Populism: A Threat to Democracy and Minority Rights in Nigeria

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Abstract
The stability of any nation depends on the harmonious integration of all its citizens. Constitutional democracy, through the rule of law, aspires to inclusive government. But populism emphasizes the sovereignty of the people, places it above the rule of law and equates the people with the majority, excluding the minority. This exposes the nation to majority tyranny, abuse of power and exclusion of some segments of the populace in governance, thereby, raising issues of legitimacy, the polarization of the population and hostilities inimical to nationhood. This paper uses historical hermeneutic analysis to examine the impact of populism on the nation-building of emerging democratic nations like Nigeria. It argues that populism is a threat to the stability of emerging plural democracies and that the rule of law based on a negotiated constitutional democracy is a better option than populism.
Keywords: Democracy, Populism, Minority right, Majority rule, Nation building

Introduction

Democracy is popularly accepted as the normative system of good governance that legitimizes a regime for providing active participation of the people in their governance. Operationally, democracy adopts majority opinion in resolving conflicting interests, which creates a threat of majority tyranny and violation of minority rights. Constitutional democracy adopts some legal frameworks that moderate majority rule to protect the rights of individuals and the inclusion of minorities in governance. However, populism advances democracy as people's rule where the populace should take control of their governance. The majority is seen as the people and consequently, the sovereign that rules. Hence, the populists attack any opposition against the majority, be it legal, institutional or groups of people, as opposing evil. This populist conception of democracy breeds intolerance to criticism, censorship, opposition and the minority rights to self-assertion.

Many politicians of a dominant group, especially in Africa, adopt the populist conception of democracy as an arbitrary rule of the majority and stratify the society into antagonistic in-group and out-group, winners and losers, and suppression of the opposing minority interests. Many developing democracies are in crisis due to grievances arising from real or perceived injustices occasioned by such stratification of society. The stratification in Africa mostly runs along ethnic and religious lines. We need only recall the political instability of such African nations as Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the split of Southern Sudan, Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, and the perennial political tensions in Nigeria.

This paper examines the challenges of populism in nation-building in Africa and Nigeria in particular. The discussion of the paper is built on the principle that a state is an integrated organic body of people established for the common good of all. It adopts the contractarian principle of human interaction for nation-building based on individual equality and the right to self-determination for the harmonious co-existence of free people. The individuals have the right to participate and determine how they are governed and conflicts in governance should be resolved through negotiations. This requires tolerance and synergy of diverse orientations towards an equilibrium founded on justice, fairness and respect for the dignity of individual persons. It considers populist political mobilization of people against a segment of the populace as negative based on the belief that suppression and exclusion of any section of the polity in governance are unjust and create resistance, tensions, and hostilities that are inimical to a nation's harmony and stability.

The populists present the elites and their establishment as corrupt and responsible for the exploitation of the people and the failures in society. They advocate for the sovereignty of the people as represented by the majority. The populist conception of the majority as the people constitutes a problem. It ignores and excludes the minority, violates their right to self-determination and exposes the system to majority tyranny, which raises the question of justice and government's legitimacy. The exclusion tendency of populism in a plural society like Nigeria leads to divisions, polarization and violence that are inimical to nation-building. From our analysis of the impact of populism in Nigeria, we suggest that an effective rule of law based on a well-negotiated inclusive constitutional democracy will address the elite corruption, protect the interest of the people (inclusive of the minority) and enhance nation-building of plural society better than populism.

The paper adopts historical and hermeneutic analytic methods in appraising the subject matter. It is divided into five sections. Section one articulates the organic nature of a state. Section two examines the concepts of democracy and populism. Section three articulates the emergence of populism. Section four takes a look at populism and its challenge to nationhood, while section five scrutinizes populism and the challenge of nation-building in Nigeria. This is followed by a conclusion.

The Organic Nature of a State

There have been controversies on the nature of a state as either an aggregate of people with individual interests or an organic body with a general interest that integrates the interests of the members. The earlier group conceives a state as just a human creation to hold an aggregate of individualistic people together in peace by enforcing mutually entered contracts among them (see LOCKE, 1823; NOZICK, 1974). This view perceives individuals as independent entities that relate to each other on the principle of their freely entered contracts. Beyond the contracts, there are no other responsibilities of the individual to the other. The individual is in the state to protect his interest and the state exists to ensure that contracts are respected to maintain harmony. Beyond these roles, the state has no other reason to be. It has no life of its own distinct from the collective agreement of the people as contained in the constitution. John Locke's (1823) social contract theory of the emergence of society and Robert Nozick's (1974) doctrine of a minimal state present this concept of a state.

