



CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM AND THE ENTRENCHMENT OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) were prominent in Africa during the colonial era. They emerged as instruments and weapons of opposition to the inhuman practices of the colonial masters, especially in relation to labour and working conditions. They emerged as stronger voices during the period of military regimes in Africa. And with the emerging democracy, they continue to be the voice of the people and shape democratic principles and ideals. The paper adopted liberal democratic theory and employed the secondary method of data collection. The data were analysed qualitatively. The findings uncovered the limitations of CSOs as being financially dependent and facing repression from the government. The paper recommends, among others, that the government should give CSOs freedom and a level playing field on the issues bordering human rights and political activities.

Keywords: Civil Society Organisations, Democracy, Activism, Africa

Introduction

Civil Society denotes the sphere of action that lies between the state and society, that is, civic groups, civil society organisations, and non-governmental organisations. They all work to represent and promote certain special interests or raise public awareness of civic duties and political rights. Conceptually, the term civil society collectively refers to people who organise to participate in governance, using their own power to strengthen democracy and the rule of law. The term CSO, as a positive descriptive term, is defined as “citizens, associating neither for power nor for profit, and are the third sector of society, complementing government and business, and they are the people who constitute civil society organisations”. CSOs can encompass grass-roots organisations, citizens’ movements, trade unions, cooperatives, NGOs, and other ways in which citizens associate for non-politically partisan and non-profit motives. They are not necessarily formal or registered.

Imobighe (2003) looks at the political economy of the modern society in three basic sectors: state, business, and a third sector defined by citizen self-organisation. The state’s distinctive competence is the legitimate use of coercion. The business sector’s competence is market exchange, and the third sector’s competence is private choice for the public good. Citizens mobilise through values they share with other citizens and through shared commitment to action with other citizens. Holloway further states that it is taken as given that CSOs can do things which neither of the other national development actors, the government and the corporate sector, can do on their own. CSOs are the population of groups formed for collective purposes primarily outside of the state and marketplace.



The common denominator in the above conceptualisations, according to Fidelis (2015), is their emphasis on the fact that civil society operates outside the state, and this means that civil society must be independent. For McNicoll (1995), Civil society is “the totality of self-initiating and self-regulating organisations, peacefully pursuing a common interest, advocating a common cause, or expressing a common passion; respecting the right of others to do the same; and maintaining their relative autonomy vis-a-vis the state, the family, the temple, and the market.” According to Diamond (1994, p.5), Civil society is the:

The realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by the legal order or set of shared rules ... It involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable. It is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state.

As with the earlier definitions, Diamond also stressed the autonomous and voluntary nature of CSOs. Deriving from this, Fidelis (2015, p.336) conceived of civil society as “stakeholding, non-governmental agencies, institutions and groups within a state, having the ability to influence certain decisions, policies and activities of either government or other groups within the state”.

White (1994) also defined civil society as an intermediate associational realm between the state and the family, populated by organisations separate from the state, which enjoys autonomy in relation to the state and is formed voluntarily by members of the society to protect or extend their interests or values. For Cox (1999), civil society refers to social organisations occupying the space between the household and the state that enable the people to coordinate their management of resources and activities. In a similar vein, Bayart (1986) sees civil society as a political space between the household and the state. He went further to state that it encompasses NGOs, advocacy organisations, business associations, chambers of commerce, informal community groups, cultural societies, religions, sports clubs, labour unions, students’ organisations, youth organisations, community-based organisations, social movements, traditional leadership, women's organisations, professional associations, for example, physicians and lawyers’ associations, and the media. This definition is all-encompassing, and it agrees with that of Diamond above, as they both concluded that civil society is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state. This means that the CSOs can influence certain decisions, policies, and activities of either the government or other groups within the state

Fidelis (2015) explained that Africa’s “nascent” civil societies were portrayed as the prime movers in the democratisation process in the 1990s. However, with the establishment of democratic governments in Africa, especially in Nigeria, it seemed that the expectations about the role and capacity of these civil society organisations to promote governance reform and foster democratic deepening had been underestimated. He explained that civil society is not only the engine of the transition to democracy in Nigeria and elsewhere, but also equally crucial to the vitality of democracy. Chazan (1996, p. 282) observed that the nurturing of civil society is widely perceived as the most effective means of controlling repeated abuses of state power, holding rulers accountable to their citizens, and establishing the foundations for durable democratic government. He proposed that “a vibrant civil society is probably more essential for consolidating and maintaining democracy than for initiating it”.

