

**THE ROLE OF THE ACADEMIA IN CONSOLIDATING NIGERIA DEMOCRACY:  
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OF THE FEDERATION AT THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL  
STUDIES, BABCOCK UNIVERSITY ANNUAL LECTURE ON TUESDAY, 27<sup>TH</sup>  
NOVEMBER 2018**

**PROTOCOL**

It gives me great pleasure to be here with you today to speak on the topic: **“The Role of the Academia in Consolidating Nigeria Democracy”**. Let me use this opportunity to thank the Vice Chancellor, Management and staff as well as the vibrant students of the Babcock University for the warm reception. In particular, I thank the Department of History and International Studies for the invitation.

2. It is indeed a good practice in the academic sector to tap from the experiences and opinions of practitioners outside the ivory towers so that both staff and students may be enriched with the perspectives of others. I believe it is in this spirit that you have invited me to give this lecture. First, I lay no claim to being an academic, but I have attempted in this lecture to be rigorous and factual, knowing full well that the desire to tell the truth and impact knowledge with hard work are among the commitments of the intellectual and every academic look out for them in any intellectual discourse.

3. This topic is germane and timely especially when we consider the level of our democracy in Nigeria, in Africa and the role democratic institutions are expected to play in nurturing the system to maturity. In the course of this presentation, we shall be looking at definitions of Democracy, the academia and

we shall be interrogating how effectively roles have been played, the challenges, and the way forward.

4. At the end of the presentation, it is expected that the listening audience would have gained amongst others the following:

- i. Types of Democracy;
- ii. Evolution of Constitutional Democracy in Nigeria;
- iii. Role of the University System; and
- iv. How democracy could be enhanced by the academia.

5. Perhaps, the safest point to begin is to find out what democracy means. The term democracy comes from the Greek word “demokratia”. It means a political system in which the people i.e the citizenry, hold sovereignty. Little wonder therefore, that the US President Abraham Linclon (1809-1865) defined democracy as “**Government of the people, by the people and for the people**”. He stated further that Democracy is by far the most challenging form of government – both for politicians and for the people.

#### 6. **Types of Democracy:**

According to Wikipedia, several types of democracy can be identified as:

- Direct democracy.
- Representative democracy.
- Presidential democracy.
- Parliamentary democracy.
- Authoritarian democracy.

- Participatory democracy.
- Islamic democracy.
- Social democracy

This list is not exhaustive, as we also have domestic democracy in our homes and traditional democracy in our communities. For our purpose however, we shall be looking at parliamentary and presidential democracies, because they feature in the different types of constitutions that we have had in Nigeria. We shall also make reference to Authoritarian democracy because of our experience under Military rule. All these have defined how effectively the academia plays its role in deepening democracy.

7. According to the editors of encyclopedia Britannica, **Parliamentary democracy** is a democratic form of government in which the party (or a coalition of parties) with the greatest representation in the parliament (legislature) forms the government, with its leader becoming the Prime Minister as practiced in the United Kingdom or Chancellor as practiced in Germany. Executive functions are exercised by members of the parliament appointed by the prime minister to the cabinet. The parties in the minority serve in opposition to the majority and have the duty to challenge it regularly. The Prime Minister may be removed from power whenever he loses the confidence of a majority of the ruling party or of the parliament. Parliamentary democracy originated in Britain and was adopted in several of its former colonies. It is also practiced in Germany.

8. The 1960 Independence Constitution provided for a Parliamentary System of Government in Nigeria. The Constitution separated the Office of the Head of

State from that of the Head of Government. It also provided powers for the parliament to make laws. In 1963, the Republican constitution was passed into law. This Constitution removed the Queen as the Head of State and gave powers to the members of the National Assembly and the House of Representatives to choose the President. The Constitution also recognized the Supreme Court as the highest court in the land. Most importantly, membership of the Senate was increased from 44 to 56, while that of the House of Representatives was increased from 305 to 312.

9. The second constitutional democratic experience is the Presidential Democracy. Wikipedia described it as a democratic and republican system of government where a head of government leads an executive branch that is separate from the legislative branch. This head of government is in most cases also the head of state, which is called President. In presidential systems, the executive is elected and is not responsible to the legislature, which cannot in normal circumstances dismiss it. Such dismissal is possible, however, in uncommon cases, often through impeachment. This has existed in Nigeria from 1999 to date.

