

Pressure Groups and the Democratic Process in Nigeria (1979-1993)

ADESOJI ABIMBOLA

Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contributions made by pressure groups to the democratic process in Nigeria. The paper attempts a conceptualization of pressure groups and democracy. It also examines the relevance of pressure groups generally, as well as their attitude to and participation in the democratic process in particular. The specific contributions of these groups to the democratic process as well as obstacles to their effectiveness are discussed. The paper concludes by advocating the need for the groups to achieve a wider spread and to participate more actively in the democratic process as ways of becoming more relevant in the democratic process.

Keywords: democracy, pressure groups, unions

INTRODUCTION

The term *pressure group* is used interchangeably with such terms as *interest groups* or *organized interests*. Henry Ehrman (1972:468-488) defines pressure groups as voluntary associations of individuals who band together for the defence of a particular interest. *Interest* in this sense is a conscious desire to have a public policy or the authoritative allocation of values, and to move in a particular, general or specific direction.

The term pressure group is however loosely used here to include trade or industrial unions, professional associations and any other associations whose focus extends beyond the realization of the parochial interests of their members. Barber (1975:198-199) categorized pressure groups generally into two, namely *defensive pressure groups* and *promotional pressure groups*. While defensive pressure groups are basically concerned with the protection of their members' interests and have a defined membership, promotional pressure groups are concerned with promoting some general public interest as opposed to their own self-interest. Trade or industrial unions, professional associations and human rights associations therefore fall into the category of promotional pressure groups, otherwise referred to here as functional pressure groups.

According to John and Erna Perry (1976:584-585), interest groups or pressure groups are many and varied. Some are formally organized, others are not. However, the more formally organized tend to be the more durable whereas those informally organized usually dissolve after the crisis that originated them

is resolved. The longevity or durability of these groups, their consistency as well as their high sense of commitment to the realization of set goals all contribute to making them functional.

Functional pressure groups can therefore be defined as those pressure or interest groups whose activities are not limited or restricted to the promotion and protection of parochial interests but who are vocal and determined in pursuing policies and goals that have relevance to citizens in their own society. Viewed within the context of political participation, such groups often criticize unpopular or unfavourable government policies, organized conferences, seminars, rallies, and even demonstrations or protest marches to express their displeasure and, in some cases, to suggest alternatives to programmes or policies which they consider unfavourable. Functional groups work towards sensitizing and mobilizing the populace against unpopular acts of government. In this respect, mention could be made of such groups as the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), human rights organisations such as the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), as well as pro-democracy groups such as the Campaign for Democracy (CD), Academic Staff Union of Universities, (ASUU), National Association of Nigerian Students, and the Press.

Democracy as a concept has been defined in various ways and given various interpretations. The generalized or loose nature of the concept would account for this. However, according to Adeyinka Banwo (1997:40-50), the basic features of democracy which serve as a consensus among the contending perspectives on what democratic system ought to entail or manifest include the right to elections, a representative form of governance and freedom of choice, respect for the rule of law and equality before the law, accountability, the guarantee of the rights of individuals, an independent judiciary, as well as a decentralization or delegation of power and authority between all tiers of government.

Obviously, functional pressure groups have contributed to the democratic process in Nigeria just as some may have contributed to the problem of democratization in Nigeria, either overtly or covertly. In the view of Obasanjo and Mabogunje (1992:23), pressure groups are to a very large extent necessary and healthy for a thriving democratic culture to evolve. Obasanjo and Mabogunje are, however, also of the opinion that such groups must not be seen to be operating under the influence of foreign bodies. Moreover, the leadership under which these groups operate some of the time, the prevailing situation in the country, the organizational structure of these groups as well as the general mood of the society determine, to a very large extent, the effectiveness of these groups and profoundly influence their contributions to the democratic process.

1. RELEVANCE OF PRESSURE GROUPS

Pressure groups are undoubtedly relevant in terms of the functions which they perform. These functions, according to Henry Ehrman (1972:488-490), include managing the flow of influence between government and the governed by participating in the political competition of a given system. Through this process, a government is able to ascertain reactions to its policies. Even so, pressure groups do not seek responsibility for the direct management of government, but reflect the concerns of the society in which they operate. They sometimes destroy an existing consensus as well as prepare for a new one. Their part in providing a balance between stability and change within a governmental system remains important. Pressure groups not only articulate the demands of their potential or actual membership, they also serve as outlets for the social energies of their members. Furthermore, through concrete and continuous group campaigns, the socialization of the citizen by pressure groups often proves more effective and lasting. In some cases, they supplement the functions of political parties while they also seek to meet conflicting claims and provoke favourable government decisions (Ehrman 1972:490).

