

National Assembly and Cost-Effective Representative Democracy in Nigeria: The Way Forward

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Abstract

With the return to democratic rule in 1999, the cost of governance has continued to spiral out of control. The economy cannot sustain these huge costs, especially as it affects the financial implications of managing members of the National Assembly. The paper is an attempt at finding ways of getting the Nigerian National Assembly to take another look at the exorbitant financial cost of maintaining the legislature at the National Assembly. The research adopted the qualitative approach to research using the conceptual method thus, data from secondary sources were utilized. As part of the findings of this work, is that a bill has to be drafted by civil society organizations with the support of organized labour and its affiliates, with the Nigerian media giving the process adequate coverage and support to ensure that the lawmakers review downward their financial package and thereby giving room for good governance.

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Background to the Study

Nigeria returned to democratic governance on the 29th of May, 1999 after elections conducted by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC). The elections were carried out under the military regime of General Abdul Salami Abubakar upon which he handed over power to the winner of the said elections. The Nigerian state continued with the federal presidential system of government with a bicameral legislature at the federal level referred to as the National Assembly (NA) while adopting a unicameral approach at the State level called State House of Assembly (SHA). The legislature is the arm of government primarily charged with law making and oversight duties (Inuwa, 2015). Comprising of men and women elected to represent their respective constituencies from all over the country. They operate to ensure harmony in governance through the principle of checks and balances.

However, this paper is concerned with a different challenge and that is the cost of maintaining the elected men and women of the NA as well as their long silence on the problem. With the country only recently exiting from recession, the President and vice presidents initiative by cutting down their take-home pay upon assumption of office is in tune with the economic situation. So, how do we as a people get the NA to also get a financial package worthy of the realities of the Nigerian state? As a methodology, the paper will adopt the qualitative type of research via the conceptual approach. This involves utilizing already existing data from various sources on the subject matter. It is from examining these data that we would draw our conclusions. It is an attempt at bringing to the fore ways Nigerians could effectively stamp there will on the National Assembly, especially as it affects their very huge recurrent costs.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

According to (Arowolo & Aluko, 2010, Dahl, 1989, Fukuyama, 1992, Prah, 2007) democracy is seen as the ethically acceptable and most appropriate type of political system created by man. Mainly because it promotes constitutionalism, universal adult suffrage, human rights, majority rule as well as minority rights amongst others. Then one would wonder why the outcry on the current funding of democracy, with emphasis on the National Assembly. This would be better understood from the context of (Imhonopi & Urim, 2011a & 2011b) were they posit that corruption, lack of accountability and expensive nature of our democracy among other factors are capable of collapsing positives of democracy for the country. The key thing to note here is the expensive nature of our democracy. This is not perpetuated by corruption and lack of accountability by the NA, which has led to their inability to justify their huge pay that is taking its toll on the Nigerian economy nor have they shown real efforts at reviewing their financial package. According to (Inuwa, 2018)

From the widely publicized disparity in the financial packages of senators and Honourable members with that of their counterparts in Africa, Western Europe, and North America, the original idea of service becomes but a mirage. It has been alleged that the financial benefits of being in the National Assembly is the primary reason politicians aspire to be there. This could be supported with

the fact that despite the call for a review, nothing much has been heard from them. The truth is accommodating the financial costs of the National Assembly is simply not sustainable.

The national Assembly has made several headlines in the media for leadership tussles, petty party rivalries and alleged emergence of groups within the legislature to serve as well as protect their group interests. What happened to serving the public interest?"

At the extremes we could consider (Ochunu, 2010) contemplation that the current democratic system operated is badly damaged and in need of a serious reversal before it consumes the Nigerian state. It is clear that the NA in Nigeria is a heavy burden on the Nigerian people. In line with this thinking, (Mailafiya, 2010) asserts that the democratic structures like the executive, legislature and judiciary are characterized by among others money politics and financial misappropriation. The one time Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) now Emir of Kano his Royal Highness Sanusi Lamido Sanusi pointed out that the NA expenditure consumes 25% of Nigerias' budget when much of the funds could have been expended on the much needed capital investments (Sun, 2010). In comparison to the cost of the United States Congress which stands at 0.2% of federal spending as reported by Empowered News. According to (Mailafiya, 2010) the NA members are not only among the highest paid in the world but also that the Senator in Nigeria receives a higher financial package than the United States President.

The theoretical framework adopted for the paper is the social conflict theory which could be traced to the works of Karl Marx (1818-1883). Based on this theory of conflict, materialist interpretation of history creates conflict. It is a position on social arrangements, a dialectical means of analysis, and a political arrangement of revolution and or reform at the very least (Marx, 1971). Work and the work people are doing are at the center of materialist interpretation of history. With emphasis on work that influences life as regards provision of basic amenities.

Marx believes the manner in which work is organized (socially and technologically) in production has a powerful effect on every sphere of society and insists that all things of value in society come from human labour. He insists the working people are involved in the making of society and fashioning the circumstances for their own survival. Most of his work was on applying materialist ideal of society on capitalism; phase of social and economic development which he saw being central in nineteenth century Europe. The main focus of capitalism in his view is private property, meaning a system of controlling capital by a few in the society. This creates classes which are opposed to one another; the two broad opposed classes are bourgeoisie, and the proletariat. The former is the owner of capital and the latter is the worker, equip with only his labour which is negotiated with the capitalist.

