

## **Edmund Burke on Democracy- Implications for Power Politics in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*Democracy is a system of government based on popular consent and people-power. It anchors and hinges on the background and foundation of popular participation in a political system. This paper examines Edmund Burke's conception of democracy showing its implications for the emerging trends and evolving dynamics of power politics in contemporary Nigerian body-politic. It further explores the possibility of establishing an ideal socio-political order in current democratic experiment in Nigeria using Burke's social and political philosophy as a single guide with a view to enhancing good governance. It utilizes qualitative research method which is basically descriptive and dwells on textual analysis of both primary and secondary texts. Its epistemological value consists in its clarification of key terms bordering on Burke's philosophical enterprise. It provides a basis for strengthening political stability in the Nigerian state. In conclusion, it posits that democracy is an ideal political system that could guarantee popular participation notwithstanding Burke's contempt for it. It recommends a reconstructive adaptation of representative democracy as a national ideology and national philosophy to guide and direct the management of state affairs in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Edmund, Burke, Implications, Power, Politics, Nigeria

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### **Introduction**

This paper focuses on Burke's valuation of democracy in his thought pattern and its implications for the operational workings of power politics in Nigeria. It is germane to stress that democracy is central to the enterprise of government and politics in every political context or social milieu. It is indeed a fundamental theme in social and political philosophy. Democracy is by far the most popular form of government in the world today. Thus, global or international politics is largely characterized by a strong appeal to the ideals of democratic governance. There is hardly any leader who does not wish to be seen as a democrat or a regime that does not seek to be described as democratic. To be sure, even the most dictatorial or odious form of government makes claim to democratic principles for prentious reasons with a view to legitimizing such a government. What is more, democracy also holds a strong appeal among the ordinary people. In the recent time, the world has witnessed the emergence or resurgence of mass organizations (e.g. Civil Society Organization, Civil Liberty Organization, Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, Pro-Democracy Advocacy Groups, etc)

in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and even Eastern Europe demanding an end to dictatorial rule and making a clarion call for its replacement with democracy (Enemu 141).

Furthermore, the world's preference and global yearnings for democratic governance is occasioned by the conviction that the canons or tenets of democracy show promise of fostering good governance in the political space. The following thought-provoking questions are pertinent in understanding this intellectual discourse or philosophical inquiry: What exactly is democracy? Why is it so desirable and under what conditions can it be realized? What has been Africa's experience of democracy? These and many other perplexing questions underlie democracy as a system of organizing human society.

### **The Concept of Democracy**

Democracy as a system of government owes its ancestry to ancient Greece. Etymologically, the term democracy is derived from two Greek words namely *demos* meaning 'people's' and *kratos* or *kratia* meaning 'rule'. Literally, democracy denotes people's rule or rule by the people. There is no universally accepted definition of democracy. There are varying conceptions of democracy as there are different scholars with divergent intellectual orientations or idiosyncrasies. In other words, there is no unanimous or consensual definition of democracy. This stems from the fact that the views or ideas of a particular scholar are coloured and shaped, to a large extent, by the cultural background or historical experiences of such thinkers. It is against this background that Johnson Anyaele succinctly defines it as follows:

Democracy may be defined as a system of government in which all qualified adult citizens share the supreme power directly or through their elected representatives.

Democracy is a system of government based on popular consent. It is a government which is derived from public opinion and is accountable to it (31).

The notion of popular participation which is the hallmark of democratic governance is emphatically stressed in the above conception of democracy. It conceives of it as a political doctrine or ideology that gives primacy to the people from whose absolute sovereignty resides or rests. No wonder Abraham Lincoln the famous American president and erudite statesman aptly defines it as "The government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Laski 44). The import of the foregoing is that democratic government ultimately derives its legitimacy from the people. Thus, the idea of democracy revolves around the centrality of the people. Hence, it is people-oriented or people-centered by its very nature.