The techniques frequently commonly employed by pressure groups to achieve their aims include campaigns, demonstrations or marches, and strikes. Specifically in Nigeria, pressure groups like the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), as well as National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), have made themselves relevant not only in terms of what they have been able to achieve for their members but also for the larger society. The NLC, for instance, successfully negotiated a new minimum wage with the Shagari administration in 1981 after an effective general strike. Similarly NMA has consistently been in the forefront of negotiating an exclusive and improved salary package for its members. In the same vein, the opposition to the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programme, spearheaded by NANS in 1989 led to the introduction of SAP relief packages for Nigerians, particularly the working class.

However, political developments in the country in the 1980s and early 1990s have not only toughened some pressure groups but have also resulted in the emergence and growth of new ones. This development has led to the increased involvement of more assertive pressure groups in efforts to attain and sustain a stable democratic order in the country.

2. ATTITUDES TO AND PARTICIPATION IN THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

The attitude of pressure groups to the democratic process and their participation in it depend to a very large extent on developments over a particular period and the resultant conditions. Even before the attainment of political independence,

organized labour has had cause to participate in party politics, particularly with its affiliation to the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) in 1944. The outcome of this affiliation was the success of the general strike of 1945. A similar situation came about in 1964 when workers not only demanded improved wages but also made a number of political demands. The climax of this development was the formation of the Nigerian Labour Party by Michael Imoudu and Eskor Toyo in 1964. Even though the party did not have much following, owing to the regional nature of political parties formed during the period, it nonetheless participated in the controversial elections of 1964 (Olukoju 1997:337-350).

Despite the decision of the Nigerian Labour Congress that its leaders should be non-partisan in the emerging political process in 1979, individual members and officers who were interested in politics were allowed to participate freely in the political process, even though they did not receive overt corporate backing from the congress. The decision to be non-partisan must have arisen out of the need to protect the new-found freedom of the congress, particularly in the face of the towering military presence in the Obasanjo administration. Consequently, many labour leaders contested and won election to various offices under the auspices of different political parties. This development notwithstanding, moves were made to pursue anti-labour policies and to introduce anti-labour legislation, though without any success.

As a result of the failure to get the Nigerian Labour Party registered in 1989, the NLC was involved in an unprincipled and incoherent affiliation and romance with the Social Democratic Party. This affiliation, which probably arose from a desire to realize the selfish ambition of Pascal Bafyau, the one-time President of the NLC and several labour leaders, did not benefit organized labour in any way and even contributed to a reversal of the political gains made by organized labour in the recent past. In contrast, however, articulate and determined labour leaders like Frank Ovie Kokori and Milton Dabibi emerged during this period, not only to restore credibility to trade unions but also to prove that “the economic power of labour could be used as a bargaining weapon in the political arena”. (Olukoju 1997:348) Specifically, Kokori and Dabibi strongly believe that the NUPENG was able to use the strike option to pressure the military to reverse its unjust annulment of the presidential election of June 12, 1993. Generally speaking, therefore, organized labour, whether in the form of the unions or as individuals within the unions, has a tendency to participate in the democratic process by contesting elections, supporting candidates for election or identifying with a party or parties with a similar ideology and orientation (Olukoju 1997:337-350).

The genesis of explicit human rights activities can be traced to 1987, when the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) was formed. From 1987 onwards, a staggering number of human rights organisations had been formed as Non-Governmental Organizations. These included the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), formed in 1989, the Constitutional Right Project (CRP), the Universal Defenders of Democracy (UDD), the National Association

of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), and the Human Right Africa, all formed after the abortive coup d'état of April 1990. Traditionally, these human rights organisations have been mainly involved in the campaign to protect human rights, highlighting the incidence of human rights abuses, and seeking redress or restitution for victims of such abuses, mainly through the due process of law. However the emergence of the dictatorial tendencies of the Babangida administration and the manipulation of the democratic process led to a radical transformation of these HROs and the manifestation of a greater interest in political matters *per se*. The climax of this development was the emergence in November 1991 of the Campaign for Democracy as an umbrella organization for all HROs and pro-democracy groups. The CD sought to pursue strictly political questions left unattended to by most of its constituent member-groups and other democratic agencies. Its struggle centred around two main issues, namely: (1) increasing pressure on the Babangida junta to keep to its hand-over date of January 2, 1993, which was eventually shifted to August 27, 1993; (2) the campaign to convene a Sovereign National Conference, SNO, where the national question could be discussed and the foundations of a new Nigeria laid. Beyond these issues, the CD was the mobilizing force in the protest against the annulment of the June 12 election results. The political commitment of the CD was further clarified by its declaration that:

although it is not a political platform the CD has a political interest that rests on the restoration of democracy and the transformation of Nigerian society, hence the CD shall set up a political commission to draw up a minimum politico-economic programme (Mimiko 1995:155).

