working well. Why is it that Nigeria has tried both systems of government and the issue of democratic governance is still a mirage? This is the critical issue to be unearthed by this study. It therefore seeks to find out if the problem is that of nomenclature, that is, the type of system or that of its operation by the Nigerian state.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- a. To find out if both Parliamentary and Presidential systems of government are positively applicable to both developed and developing countries;
- b. To compare notes in terms of merits and demerits of Nigeria's application of both systems since independence; and
- c. To objectively posit a way forward for Nigeria to successfully achieve good democratic governance via the adoption of a system of government.

### **Literature Review**

Lijphart (1999) believes strongly that there are advantages in the adoption of the parliamentary system because since the Executive is constitutionally part of the Legislature, there will be faster promulgation of laws for the smooth running of the state, with minimal conflicts. With the divided powers between the Head of Government and the Head of State, there would be less potential autocratic governance and it serves as an in-built system check. With the provision of a party in opposition, the ruling party will always be under check and ensure that it is displaying positive performance so as not to be indicted by the opposition party which could spell failure in the subsequent election by the people.

To Montesquieu (1748), with the principle of *trias politica*, the combined powers of the Head of Government and Head of State in one person in the Presidential system would be checked against autocracy and enable the office holder to perform. The uncertain lifespan of the Prime Minister because of the responsibility to the Parliament is taken care of. The President is elected directly by the people and also responsible to them directly. The fact that the Executive is separate from the Legislature would ensure healthy debate and consideration of policies and laws that would be beneficial to the people. While the President is the Head of State, Chief of party, Commander-in-Chief, the checks and balance in place is expected to be effected. The president can veto a legislation but this can be overturned by a two-third majority of the legislators in each chamber.

Democracy which is from the Greek language, is culled from two sources: *Demos*, connoting citizens or common people living within a particular State and *Kratos*, connoting the power to rule. To Popper (1958), Democracy essentially means the rule of the people and that they have that right to rule. Key elements of Democracy include amongst others, the system to choose and replace representatives via elections, active participation of citizens in politics, protection of the rights of citizens and maintenance of the rule of law, forestalling arbitrariness.

Democratic practice essentially entails a mixture of the essence of democracy and some measure of dictatorship. This is where the essence of democracy means the rule of the common people but the measure of dictatorship operates because the organized few determines the common people. This is what some scholars call the 'Exclusion principle'.

So, democratic practice is a convenient product of both situations, witnessing a constant struggle between society and the State. The level of dictatorship which is the indispensable control function connotes the degree of regulation, centralization of political power and level of brutality while the level of democracy displays the level of cultural compatibility, tolerance, respect for individual rights and participation. There is an inverse relationship between the level of dictatorship and level of democracy and this differs across societies. A stable democratic practice witnesses a balanced combination of democracy and dictatorship components that it reaches a point of political equilibrium. It can also vary across internal and external governmental relations.

So, in practice, pure democracy (in terms of the rule of the common people) does not exist. It is the point of acceptable political equilibrium that matters. Is this achievable by the type of system of government or the implementation of the adopted type? This is the question.

### **Theoretical framework**

A theory essentially guides an investigation (Goode and Hatt, 1986) in that it enables the data in a study to be juxtaposed within its framework to enable a conclusion as to the fulfilment or otherwise of the tenets of the relationship adjudged by the theory.

The field of democratic theory is contested in that while some scholars view it in terms of the subfield of political theory (Pennock, 1979) concerned with the examination of the definition and meaning of democracy, others view it in a much more encompassing basis (Gagnon, 2019). To Schumpeter (1976), democratic theory can be viewed along five (5) explanatory planes namely, the *What, Where, Who, When and Why* of democracy.

The *What* plane views democracy in terms of competitive elections with legitimacy demanding accountability and effective representation. This springs up the point that there could be variety of models of democracy like Representative, Participatory or Deliberative democracy indicating areas of emphasis.

The *Where* plane stresses politics of the State as the primary objective (Pateman, 1970). Here, it is perceived to take place in different platforms. The *Who* plane emphasizes the interest of future generations (Bennette, 2017). It concentrates on who constitutes *Demos* and how it is composed. It stresses a broader perspective of democracy. The *When* plane views democracy as an ancient idea, not a transcendental abstract phenomenon. It is in a form of intellectual history.

The *Why* plane is the most pre-eminent perspective of democratic theory. It entails the principles of autonomy, equality and freedom (Dahl, 2000). It stresses the consequences of democratic governance in the forms of general freedom, maintenance of essential rights, self determination, absence of tyranny, political equality and prosperity.

So, to Pennock, 1979, and Warren, 2008, amongst others, democratic theory is a field characterized by its multiplicity of attributes including aspects of political theory, seeking non-violent resolution of problems, open decision making and generally seeking how life can be better for all.