Diamond (1994), on his part, defines the role of civil society as that of containing the power of democratic governments, checking their potential for abuse and violation of the law, and subjecting them to public scrutiny. He believes that civil society organisations supplement political parties as



schools for leadership training and fostering the development of democratic culture. Citizens learn political advocacy and contestation from participating in such organisations. As avenues for interest aggregation and representation, Diamond posits that they serve to mitigate political conflicts. The theory of social capital also underscores the importance of civil society to the democratisation process.

Alidu and Gyekye-Jandoh (2016) explained that the essence of ‘civil society’ appeared in the writings of early philosophers such as Rousseau, Ferguson, Tocqueville, and Gramsci, though the term's use and current multidimensional understanding became prominent only later, after these writings. Various defined, the meaning, applicability, and categorisation of civil society are embedded in the highly contextualised ideological debates of Tocqueville’s liberal democracy and the Gramscian post-Marxist school of thought. Whilst liberals see civil society as characterised by high social capital, trust, and cooperation necessary for the development of political and economic democracy, and also for protecting the individual from the state’s overwhelming power, the Gramscian conception assumes a more direct political position. It considers civil society as an instrument of resistance and activism that seeks to promote the creation and sustenance of social movements to negotiate or challenge political, social, or economic hegemony.

Instructively, the use of the term civil society among Ghanaian scholars has tended to align more with Tocqueville’s neo-liberal perspective than with the Gramscian post-Marxist thought. It is defined in relation to the political end of promoting democracy and checking the despotic tendency of the state. Since the role of civil society is applauded in this regard, great caution needs to be exercised in universalising all civic organisations in Ghana as pro-democratic entities (Alidu and Gyekye-Jandoh, 2026).

In terms of methodology, this paper adopts the “theory of liberal democracy”. The Theory of liberal democracy has its origin in 17th–18th century Europe. It integrated classical liberalism of individual rights with democratic popular sovereignty, largely emerging during the Enlightenment age, an era that challenged absolute monarchies. Its major proponents include Locke’s natural rights (17th c.), Montesquieu’s separation of powers, and Rousseau's social contract theory (1762). The paper made use of the secondary method of data collection. The method of analysis was qualitative.

The Activities of Civil Society Organisations in West Africa

Situating the role of civil society in the democratisation process in Nigeria, Gbodi (2001, p. 3) stated that their roles and contributions have occurred in different phases and so cannot be generalised. According to him, their role from 1985 to 1999 centred on the campaign for immediate disengagement of the military from the political space and the restoration of democracy in the country (and Africa at large). Civil society (under the military) was successful in accomplishing the above objective; however, the role changed to that of deepening democratic practices from 1999, and because the Nigerian civil society is yet to change its campaign strategy from militant to a proactive method, it is presently experiencing difficulties in its interaction with “democratic governments”. Gbodi further argued that the above challenge has impacted negatively on the role and contributions of the sector to the “second phase” of the democratisation process in the country.

Analysing the evolution of civil society in the democratisation process in Nigeria, Fidelis asserted that the civil society in Nigeria, like in other third-world countries, differs sharply in terms of its evolution from that of the Western world. This, according to him, has tended to shape its actions, objectives, or goals. While in Western society, civil society grew out of necessities, that is to say, it grew out of the expansion of the state, which was occasioned by the complexities of the governmental



role in everyday affairs; third-world civil society came about as a result of dissatisfaction with state policies. In fact, most scholars and political commentators have tended to trace the evolution and subsequent proliferation of civil society groups to the high-handedness witnessed by the masses during military dictatorship in Nigeria, as in other third-world nations. For this reason, civil society actors in Nigeria have been in the vanguard of the democratic struggle, especially immediately after Independence.

