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The Social Democratic State, Social Inequality and Social Justice: Nigeria 1999-2020

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an exploratory study that seeks to find the reason's why the Nigerian state can be deemed a social democracy. This way, the variables of social inequality and social justice are parameters used to gauge the social democratic ethic of the Nigerian state. To this, five policies were interrogated to find if they conform to the social democratic etiquette of reducing social inequality and fostering forward social justice. The NHIS (National health insurance scheme), Sure-P, N-power, the minimum wage saga, and fuel subsidy regime, were looked into. This is justified due to the existence of scant literature about Nigerian social democracy in its existence since independence. The findings show that indeed the policies under review have enhanced the social wellbeing of the Nigerian citizen, as without them Nigerians will come out worse off. This way, answering the research question that "is Nigeria a social democracy?" By the way, also testing hypothesis, and confirming the initial hypothesis that "Nigeria is a social democracy in view of its social welfare policies" and debunking the later that claimed this hypothesis not to be true. Interconnected with this, hence on giving a pass mark for the Nigerian state as a social democracy, even if "partially", because of the nature of administrations and the parties they belong to especially before and since 1999. Thus, the paper starts with an introduction, then a conceptual clarification, then a discussion on methodology, test of hypothesis using empirical research based on predominantly secondary data and finally concludes and recommends. The paper hints at possible areas of future research which have to do with conducting in depth analysis of the Social democratic party of Nigeria as it existed in the 1990s and its current formulation in Nigerian politics. Other areas of research the paper hints at is that which will be hinged on the Buhari regime, from 2015-2022. Also the Kaduna state government's social intervention in the same time period. And finally other social welfare policies that were mentioned in the paper but were not discussed or used as empirical evidence of Nigerian social democracy.

Keywords: Social justice, Social Inequality, Welfare, Social Democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The search for social justice is a norm democratic states and ideas have sought to establish. Thus, parties in the political system seek to implement socialist policies that could cater for the benefit ¹of the worse

off in society and also protect them from gross inequality that is associated with a full-fledged capitalist social formation and market economics. These protections are not only for the peasantry otherwise known as the lower classes, but rather it also caters to the middleclass whose gap with the top 1% can be bridged. Hence on reducing inequality. Justifiably, there exist scant literature on the Nigerian Social democratic etiquette or even information about the social democratic party and its goals of bridging inequality and ensuring social justice. This informed our decision to engage in writing this paper to add to the literature. Thus, we ask the question, is Nigeria a social democracy? We then hypothesize; “Nigeria is a social democracy in view of its social welfare policies”. The counter hypothesis is that “Nigeria is not a social democracy in view of its social welfare policies”. With this in mind we decided to use the method of exploratory research to flesh out Nigeria’s social democratic credentials. Thus, a state that claims itself to be a fighter for the welfare of the poor, the middle class (working class) and also the worse off can lay claim to be mechanized in the realm of a social democracy. This could be gauged using its social welfare policies.

Thus, what is social democracy? Social democracy does not have a simplistic definition and like other social science concepts, has a plethora of definitions. This way, social democracy is a “political ideology that originally advocated a peaceful evolutionary transition of society from capitalism to socialism using established political processes. Also, as Britannica encyclopedia (2020) puts it that “in the second half of the 20th century, there emerged a more moderate version of the doctrine, which generally espoused state regulation, rather than state ownership, of the means of production and extensive social welfare programs.”

If the above is true, the social democratic state would cater to making sure the market does not fall into predatory hands where exploitation of the citizenry might occur due to extensive monopolies developing or perhaps oligopolies. Which would regulate prices of goods to their own benefit as against society and the working class especially. Thus Social democracy is about social justice through the eradication of hardships witnessed within the state and the protection of the poor and downtrodden.

This way, this paper has set out to outline and investigate the social democratic potentials of the Nigerian state. In this way seeing if there are concrete attempts at providing welfare and interventions into the market for the purpose of ensuring social justice in the country.

METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS

This study adopts the exploratory research method, predominantly using secondary sources of data for its sources of information and facts. As the online source ² Puts it, exploratory research is defined as research used to investigate a problem which is not clearly defined. It is conducted to have a better understanding of the existing problem, but will not provide conclusive results. For such research, a researcher starts with a general idea and uses this research as a medium to identify issues that can be the focus for future research. An important aspect here is that the researcher should be willing to change his/her direction subject to the revelation of new data or insight

While the above is the case for exploratory research, our crux is to investigate the causal link between the social democratic etiquette of the Nigerian state, its aim at bridging social inequality, and hence ensuring

² “Exploratory Research: Definition, Types and Methodologies | QuestionPro.”

social justice. This is a link that has been less documented especially in view of the Nigerian state after a careful review of the literature. We only found a hint at social democracy for Nigeria in a study by (Ayoada, 1985), whom discussed the Nigerian early independence political party the Action Group. Ayoada (1985) enumerated early attempts at fostering democratic socialism as a part of the action group party's manifesto. No other study was found in close connection and hence justified our attempts at pursuing an exploratory approach or method at gauging Nigerian social democracy.

Hence, since the above study was inadequate in bringing forward Nigeria's social democratic character especially in post-independence Nigeria, and most importantly since 1999, the paper asides adopting exploratory method and research design uses the secondary sources of data for its investigations. Secondary sources of data asides the primary sources are data that have already been generated or exist away from the researchers' own attempts at generating them. This is justified as generating primary data for research of such exploratory manner will be time consuming and requires advanced techniques to find the link from a specific population in Nigeria. We believe future research will be able to do this as this is just the beginning of a new vista. Online sources where the major sources of secondary data for this research asides some articles and newspaper bulletins.

Towards Conceptual Clarification- Social Democracy, Social Inequality and Social Justice

Social Democracy.

As already mentioned in the introduction, Social democracy does not have a simplistic definition of sorts. However, a quick search gives the following quick answers; that social democracy is:

1. A political movement advocating a gradual and peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism by democratic means &
2. A democratic welfare state that incorporates both capitalist and socialist practices.

The first definition means to say that a social democratic state is a state that seeks to pursue socialist policies away from capitalism in attempts at providing for social benefits for the citizenry. Meanwhile, the second definition means to say that the state, that is the social democratic state, seeks to marry both capitalist and socialist policies in attempts at ensuring the welfare of the citizens. Both of these definitions are valid, but do not capture the whole picture of what social democracy entails. A more elaborate definition by the Merriam Webster Dictionary (2021) is that "social democracy, now often referred to as *democratic socialism*, in which extensive state regulation, with limited state ownership, has been employed by democratically elected governments (as in Sweden and Denmark) in the belief that it produces a fair distribution of income without impairing economic growth."

Another look at the concept of social democracy as seen by Rothstein & Stein Mo (2012, P.4) is "...a political economy built on the ideas of universal social solidarity, modernity and the belief that society can be changed by "enlightened politics". Also, in another more comprehensive view, Freedden et al. (2013, P5) assert that "social democracy can be defined as an ideology which prescribes the use of democratic collective action to extend the principles of freedom and equality valued by democrats in the political sphere to the organization of the economy and society, chiefly by opposing the inequality and oppression created by *laissez-faire* capitalism".

In addition to the above, social democracy as it is, seeks to regulate the market as Polanyi (2001, P.242) describes thus, “Socialism is, essentially, the tendency inherent in an industrial civilisation to transcend the self-regulating market by consciously subordinating it to democratic society”.

According to Kastning (2013, P. 7), Social Democracy is based on four fundamental core values. These are Freedom, equality, justice and solidarity. Freedom here represents the idea to make free un-coerced decisions without any hindrances, albeit without infringing on the right to free decisions of the other. To him, as for equality, social democracy seeks to promote an egalitarian society in which inequality is successfully checked by the notion of creating welfare for the worse off in society. This leads us to justice in which a fair distribution of the goods of society are ensured, making sure no one is left behind in the share of the cake of the goods of life. And then there is solidarity, in which the community are committed in their attempts at helping one another in times of need and also out of times of need.

In further clarification, there is the assertion by Heywood (2007, P.58) that “Social democracy stands for the balance between the market and the state, a balance between the individual and community.” In continuation, Heywood (2007, P. 59) asserts that “At the heart of social democracy, there is a compromise between, on the one hand, an acceptance of capitalism as the only reliable mechanism for generating wealth and, on the other, a desire to distribute wealth in accordance with moral, rather than market principles.”. The slogan is ‘competition where possible, planning where necessary’.