Since the objective of adopting any system of government is to ensure better life for all, at least the majority, the Democratic theory will be used for the purpose of this paper.

### **Methodology of the Study**

The methodology adopted in this study is essentially qualitative. This is because secondary data has been derived from textbooks, journals, reports, internet sources as well as content analysis. The data are relevant to both the Independent and Dependent variables of the study as they relate to the test case, Nigeria. This data has been analytically used to unravel the problem of study so as to raise valid recommendations aimed at its resolution.

### **Nigeria's Experience of Parliamentary System of Government**

Expectedly, with the independence of Nigeria in October, 1960, it was most convenient and seamless to adopt the system of government operated by its departing colonial ruler, Gt. Britain. Thus, Nigeria took off as an independent state with the parliamentary system of government.

Arising from the elections of 1959, through a winning coalition of Northern Peoples Congress, NPC and National Council for Nigerian Citizens, NCNC, NPC formed government with Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe being Governor-General and Sir Tafawa Balewa as Prime Minister. By the republican constitution of 1963, Dr. Azikiwe became President and Head of State while Sir Balewa remained as Prime Minister and Head of Government.

In the first republic, from the Western regional crises in 1962 to the electoral malpractices of 1964/5, it was clear that the operation of the parliamentary system was heading for the rocks. It seemed that the Nigerian political leaders that succeeded the British rulers either did not prepare sufficiently for rulership apart from merely taking over from the foreign rulers or they did not fully understand the tenets of the system of government being operated. It took some time for Dr.

Azikiwe to realize that even as President of the nation, it was Sir Balewa that had powers to operate. The Head of State was simply a titular head (Adebayo, 1986).

The ethnic and regional differences between the three and later, four regions (North, West, East and Midwest) reared up their ugly heads post independence (Ogbeide, 2021). The coalition between NPC and NCNC which led to the formation of national government because NPC could not secure the majority singly, soon had internal cracks. NCNC and Action Group, AG, could have been able to form a coalition to secure a majority for government but this did not come to pass due to mutual suspicion between both parties and protagonists.

It was therefore not shocking that with the failure of the political class and the opportunity seized by the military through a coup on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1966, the first Nigerian republic of parliamentary system of government collapsed.

### **Nigeria's Experience of Presidential System of Government**

With the failure of parliamentarism in 1966 and the resultant incursion of military dictatorship and the civil war that lasted from 1967 to 1970, under the headship of General Yakubu Gowon, democracy suffered a major setback.

With the military coup that ousted General Gowon in 1975, General Murtala Mohammed became Head of State and after an aborted coup in 1976, was replaced by General Olusegun Obasanjo who steered the ship of State until October, 1979.

During the transition programme to civilian rule by General Obasanjo, the likely causes of the failure of the first republic were attributed to the parliamentary system of government which was operated. There was then the view that Nigeria, having tried the system used by the past colonial rulers, Britain and failed, could try the system used by United States of America which was formerly a colony of Britain, the Presidential system of government. Hence, with the inception of the second republic in 1979, the Presidential system was adopted and Alhaji Shehu Shagari of National Party of Nigeria, NPN, emerged as President. Unfortunately, after the first term of four years, arising from alleged electoral malpractices, a military coup took place in December, 2003 bringing in Major General Muhamadu Buhari as Head of State.

In 1985, another coup ousted Major General Buhari and saw General Ibrahim Babangida as Head of State. Between 1992 and 1993 in the process of planning a return to civilian rule, General Babangida put in place a botched third republic whereby some civilians were incorporated in the military rulership. With the annulled general elections of 1993 where Chief M. K. O. Abiola was assumed to have won the presidential seat, the setting up of Interim National Government headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan, the military takeover in November, 1993 by General Sani Abacha, the military dictatorship subsisted until General Abdulsalami Abubakar (successor of General Abacha after his death in 1998), transited the government to civilian rule on May 29, 1999.

Since 1999, marking the beginning of Nigeria's fourth republic, the presidential system which commenced in 1979 and was truncated by the military interregnum, has continued to date.

## **Position of Blame**

With the expectations of democracy, the citizen's interests are supposed to be the focus of those in government, to satisfy. For good governance, the two-fold function of the State should be ensured by government, namely,

- i. The maintenance of the security of the citizens (the safety function); and
- ii. The maintenance of the welfare of the citizens (the development function).

With a cursory look at the operation of government between 1960 and 1966 when the parliamentary system was adopted in Nigeria, was this two-fold function of the State successfully performed by government? The answer is obviously in the negative, hence, the republic failed.