10. The third experience of governance in Nigeria since independence is the Military system of government, which can be described as the Authoritarian democracy. The impact of this form of intervention on our democracy explains the rationale of the military's deposition of politicians whether under parliamentary or presidential democracy. It manifests in present day democratic practices and it is not uncommon to encounter such experiences like

disobedience to court orders, self-help and violence, suppression of dissent, closure of media houses and complete disregard for the Rule of Law. Essentially, democracy should be based on its values.<sup>1</sup> (Frank Etim & Ukpere William (2012) The Impact of Military Rule on Democracy in Nigeria: Journal of Social Services 33).

11. I am happy to state that the academia championed the struggle for human rights and democratic rule through sustained attack on military rule. In this wise, students of the universities also played vocal roles through demonstrations (not always peaceful) in sympathy with revolutionary causes. Notable among these scholars are Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, G. Okoro, T.M. Aluko, Bala Usman, to mention a few, who made their presence felt in the process of nation-building through their writings and activism.

12. Having established the systems that we have experienced in Nigeria, the questions we must answer in the course of this paper include the following:

- i. What are the essential democratic institutions?
- ii. What are their roles and challenges?
- iii. What is the role of the academia in a democratic system?
- iv. Where are the gaps and the way forward?
- v. What are the costs if the academia fails to play its role?

13. According to **Quora**, democratic institutions are institutions that help to develop and protect democracy. Some of these institutions include legislative bodies, electoral bodies, executive bodies and institutions, the Judiciary, the

Police, ombudsman institutions, human rights councils, the Media that helps to achieve checks and balances in the institutions.

14. The roles of these institutions are defined by the Constitution, the Statute, practices and evolution over time. Under a Presidential system of government, The Legislature has been given powers to ensure checks and balances, the electoral bodies enjoy their independence so that executive influence will not be brought to bear on them in a manner that may impact on electoral processes. The role of the Police in the success or failure of a democratic experiment will depend largely on the understanding of its mandate and ability to remain apolitical while maintaining law and order. Overtime, the issue of human rights has taken preeminence and has attracted the attention of the international community. From the United Nations to the African Union to ECOWAS, emphasis has been placed on Human Rights under democratic dispensations. Indeed, the right to vote is an inalienable right enshrined in various national constitutions.

15. As a result of evolution, other forms of democratic institutions have emerged, these include civil societies, Non-Governmental Organizations as well as the University system (academia). These new forms of institutions provide the intellectual dimensions to the consolidating of democracy, its practices and development. They shape policies, deploy outcomes of research, they carry out comparative analysis, they interrogate programmes, above all, they train, shape

the minds and produce future leaders for our nation. To play these roles very effectively, we must have an understanding of what a University ought to be.

16. A University is a citadel of higher learning where knowledge is produced and consumed, where research is conducted in order to advance scientific, legal, political, social, economic and intellectual development of the nation. It's a place where the society looks up to for solutions to its problems. In taking this position, please be guided by the fact that members of the academia are also members of the society and they are impacted by the environment in which they live.

17. Tertiary institutions provide the environment where learning and research activities are conceived, nurtured and modelled into societal ideals for the good of the people. It is a fact that the democratic process can take many forms, including the pursuit of social justice, advocating for proper policy, participating in political campaigns and expressing personal opinions in a public forum. Our academic institutions of higher learning provide the required foundation and guidance to mould the raw skills and talents into dependable assets needed to effectively participate in civic life. It is also important to note that the institutions play a prominent role in support of government in order to strengthen democracy by the achievement of good governance.

18. To effectively contribute to the process and advancement of governance, the freedom to pursue intellectual enquiry must remain the core value for the academia, the students and the educational institutions alike. This freedom

enhances the pursuit of the mission for higher education, teaching, learning and research. What then does academic freedom and institutional autonomy mean. Patrick Blessinger, an adjunct associate professor of education at St John's University, New York City, USA, quoted Kemal Gürüz, a former president of the Council of Higher Education of Turkey, as saying that ***“institutional autonomy and self-governance is the right of universities to decide how best to run their institutions without unreasonable interference... Academic freedom, on the other hand, is the individual right of professors and students to engage in the production, consumption and dissemination of knowledge without unreasonable restrictions”***. He also stated that ***“the principle of academic freedom is derived from the notion of freedom of thought, which is a basic human right. Academic freedom therefore implies the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn, both of which are central to the proper functioning and purpose of higher education. Given its centrality, academic freedom is widely protected by institutional policies and rules, by collective bargaining agreements and by a long history of academic custom and tradition”***. This is what the Babcock University and indeed the entire academia must build on.