Evaluating the role of civil society in democratic governance in Ghana, Alidu and Gyekye-Jandoh (2016) traced the origin of civil society in Africa's "academic, bureaucratic and policy circles" to the late 1980s. According to them, the history and development of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Ghana is closely associated with and shaped by the political dynamics of the country. Taking a long historical view, Ihonvbere (2000) noted that the evolution of civil society in Ghana goes as far back as 1781, when local people in the Gold Coast formed Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) to protect and promote their rights. These included the Fante Confederacy and the Aborigines Rights Protection Society (ARPS), which were notable historical CBOs that fought against the possible encroachment on the rights of indigenes by British colonial authorities (Gyimah-Boadi et al., 2000). Increased local grievances witnessed a corresponding proliferation and vibrancy of CBOs in Ghana to the extent that activities of CBOs expanded to embrace economic interests and attempts to influence pricing policies in the country.

Such advancement allowed local cocoa producers to strongly object to the total control of the local market by the expatriate-controlled Association of West African Merchants (AWAM) in 1938. Partly influenced by the desire for economic and political liberation, these historical struggles nonetheless feed into the Ghanaian cultural essence of self-help. Undeniably, the concept of civil society or the idea behind it is not new in Ghana. Ghanaian cultural and social norms profess the concept of communalism as a way of learning and burden-sharing. Therefore, the explosion of CSOs as well as their increased activities in Ghana could also be understood from this perspective. Indeed, the concept of civil society is often discussed in contrast to the state and the market. It is argued that civil society organisations exist to make up for the failures of both the market and the state. And therefore, demonstrate the desire of ordinary citizens to provide for themselves in times of need.

Before independence, civil society actors emanating from political change and ending colonial rule were already in place; however, tenuous in Nigeria. Many of the early civil society groups in the pre-independence era re-emerged in the 1990s as democratic activists. In fact, some of the most strident pro-democracy activists against continued military rule before the election of President Obasanjo in 1999, including Anthony Enahoro of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), comprised the 1950s pro-independence nationalists. Thus, the contemporary, pro-democracy movement in Nigeria has its roots in the early pre-independence days. First among these various groups was a trans-national organisation known as the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), led by some intellectuals under the leadership of a Ghanaian Lawyer, Casely Hayford. Its main objective was uniting the four British West African Countries-Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast now Ghana, and Nigeria in their demand for self-determination. Some scholars believed that despite the colonialist opposition to the demands of these groups, they were successful in their bid because, in 1922, the establishment of a new legislature with the elective principle was made by the Governor, Sir Hugh Clifford, in Nigeria, a major request of the group. In short, it may not be wrong for one to conclude that the pre-colonial civil society came into existence mainly to fight off what they perceived to be an unprecedented oppression of the black race, and more specifically against the Nigerian masses by the colonial masters (Ekeh, 1994).



As independence loomed on the horizon of the Nigerian state, a barrage of religious, peasant, communal, students, women, and labour groups permeated the Nigerian civil space. The explosion of civil society activity was further galvanised because of the repressive post-independence military rulers, as well as the feeling of non-reprisal from the colonial regime and other regional events that stirred citizens into democratic action. Some of Nigeria's most prominent civil society organisations, like the Nigerian Union of Teachers, the Nigerian Bar Association, the Nigerian Society of Engineers, the Nigerian Medical Association, and the Pharmaceutical Society of Nigeria, were all founded before independence and were patterned after similar European civil society actors (Kwasau, 2013). After independence, new professional associations became deeply entrenched in the country, with CSOs such as the Nigerian Union of Journalists and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (Igbokwe-Ibeto et al., 2014). However, trade union CSOs like the Nigerian Labour Congress and the Nigerian Bar Association became the most active of pro-democracy CSOs. Membership in a professional association was largely a status symbol and admission into a class-oriented brotherhood.

By the early 1990s in Nigeria, many new civil society organisations were established for the specific purpose of defending the rights of citizens and extending the frontiers of political rights and freedoms throughout the country. During this period, Nigeria experienced not only an exponential growth in the area of human rights and social activism, but also a growth in the area of personal freedoms. These emerged to coordinate the struggle for civil liberties (Kwasau, 2013).