As Magstadt (2013, P.30) puts it, democratic socialists, another name social democracy is known by embraces collectivist ends, but also committed to democratic means. Social democrats believe in gradualism, or reform, rather than revolution as Marxists believe, but they hold to the view that social justice cannot be achieved without substantial economic equality. They also tend to favor a greatly expanded role of government and a tightly regulated economy. Democratic nationalist parties typically advocate nationalization of key parts of the economy- transportation, communication, public utilities, banking and finance, insurance and such basic industries as automobile manufacturing, iron and steel processing, mining and energy. To Magstadt, (2013, P.30), “the modern-day welfare state, wherein government assumes broad responsibility for the health, education, and welfare of its citizens, is the brain child of European social democracy”.

Social Inequality.

According to Binelli et al. (2015), in the study of inequality, a crucial question arises that “inequality of what?” is being studied. This is to say that there are several types of inequality and thus to take it as a concept, one has to specify, that which social inequality one is talking about. Is it inequality of wealth? Or inequality of income? Or inequality of welfare and so on. A definition of social inequality goes thus “Social inequality exists when people frequently receive more of a society’s ‘valuable goods’ than others owing to their position in the social network of relationships.” (Hradil, 2001, P.30). This definition takes as its aim to show that inequality does not do with physical attributes such as weight or height, but rather deals with the question of whom gets what when and how? In this way, welfare is an index that can be used to measure social inequality. Income is another that can be used to measure social inequality. The goods of democracy such as the good life can be used to measure social inequality.

With the above consideration in mind, our main concern in this paper is the social inequality of welfare. The extent to which social welfare is distributed in society is a question we seek to explain. Welfare could

be in the form of health care, subsidies on goods, the provision of reduced prices in access to education or even perhaps regulation of the prices of public goods such as petroleum, grains, electricity tariffs etc. This we shall refer to as welfare and the inequality in the distribution of such is the main concern in this paper.

Social Justice.

According to Chappelow (2014), social justice is a political and philosophical theory which asserts that there are dimensions to the concept of justice beyond those embodied in the principles of civil or criminal law, economic supply and demand, or traditional moral frameworks. Social justice tends to focus more on just relations between groups within society as opposed to the justice of individual conduct or justice for individuals. This way, as Investopedia (2022) puts it, in theory; the idea of social justice is that all people should have equal access to wealth, health, well-being, justice, privileges, and opportunity regardless of their legal, political, economic, or other circumstances.

The Oxford English dictionary defines social justice broadly as “justice at all levels of society or state as regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities and privileges”. This definition seems to encompass a lot but there are other considerations that are missing, such as that of human rights, which is mutually inclusive with social justice. To P. King (2020), the term ‘Fairness’ remains at the heart of social justice as well as its sister term human rights. If this is the case, then I assert that the term social justice is as above a move to seek fairness in the distribution of the goods of society such as democracy, human rights, the distribution of resources and food etc. Another rejoinder to this is the search for equity in the distribution of the above said goods. As capitalism breeds inequality, so does the social democratic ethic of fairness and equality seek to regulate these unequal relationships so that the worse off will get a justified means to an end. Thus we will attempt to use the term social justice as that of fairness and equality in society.

On the final note, what does social justice mean? As Human rights careers (2020) puts it, social justice means that everyone’s human rights are respected and protected. Everyone has equal opportunities. This doesn’t guarantee that society will be perfect and everyone will always be happy. However, everyone will have a fighting chance at the life they want. They aren’t held back by things out of their control like systemic obstacles or discrimination. There isn’t one clear framework for what successful social justice looks like in practice, but that’s why principles such as participation are so important. As long as a nation values social justice and remains committed to equality, progress is possible.

DISCUSSION: Answering Research Question (s) and Test of Hypothesis: The Social Democratic State, Social Inequality and Social Justice: Nigeria 1999-2020

In a study by Ayoada (1985), the social democratic ethic in Nigeria can be traced to pre-independence parties such as the Action group. To this end, the party in 1951 adopted democratic socialism as against communist socialism which is violent in its approach. According to Ayoada (1985), the action group began the move towards rewarding the working-class stipends in form of minimum wage on October, 1st, 1954. According to him, The Action Group held the belief that the welfare state won’t only eradicate poverty, ignorance and disease, but also abolish them completely, and move to guarantee a minimum standard of life below which no citizen will be allowed to fall.