On the other side, the organic conception of society entails that the state is greater than the aggregate of its members (ROUSSEAU, 1761). It is an organic whole with the individuals organically integrated like different parts of a living organism in which the meaning and significance of the individual parts are dependent on their roles in the sustenance of the organism. The parts contribute to the definition of the organism, and the organism as a whole defines the essence of the parts. In the like manner, the individuals through their activities define the state and the state defines the individuals by providing meaning and relevance to their activities. As an organism transcends the simple aggregate of its constituent parts and moulds the parts in line with its essence, so does the state transcend the aggregate of its constituent members and mold their personality. The individuals are not isolated independent entities from the state because their existence is intertwined with the reality of the state. The state subsists in and at the same time transcends a simple collection of individual citizens. Its roles go beyond creating peace and protecting the lives and properties of its citizens to moulding their personalities for an integrated society. W.H. Manwaring (1938) has it that the organic conception of the state perceives social planning as a biological problem that requires creative intelligence or evolutionary wisdom identical to biological complex and not just mechanical engineering efficiency.

The state cannot be just an aggregate of people. A state has a life of its own with the individuals organically integrated into one reality. There is a shared consciousness of unity among the citizens of a state. There is a synergy, a moral bond that transcends contract obligations that bind a state together. Each individual's life is interwoven with every other member of the state. To be is to be in relation with others (see HEIDEGGER, 1927; EKEI, 2001; ASOUZU 2004; NWALA, 2010). Whatever one is in a state is occasioned by the existence of others. One needs the cooperation of others to actualize his aspirations. Though individuals may have their aspirations, their aspirations should be integrated into the general aspirations of the state. It is the state that coordinates the activity of society and society moderates and gives meaning (value) to individual interests. The meaning and value of an individual in a society are dependent on the society's acceptance of the activities of the individual. The common good of society incorporates the good of the individual. The optimal realization of an individual's interest can only be achieved when integrated into the general interest. Society should take care of the individual even if he is in a disadvantaged position. Hence, the state should not be run by just the arbitrary interest of the majority but by the integrated general interest of all - the interest of the minority inclusive. It is a social responsibility that everyone should moderate his interests to accommodate others to have a harmonious society where everybody's interest is protected in collectivity. An individual's personality is a product of a network of interpersonal relationships and challenges of the state.

John Rawls (1999) addresses the problem of social harmony and calls for the social responsibility of individuals in ensuring social justice and equity in the state. He argues for the organic conception of the state with his doctrine of a veil of ignorance, where people should establish a social system that protects the interest of all irrespective of individual positions. He advocates that the state should protect the interest of all with special attention given to the weak to augment their disadvantages and to ensure fairness. He is opposed to a liberalist presentation of individuals as independent entities without collective moral responsibility to others.

Democracy and Populism

Democracy generally means rule by the people. It depicts the freedom of the people to determine their governance. Abraham Lincoln in his 1863 Gettysburg Address projected democratic ideas in his assertion of the " … government of the people, by the people, for the people…." (1863). Democracy empowers people to control their governance through their elected leaders. Britannica defines democracy as "a form of government in which people choose leaders by voting." It also describes democracy as "a situation in which everyone is treated equally and has equal rights" (DEMOCRACY, BRITANNICA ND). There are different versions of democracy but its central feature is the promotion of the dignity and equality of human persons and the right to self-determination expressed by people's freedom of active participation in their governance. Democracy may operate by direct participation of people in decision-making as direct democracy or by elected representatives known as representative democracy. In a democracy, conflicting interests are resolved through negotiations and the majority opinion is taken when consensus cannot be achieved.

Deliberation on issues among an unpolarised people may generate differences, but the majority of enlightened opinions will reflect the people's general will. John Stuart Mill (2001) argues that when people freely deliberate on issues for the common good of all, the majority of opinion will reflect the general will and interest of the people. Errors in the judgment of some individuals will be cancelled out. In this situation, there cannot be a permanent minority and such minorities quickly dissolve after a decision is reached as everyone is concerned with the general good of all.