The establishment of the Campaign for Democracy (CD) became the quintessential pro-democracy, a civil society organisation. The CD is an „umbrella“ organisation that advocates processes and procedures, human rights, and addresses social ills throughout Nigeria. Some of the “constituent bodies” under the umbrella include the National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Women in Nigeria (WIN), and the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ). The authoritarian regime of General Muhammadu Buhari provided the grounds for the various groups and associations to forge a common front in confronting the excesses of that regime. In the particular case of Decree No.2 of 1984, which stipulated detention of people without trial, and the application of that decree to the arrest, trial, and sentencing of Nduka Irabor and Tunde Thompson (Journalists with the Guardian Newspaper), the refusal of the state to listen to pleas for leniency by various groups watered the seed of resistance by civil society groups in Nigeria. This accentuated the quest for self-preservation in an increasingly harsh political climate and crisis-ridden economy, as well as the realisation by this enlightened corps of Nigerian professionals to establish a cross-associational alliance to retain social relevance.

When General Ibrahim Babangida came on stage as a successor to General Buhari, he appeared as if he had respect for human rights. He released political prisoners imprisoned by his predecessor and gave a commitment to return the country to civilian rule. However, the notorious Decree 2 was not abrogated. Rather, it was strengthened to permit the detention of persons for renewable periods of six months at a time. The economic crisis of the 1980s continued unabated, and General Babangida subjected the issue of the IMF loan to a national debate on whether or not Nigeria should accept the loan from the International Monetary Fund. As observed by analysts, the IMF debate provided an occasion for associational life to blossom. Various groups, including professionals, students, market women, religious organisations, trade unions, roadside mechanics, associations, and a host of others, took advantage of the opportunity that it offered to air their views and canvass support for their opinions on the question of IMF participation in Nigeria's economic reconstruction efforts. The state made a spirited effort to weaken the opposition, made up largely of these civil associations, through co-optation, threats, and intimidation because of their resistance to the market reform, which had successfully decimated the middle class and caused massive misery in the land.



Consequently, the structural adjustment programme of General Ibrahim Babangida served by default to hasten, reinforce, and intensify the radicalisation of professional associations, which began during the Buhari regime. The annulment of the June 12 presidential elections of 1993 further ignited a fire of opposition against the military rule of General Babangida. Labour, students, and other professional associations mobilised against the criminal act, and despite the use of force by the state, including the killing of protesters on the streets of Lagos, General Babangida was forced to step aside in August 1993. The pressure from this group of people on his successor, Chief Ernest Shonekan, made it impossible for the Interim National Government to last more than 83 days in office. General Sani Abacha took over government at the height of the agitation for the revalidation of the June 12 presidential election, believed to have been won by the late businessman, Chief M.K.O. Abiola. However, as General Abacha reneged and clung tenaciously to power, the civil society organisations went to the trenches again. This time, with the formation of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), this incorporated different pro-democracy organisations, with operational bases in Europe and the United States of America (Cox, 1999).

CIVICUS (1997), however, notes that culture alone is not a sufficient explanation for the proliferation of CSOs and their activities in Ghana. Without an enabling political environment, it would be very difficult to celebrate this unique culture. In many countries, political support for CSOs is either limited or subject to arbitrary regulations. Until the turn of the last two decades, CSOs in the country operated under a difficult political climate, suggesting that the type of government in a country invariably affects civil society operations. Certainly, Cox (1999) notes that “the formation and growth of CSOs are greatly undermined by totalitarian rule since such regimes ‘atomise’ individual citizens and create mistrust among them”. Consequently, there is mistrust among citizens, which makes it difficult for them to work together effectively.

The promulgation of a liberal constitution in 1992 and the subsequent return to democratic rule in 1993 created an enabling political environment for civil society groups to freely operate in Ghana (Alidu & Gyekye-Jandoh, 2016). The 1963 Companies Code (Act 179), the 1962/1993 Trustees (Incorporation) (Amendment) Law, the 1992 Constitution, and Cabinet Directives define the institutional and legal framework for government-CSO engagement in Ghana. Though Article 21(1) of the 1992 Constitution provides considerable space for the growth of participatory civil society and associational life, it is rather Article 37(2) that gives enormous powers for the formation and participation of civil society in the process of development. It calls on the state to enact appropriate laws that assure the enjoyment of rights of effective participation in development processes, including the right of people to form their own associations free of state interference and use them to promote and protect their interests in relation to development processes. It further enjoins on CSOs the “... freedom to form organisations to engage in self-help and income-generating projects; and ... to raise funds to support these actions.”