More so, Okwudiba Nnoli posits that it is no more than "government by the consent of the governed" (31). In what follows, it is a form of government with the approval of the people being governed. It is diametrically opposed to absolute monarchy and totalitarianism which are basically autocratic and dictatorial by their dispositions. Alan Gewirth straightforwardly outlines the attributes or elements of democracy as follows: Regular and periodic elections; Assertion of the principles of rule of law in the constitution and its observance; Majority rule in the country; Respect for the rights of minority groups; Equality before the law; Guaranteeing fundamental human rights; Free and fair elections; Equal political rights to vote and be voted for; The application of the principles of separation of powers and; Freedom of the press (35-36).

The implication of the foregoing submission is that democracy is meaningful to the extent that it serves people's interests. Put differently, it represents the interests and divergent views of the citizenry within the ambit or framework of the rule of law.

It is important to note that Nigeria is a post-colonial state in the African continent. It has had a long historical trajectory of democratic experiment right from the pre-colonial through post-colonial periods in her political history. It is against this background that George Sabine and Thomas Thorson while commenting on Plato's view of democracy note that:

Many commentators have attributed his (Plato's) critical attitude toward democracy to his aristocratic birth, and it is a fact... But the fact can be perfectly well explained otherwise, his distrust of democracy was no greater than Aristotle's who was not noble by birth or even Athenian (49).

Plato had disdain for, and disillusionment in, democracy. His unrepentant displeasure with democracy stems from the fact that it enthrones mediocrity at the expense of meritocracy. Still commenting on the rejection of democracy by ancient political philosophers, Joseph Omoregbe remarks thus, "(According to Aristotle) democracy... is 'the worst of all lawful governments, and the best of all lawless one'. Democracy is said to be at the apex or higher echelon of bad governance and correspondingly the least among responsible or good government. Thus, a perverted polity degenerates into democracy which Aristotle sees as a bad form of government; a rule by the mob. Aristotle shares with Plato his dislike for democracy. He accepted constitutional rule not as a concession to human frailty but as an intrinsic part of good government and therefore a characteristic of an ideal state (Sabine and Thorson 99). Subrata Mukherjee and Sushila Ramaswamy comment on Aristotle thus, "Legality itself then is only a relative guarantee of goodness, better than force of personal power, but quite possibly bad. A good state must be ruled according to law" (126). This presupposes that democracy has some merits that qualify it as an ideal system of government notwithstanding the criticisms leveled against it by some antidemocratic scholars including Burke. Kenneth Owolabi in *The Quest for Democracy in Africa: A Theoretical Exploration* contends that "Democracy is a form of government, a way of life, or an attitude of the mind" (25). The import of the foregoing is that democracy is an essential element of political sociology. It determines the pattern of political behaviour in a given cultural context or social milieu.

Furthermore, Anthony Obikeze submit thus, "Democracy is essentially a method of organizing society politically" (18). It follows that democracy is a formidable political doctrine that provides the basis for proper socio-political organization of the human society. Chidozie Nnadi writes that, "...democracy denotes a set of ideals, institutions and processes of governance that allows the broad mass of the people to choose their leaders and that guarantees them a broad range of civic rights" (64). The foregoing remark is an evident demonstration of the fact that democracy promotes effective political participation and guarantees or safeguards fundamental human rights of the citizens. Hence, participatory democracy. Attempting to draw a line of convergence between democracy and constitutionalism, Emeka Nwosu avers that:

"It is necessary that government be based, as far as possible, on an impersonal law, rather than on the unpredictable whims of men. In other words, a democratic government should be based on the rule of law"(71).