This is not the situation in a polarised society where conflicting groups struggle to dominate and manipulate issues for their self-interests. The argument that when different interests converge, they will cancel themselves out does not stand, as what happens in such a situation is that the interest of the dominant group prevails. The dominant group maximally pursues its interest disregarding the rights of the minority. Democracy, here, cannot ensure the accommodation of the interests of all. It will become a tool for the dominant group to legitimize their dominance, leading to majority tyranny. To have a just and inclusive democracy that protects individual rights, some institutional legal frameworks are established to moderate majority rule in the form of constitutional democracy.

Constitutional frameworks are established to "effectively control(s) the exercise of political powers" (BRITANNICA, ND). Constitutional democracy establishes some legal structures that checkmate the arbitrariness of majority rule and protect the general interest of all the people, both the majority and minority. However, the populist aversion of the elites and the institutional structures that sustain them led to the enthronement of popular opinion as the sovereign determinant of governance. The majority is symbolized as the people with the sovereign power to determine the affairs of the state (MUELLER 2019, 1040). They are the winners and should govern, while the minorities are losers and anti-people, and should be barred from interfering in governance. The equation of the majority with the people is an erroneous redefinition of the population. It splits the populace and stratifies some sections, the minorities. The exclusion of minorities raises the issue of the legitimacy of a democracy, and might even signal the emergence of populism as minorities are denied the right to participate in their governance. The issue becomes more pronounced under representative democracy where the representatives are elected with a simple majority. A good percentage of the populace could be excluded from governance. Popular liberal democracy differs from populism by providing some legal frameworks to protect minorities.

Emergence of Populism

There are different conceptualizations of populism. Some see populism as a popular engagement of the people in decision-making. Ernesto Laclau (2005) perceives populism as a way of constructing a political entity for its emancipation from oppressive political structure. He maintains that political entities are not natural but social constructs and all political interventions are populist. Hence, populism is a process by which an undetermined and unrepresented mass of people constitutes itself as a people, thereby, forming a unit in contrast to the other outside itself. It galvanizes people to promote their interest in society. Some economists conceive populism as a concentration of public spending on the people's welfare against the strengthening of establishments. Some political analysts describe populism as an opportunistic political manoeuvring for relevance that exploits the momentary emotional disposition of a people by offering shallow simplistic solutions to deep complex problems. These conceptions highlight populism as giving preference to a people's interest in juxtaposition to other interests.

Populism has been an old challenge in the operation of democracy. In short, it is often regarded as a popular democracy that champions the voice of the common people who are marginalized by the structures of governance. Populism is a movement for the emancipation of the people from the exploitation of the elites and their establishment; and for the people to take control of their governance. It mobilizes against perceived corrupt institutions, the elites and any system or groups opposed to its agenda (see LACLAU, 2005; HANNES SWOBODA and JAN MARINUS WIERSMA, 2008; MUDDE and KALTWASSER, 2017; RODRIK, 2018). It has the positive value of sensitizing and galvanizing people to address their negative conditions. It exposes the ills of society and makes the government responsive to the plights of the people. Its negative features come from its abhorrence of criticism, censorship and the exclusionary definition of people. It splits society into opposing camps, the 'we', (pure and just people), and the 'others', (conspirators, and corrupt people) (RESNICK, 2010; MUDDE 2018). Donald Trump's administration as the President of the USA is referred to as populist because his policies tend towards white supremacy, presenting the white's interest as the national interest above that of other racial groups in America. He castigates the political class as corrupt and getting away with wrongs through carrying files, opposes the resolution of problems through political means of tolerance and returns the USA to the good old days of unadulterated American values. He taunts to deport immigrants, kill terrorists, improve the economy by restricting welfarist policies and review foreign policies to favor the white American capitalist interest based on his charism.

The populist aspires for its group to attain the majority position, symbolizing it as the people with the sovereign power (MUELLER 2019, 1040). They are the winners and should govern, while the minorities are losers and anti-people, and should be barred from interfering in governance. The equation of the majority with the people is an erroneous redefinition of the population as it stratifies some segments of the population. The populist's lines of division of the people vary. It could be by ideology, class, ethnicity, nationality or religion. The exclusion of some segments of the population in governance raises the issue of the legitimacy of a populist democracy.

Scholars like Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), argue that populism is enhanced by corruption, economic inequality, and unemployment. Bad governance and socioeconomic hardship trigger agitations and blame games against the elites and opposing groups. Similarly, Mueller claims that "massive global and domestic inequality and injustice work in favour of populist platforms and their mobilization technique to portray themselves as alternatives to business as usual. Populist platforms more often than not look more like a cynical means of exchanging elites rather than abolishing elitist inequality" (1030).

