

# **DEEPENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

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## **Abstract**

The development of any democratic system depends largely on the effectiveness of its civil society. The civil society has been known to have performed fundamental roles in the development and advancement of democratic governance across nations, including Nigeria. These roles include national orientation, mobilization of the masses, provision of certain social amenities for the people and engagement with those in power among, others. The story is not different with Nigeria pre- and post-independence. However, in the light of current realities of poor engagement by civil society, partly occasioned by the refusal of government officials to engage with the civil society, democratic setbacks, and violation of human rights by government agencies among others, it becomes important to interrogate the role of civil society in deepening democratic governance in Nigeria. The study examines the meaning, history and roles of civil society in Nigeria. It concludes that the role of civil society in democratic governance of Nigeria, just like that of any other nation cannot be over-emphasised. The study found among others that no democracy is ever better than its civil society. The study recommended enhanced engagement of the civil society with the legislature and law-making process of the nation towards ensuring people-oriented legislations. It further recommended that civil society should be more involved in the orientation of citizens. This way, the citizens including law enforcement agencies would know their rights and duties and by so doing, stem the tide of growing violation of human rights by law enforcement agents in Nigeria.

**Key Words: Civil Education, Civil Rule, Civil Society; Democratic governance; Judicial Independence; Socio-economic Services**

## 1. Introduction

The political history of Nigeria from the colonial era to the military and civil rule, and the attendant neck-deep immersion of the nation into corruption, lack of accountability, impunity, abuse of power and public offices, brazen human rights violation, electoral fraud and violence and the utter disregard for the electorates, necessitates the emergence and undeniable contributions of civil societies to the nation's development and democratic governance. Globally, civil societies have attained the status of non-state agents of democratic governance, vested with the multifaceted responsibilities of providing social welfare, economic empowerment, humanitarian services, political participation, human rights and human capital development, and economic activities.<sup>1</sup> The many dictatorial regimes in Nigeria under the colonial and military governments have been resisted by many civil society organisations which rose to various occasions, even at the detriment of their freedom and life, in an attempt to represent the neglected masses and advance democratic governance in the nation.<sup>2</sup>

Although the concept, just like many other concepts, does not yield a globally acceptable definition, Civil Society can be seen as a set of bodies or organisations committed to restoring or entrenching social order and people-oriented democratic governance. It can also be said to refer to a set of institutions or organization and behavior situated between the state, business world and family. These include non-governmental organization, private voluntary organization, people's organizations, civic organization, community-based organization, cultural, gender, religious, and social organizations.<sup>3</sup>

Muhammad Abdullahi and Abdulkarim Baba Gaba, citing Diamond, Linz and Lipset, defined civil society as 'the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-

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<sup>1</sup> AO, Ikelegbe, 'State, Civil Society and Sustainable Development in Nigeria', CEPED Monograph Series, No.7.

<sup>2</sup> Abah Danladi and Adihikon Tanko, 'Civil Society And Democratic Governance In Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Historical Reflection' <[microsoft word - civil society and democratic governance in nigeria \(ymaws.com\)](https://www.ymaws.com/microsoft-word-civil-society-and-democratic-governance-in-nigeria)> 6 October, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> I, Chukwuma, 'Government –Civil Society Partnership in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects', Paper presented at special retreat on Government- Civil Society Partnership in Nigeria, Kaduna, September 12-15, 2005

supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules.<sup>4</sup> The organisations making up civil societies largely consist of varied organisations, which are both formal and informal in nature. This include but not limited to interest groups, cultural and religious organizations, civic and developmental associations, issue-based movements, the mass media, research and educational institutions, and similar organisations traversing various facets of the life of the nation.<sup>5</sup>

While civil societies may differ with respect to their core values and areas of focus, one attribute that is common to them all is that they are cooperative in nature, voluntary in structures, and share values such as trust, reciprocity, tolerance, and inclusion.<sup>6</sup> They are also directed at lawfully provoking the expected changes in society as active non-state agents of democratic governance.

