

PRESSURE GROUPS AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESS IN NIGERIA (1979–1993)

ADESOJI ABIMBOLA

Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contribution of pressure groups to democratic process in Nigeria. The paper attempts a conceptualisation 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 particularly. The specific contributions of these groups to democratic process as well as obstacle to their effectiveness are discussed. The paper concludes by advocating the need for the groups to have wider spread and to participate more actively in the democratic process, among others, as ways of being more relevant in democratic process:

Keywords: democracy, democratic process, pressure groups, interest groups

INTRODUCTION

The term *pressure group* is interchangeably used with such terms as interest group or organized interest. Henry Ehrman (1972: 468–488) defines pressure groups as voluntary associations of individual who band together for the defence of a particular interest. Interest in this sense is a conscious desire to have public policy or the authoritative allocation of values, 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 other associations whose focus extend beyond the realization of parochial interest of their members. Barber (1975: 198–199) categorized pressure groups generally into two namely defensive and promotional pressure groups. While defensive pressure groups are basically concerned with the protection of their members' interest 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 as well as professional associations and human rights associations therefore fall into the category of promotional pressure groups otherwise referred to as functional pressure groups here.

According to John and Erna Perry (1976: 584–585) interest groups or pressure groups are many and vary. Some are formally organized others are not. However the more formally organized groups tend to be 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 contributes 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 interest but which are vocal and determined in pursuing policies and goals that have relevance to citizens in the 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, suggest alternatives to programs or policies which they consider as being unfavourable. Functional groups work towards sensitising 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 organizations like the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, (CDHR) as well as Pro-democracy groups like 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 must have accounted for this. However, according to Adeyinka Banwo (1997: 40–50) certain basic features of democracy which serve as a consensus among the contending perspectives on what democratic system ought to entail or manifest are the right to elections, representative form of governance and freedom of choice, respect for the rule of law and equality before the law, accountability, guarantee of the rights of individuals, an independent judiciary as well as decentralization or delegation of power and authority between all tiers of government, among others.

Obviously, functional pressure groups have contributed to democratic process in Nigeria just as some might have contributed to the problem of democratisation 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. They are however of the opinion that such groups must not be seen to be operating under influence from 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 influence profoundly their contributions to 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, government is able to ascertain reactions to her policies. Even though, pressure groups do not seek responsibility for direct management of government, they 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 outlet for the social energies of their members. Furthermore, through concrete and continuous group campaigns, socialization of the citizen by pressure groups often proves 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 decision (Ehrman 1972: 490).

Techniques often 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 or negotiating 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 1980's and early 1990's have not only toughened some pressure groups, it has also led to the emergence and growth of new ones. This development has led to the increased involvement of more assertive pressure groups in the efforts at attaining and sustaining a stable democratic order in the country.

2. ATTITUDE TO AND PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

The attitude of pressure groups to, as well as their participation in democratic process, depends to a very large extent on the development in a particular period

and the prevailing situations. Even before the attainment of political independence, the organized labour, for instance, has had cause to participate in party politics particularly with its affiliation to the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon, (NCNC) in 1944. The outcome of this affiliation was the success of the general strike of 1945. A similar thing happened in 1964 when workers not only demanded for 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 election 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 without 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 towering military presence as seen in the Obasanjo administration. Consequently many labour leaders contested and won election into various offices on the platform of different political parties. This development notwithstanding, moves were made to pursue anti-labour policies and to introduce anti-labour legislation even though without any success (Lakemfa 1997: 95–102).

Owing to 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 arose probably out of the desire for the realization of selfish ambition of Pascal Bafyau, a one time President of NLC and some few labour leaders did not benefit the organized labour in any way and even contributed to the reversal of the political gains of the organized labour in the not too distant past. On the contrary however, articulate and determined labour leaders like Frank Ovie Kokori and Milton Dabibi emerged during the 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 NUPENG could use the strike option to pressure the military to reverse its unjust annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election. Generally speaking, therefore, organized labour whether as unions or as individual within the union has the tendency to participate in the democratic process, either by contesting elections, supporting candidates for election or identifying with a party or parties with similar ideology and orientation (Olukoju 1997: 337–350).