To this end, in modern times, especially since the change in regime from military to civilian democracy in 1999, various administrations had sought to implement policies that would cater for the worker, unemployed and worse off in the Nigerian society.³ Some of such policies include but are not limited to: NHIS (National health insurance scheme), the National Pension Scheme, Employers Compensation Bill, the minimum wage increase, SURE-P & N-POWER amongst others. However, due to the scope of this paper, we are going to delve into the first and last three policies as social democratic policies aimed at bridging the gap in inequality and ensuring social justice in Nigeria.

According to Holmes et al. (2012, P19), “the NHIS established in 1999 was officially launched in 2005 with three main social health insurance programmes: formal sector, urban- self-employed and rural community. Only the formal sector took off fully, even though it was mostly successful in two states”. According Holmes, the aim was to provide cheap healthcare to the working population, in attempts at improving their livelihood. This in itself has opened the door to the social democratic credentials of the Nigerian state. As seen in the aims of the scheme, if it can expand its reach or awareness to the rural community as it’s meant to do, a whole lot of the poor who mainly reside in these rural communities will be enrolled, hence on bridging the gap between them and the urban population, in the pursuit of social justice.

As enumerated by Salaudeen (2021), The N-Power Program under the current President Buhari regime is also a social policy aimed at youths whom are otherwise unemployed. The goal is to provide gainful employment, which will enable the youths to gain the necessary skills that will enable them to be ready for employability in the larger labor market. This social intervention policy in itself is aimed at the most important segment of the social demographic in this case the youths in pursuit of realigning them to the vagaries of employment. This as can be seen is a social democratic ethic, which aims to increase the self-worth of youths, whom are seeking to join the labor force, in itself enhancing social mobility and importantly social justice. The gap between the working lower and the middle class has been reduced, thus ensuring more of the social mobility for the youths in joining the middle working class. Social justice has been enhanced.

As acknowledged by Salaudeen (2021), before N-Power there was the social policy of Sure-P. Introduced in February 2012, the Sure-P invested fuel subsidy savings for vocational training, youth empowerment, and community service. Like N-Power the Sure-P was aimed at unemployed youths in order to equip them with the necessary skills needed for gainful employment. Social justice may have been sought to be enhanced through this but the impact was minimal. This is because the program is a temporary form of gainful employment for youths and is not permanent. After a two year run of the program, those in the program are graduated and new intakes taken. This is without the guarantee of further employment for the graduates of the program previously. In this regard, both Sure-P and N-Power are reductionist in impact in pursuit of greater equality and the pursuit of social justice.

³ Military regimes due to their nature have been carefully excluded here because they are anti-democratic and their rule is basically non-conforming to any ideology, including social democracy or even to ideals such as social welfare. Note also some civilian regimes especially since the 1970s (i.e. the Shagari civilian regime) have also not been discussed here for obvious reasons as they have failed to exist for a sufficient amount of time to test their social democratic credentials. In fact the social democratic party of Nigeria de-facto only came into existence in the 1990s as a military creation to contest election which was doomed to fail due to insincerity of the military regime at the time.

Nwane (2019) opined that in 2019, there was the dramatic saga of the increase of the minimum wage payable to workers across the Nigerian federation. The minimum wage is a social policy bill that has meant to ensure that workers are not exploited in their various capacities as employees across Nigeria. The initial existing bill in parliament only stipulated #18000 (\$46.45) eighteen thousand Naira as the minimum wage payable to workers. This as foreseen in reality remained very uncomfortable for the worker in the labor force especially in the inflationary situation of the world including Nigeria since 2020. This then ushered in moves to increase it further and upwards. The labor union championed by its head Chris Ngige insisted on the raising of the minimum wage to #30,000 (\$77.42) by the end of year 2019 by the Nigerian government. This contributed to the discussions made by the Nigerian labor union and the Nigerian government in efforts to increase the minimum wage payable. By October 2019, a deal was struck and then the Minimum wage increased from #18,000 to #30,000. This move ensured that the welfare of the worker has been enhanced and thus encouraged the social mobility of the working class. Also in the realm of this study, we can say the social democratic credentials in terms of welfare has been enhance and in addition inequality marginally reduced, all in pursuit if social justice.