On its part, democracy has been referred to as a buzzword that lacks a generally acceptable definition globally; this, even partly, explains why some autocratic regimes have branded themselves to be democratic.<sup>7</sup> Abraham Lincoln in 1863, defined democracy as the government of the people, by the people, and for the people. The basic tenet of democracy is the rule of law, the sovereignty of the people, effective representation of the people, accountability, and rule of law, free and fair periodic elections, and provisions of basic infrastructure, social security, and transparency in the management of common wealth.<sup>8</sup>

The above position was reflected in the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly 1962 which recognizes that the right of people freely to exploit and use their natural resources is inherent in their sovereignty and that the Right of the peoples and nations to permanent sovereignty over

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<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Abdullahi & Abdulkarim Baba Gaba, 'International Journal of Administration and Development Studies, Volume 7, Number 1, March 2017.

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332848764\\_role\\_of\\_civil\\_society\\_organisations\\_in\\_promoting\\_democracy\\_and\\_good\\_governance\\_in\\_nigeria](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332848764_role_of_civil_society_organisations_in_promoting_democracy_and_good_governance_in_nigeria)> 6 October, 2024

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> The case of General Ibrahim Babangida who repeatedly referred to himself as a democrat while inflicting untold pain and hardship on Nigeria through the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) having blindly adopted the ill-intentioned counsel of IMF and World Bank readily comes to mind. See J Lee, 'Civil Society in Nigeria: An Overview, Geneva: CASIN Negotiations on NGO and Civil Society' 2003 referred to by Abah Danladi and Adihikon Tanko, 'Civil Society And Democratic Governance In Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Historical Reflection' <[microsoft word - civil society and democratic governance in nigeria \(ymaws.com\)](https://www.ymaws.com/civil-society-and-democratic-governance-in-nigeria)>

6 October, 2024

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

their natural wealth and resources must be exercised in the interest of their national development and of the well-being of the people of the state concerned.<sup>9</sup>

Taking cognizance of the indispensability of civil society in any sustainable democracy, this paper shall take a look at the history of civil society in Nigeria, and the role/function of civil society in enhancing democratic governance in Nigeria. The paper shall equally examine the challenges of civil society in Nigeria and make valuable recommendations for the enhancement of its roles in enhancing Nigeria's democratic experience.

## **2. Historical Context**

It has been generally argued that the history of civil society in Nigeria is relatively nascent and traceable to the colonial and post-colonial eras. Mamdani Mahmood<sup>10</sup> has argued that it is traceable to the nation's colonial experience. It was argued<sup>11</sup> that there is a paucity of literature on the historical development of civil society in Nigeria. Be that as it may, in this study, an attempt is made to identify and chronicle as much as possible the gradual development and growth of civil society organizations in the various phases of Nigeria's leadership experience, beginning with the colonial era, on to the post-independence civilian and military administration and regimes in Nigeria. The rise of civil societies in Nigeria, particularly in the democratic process, is a twentieth-century social phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Although some scholars posited that civil societies existed in pre-colonial Nigeria, it remains unknown how and what roles they played in pre-colonial development, especially with regards to slavery and traditional dictatorship.

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<sup>9</sup> JN Agada and EI Umbu, 'A Critical Appraisal of the Legal Regime Regulating Ownership and Control of Petroleum and other Natural Resources in Nigeria' (2021) 6 Crescent University Law Journal, 62. See also Resolution No 626 (VII) of the United Nations General Assembly, December 21, 1952 cited by Yemi Oke, *Nigerian Energy & Natural Resources Law Notes & Materials* (1<sup>st</sup> edn. Princeton & Associates Publishing Co. Ltd, 2016) 205.

<sup>10</sup> Mamdani Mahmood. 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacies of Colonialism*. David Philip, Capetown, p.19

<sup>11</sup> Abah, Danladi & Adihikon Tanko, 'Civil Society And Democratic Governance In Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Historical Reflection' <[microsoft word - civil society and democratic governance in nigeria \(ymaws.com\)](https://www.ymaws.com/microsoft-word-civil-society-and-democratic-governance-in-nigeria)> 6 October, 2024 where they argued that there is acute paucity of literature, especially quantitative and statistical data on the growth and development of civil society organization in Nigeria since independence.