The major preoccupation of the Academic Staff Union of Universities, ASUU, has been with pressurizing the government into ensuring the adequate funding of research and accommodation for students, the maintenance or safeguarding of university autonomy, and improvement in salaries. The ASUU has nevertheless had cause to become involved in covert political activities. The progressive nature of the ASUU has probably accounted for this. The glorious era of the ASUU was witnessed during the tenure of Dr. Attahiru Jega, and later that of Dr. Asisi Asobie. It could be inferred that the strike action embarked on by the ASUU between May and November 1993, even though it was primarily due to the unwillingness of the government to honour its 1992 agreement with the union, smacked of political involvement on the part of the ASUU. This was clearly manifested in the demand made by the union for the revalidation of the annulled elections of June 12, 1993 by the Babangida regime (Akinyanju 1997:65-73). In the same vein, the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) had actively associated themselves with the maintenance of democratic principles in Nigeria. The NBA has not only consistently advocated the independence of the judiciary but has also advocated respect for the rule of law and equality before the law, all of which constitute the bedrock of democracy. The growing radical inclination of the NBA particularly under Alao Aka-Bashorun and Mrs. Priscilla Kuye eventually made the Bar

Association a target of attack on the part of the adventurous military regime of Ibrahim Babangida. The outcome was the comatose state of the NBA from 1992 to 1995. (Mimiko 1995:150-166).

Under the auspices of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) and later the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Nigerian students have not only displayed a positive attitude to the democratic struggle but have been fully involved in it since the 1960s. The repudiation of the Anglo-Nigerian defence pact of 1962 owed a lot to the struggle waged by students. The philosophical basis of the students' democratic struggle is contained in the Charter of Demands of the National Association of Nigerian Students, which focuses on the revolutionary perspective that democracy is not possible unless the exploiter class is overthrown. The body has also constantly kicked against the violation of the constitutional rights of the people while advocating the restoration of popular democracy (Idika 1997:77-86).

Moreover, the emergence of a radical, progressive and activist press has undoubtedly given further impetus to the democratic process in the country. Mention could be made of such newspapers and magazines as *The News*, *Tempo* and *Tell*. Their biting criticisms of the inherent contradictions in the Babangida transition programme eventually led to their proscription, seizure and even the arrest and detention of the journalists involved at various points in time. Their strong desire to give a fillip to the democratic process led to the emergence of what has been described as "guerilla journalism" (Mimiko 1995:150-166).

3. CONTRIBUTION OF FUNCTIONAL PRESSURE GROUPS TO THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

There is no doubt that, in one form or another, progressive groups have contributed to the democratic process in Nigeria, just as a few of them have also constituted an obstacle in the path of the democratic process. The dismal performance of organized labour between 1984 and 1988 notwithstanding, the unions still succeeded in recording some achievements. For instance, the Chiroma-led NLC identified with the Nigerian students in their struggle for a better educational environment. More importantly, the trade unions participated effectively in the political debate of 1986. In the same vein, Abiodun A. A. has observed with reference to organized labour that:

Its articulated position for a political arrangement of "socialist organization" that could bring Nigeria to the path of social progress remained the hallmark of the trade union movement's involvement with other constituencies of democratic struggles... (Abiodun 1997:115).

However, the poor leadership provided by Pascal Bafyau from 1988 to 1993, in sharp contrast to the exemplary leadership of Hassan Sunmonu, weakened the organized labour. In consequence, organized labour could not mobilize

Nigerians against the glaring injustices of the period, as a social movement would have done. The Campaign for Democracy (CD) eventually filled this gap.

Human rights organizations have undoubtedly contributed meaningfully to the maintenance of democratic zeal in the country. Apart from organizing conferences, seminars, symposia and lectures on the maintenance of democracy in the country with a view to sensitizing and mobilizing Nigerians, in extreme and serious cases it has also challenged government attempts to abort democracy or stifle the democratic process. This they have done by organizing mass protests and civil disobedience campaigns. For instance, between July 5 and 7 1993 the CD commenced direct political action by calling for mass protests against the annulment of the presidential election of June 12 1993. The violent manner in which the protests were put down led to a change of tactics with the adoption of a campaign of civil disobedience. Sola Iji (1997:74-88) has rightly observed that the pro-democracy agitation anchored by the CD and other human rights organizations contributed in part to the unceremonious exit of General Ibrahim Babangida from power in August 1993. Mobilization is thus a potential tool for the achievement of desired objectives by the human rights organizations.