In addition, there exists a policy known as the fuel subsidy regime. The Nigerian government exports crude oil to refining countries and then imports the refined products into the nation. This comes with added costs as petroleum is bought by the Nigerian state after exporting the mother product crude oil. As Okunade (2019) put it, to counteract the high prices of oil products in the nation, the government devised a mechanism to regulate its prices so that the worse off or poor citizen will have access to the product. This mechanism is known as the fuel subsidy regime. This was aimed at making more affordable for the Nigerian citizen petroleum products. This in essence is a social democratic trend as the Nigerian government has dwelt into the market to regulate prices and in this case petroleum. Petroleum is affordable to the poor because of the government intervention. Social justice as a virtue has been enhanced. To also keep mind, fuel subsidy as a government policy in Nigeria is under threat since 1999 as successive governments since then have been looking to scrap it because of its huge burden and constraint on government budget, where such monies could be used for development, socially, politically and economically.

Conclusion, Recommendation and Future Research

In conclusion, we have seen that social democracy is an ideology that seeks to promote social justice through the intervention of the state in the public realm. This is also through targeting policies that cater to the worse off or disadvantaged in society. This has ensured that inequality as it is can be checked in its tracks due to the capitalist nature of the economy. The Nigerian state has not been left behind in this crusade. Through social intervention policies as exemplified by the NHIS, SURE-P, N-POWER, Minimum wage increase regime and fuel subsidy regime, the Nigerian state has come far in laying claim to be a social democracy. This in essence has worked to make things more bearable to the Nigerian citizen, especially the worse off. This confirms our hypothesis that “Nigeria is a social democracy in view of its social welfare policies” as true, and subsequently debunking the alternate hypothesis that “Nigeria is not a social democracy in view of its social welfare policies”. With this, we have also answered our research question that “Is Nigeria a social democracy?” Thus, we assert that Nigeria is indeed a social democracy, even if “**partially**”, in view of the policies discussed a section above. We term it “**partially**” because Nigeria may not be ideologically a social democratic country, but its policies hint at the welfare that could qualify it as one. Additionally, Nigeria has been drifting towards a two party state. The main

Political parties that contest elections are the PDP (People’s Democratic Party), and the APC “All Peoples Congress”. This is even as the constitution of Nigeria provides for a multiparty system. The Nigerian SDP (Social Democratic Party) with its democratic socialist ideology plays a minimal role of fielding candidates for presidential and other elections, but only as a minimal rival to the above named parties, the PDP and APC. Perhaps if the SDP plays a bigger role in Nigeria government and politics, with its ideology, we may lay a bigger claim to Nigeria as a “**medium scale**” or “**full-fledged**” social democracy, and that is especially if the SDP was to, or captures power at the center or lower tiers of government.⁴

By way of recommendation, the author will like to bring to the attention of the Nigerian Government in its attempts at social policy, to look at the policy of non-employment benefits for the teeming youths and all unemployed. This can be done as the Nigerian state is wealthy enough to cater to its optimum population (or maybe not, especially in regards to current realities (2020-2022), but probably if the fuel subsidy scraping proceeds can be used to expand social policy). This will eradicate hunger and reduce petty crime even if to a minimum extent in the Nigerian social space. Also the Nigerian government should expand the frontiers of the state to encourage more corporate social responsibility by companies in their communities, thereby ensuring these companies extend employment benefits to their host communities, thereby enhancing the lives of the host community.

In pointing to future research, the author will look into social intervention policies in Nigeria especially the period 2015-2022. This is as the Buhari regime in Nigeria campaigned on the mantra of change, where there were promises made in lieu of social interventions such as conditional cash transfer, school feeding system, legislation to the effect all geared towards rescuing the poorest of the poor from perishing. There are also state social interventions, such as one implemented in Kaduna, also geared towards poverty alleviation. These will serve the purpose of further research in the future.

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⁴ Bear in mind the author acknowledges that the SDP as a party had captured power in the early 90s, only that that election was annulled. We could have based that regime as a strong candidate for us making claim that Nigeria at least in a part of its history had practiced a full-fledged social democratic social formation.

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