<sup>12</sup> RE Aiyede, 'The Dynamics of Civil Society and Democratization Process in Nigeria', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (2003), 39(1)

## 2.1 The Colonial Era

To Rodney, European colonialism was a watershed in the annals of African history. It provided the platform that gave rise to the growth of social consciousness among Africans, which in turn culminated in the formation of various associations that served as watchdogs and performed the function of checks and balances to the colonial government.<sup>13</sup> During the colonial era in Nigeria, bodies like the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Egbe Omo Oduduwa, Jamatu Arewa, Nigeria Trade and Labour Unions, Tin Miners Association of Nigeria, Association of Nigerian Coal Workers, Muslim and Christian (Faith-based) organizations were formed and helped to stimulate and galvanize collective force that laid the foundation for civil society in Nigeria.<sup>14</sup> The period when nationalist movement and agitations for independence were highly pronounced, has been noted as the golden era of civil society development in Nigeria.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 Post-Independence/Military Era

Upon the attainment of Nigeria's independence in 1960, the new national leaders, attempted as expected to create a thriving environment for the active participation of civil society organizations in the nation's democratic voyage. However, their sincere efforts were scuttled by Military intervention in Nigerian politics in 1966. Thus, from 1966 to 1979, Nigeria was under successive military regimes that were highly dictatorial and anti-civil society.<sup>16</sup> Even though the number of civil societies was few at the material time, their advocacy was ripe and vocal as they vehemently contend for the return of the country to civil rule.<sup>17</sup> There were mass campaigns organized by the members of civil society groups across the nation.

They equally encouraged their members to embark on strikes to drive home their agitations. Supported by the civil society, the then military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo, returned

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<sup>13</sup> AO Ikelegbe, 'State, Civil Society and Sustainable Development in Nigeria', (2013) CEPED Monograph Series, No.7

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, where AO Ikelegbe stated 'With colonialism, new social exchange, modernism and attendant social dislocations provided a new platform of consciousness and agitation which catalyzed the formation of communal, traditional, cultural and other groups'.

<sup>15</sup> Abah Danladi & Adihikon Tanko, 'Civil Society And Democratic Governance In Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Historical Reflection' <[microsoft word-civil society and democratic governance in nigeria \(ymaws.com\)](https://www.ymaws.com)> 6 October, 2024 where they argued that there is acute paucity of literature, especially quantitative and statistical data on the growth and development of civil society organization in Nigeria since independence.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> A Ghaus-Pasha, 'Role of Civil Society Organization in Governance, Paper Presented at the Global Forum on Reinventing Government Towards Participatory and Transparent Governance (2004) Seoul, May 24-27, See also AO Ikelegbe, *op. cit.* 39

Nigeria to a democratic government following the election of Alhaji Shehu Shagari as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in late 1979. Shagari's administration also known as the Second Republic (1979-1983) was characterized by the resurgence and proliferation of civil society organizations. These bodies assisted with the exposure of some corrupt politicians, while others were engaged in mass socio-political mobilization. The success achieved under President Shehu Shagari's administration was equally cut short by the military coup d'état led by General Muhammad Buhari, on the 31st of December 1983, which terminated the Second Republic.<sup>18</sup>

Upon assuming office, Buhari immediately banned all political parties and associations including public gatherings. This, of course, include all civil societies in the country. He proceeded to jail some politicians and human rights activists. General Buhari's regime was also short-lived as it lasted for only nineteen (19) months.<sup>19</sup> General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida toppled General Buhari's government in 1985.<sup>20</sup> Using the instrumentality of military decree, General Babangida banned all kinds of political or public gatherings, and jailed many human rights activists and civil society advocates across the nation. This includes the leaders of Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), members of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), among others.<sup>21</sup>

The regime of General Babangida adopted a neoliberal-economic policy tagged the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP)<sup>22</sup> as recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. The policy brought untold hardship to Nigeria and Nigerians, leading to increased agitation by civil society organisations. As pointed out by Abah Danladi and Adihikon Tanko,<sup>23</sup> 'SAP culminated to the retrenchment and massive unemployment in the country coupled with astronomical rise in prices of basic food items amid a depreciated national currency value'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Boumo Ezonbi, A Historical overview of Nigeria's Political Structure: Lessons, Hope, and Realities, 1960-2020 Awka Journal of History (AJOH) Maiden Issue, Vol.1, No.2, Aug. 2023

<sup>19</sup> Abah Danladi & Adihikon Tanko, *op. cit.* n 15.