The inseparability between democratic governance and observance of the rule of law-constitutionalism, is emphatically stressed in the foregoing point of view. Luke Ilonu informs that "in the absence of fair constitution, the rule of law becomes a near impossibility" (66). This underscores the extent to which the nature and character of a constitution impact on the applicability or effective operation of the rule of law. It implies that a just constitution is a determinant of the strength and weakness of rule of law in a political system. No wonder Ben Nwabueze paints a vivid picture of the indispensability or place of the constitution as a legal document or an article of faith in

a body-politic. For him; “The constitution is the blood of a country. Once, it is bad, the country will die. The two elements that threaten a constitution most are injustice and dysfunctionality”(Nwabueze 42).

It is manifestly evident from the above background that it is the constitution that determines the pace of politics and governance in a political setting. It serves as a roadmap or pilot’s compass for the management of state affairs and provides justification for the application of state power. Little wonder that Andrew Efemini adumbrates that:

Without much debate, it appears Nigeria is far from being a democracy on all grounds. Arguably, the absence of a people’s constitution is responsible for all the anemic democratic experience of this country (113).

It follows that Nigeria practices a pseudo-democracy. What is obtainable in the Nigerian society is not the true picture of democratic governance. Efemini further suggests that, “...only democracy can resolve most of Nigeria’s problems. Democracy is the system of government which places power with the people”.(113). This implies that the myriad or manifold problems that bedeviled or beset the Nigerian society can be addressed or resolved through the adoption or application of democracy as a national ideology or philosophy. In the same vein, Mel Thompson remarks that, “it (democracy) is ‘people power’ in the sense that people are able to choose and change a government by a process of election” (99). It is very crystal clear that one of the essential characteristics of democratic governance is free, fair, and periodic election.

### **The meaning of Power Politics**

The concept of power politics connotes or designates two variables namely *power* and *politics* respectively. In a nutshell, power is simply the ability to control the actions of others through the possession of means of sanctions. Thus, others may be forced or coerced to change their actions against their will and to compel obedience on their part. In other words, it is the ability to control the actions of others through the possession of means of sanctions. This, others may be forced or coerced to change their actions against their will and to compel obedience on their part. In other words, it is the ability to make others do what ordinarily they would not do through the use of sanctions or threat to apply such sanctions (Jaja 67). For Marx Weber, “power is the possibility of imposing one’s will upon the behavior of other persons” (13). The foregoing assertion presupposes that power is the capacity of an individual or groups to modify the conduct of others in the manner which is desired or deems appropriate. It is important to note that political power is nothing more than social power. Political power entails interaction between the parties in conflict competing for control of state power. On the other hand, politics is considered as the activities and process that take place in the political realm. It has to do with the dynamics and trends of political behavior of individuals, groups and societies; the factors and conditions that affect political actors, political events and institutions (Anifowose 4).

In view of this, power politics becomes a marriage of two terms viz: *power* and *politics* which simply means the pattern or process of pursuing control of political power i.e. state power. It therefore involves the struggle among actors pursuing conflicting interests on public issues or matters of political importance. Thus, the pursuit of these conflicting and opposing interests involves the art of influencing, manipulating, and controlling the process of authoritative allocation of values e.g. resource control, revenue allocation, etc. At any rate, power politics is simply a relation among actors such that the wants, desires, preferences, or intention of one or more actors affect the actions, or

predisposition to act, of one or more other actors (Bello 71-71). In this way, it revolves around political power or an amalgam of authority and influence.

### **Burke on Democracy and Power Politics**

Historically, Burke expresses his deep seated aversion and disdain for an inefficient democratic governance and its institutional agencies. He also registers his displeasure with the theory of natural rights, absolute liberty, equality, democracy, popular sovereignty, general will, as well as abstract principle of change and revolution based on reason. He was, no doubt, an uncompromising philosophic conservative whose ideas and thought pattern stand diametrically oppose to revolutionary tendency and socio-political change. In his masterpiece entitled *Reflections* he argues that “Revolution is undesirable because it would sweep away the sound principles of political action and discard the guidance of nature” (46). In his own sense of judgement, revolutionary change is undesirable not only for the uncontrollable violence it unleashes, but also because it invariably leads to seizure of power by those who are unable to apply it prudently. What is more, radical revolutionary ideology predicated on the background or foundation of democracy and its core values inevitably leads to subversion and culminates in anarchy; it engenders a false consciousness of rights but not of moral duties of order and political obligation to constituted authority. His valuation of democracy is that it is the “most shameless thing in the world”. (Burke reflections 190). His aberration of democracy as a system of government is manifestly evident in the foregoing assertion.