For its part, the National Association of Nigerian Students has at different times exercised their constitutionally granted freedom of expression by mobilising in 1986 against a 25 kobo increase in the price of petroleum. Similarly, in 1989 the student body was at the forefront of a popular uprising against the dehumanizing effect of the Structural Adjustment Programme pursued by the Babangida regime (Idika 1997:79-88). The SAP relief packages that came afterward were visible evidence of the success of the protests.

Even in the second republic which lasted from 1979 to 1983 the undemocratic actions and political intolerance of the political actors of the period did not go unchallenged. A good example of such undemocratic acts was the illegal deportation of an opposition leader, Alhaji Shugaba Abdulrahman Darman, in 1980. Adeyinka Banwo (1997:44) has posited that

Opposition to these undemocratic practices was spear-headed by the students, members of the intelligentsia and workers through their main bodies like the NANS, ASUU and the NLC in a new-found alliance. This was complemented by support from progressive politicians, lawyers, journalists and other professionals.

Other functional professional groups like the NMA and NBA have consistently commented on national issues with a view to influencing the direction of policy. The NBA, for instance, has constantly criticized the inclusion of ouster clauses in decrees which have effectively thrown out judgments made by courts, thus constituting a breach of the rule of law. In addition, the setting-up of tribunals to try cases that could be tried by normal courts has also been criticized by the NBA.

4. OBSTACLES TO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PRESSURE GROUPS IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

The functional pressure groups faced a number of problems as a result of their belief in democratic ideals and their active pursuit. One of such obstacles was the interference of the government in the affairs of these groups. This has contributed to a marked weakening of the groups. In addition, the perceived meddlesomeness in the groups' activities has created specific problems for the different groups themselves. For instance, it has led to the emergence of Pascal Bafyau, a military apologist, as the leader of the NLC. It has also resulted in the inability of the NBA to constitute its central leadership between 1992 and 1995, while the NMA was almost polarized into groups or camps on various occasions. Furthermore, at one point in the history of NANS two national presidents with different executive committee members co-existed. Consequently, it has been difficult for most of the groups to focus wholly on the pursuit of democratic principles, bogged down as they were in internal problems.

In some extreme cases, the government has wielded a big stick by outright proscription of some of these groups, the purpose being to keep them out of circulation for as long as possible so that they would not pose any threat to the undemocratic government. Part of the effectiveness of this policy was achieved by the NLC, ASUU and NANS being proscribed separately at different times.

Similarly, unfavourable legislation was imposed on these groups to incapacitate them and in the process render them useless or at best ineffective. Such unfavourable legislation includes the National Economic Emergency Power Decree 22 of 1985, the Trade Union (Miscellaneous Provisions) Decree 17 of 1986, Decree 12 and 16 of 1986, and Decree 47 of 1987. In the course of this process the ASUU became disaffiliated from the NLC (through the provision of Decree 17 of 1986) as a result of what the government considered the "radical influence" of the NLC.

Moreover, unwarranted arrests and detentions of members of these groups, often without trial, was a common development. Many examples abound of human rights, labour and pro-democracy activists who were detained without trial, including Olisa Agbakoba, Baba Omojola, Gani Fawehinmi and Femi Falana. In the same vein, progressive news media have had their premises sealed up several times, while printed copies of their papers and magazine have been confiscated on the slightest excuse. Moreover, many journalists have arrested and detained without just cause. For instance, on May 5 1991 the Editor-in-Chief of the now defunct *Newbreed Magazine*, Chief Chris Okolie, was detained, apparently because of criticism of the Babangida administration. Similarly, in 1993 alone, several copies of *Tell* magazine were confiscated on at separate occasions and the editor went underground in order to escape arrest (CHDR Annual Reports 1991-1993).

5. CONCLUSION

Functional pressure groups have contributed immensely and are still contributing to the promotion and protection of democratic ideals in the country. However, for the groups to be more effective in the democratic process there is a need for them to have a wider influence so that their impact will be felt nationwide. As presently constituted, these groups are restricted to the south-western part of the country. The expansion of their base would provide them with a more broad based and national outlook. Moreover, it is very difficult to define the sources of funding of some of these groups. There is therefore a need for them to disclose their sources in order to clear up all doubts. Furthermore, these groups should not simply criticize the government for the sake of criticism alone, with a view largely to drawing attention to themselves and thus attracting popularity; rather, they should be principled and constructive in their criticism. There is also a need for pressure groups to be more democratic in their operation as well as in the running of their organizations.

Finally, these groups should consider moving beyond the status of facilitators to actual participants in the democratic process in order to be more relevant. In doing so, however, they must be prepared to pursue political activities and the attendant developments with the courage and vigour with which they pursue pressure group activities, without hiding anything from the people.

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