Fidelis (2015) argued that despite the massive use of the state apparatus of coercion, including state killings, false allegations of coup plots, and compulsory exile for many of the leading figures, the civil society organisations maintained a sustained pressure on the discredited, suppressive, and bloodthirsty regime until the sudden death of General Sani Abacha on June 8, 1998. He surmised that it was in response to that pressure that Abacha’s successor, General Abdusalami Abubakar, fast-tracked the transition to civil rule, which produced Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the second Executive President of Nigeria on May 29, 1999.



About the contributions of civil society organisations to the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria, scholars pointed out that, to their credit, the CSOs have made some notable contributions, which include their opposition to the third-term agenda of then President Olusegun Obasanjo, who attempted to insert an elongation clause in the constitution to ensure his continued stay in office beyond the original provision for two four-year tenures for an elected president. Even though Obasanjo at the time did not make any categorical statement regarding his intention to elongate his tenure, the actions and utterances of his aides, which he did not refute, were strong enough indicators of his intent to extend his tenure.

The civil society also rose to the occasion to demand the recognition of the then Vice President Goodluck Jonathan as the Acting President when Late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua was indisposed and was away to Saudi Arabia on medical treatment between November 2009 and March 2010. Civil rights organisations such as the Save Nigeria Group and Enough is Enough Group actually seized the initiative, mobilised, and marched on the National Assembly to demand a resolution that would give due recognition to the vice president as acting president. This led to the adoption of the now-popular “Doctrine of Necessity” by the National Assembly on February 9, 2010 (Ojo, 2011). The Senate based its resolution to declare Jonathan as the Acting President on the Doctrine of Necessity.

According to the then Senate President, David Mark, “a rigid and inflexible interpretation will not only stifle the spirit and intendment of the Constitution, but will also affront the doctrine of necessity. The doctrine of necessity requires that we do what is necessary when faced with a situation that was not contemplated by the Constitution. And that is precisely what we have done today. In doing so, we have also maintained the sanctity of our Constitution as the ultimate law of the land”. There is no doubt that the history of Nigerian democracy with regard to the doctrine of necessity invoked by the Nigerian Senate at that trying moment cannot be written without a prominent place assigned to the role of the CSOs (Fidelis, 2015).

The CSOs were also very active in the push for electoral reforms, especially following the 2007 general election that was roundly discredited by both local and international observers. This is why it has been reported that perhaps one of the unforgettable efforts of the CSOs in the consolidation of Nigeria’s democracy was the unflinching support they gave to the Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Committee (ERC), inaugurated on August 28, 2007, by the late President Yar'Adua. CSOs submitted tonnes of memoranda to the ERC offering suggestions on how Nigeria can break the chain of its electoral debacle. Indeed, a significant number of the 22-member ERC were drawn from the civil society groups. They helped in analysing the challenges of Nigeria’s previous elections as well as charting the way forward. During the constitutional and electoral reform public hearings, CSOs were there in good numbers to present memoranda. This led to a better legal framework for elections that Nigeria currently has (Ojo, 2011).

The contributions of CSOs in electioneering activities also deserve prominent mention. They embarked on a series of advocacy efforts to mobilise the citizens and encourage them to actively participate in the voter registration exercises that preceded the elections. Coming together under the umbrella- Domestic Election Observation Groups (the group which included the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Labour Monitoring Team (LMT), Women Environmental Programme (WEP), Muslim League for Accountability (MULAC), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD); Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), Alliance for Credible Elections, Citizens Forum for Constitutional Reform (CFCR) and the Electoral Reform Network, ERN); deployed approximately 50,000 trained election



monitors throughout the country during the 2007 general election (Akinboye and Oloruntoba, 2007, p. 14-15).