Nevertheless, Burke attempts to reconstruct democracy by giving it an aristocratic outlook. Little wonder that the best form of political organization, for Burke, is the one involving a few enlightened and noble aristocratic elites. Thus, his own model of socio-political order or governance can be christened “aristocratic democracy”. His understanding of democracy is that elections give an opportunity for the enfranchised citizens to choose a credible elite to govern them. Hence, the task of a citizen is “to deliver an opinion while a member of parliament should use his mature judgement and enlightened conscience to ensure good governance” (Burke *Reflections* 69). His idea of representative democracy is that representatives have to possess the capacity for ration decision making; one has to possess the pedigree of *practical wisdom*, as in the case of Plato’s philosopher ruler, as a prerequisite for political leadership. Here is Burke in full, “political representation is the representation of interest, and interest has an objective, impersonal and unattached reality... Aristocracy of virtue and wisdom should govern for the good of a nation” (*A Vindication of Natural Society* 10-11). He opines that though it is imperative for a representative to reflect the aspirations and interests of the people (electorates or constituents), the representative is at liberty to differ from his voters on certain issues revolving around the common good.

It is also interesting to note that Burke anchors and hinges his conception of democracy and power politics on both pluralism and elite theory of state power. Suffice it to say that pluralism sees politics primarily as a contest among competing interest groups. It holds that politics and decision making are located mostly in the framework of government, but many non-governmental groups use their resources to exert influence (Bankole 59). It concerns itself with the roles of both state and non-state actors or key players in the process of power relations. Thus, power relationships within and between social groups e.g. bureaucracy, interest groups, etc. it is concerned with how social trends, dynamics, and structures of domination affect formal and political process (Adeniye 72). It also explores how various social forces work together to change political behavior or inference public policies (Imoh 44). Moreso, Burke’s conception of democracy also borders on elite or social class analysis which emphasized the political power of dominant elites. The power structure or instrumentalist approach focuses o determining who rules, while the structuralist approach emphasizes the way a capitalist

economy operates, allowing and encouraging the state to do some things and prohibit others (Dike 73). Recall that Burke's preference for aristocratic democracy has an elitist orientation or persuasion. In any case, this state-centered approach posits that a small minority-consisting of members of the economic structure or sector and policy planning network holds the most power and that this power is independent of a state's democratic elections process. (Onuoha 116). Consequently, power politics concerns itself with patterns of political behavior and event and also deals with conflict in the determination and exercise of power and influence, leadership and decision making.

### **Implications of Burke's Concept of Democracy for Power Politics in Nigeria**

Burke's understanding of Aristocratic democracy sets the pace for representative government in Nigeria. His political philosophy provides an alternative government for a weak political institution with fragile state structure which renders the management of public affairs inefficient. In the landscape of Nigeria's representative democracy, state and non-state actors competing for power and influence must have the political will-power to formulate policies and programmes with the overall aim of promoting the common good as a dividend of democracy. Thus, power politics entails the formation of political parties as platforms for the display of political behavior, conflict resolution and the determination and exercise of power and influence in relation to leadership and decision making. To this end, participatory democracy must be anchored on the philosophical foundation of normative standards and effective leadership through accountable representation.

### **Conclusion**

This paper critically examines Burke's political philosophy with particular attention to his conception of democracy. It x-rays the interconnection between democracy and the dynamics of power politics in the Nigerian state.

In conclusion, it argues that there is an imperative need to deepen and strengthen Nigerian democratic institution through strict adherence to the core values of constitutional democracy.

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