Similarly, looking at the operation of government particularly from 1999 to date (a period of twenty three years) when the presidential system has consistently been operated, aside from the stint of operation between 1979 and 1983, has the two-fold function of the State been creditably performed? Again, looking at the prevailing situation in Nigeria, the answer is also in the negative.

Then, what is wrong? It should therefore be clear that it is not a system-type failure but an implementation-failure.

## **Discussion of Findings**

It is certain that no political system in the world will be expected to be perfect, that is, devoid of some form of weaknesses or the other. However, from examples of countries operating the parliamentary system of government to date, including Gt. Britain, The Netherlands, Canada, Italy, Japan, amongst others, the government has accomplished great heights in fulfilment of the requirements of the State in favour of the people with which power actually inheres.

In the same respect, there are many countries operating the presidential system of government, including United States of America, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, amongst others, where government has accomplished some reasonable level of democratic heights in favour of the people.

Then, what is the problem with the Nigerian case?

In Nigeria's first republic when parliamentarism was operated, it would seem that the political class was more interested in succeeding the colonial officials rather than understanding the tenets of the system of government. The President, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, for instance did not understand early that it was the Prime Minister, Sir Tafawa Balewa that had powers over the military.

The coalition between the NPC and NCNC soon broke down after commencement of government and the three major parties (NPC, NCNC and AG) rather than work together to ensure dividends of democracy reached the people, engaged in mutual antagonisms. Both intra- and inter-party strife held sway and the electoral process was infested with elaborate malpractices. This degenerated to the level which culminated in the military take-over in January, 1966, marking the demise of the first republic.

Thinking that it was the type of system that was problematic, at the commencement of the second republic in 1979, the presidential system was adopted, taking cue largely from the American type, though some aspects that could have made it less expensive, were not adopted.

Just after the first four-year term in 1983, the high degree of electoral malpractices gave way to the incursion of the military in 1983. By this time, no visible dividends of democratic practice had been enjoyed by the people.

After the military interregnum in 1999, though with a botched third republican attempt of 1992 to 1993, the fourth republic has been on since 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1999. While it is commendable that there is continuity in the civilian democratic rule since 1999, the period has been bedeviled with varying levels of problems affecting the people generally. The fear of incessant military *coup detat* has been reduced but the electoral process at the four-yearly occasions has degenerated from the level of ballot snatching, burning of polling booths, falsification of collated results to vote-buying, even in foreign currencies. These have been noticed since 1999 up till the primary elections in 2022, conducted by the various political parties in preparation for the 2023 general elections.

The two-fold function of the State expected to be expressed by government still remains the ability to maintain the safety of citizens as well as their welfare. To date, in spite of the change in government from Peoples Democratic Party, PDP to All Progressives Congress, APC, at the national level and other changes at the state level, government has not fared well in accomplishing the two-fold task. In contemporary Nigeria, the level of insecurity, banditry, kidnapping and terrorism is alarming to the extent that citizens are in great fear. The cost of living is constantly experiencing an upward swing leading to a worsening living standard of the citizens.

So, the expected dividends of democracy are not being enjoyed by the people.

## **Conclusion**

Recounting the Democratic theory adopted to analyse this study, government should seek non-violent resolution of problems, endorse open decision-making and generally seek how life can be better for all. Also, recounting the Objectives of this Study, it is clear that both parliamentary and presidential systems of government are applicable to developed and developing states of the world.

In comparative terms, since the operation of both systems in Nigeria, the benefits from them have been far outweighed by the demerits. Some countries of the world operate the parliamentary system and have good governance while some others operate the presidential type and also have good governance.

The excuse of the expensive nature of one or the other is untenable since either system can be adjusted to suit peculiarities of the milieu. It is clear therefore that the non-impressive story of Nigeria to date is not in the type of system but in the capacity and willingness of the leadership to operate either system optimally to achieve the expected benefits in favour of the generality of the people.



## Recommendations

Based on the conclusion above, some relevant recommendations are posited as follows:

1. Since Nigeria operated Parliamentary system of government for only six years (1960 to 1966) but has operated the Presidential counterpart for a total of twenty seven years (1979 to 1983 and 1999 to date), it can stick to Presidentialism;
2. The electoral process should be further sanitized to make it explicitly free, fair, non-violent and credible;
3. The expensive structure of the presidential system can be curtailed, through constitutional modifications for instance, Vice President, being also Senate President, Uni-cameral legislature at both federal and state levels and reduction of size of cabinet;
4. Enjoining political parties to operate on the basis of explicit political ideologies, spinning off credible party manifestoes; and
5. Ensuring inclusiveness of the generality of the people, taking cognisance of the country's heterogeneity.

The accomplishment of all above will translate into a very reasonable level of maintenance of security and welfare of the people.

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