It may be true that hardship and corruption of the elites may trigger populist agitation but populism, more often, lacks the capacity to solve the problems. Populist regimes create their elites who tend to be more corrupt because of their authoritarian disposition and suppression of criticism and opposition. Many populist regimes fail to deliver their campaign promises and plunge the state into deeper crisis like the government of Gotabaya Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka which was driven out of office by protest.

Further, Jean-Michel De Waele (2008) presents populism as an attitude and not a political program. For him, it is a way of talking or a kind of rhetoric characterized by the denunciation of corrupt elites and their structures; the defence of an imaginary people believed to be marginalized by the political structures; and providing facial solutions to deep socioeconomic problems. According to Jan-Werner Muller (2016), the populists advance that the "real people", they represent are prevented from impacting the policy of the state by the conspiracy of the elites. The shallowness of populist solutions to existential challenges shows the lack of commitment of the populist to provide an enduring solution They play to the gallery and fantasy of the moment and evade the central issues. When their weak solution fails they look for a scapegoat to blame

Some scholars also argue that populists cash in on the challenges and diversity of society to get a winning majority. For example, Anton Pelinka states that:

> ...it is not the existing diversity that creates "the other", but the need of a particular in-group to create an outsider as a scapegoat. This need is strongly correlated with social security, with social status: the less secure a person feels, the more he/she is inclined to construct such an otherness. Contemporary populism uses this inclination. Contemporary populism is - to a significant extent - the product of the decline of security of status. (2008, 44)

From Pelinka's view, we can say that populism is a tool for opportunistic political maneuvering to be relevant. Its negative presentation of the critical elites and the regulating institutions as corrupt and against the people in its emancipatory role appears as a ploy to create new elites that are above criticisms and censorship. Many populist leaders emasculate opposition, and mass media on which they climbed to relevance. Adam Oshimole was a vibrant charismatic labour leader who aggressively confronted the government on behalf of the workers but turned to oppress the workers when he became the governor of Edo state.

According to Swoboda and Wiersma (2008, 11), three main factors promote populism, namely: (1) the integrity and impact of governance on the people, (2) political party populist mobilization, and (3) media sensitization. Developing countries are more susceptible to populism due to weak nationalism, poverty, and low levels of education. The military coups that swept across developing democracies in the second half of the twentieth century (especially in Africa) adopted populist strategies promising to solve all the problems of the nations in swift action. They suspend political institutions and accuse political elites of corruption and exploitation of the people. Often, the ignorant masses fall for those gimmicks and accept the coups without questioning how the coup plotters will achieve their promises. The political class does not fare better. Most of the political parties in the developing world do not espouse any ideology. They take the philanthropic approach promising goodies without stating the mechanism of achieving them. The consequence is that most populists fail to actualize their promises.

Despite the negative features of populism, it can be seen as a democratic response to the crisis of representation and governance, to restore the link between the people and their rulers and make politics responsive and accountable to the people. Some scholars have the view that populism arises when the people have been severally betrayed and there is mistrust and gulf between the people and their rules. It works as an instrument for sensitizing the populace to be conscious of their manipulation and exploitation; and for mobilizing them to take control of their governance. Hence, it can stimulate political activism in a docile populace to checkmate the excesses of the elites and political leaders.

Populism and the Challenge of Nationhood

Populism weakens the harmony and unity of a state by splitting the society into antagonistic opposing factions of "the us" (the good people) and "the others" (the evil people) to exclude "the others" from governance. It may bring the elites and the state's institutional frameworks for social freedom, justice, equity, and harmony to disrepute by presenting them as corrupt and needing to be overridden to achieve a better society. This affects the very fabric of the state's stability, especially in Africa where people see their states as a foreign imposition. The resilience, tolerance, accommodation, patriotism, and sacrifices necessary for the systematic handling of issues of democracy may be lost to the divisive propaganda slogans of populism.

The antagonistic divisive propaganda of populism grooms self-indulging and intolerant citizens who are dictatorial and unaccommodating to divergent opinions. Hence, a populist dominant group will be intolerant of the plight of the minority in the pursuit of its interest and ignore the social responsibility of the state to protect and accommodate the interests of all. It will override constitutional provisions and arbitrarily impose its will on others. This constitutes a problem in many plural developing democracies. There are always cries of domination and marginalization of minorities in these democracies even as there are constitutional provisions to protect them.