The genesis of pronounced human rights activities could be traced to 1987 when the Civil Liberties Organisation, (CLO) was formed. Since 1987, a staggering number of human right organisations had been formed as non-governmental organizations. These include the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), formed in 1989, Constitutional Right Project (CRP),

Universal Defenders of Democracy (UDD), National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), as well as Human Right Africa, among others, all formed after the April 1990 abortive coup d'état. Traditionally, these human rights organisations are mainly involved in the campaign for the protection of human rights, highlighting the incidence of human rights abuse and seeking redress or restitution for victims of such abuses, mainly through the due process of law. However, the emergence of dictatorial tendencies of the Babangida administration as well as the manipulation of the democratic process led to the radical transformation of these HRO's and the manifestation of greater interest in political matters. The climax of this development was the emergence in November 1991 of the Campaign for Democracy, as an umbrella organization for all HRO's and pro-democracy groups. The CD seeks to pursue strictly the 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) mounting of 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 for the convening of a Sovereign National Conference, SNO, where the National Question could be discussed and the basis of a new Nigeria laid. Beyond these issues, the CD was the mobilizing force in the protest of June 12 election result annulment. The political commitment of CD was further clarified by its declaration that:

although it is not a political platform the CD has political interest that rest 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).

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

adventurous military regime of Ibrahim Babangida. The outcome was the comatose state of NBA from 1992 to 1995 (Mimiko 1995: 150–166).

The Nigerian students, under the auspices of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) and later the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) not only show positive attitude towards democratic struggle but also have been fully involved in it since the 1960's. The repudiation of the Anglo-Nigerian defence pact of 1962, owed a lot to the struggle of Nigerian students. The philosophical basis of Nigerian students' democratic struggle is contained in the Charter of Demands of the National Association of Nigerian Students. The charter 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 restoration of popular democracy (Idika 1997: 77–86).

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

3. CONTRIBUTIONS OF FUNCTIONAL PRESSURE GROUPS TO DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

There is no doubt that, in one form or the other, progressive groups have contributed to democratic process in Nigeria, just as a few of them have constituted themselves to obstacles in the path of democratic process. The dismal performance of the organized labour between 1984 and 1988 notwithstanding, the Union still succeeded in recording some achievements. For instance the Chiroma led NLC identified with the Nigerian students on their struggle for a better educational environment. More importantly, trade unions participated effectively in the political debate of 1986. In the same vein, Abiodun has observe with reference to the 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. Consequently the organized labour could not mobilize

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

Human rights organizations have undoubtedly contributed meaningfully to the sustenance of democratic zeal in the country. Apart from organizing conferences, seminars, symposia and lectures on the sustenance of democracy in the country with a view to sensitising and mobilizing Nigerians, it has also in extreme and serious cases taken up government attempting or making effort to abort democracy or stifle democratic process. This they did by organizing mass protests and campaigns of civil disobedience. For instance between July 5 and 7, 1993, the CD commenced direct political action by calling for mass protests against the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election. The violent manner in which the protests were put down led to the change of tactics to a campaign of civil disobedience. Sola Iji (1997: 74–88) has observed that the pro-democracy agitation anchored by the CD and other human rights organizations led 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 objective by the Human Rights Organizations.

On its part, the National Association of Nigerian Students had at different times exercised the constitutionally granted freedom of expression by mobilising against the 25 kobo increase in the price of petroleum in 1986. Similarly in 1989, the student body was in the forefront of the popular uprising against the dehumanising effect of the Structural Adjustment Programme as 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, undemocratic acts and political intolerance of the political actors of the period did not go unchallenged. A good example of such undemocratic act was the illegal deportation of an opposition leader, Alhaji Shugaba Abdulrahman Darman in 1980. Adeyinka Banwo (1997: 44) 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 few found alliance. This was complemented by support from progressive politicians, lawyers, journalist 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 effectively oust the jurisdiction of the court and constitute a breach of the rule of law. Besides, 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 and in the process of pursuing democratic ideals. One of such obstacles was the interference of government in the affairs of these groups. This has contributed tremendously towards weakening the groups. Besides, this meddlesomeness in the groups' activities has created specific problems for the different groups. For instance, it led to the emergence of Pascal Bafyau, a military apologist as the leader of NLC. It also resulted in the inability of NBA to constitute its central leadership from 1992 to 1995, while the NMA was almost polarized into groups or camps on different occasions. Furthermore at a time in the history of NANS, two national presidents with different executive committee members existed. Consequently it has been difficult for most of the groups to focus wholly on the pursuance of democratic principles, bogged down as they were by internal problems.

In some extreme cases, the government has wielded the big stick by outright proscription of some of these groups. The purpose was to keep them out of circulation for as long as possible so that they would not pose any threat to undemocratic government. It was in an effort to achieve this aim that the NLC, ASUU and NANS were proscribed at different times.

Similarly, unfavourable legislations were imposed on these groups to incapacitate them and in the process render them useless or at best ineffective. Such unfavourable legislations are many among which are the National Economic Emergency Power Decree 22 of 1985, the Trade Union (Miscellaneous Provisions) Decree 17 of 1986, Decree 12 and 16 of 1986 as well as Decree 47 of 1987 among others. Through this process, ASUU was disaffiliated from the NLC (through the provision of Decree 17 of 1986) because of what government considered as "radical influence" on the NLC.