In addition, CSOs played a prominent role in ensuring the credibility of the widely acclaimed 2011 elections through vigorous voter education using both traditional and social media for their campaigns. They also established the Nigeria Civil Society Election Situation Room, a broad platform of civil society groups in Nigeria that collaborated to provide a more effective response to electoral fraud and violence, the key threats to the country's electoral process. The Nigeria Civil Society Election Situation Room later evolved and became the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (the Situation Room). The word "Election" was dropped from its name to reflect a wider focus extending to other governance issues and concerns.

Similarly, the passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, which was championed by CSOs, is a victory for Nigerian democracy. The Act stipulates that all institutions spending public funds will have to be open about their operations and expenditure, while citizens will have the right to access information about such activities. The FOI bill was first submitted to Nigeria's 4th National Assembly in 1999, when the country returned to democracy, but it did not make much progress. It returned to the legislative chambers in the 5th National Assembly in 2003 and was passed in the first quarter of 2007 by both chambers. However, President Olusegun Obasanjo vetoed it. It returned to both chambers of the 6th National Assembly in 2007 and was finally passed on 24 May 2011. (Sunday Trust, 5th June 2011) This success is chiefly attributed to the relentless efforts of the coalition of Nigerian civil society groups, who have long worked and advocated for the passage of the FOI Bill under the leadership of the Right to Know Movement, Media Rights Agenda (MRA), and the Open Society Justice Initiative. The significance of the inclusive joint workings of the CSOs is captured in "the signing of the FOI Bill into law, which was the clearest demonstration ever of the power of civil society working together to influence public policy and initiate reform in making government work for the people". (Sunday Trust, 5th June 2011).

Despite these notable achievements, the civil society in Nigeria has been bedevilled by a plethora of challenges that have tended to undermine its capacity to impact the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. Such challenges include, but are not limited to, inadequate funding, state co-optation, state antagonism, as well as lack of cooperation and unity among different civil society groupings.

Civil Society and Political Transition in Africa

Civil society has been defined as "a sphere of social interaction between the household and the state which is manifest in norms of community cooperation, structures of voluntary association, and networks of public communication" (Bratton, 1994, p.1). The idea of civil society has been traced to both the liberal and Marxist traditions of European political thought as embodied in de Tocqueville's stress on the importance of voluntary associations in promoting democratic citizenship as well as in Gramsci's emphasis on the role of social institutions in either buttressing or challenging state power (Bratton, 1994).

Bratton (1994) observed that the revival of the idea of civil society in contemporary times gained a lot of impetus from the emergence of a democratic opposition to authoritarian socialist party-states in Central and Eastern Europe in the twilight of the Cold War. From there, it spread to transition regimes in Southern Europe and Latin America and further gained traction through the activities of analysts critical of declining civic values in the advanced capitalist countries. It was subsequently adopted by social movements and political activists in post-communist Russia, China, and more generally by opponents of military authoritarianism in Africa (Bratton, 1994). Bratton further



explained that “the common thread in civil society discourse is a critique of state domination of public life, a preference for reform over revolution, and a strategy for political change based upon negotiations and elections” (p.1).

On the distinctiveness of civil society in Africa, Bratton explained that at first glance, it would appear that African societies possess few intermediary organisations that occupy the political space between the household and the state. But in fact, there exist “many cultural and religious institutions that express collective identities such as clan, age-set, and brotherhood, to which rural folk continue to grant allegiance”. Beyond these more traditional institutions, “Africans constructed fresh forms of voluntary association in response to the disruptive effects of urbanisation and the market economy during the colonial period”. Sometimes, these associations were modernised “expressions of long-standing informal solidarities (like ethnic welfare associations, prophetic movements, and agricultural work parties); in other cases, they gave expression to new occupational and class identities (peasant movements, labor unions, teachers' associations)” (Bratton, 1994, p.5). Within the milieu of colonialism, these associations assumed explicit political forms and became the vehicle for protesting the indignities of colonial rule. Later on, they transformed into the building blocks for the formation of nationalist political parties.

Bratton explained that after independence, African ruling elites gave top priority to state sovereignty and national security and so sought to whittle down the powers and influence of such associations and stop them from taking root in civil society. Such attempts succeeded in some countries through the process of co-optation of the associations into the fold of the ruling parties, while in others, they were clamped down successfully. In many others, though, such voluntary associations proved too resilient to be subordinated and so “survived as an alternative institutional framework to officialdom” (Bratton, 1994, p.5).