Populism communicates half-truths to the people. Information to the people is not balanced. The populist's aspiration to have a majority leads to his appeal to the emotions of the moment and manipulate the challenges of the state to soothe the emotional wishes of the populace without considering the prolonged consequences on the state. Their propaganda is packaged to elicit reactionary behaviour to carve out a majority. The ignorant and the self-seekers are always in the majority in any society and they easily fall for the manipulations of the populist. This impedes rationality and balanced consideration of issues. For instance, a populist will oppose austerity policies that will curb government expenses to stabilize the economy even when it is obvious that the economy is going to rock. He evades the kernel issues and addresses peripherals, blames "the other" for all the evils, and incites people against them.

Populism negates the basic goal of democracy, which it claims to project. The Democratic aim to establish equity, liberty, and harmonious co-existence in line with the general will of the people is confounded by populist majoritarianism. Swoboda and Wiersima (2008) argue that the problem of populism is that it understands democracy simply as an arbitrary majority rule. The minority's liberty, rights, and privileges are at the mercy of the majority. Equity and harmonious co-existence are sacrificed on the altar of the majority. Alexis de Tocqueville (2010) has warned that the majority can be as tyrannical as any despot. The threat to the minority's rights creates tension and instability. It raises the question of the legitimacy of the state that could not ensure equity and security for all its citizens. To substantiate the preceding, Jibrin Ibrahim argues that:

> The legitimacy of the state is linked to its capacity to present itself as a provider of necessary public goods and more important, a neutral arbiter that guarantees the security of all sections of society. When the state is generally perceived as serving the particularistic interests of one group, it starts losing its legitimacy, and indeed, its authority. As state capacity declines, fear of 'the other' rises and inhabitants of the state resort to other levels of solidarity such as the religious, ethnic and regional forms in search of security. (2002, N.P.)

The divisive and polarizing nature of populism weakens the stability of a nation. Populist government can easily degenerate into authoritarianism, violate individual rights, ignite distrust and antagonistic relationships and radicalize the populace, thereby becoming inimical to harmonious coexistence and nationhood. The populist attack against institutional censorship and criticisms exposes the nation to mediocrity and inefficiency as national issues are not robustly analyzed.

Populism and Nation-Building in Nigeria: Consolidating Democratic Values

Nigeria is a plural society based on religious and ethnic solidarities. From the days of her formation, as a state, she has been battling to contend with her people's cultural and religious diversity. The nation is divided into three main religious orientations: traditional African religions, Islam, and Christianity. Traditional African religions, which are indigenous in all parts of the nation, are under threat by the two later religions of Islam and Christianity, which are more sophisticated and organized. The proselyte nature of the two later religions leads to continual conflicts between the religions as they compete for adherents and domination of the state. There are spiral suspicions, distrusts, hostilities and accusations of conspiracies between the two religions that continually threaten the stability of the state. Government policies are assessed as to how they affect the perceived promotion of one religion over the other. The Nigerian government had been pushed to the precipice of collapse on contentious religious issues like Nigeria joining the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the introduction of Sharia as a penal code, and the consideration of Nigeria as a secular state.

Culturally, two trends of civilization pitched their tents at the two ends of the state. Arab Islamic civilization pitched her tent in the north, while the European Christian civilization pitched hers in the south. These two civilizations and religions have polarised the state into a north and south cultural divide. The depth of this divide is perceived when any socioeconomic or political issues are discussed. Some political analysts have opined that the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Niger Protectorates by the colonial administration was a mistake that has held the nation down.

Besides this cultural divide, Nigeria is home to many ethnic groups and over 400 different languages. The people's loyalty is first to their ethnic groups. National patriotism is very low and the government is doing very little to promote national patriotism above ethnic loyalty. The insistence on relating with people based on their genealogy (place of origin) rather than where they live and what they do promotes ethnic consciousness and weakens integration and national cohesion.

From the early time of the nationalist struggle for independence, populism has been present in Nigerian politics. Most politicians in Nigeria adopt a populist strategy to be relevant to the detriment of nation-building. They stir sectional consciousness that split society between the in-group and out-group and attribute the ills of the society to the out-group. They carve out areas where their in-group will be dominant and use the majority rule doctrine to suppress minorities therein. This is part of the reasons for the continuous agitations for the political partitioning of the nation into unviable federating states. The nation started with three regions as the federating units at the time of her independence in 1960, which has now been divided into thirty-six states as federating units and Abuja as the capital. There are still agitations for the creation of more states when many of the created states cannot live up to their responsibility, especially regarding the funding of their administration without depending on the central government.