19. Let me go further by stating that the path of the academia in consolidating democracy is still hazy and needs a lot of refinement as the university autonomy and academic freedom has come under threat due to a variety of reasons within a rapidly changing environment. However, UNESCO affirms through its **“Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching**



**Personnel**” of 11 November 1997 that “...*the right to education, teaching and research can only be fully enjoyed in an atmosphere of academic freedom and autonomy for institutions of higher education and that the open communication of findings, hypotheses and opinions lies at the very heart of higher education and provides the strongest guarantee of the accuracy and objectivity of scholarship and research*”.

20. It is important to state that the benefits of academic freedom accrue not only to professors, students and institutions but primarily to the broader society through the creation of new knowledge and innovations, and ultimately, through political, economic, social and technological progress. In short, academic freedom serves the common good.

21. Coming home to Nigeria, the changing environment whether in structure of ownership, the period under the military and a combination of factors have led to suspicion that universities had become breeding grounds for teaching of ideas that run against the expectations of their employers. It is not far fetched therefore that government interventions have robbed not only Nigerian Universities and the academia, but also contributed to an exodus of academics from the Nigerian institutions and from Nigeria itself.

22. Having identified and established the type of relationship between the role of the academia and the society, I will proceed to make recommendations on how democracy can be consolidated by the academia:

- i. All efforts must be made to avoid the politicization of the academia as this contributes to the decline in the standard of teaching, learning and research;
- ii. The academia must return to the path of being constructively critical of the performance of government;
- iii. The academic institutions should expand the frontiers of research and studies into various contemporary issues of the society that are critical to the growth of democracy. These include economy, health system, infrastructure development, foreign policy, defence and intelligence, agriculture, government policies and programmes, to mention but a few. Suffice it to say that institutions such as NISER, NIIA, IAR&D, Zaria have all blazed the trail in this regard;
- iv. Outside the academic environment, the academia must brighten and broaden the mindset of students to make them fertile for the promotion of democracy. They must be prepared for the challenges in the labour market, political sphere, the demands of rule of law, respect for dialogue and international competitiveness;
- v. The academia must galvanize itself into a think tank that will lead the larger society into recognizing the innate benefits of democracy. They must do this through involvement in governance and in creating the right platforms for interaction with the society and all arms of government;
- vi. Academia must assist the legislature in introducing bills that are of immense benefit to the society. For example, the statutory environment

within which the protection of Intellectual Property Rights and management exist in Nigeria has remained a disincentive for creativity, innovation and investments; and

- vii. The academia must guide against the idea of selecting and appointing principal officers on the basis of indigeneship, which runs contrary to the principle of democracy and development. The best brains must be allowed to pilot the affairs of the institutions regardless of where the person comes from because pursuing such principles deprives the institution of the best brains.

23. On the heels of the foregoing recommendations, let me leave you with a list of action taken by this administration that can challenge the academia in the area of research, development and further engagements as part of consolidating democracy in Nigeria:

- i. Release of Special Intervention Fund: utilization, justification and need for more intervention;
- ii. The performance of Government on the ERGP especially the establishment of Focus Labs;
- iii. Injection of Executive Orders into the governance process: its effectiveness and areas requiring improvements especially in the area of ease of doing business;
- iv. Government effort to combat the menace of drug and substance abuse across all demographics;

- v. Involvement of the academia in the electoral process;
- vi. Appointment of academics into public office;
- vii. Implementation of policies that have enhanced agricultural development; the Anchor Borrowers Scheme; enhanced local production of rice, creation of Grazing Reserve to avert continuation of the Farmers/Herders conflict; and
- viii. Research into the three cardinal programmes of the Government, which are Security, Economy and the fight against Corruption.

24. Before I close my presentation, let me say that there's much more at stake here than protecting and opening the boundaries of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. It is of very critical necessity to deepen and expand the formative cultures and public spheres that make democracy possible. It is also important to note that the struggle for democracy is more rewarding than the struggle over economic resources and power. Universities and other higher institutions must define themselves anew for public good in a protective space for the promotion of democratic ideals.

25. Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, the aim of this presentation is to stimulate your personal reflection on your roles in consolidating democracy because government alone cannot solve the problems of the society. I hope that my remarks will provide a general framework for the ideas and opinions that will be expressed at this lecture, today and beyond. It requires a joint effort of all to

take Nigeria to the Next Level. We have a duty to help the government deliver on its policies and programmes.

26. I thank you for your kind attention.