Bratton observed that associational life took different forms in different countries during the colonial and immediate post-independence period. In Kenya and Burundi, for instance, Christian churches were dominant; in Senegal and Sudan, the Islamic brotherhoods held sway; in Zimbabwe and Kenya, farmer organisations were most prominent; in Zambia and South Africa, it was the mineworkers' unions; while in Ghana and Nigeria, the lawyers' and journalists' associations led the way (Bratton, 1994).

Bratton explained that everywhere independent associations survived, they provided ordinary Africans with an outlet for the urge to combine in pursuit of shared goals. He further noted that the poor performance of planned economies in Africa gave an added impetus to autonomous activity beyond the purview of the state. As a means of evading the costs and inefficiencies of economic regulation, producers and traders chose increasingly to participate directly in “that part of the economy variously referred to as the second, parallel, informal, underground, black or irregular economy” (Bratton, 1994, p. 74). In scope and formality, trading networks ranged from ad hoc village markets to organised smuggling rings spanning international frontiers. By 1980, the size of the second economy in several African countries (for example, Ghana, Uganda, and Zaire) was estimated to approach, if not exceed, the size of the official gross domestic product.

The fact that African citizens autonomously undertook a wide gamut of organised economic activity had profound political implications. As trade shifted to illegal or informal networks, taxes became difficult to collect, and public revenues diminished, especially in valuable foreign exchange, thereby exacerbating the fiscal crisis of the state. Financially deprived governments had little option but to loosen restrictions on autonomous networks and organisations by permitting them to perform some



of the functions previously monopolised by the government. By the end of the 1980s, independent associations and alternative economic networks together provided a recruiting ground for a popular upsurge against post-colonial autocracy.

As to whether the emergence of opposition to authoritarian rule in African countries signified the presence of strong civil societies, Bratton explained:

Certainly, civic actors in Africa derived newfound energy from the climate of political liberalisation in the 1990s. In response to popular protest and donor pressure, African political leaders created political openings -- for example, by releasing political prisoners and abandoning one-party constitutions -- that improved the legal environment for free expression and association. There is considerable evidence that previously closed political space was occupied by genuine manifestations of civil society, namely by structures of associations, networks of communication, and norms of civic engagement (Bratton, 1994, p.6).

On the role of civil society in democratic consolidation in Africa, Osaghae (1997) stated that:

it has varied from transition to transition depending on the mode of transition, the scope of popular participation by various constituents and their ability to reconcile their differences and form stable coalitions, and the extent of political and economic liberalisation (or openness of the system), all of which had implications for the outcome of transition in the short run, and democratic consolidation in the long run (Osaghae, 1997, p.20).

Osaghae explained that it is the class dynamics of transitions that set the overall parameters for civil society's involvement in democratisation, and that in almost all cases, democratisation was prefaced by prolonged civil strife and political turmoil – demonstrations, strikes, riots, and so on. Osaghae went on to explain that:

These mass protests, which were primarily aimed at exacting improved economic and social conditions for workers, students, and other groups, provided, as it were, the enabling environment for specifically political demands to emerge for the ousting of incumbent authoritarian leaders and regimes (Osaghae, 1997, p.20).

Citing Fatton (1995), Osaghae further stated that “the transition-inducing struggles involved mainly the subordinate classes and groups which have been the most forceful promoter, defender and supporter of democracy simply because they have consistently been excluded from political participation” (Osaghae, 1997, p.20). The problem, according to him, was that these mass-based organisations and movements tended to be sidelined from the actual processes and arrangements of transition, which were taken over by members of the “predatory” classes, typically public and private sector elites forced by economic reforms to seek new forms of control and accumulation, and the middle-sector classes and groups comprising the intelligentsia, professionals, labour, exile opposition groups and displaced elites from the predator class. And in most cases:

These latter groups literally hijacked the democratisation process, subordinated popular demands to their narrow class interests, and foreclosed the chances of fundamental reforms of the state and its relations with society, which were central to the demands of the lower classes. It was the dominance of these groups that coalesced into opposition coalitions that led to the quest for and, in some cases, actual takeover of state power by civil society constituents (Osaghae, 1997, p. 20).