The populist mobilization deepens the line of the plurality of the society and promotes the interests of the dominant sectional groups above the common interest of the state as dominant sectional groups insist on having their way irrespective of how parochial their interest may be. The refined civil manners that are essential for socializing the people for liberal democratic values of justice, equity, tolerance and respect for people's rights and freedom are eroded. The political class insensitivity to the rights of minorities in Nigeria is epitomized in the arbitrary introduction and implementation of Sharia law as a penal code in nine Moslem-dominated states in 2000 without regard to the sensitivity and resistance of Christians and adherents of other religions. The implementation of Sharia law as a penal code implies the adoption of Islam as the state religion, which is contrary to the provisions of the Nigerian 1999 constitution that no state should adopt any religion as the state religion. The Sharia law has been an instrument of struggle for relevance and getting majority votes in elections among northern politicians and many of the politicians ascribe to it to please the dominant group and ignore the right of the minority non-Moslems.

In response to the threat of the majority excluding the minorities in governance, the 1999 Nigeria Constitution stipulates that the election of the governor of the states and the president of the nation should be based on winning 25% of votes spread across two-thirds of their constituency and implementation of the federal character principle in the recruitment of officials.

The populist's intolerance of opposition often deteriorates into a dictatorship. President Muhammadu Buhari became Nigeria's president in 2015 with a populist campaign strategy to fight corruption, boost the economy, and enhance the security of the nation against the threat of Boko Haram terrorism. He discredited the elites and state institutions as corrupt and blamed them for the evils in society. The administration used the Department of State Security (DSS) and the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) to intimidate the opposition and other arms of government like the illegal siege of the National Assembly by members of DSS on August 7, 2018 (OGBONNA 2016. N.P), and the violation of the privacy of judges by the DSS' night raiding of their residence under the pretence of fighting corruption. Any law that did not favor the administration was ignored. Oppositions were not tolerated and dismissed as evil conspirators with the expression, "Corruption is fighting back". Even criticisms from international organizations were termed the handiwork of corrupt elites.

The Buhari administration leveraged propaganda, fed the nation with half-truths, and suppressed opposing views. DAAR Communication PLC with its broadcasting media, African Independent Television (AIT) and Raypower Radio were persecuted because of the Buhari administration's perception that the communication media were not favourable to it. The administration sent the EFCC against the founder of DAAR Communications PLC, Raymond Dokpesi for the money paid by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) (the ruling party during the 2015 general election) to the company for media services and barred the media from covering the activities of the government on many occasions. The AIT, Channels and Arise Televisions were heavily fined and threatened to be shut down for their open and unedited coverage of the EndSARS protest against the government in October 2020. Omoyele Sowore, a Nigerian human rights activist and politician, was arrested, detained, and accused of treason by DSS for calling for a public demonstration against the poor governance of the nation by the administration. DSS refused to release him even after the court granted him bail. The administration blamed the failure to deliver its campaign promises on past administrations' failures and activities.

The Buhari administration identified with the dominant ethnic group, the Hausa-Fulani and championed the interest of the ethnic group above that of the other ethnic groups. The appointments into government positions and policy implementation were skewed to favour Fulani Moslems. His administration excluded the southeast region, a significant part of the nation, from governance because of the low votes he got from the region. The head of most of the security agencies, the Police, Army, DSS, Immigration, Customs and Civil Defence, in the country were manned by the Fulani Moslems. The automatic-rifle-armed Fulani Herdsmen pillaging Benue State, Plateau State, and many other parts of the country were condoned while the unarmed flag-bearing agitators for self-determination of the southeastern part of the country as Biafra were declared terrorists by the government because of the ethnic bias.

During the eight years of his administration, the insecurity in the nation worsened with Boko Haram sustaining its terrorism, and other criminal groups like the Fulani herdsmen, bandits, and kidnappers were emboldened and terrorized the nation. The economy collapsed and the currency grossly devalued with the exchange rate of Naira to the USA dollar dropping from 160:1 when he took office in 2015 to 780:1 when he left in 2023. His administration so divided the nation and deepened sectional cleavages and antagonism than ever before, that those outside his in-group (four out of the nation's six geo-political zones) were agitating for restructuring or total disintegration.