Bourgeoisie make money by engaging in unfair contracts with the proletariat and hence, exploitation sets in. There is a direct connection between economic exploitation and political oppression because they use economic advantage to achieve control of the state

for the purpose of using it to serve the economic interest of the bourgeoisie. Because of these factors and more Marx saw exploitative nature in economic activities of capitalism to being the actual basis for which the framework of intellectual, political, and social perception is framed (Wallerstein, 1980). Based on Marx's view the bourgeoisie (National Assembly) wanting to maintain the disadvantaged pay disparities between them and the proletariat as well as serve their own interests would most likely resist moves to changing the narrative. This is something being witnessed in Nigeria. Thus, according to him the people would have to revolt or in the very least fight the oppressive system. As long as we the people do nothing they will continue not being accountable. Thus, this theoretical framework will be used within the context of constitutionality to stamp the peoples will upon the National Assembly.

Applying Direct Democracy Referendum

This is a method of allowing electorates to have a direct vote in decision making. Citizens directly participate in determining constitutional, legislative and political issues. The options are usually for the people to accept or reject. Referendum encourages mass participation on matters affecting citizens. It is unfortunate in the very least that referendum is has not been captured in the Nigerian constitution. It was not only dubious for the drafters to have omitted it but perhaps also an effort at ensuring citizens do not have direct votes on policy matters of the country. Our elected representatives (legislature) are there to serve the people however the issue is are they? And the answered is in the negative (Whyte, 2017).

Section 14(2) of the Nigerian constitution (1999) clearly explains that the legitimacy of the constitution is derived from the citizens. With this it becomes unfathomable that citizens cannot participate directly in deciding very important issues that affect their own progress. The referendum option seems to have been taken off the table. Citizens would have to find other means of stamping their will.

Citizens Bill

Initiating a bill can be done by anyone but introducing it to the senate or floor of the house requires a senator and member respectively. Any person could draft a bill seeking to review the enormous cost of maintaining the senators and members of the house of representative. A constituent could also convince their representative to present same at the floor of the house but the question is how do you get the house to adopt it? Introducing bills (whether new or amendment) to the national assembly is a good way of bring positive change as well as increasing citizen participation. However, when such bills try to change the status quo of the national assembly how then do you get them to stamp their approval? The reality in Nigeria is that this right to initiate bills is simply a mirage of direct democracy, nothing more nothing less.

Recall

The recall is a principle of direct democracy which allows citizens the power to sack their senator or representative at the legislature, by recalling him from the legislature.. Recall entails garnering enough signatures from constituents of the affected legislative representative to satisfy the constitutional provisions of the law. Upon satisfying the provisions of the law the electoral umpire, in this case the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) would set a date for registered voters of the said constituency to come and confirm or reject the recall through voting. The recall is a political weapon that could be effectively used as a threat on the legislature. Organized Labour and Civil society organizations could effectively utilize the recall option in Nigeria. This is due to their structure, appeal and coverage.

Labour and Civil Society Organizations

Civil society organizations have been in the vanguard for democratization in Nigeria and when that was achieved they are now playing various roles in trying to ensure good governance among other things. The influence of such organizations could help bring about a change of heart on the part of the legislature regarding their huge financial burden on the tax payer. With the right bill am sure Nigerians would support them openly, even if it means marching on to the National Assembly to submit such a draft and to also show the backing of the people.

The Nigerian Labour Congress and its affiliates as stakeholders can come in as pressure groups to back such a bill from the civil society. We all know the strength of the Nigerian labour congress and their doggedness on matters of interest to their members. The truth is what affects the state affects Labour.

Discussion of Findings

From the above, it is clear that the referendum option would have been the best if not for its exclusion from the constitution. Perhaps for fears of secession, and or to maintain the bourgeoisie class interests in the Nigerian state. With referendum not being an option and the argument of a class conflict, change would have to be imposed by the people and not delivered to them. The citizens' bill is a viable option of getting the legislature to serve the public interest. Even at that the principle of initiation of a bill is not automatic but would have to be followed or backed by the right amount of influence or pressure.

The recall is a constitutional provision that could serve most appropriately towards getting our law makers to serve the greater good. It could be efficiently and effectively used as a pressure tool only by the right bodies or groups. Getting a body with the capacity to not only present but also pursue a sustained agenda for the downward review of the cost of the National Assembly would require bodies like the civil society organizations and the Nigerian labour congress and its affiliates.

Recommendations

A conceptual paper of this nature would have to give recommendations on the way forward. Below is therefore, our recommendation on how to get the National Assembly to cut its huge financial costs on the Nigerian tax payers.

The attainment of democratization in Nigeria in 1999 should not be the end of the matter, civil society organizations that played significant roles in the democratization process must stand once again to save our country by championing the call for a cost effective National Assembly. Civil society organizations have the good will, capacity, integrity and moral obligation to take the lead in the struggle for a better democracy in Nigeria.

It is our recommendation that organized labour and its affiliates must be part of the support group for any move to pressurize the National Assembly in cutting their budget. History has shown that organized labour is a success story.

The role of the media is pertinent to the success of such a move thus, the media has to be carried along on the fight for a better Nigeria. This could be achieved through courtesy visits to media houses to solicit for support and coverage. The media has the capacity to shine the searchlight on politicians and the stages the bill is subjected to by such politicians.

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