In general, the efficacy of civil society in transition depended greatly on the scope of involvement of its various constituents and their ability to reconcile conflicting interests. Where participation was restricted to only a few constituents, as in transitions by cooptation and military-engineered



transitions, where incumbent regimes and selected opposition groups were the main actors, the ability of civil society to play its role maximally was constrained. The problem was that fundamental problems which precipitated transition - authoritarian and non-accountable rulership, exclusion and marginalisation of large segments of the citizenry from state power and resources, competing identities and contested citizenship, corrupt and nonperforming governments, economic hardship, declining standards of living, and so on - were in danger of not being properly addressed. The prospect for successful transition and eventual consolidation was brighter where the scope of participation was wide enough to allow all the contesting interests to be articulated and addressed by civil society constituents: this increased the chances of legitimacy of the ensuing democracy, which is a prerequisite for consolidation.

Osaghae further clarified that the actual role of civil society in democratisation depended on the mode of transition. He classified the modes of transition in Africa into the national conference, as happened in Benin, Gabon, Togo, Zaire, and Congo (South Africa also had a pseudo-national conference transition through the long-drawn-out and encompassing constitutional talks); military disengagement as occurred in Nigeria, Ghana, and Burkina Faso; as well as plural elections with or without regime as was the case in Cape Verde, Malawi, and Zambia (Osaghae, 1997). He further classified these modes of transition into forced transition, negotiated transition, and voluntary transition.

Osaghae noted that by 1994, when many dictators and authoritarian regimes had been unseated in Africa, there was a celebration of the dawn of democracy in several parts of the continent. But by mid-1996, all that euphoria, just like the euphoria of independence in the 1960s, seemed to have given way to despair. Countries like Zambia and Kenya that had supposedly completed a process of democratic transition were, for all practical purposes. Back to Square One. They were back to repressive and arbitrary rule, weak watchdog and oversight institutions, corruption, and prebendalism. And mismanagement. Even the supposedly multiparty systems were fast giving way to one-party dominant systems. which could yet be the prelude to full-fledged single-party systems.

Osaghae blamed the crumbling of the democratisation project on the incompleteness of the civil society-led democratic transitions, particularly their tendency to take the essence of democratisation to be leadership and regime change, as well as multiparty rule, and, in the process, to leave the question of rule-setting for the public domain. According to him, constitutionalism. The resolution of the contradictory centrifugal and centripetal forces, and the transformation of the state, which are critical for democratic consolidation, were virtually ignored, thereby giving the new men of power a blank cheque to relapse into old authoritarian ways.

Bratton's position, however, appears to have clarified the apparent failure of civil society in Africa when he stated that "in practice, civil societies do not generally perform well in the early stages of democratic consolidation" (Bratton, 1994, p.11). He traced the reasons for this to the dynamics of the democratisation process, notably in the deflation of political energies that occurs immediately after transition. He observed that the critical difference would be in the ability to reinvigorate civil society as a force for democratic governance during the post-transition period.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are vital to entrenching democracy in Africa by acting as watchdogs, fostering accountability, and promoting civic engagement. During colonialism and thereafter. They bridge the gap between the state and citizens, strengthening governance by monitoring elections, promoting voter education, checking the activities of political parties, especially



spending during campaigns and the electioneering process, combating corruption, and amplifying marginalised voices to protect human rights. CSOs monitor government actions, promote transparency and accountability, and expose corruption, ensuring officials remain accountable to citizens. They play a vital role in enhancing democracy by providing independent election monitoring and voter registration mobilisation, among others. They, however, lack independence due to financing and often face intimidation from the government, which reduces their performance. This paper therefore recommends, among other things, that:

1. CSOs should strive to improve their financial base, including sourcing foreign funding and
2. The government should grant CSOs freedom to operate and give them a level playing field on issues relating to political activities and human rights.

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AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy, Vol. 24. No. 3, 2026

ISSN Print: 1597 – 0779; ISSN Online: 3043- 5269

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Indexed: Academic Journals Online, Google Scholar, Igwebuike Research Institute

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