

Chapter 20

Public Opinion on Nigeria's Democracy: Why the Arab Spring Stopped in the Desert

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ABSTRACT

As popular movements of citizens of countries in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region progressed, and in their aftermath, pundits in Nigeria and the Diaspora wondered if there would be a bandwagon effect in Africa's largest democracy. Yet, despite offline and online mobilizations, a growing national insecurity and the "Occupy Nigeria Movement" that sprang up against fuel price hikes in Nigeria, protests and revolts in Nigeria remained short-lived and aimed at piecemeal policy reforms rather than becoming a revolution to unseat the current government. Relying on a human development factors chart, the authors suggest that Nigerians' discontent appears to be motivated by yearnings for what citizens of some MENA countries already have and vice versa. As such, neither democracy nor autocracy—as systems of governance—has delivered the aspirations of African citizens.

INTRODUCTION

Periodic assessment of public opinion is a non-negotiable ingredient for the health of a democracy. It serves as a barometer for assessing the popularity of the government and of citizen input into fundamental policy choices and national direction

(Post, 2005). Yet, academic evaluations of public opinion about the progress of democracy on the African continent have been few and far between. Communication scholars have been more focused on media roles in democratic governance (Ngugi, 1995; Olorunnisola, 1997; Ansah, 1998;) and media coverage of campaigns, elections, impeach-

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ments, and trials (Oduko, 1987; Olayiwola, 1991; Phillips, Roberts, & Benjamin, 1999; Mvendaga, 2003). Others (Leslie, 1995; Ogbondah, 1997; Jacobs, 1999; Olorunnisola, 2006; Olorunnisola & Tomaselli, 2011) prefer to examine impacts of democratization on the media either by tracking post-transition changes that media systems exhibit or roles that the mass media play in nations in transit. With the "third wave" of democracy well underway on the African continent, there is ample room for scholars to profile public appraisal of democratic governance.

Only in South Africa (Brodie, Altman, & Sinclair, 1999; *Washington Post*, Kaiser Family Foundation, & Harvard University, 2004) and in Ghana (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 1999) have there been records of public opinion assessments focused, for instance, on the proficiency of the democratic experiments and on the viability of the several arms of government. Of recent, the NOI-Gallup polls conducted in Nigeria (2007, 2008), though quite commendable, have focused on too many variant issues thus understandably lacking depth in the specific areas of governance and democracy.

The survey of public opinion about democracy in South Africa in 1999 and 2004 (Brodie et al, 1999; *Washington Post*, Kaiser Family Foundation, & Harvard University, 2004) spurred us to craft an adapted survey with which we surveyed public opinion in Nigeria with focus on public perception of the implementation of democracy in the last twelve years. We felt the need to provide opportunity for Nigerians to appraise progress made with democratization a system of government that many Nigerians clamoured for and for which others made the supreme sacrifice. In search of contextual information, we also conducted focused group discussions in Nigeria in 2007. Our plan to conduct a second national survey after April 2011 was foreclosed by post-presidential election violence in many parts of the country. In place of a national survey, we conducted focused group discussions in 2011.

Our exploration in this chapter is part of a larger and more elaborate study. We began with multiple curiosities. Nigeria is one of the largest democracies on the African continent. Nigeria has had long years of non-democratic rule. At the time the survey and FGDs that informed the content of this chapter were administered, Nigeria had just experienced civilian-to-civilian transition; an uncommon event in its recent political history.

Our data gathering, especially the conduct of the second Focused Group Discussion, coincided with the commencement and spread in 2011 of anti-government social movements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The bush fire of public disenchantment in the MENA region and the way in which citizens of successive countries in the region (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen) jumped on the bandwagon of violent protests led pundits across the African continent and in Nigeria to speculate that Nigerians may rise up against the government. We wonder in this chapter if the issues that drove social movements in the MENA region were identical to the rationale for public disenchantment in Nigeria upon which pundits based their warnings about the likelihood of a bandwagon effect. Some public commentators concluded that MENA citizens clamored for democratic ideals which ideally, open new vistas for citizen participation, an era in which the opinion and, much more than that, active participation of citizens in governance are encouraged. We were not entirely certain that western-style democracy was what MENA citizens were after. Nonetheless, why would Nigerians who have enjoyed democratic governance since 1999 join the democratization movement bandwagon in 2011? Rather than speculate, co-authors resorted to unpacking relevant public responses offered by a cross-section of Nigerians over a four-year span. Thereafter, we offer educated guesses about the consistencies or inconsistencies between the aspirations of citizens of MENA countries and experiences of Nigerians with democratic governance.

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