Moreover, unwarranted arrests and detentions of members of these groups even without trial was a common development. Many examples abound of human rights, labour and pro-democracy activists who were detained without trial. Such activists include 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 magazines were confiscated at the slightest excuse. Not only this, many journalist were arrested and detained even without any just cause. For instance, on May 5 1991, the Editor-in-Chief of the defunct *Newbreed Magazine*, Chief Chris Okolie was detained apparently because his magazine criticised the Babangida administration. Similarly, in 1993 alone, several copies of *Tell* magazine were confiscated at different times while 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 Nigeria. However for the groups to be more effective in the democratic process, there is the need for them to have a wider spread. By so doing, their impact will be better felt. These groups as presently constituted are restricted to the South-Western part of the country. The expansion of the base of the groups will give them a broad and national outlook. Moreover, it is very difficult to tell the sources of fund of some of these groups. There is therefore the need for them to disclose their sources of funding in order to clear all doubts related to their funding. Furthermore, these groups should not just criticize the government just for the purpose of criticising. They should be principled and constructive in their criticism. There is also the need for pressure groups to be more democratic in their operation as well as in the running of their organization.

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 this, 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.

REFERENCES

- Abiodun, A. A. 1997.
The Role of Labour in the Political/Democratic Process in Nigeria. In: F. Adewunmi (ed.) *Trade Unionism in Nigeria: Challenges For The 21st Century*, pp. 113–136. Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.
- Akinyanju, A. 1997.
Trade Union and Democratic Struggle. In: T. Olorode, W. Raji, J. Ogunye and S. Jegede (eds.), *Nigeria, Non-Governmental Organizations and Democracy*, pp.65–73. Lagos: Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR).
- Banwo, A. 1997.
Democracy and Human Rights in Nigeria: An Overview. In: T. Olorode, W. Raji, J. Ogunye and S. Jegede (eds.), *Nigerian Non-Governmental Organisation and Democracy*, pp. 40–50. Lagos: Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR).
- Barber, M. P. 1975.
Public Administration, pp. 198–199. London: Macdonald and Evans Limited.
- Committee For The Defence of Human Rights. 1991.
Annual Reports on Human Right Situation in Nigeria, Lagos: CDHR.

- Committee For The Defence of Human Rights. 1992.
Annual Reports on Human Right Situation in Nigeria, Lagos: CDHR.
- Committee For The Defence of Human Rights. 1993.
Annual Reports on Human Right Situation in Nigeria, Lagos: CDHR.
- Committee For The Defence of Human Rights. 1996.
Freedom Watch, June 1996. “Why ASUU is on Strike”, p. 3. Lagos: CDHR.
- Committee For The Defence of Human Rights. 1992.
Victims CDHR Newsletter Volume 3, No.3, Nov. 1992, p. 8. “NGOS To Sustain Democracy”, Lagos: CDHR.
- Ehrman, H. W. 1972.
Interest Groups. In: D. L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Science*, Vol.7 & 8, pp. 486–490. New York: The Macmillan Company & The Free Press.
- Idika, C. 1997.
Military Rule, Nigerian Students and Democratic Struggles. In: T. Olorode, W. Raji, Y. Ogunye and S. Jegede (eds.), *Nigeria, Non-Governmental Organizations and Democracy*, pp. 77–86. Lagos: Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR).
- Iji, S. 1997.
Trade Unions and the Political Process. In: F. Adewunmi (ed.), *Trade Unionism in Nigeria: Challenges For The 21st Century*, pp. 74–88. Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.
- Mimiko, N. O. 1995.
From Agitation For Human Rights To The Pursuit of Power The Impact of Human Rights Organizations on Nigeria’s Aborted Democratisation Programme, 1986–1993. In: N. O. Mimiko (ed.), *Crises and Contradictions in Nigeria’s Democratisation Programme 1986–1993*, pp. 150–166. Akure: Stebak.
- Obasanjo, O. and Mabogunje, A. (ed.) 1992.
Elements of Democracy, p. 23. Abeokuta: ALF Publications.
- Olukoju, A. 1997.
Organised Labour, Governance and The Electoral Process: Insights From The American and Nigeria Experiences. In: A. Ogunba (ed.), *Governance and The Electoral Process: Nigerian and United States of America*, pp. 337–350. Lagos: American Studies Association of Nigeria (ASAN).
- Perry, J. A. and Perry, E. K. 1976.
The Social Web: An Introduction to Sociology. Second Edition, pp. 584–585. New York: Harper & Rour Publishers.