Government officials' penchant for placing the interest of their sectional in-group above that of the nation, as epitomized in the Buhari administration, threatens national stability. They personalize the state's resources and apportion them discriminately to sustain their in-group. This engenders spiral populist movements geared towards the solidification of sectional in-group consciousness. Any opposition to such movements within the in-group is treated as sabotage that must be crushed.

Despite the negative impact of populism on nationhood, it is still attractive to political activists for the mobilization of people. Nigerian populace is very docile and the elites have been exploiting the docility to accumulate and personalize national resources in neglect of the plight of the people. Privileged dominant groups also marginalize others from partaking in the national resources. There is a need for the people to rise to demand their rights and checkmate the excesses of the elites and the privileged. Through populism, the people can be conscientized and mobilized to fight for their rights and checkmate their marginalization. Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), use populism to sensitize the people of Southeastern Nigeria to their marginalization in national affairs.

Populism can mitigate the evils of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy tends to alienate the people from the government. Leaders occasionally need a populist approach to take the government to the people and have undiluted feelings and knowledge of the challenges of the people. The government's practice of town hall meetings abridged the elites from interfering with the people's interaction with the leaders. Peter Obi in some of his speeches extolled the success of his direct dealings with the people in the execution of projects during his tenure as the governor of Anambra State.

Considering the plurality of Nigerian society and its challenges in nation-building, we advocate for the rule of law based on a negotiated constitution anchored on the democratic values of respect for the dignity and equality of the human person and the right to self-determination The plural nature of Nigeria should be acknowledged and addressed in a way that will elicit trust, inclusiveness and enterprise.

Nigeria embarked on the negotiation of the conditions of her nationhood through a series of constitutional conferences during the struggle for national independence. However, the euphoria of independence led to the hasty adoption of a British-influenced agreement as the constitution. The trial and adjustment of the constitution to suit the existential realities of the nation were truncated by the military dictators who hijacked the nation and continued issuing out their interest as the constitution instead of the negotiated agreement of the people. Even the 1999 constitution, being operated today, is still a military dictator's opinion of how they want the nation to run for their interest. The current movement of the legislators to amend the constitution to reflect the general will of the people is bedevilled by the fact that the legislators and those in government are beneficiaries of the system and want the status quo to remain as long as they are in office. The political class lacks principle and integrity in taking stands on national issues. Their stands on any national issue are dependent on their proximity to power and what they stand to gain. It is ridiculous that state governors that agitate for true federalism and devolution of more powers to the states, at the same time, oppose the autonomy of the local governments (another tier of government). There is a need for national dialogue in the form of a sovereign national conference, constituted of the different sectional interests, to articulate the general will that will determine the nature and operation of the nation.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to examine the impact of populism on minority rights in democratic nation-building with particular reference to Nigeria. To accomplish this task, the paper has highlighted a state as an organic integrated social entity built on the respect and cooperation of all. It took a look at the conception of both democracy and populism and presented democracy as the best pragmatic system of governance available, as it promotes people's participation, social justice, respect for human dignity, political enlightenment, tolerance, accommodation, and cooperation; while it criticizes populism as a democracy for being divisive, majoritarian and exclusionary to minorities. Populism is presented as a challenge to stable nation-building in Nigeria. The paper holds that the stability of any state requires the willing cooperation and integration of all her citizens as one body, but populism threatens this unity by splitting the state into opposing hostile in-groups and out-groups, which leads to antagonistic dominant and minority relationships. Populism is a challenge to the legitimacy of democracy by reducing it to majoritocracy and negating its inclusive values of respect for minority rights. It leaves the state in the vagrancy of power politics and weakens socio-political institutions that moderate governance for all. Finally, the illiberal and non-inclusion nature of populism leads to intolerance, social injustice, agitations, socio-political tensions, and instability and can easily degenerate into dictatorship and fascism.

There is a need to address the challenges of populism to achieve virile democracy, especially in the developing countries of Africa. The threat of populism can be checkmated through political education and the strengthening of the rule of law and state institutions. Political activism should be distinguished from populism. States should develop a people's negotiated constitution that respects the rights and aspirations of all as free citizens. Such a constitution should be supreme and guide the affairs of the state. Our arguments here are not to be taken as final words but as bases for other scholars to join the debate on the presence of populism in Nigeria and its effects.

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