<sup>20</sup>, Ogban Ogban-Iyam, 'Federalism in Nigeria Past, Present and Future' in Tunde Babawale *et. al.* (eds) Reinventing Federalism in Nigeria Issues and Perspectives. (Malthouse Press Limited 1998) 6

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> A Otoghile, 'The Structural Adjustment Programme and Democratic Ideals in Nigeria. Journal of politics and public policy, 1997, vol. 1 No. 1

<sup>23</sup> Abah Danladi & Adihikon Tanko, 'Civil Society And Democratic Governance In Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Historical Reflection<[microsoft word-civil society and democratic governance in nigeria \(ymaws.com\)](https://ymaws.com)> 6 October, 2024

<sup>24</sup> See J Lee, 'Civil Society in Nigeria: An Overview, Geneva: CASIN Negotiations on NGO and Civil Society' referred to by Abah Danladi & Adihikon Tanko, *ibid.*

Furthermore, the annulment by General Babangida of the June 12, 1993 general election which was considered by both local and foreign election observers as the fairest elections ever held in Africa, also marked a watershed in the astronomical rise in the number and vigour of civil society in Nigeria. Babangida showed no potent interest in transiting the nation to civil rule. Even though he did set up the transition machinery, he oscillated between dictatorship and democracy.<sup>25</sup> General Babangida went further to suspend all judicial deliberations relating to the election results and abolished the electoral commission. This act of autocracy was condemned by all civil society and pro-democracy groups in Nigeria. Consequently, civil society organizations organized massive nationwide protests which almost brought the country to a standstill.<sup>26</sup>

Rising from the continuous abuses by the military regime, two courageous human rights civil society organizations were formed in 1989. These are the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR) formed with the mandate to free political prisoners and Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) focused on the responsibilities of human rights protection, judicial freedom, and advancement of the rule of law. CLO and CDHR treated cases of people detained through opprobrious military decrees. In 1990, following increased commitments and public pronouncements of General Babangida to organise election and return the nation to civil rule, CDHR and CLO merged to form the Campaign for Democracy (CD) to end military rule and SAP in Nigeria.<sup>27</sup>

Instead of handing over power to MKO Abiola, the winner of the June 12 1993 elections, General Babangida set up an Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan. The ING was subsequently declared illegal by the Federal High Court sitting in Lagos, and Babangida was mandated to validate Abiola's election, but he never did. This era saw massive activities by civil society organisations across Nigeria, with many more willing and ready to be jailed.

Subsequently, General Sani Abacha, the only military member of, and Secretary to the ING usurped power from Chief Ernest Shonekan after three months and returned the country to another era of horrendous military dictatorship never before experienced in the military history of

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<sup>25</sup> RC Fatton, 'Africa in the Age of Democratization: the Civic Limitations of Civil Society, *African Studies Review*, Sep., 1995, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Sep., 1995), pp. 67-99 Published by: Cambridge University Press Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/525318> 6 October 2024

<sup>26</sup> Abah Danladi & Adihikon Tanko, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

Nigeria.<sup>28</sup> The dictatorial era of Abacha between 1993 and 1998, saw a new vigour of civil society organisations in Nigeria, principal among which was the National Democratic Coalition, (NADECO) which was an amalgamation of principal civil society and pro-democracy groups that organized massive protests to defend the democratic transition programme. The sudden, but highly celebrated demise of General Sani Abacha brought about the government of General Abdulsalami Abubakar, who eventually transited Nigeria to civilian rule in 1999.

### **2.3 Civil Rule or Democratic Era**

The activities of civil society in Nigeria have not waned with the advent of democratic rule in the country; it has rather been strengthened by the various statutory and judicial pronouncements which have served to enhance freedom and access to public records and information, including the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended). Specifically, Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution provides; ‘The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this Chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people’. Additionally, Nigeria has ratified both the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) and the African Union Convention Against Corruption. These international treaties impose an obligation on Nigeria to ensure the participation of civil society in the fight against corruption. The UNCAC in Article 5 provides;

Each state party shall, in accordance with the fundamental principles of its legal system, develop and implement or maintain effective, coordinated anti-corruption policies that promote the participation of society and reflect the principles of the rule of law, proper management of public affairs and public property, integrity, transparency and accountability’.

The UNCAC, in Article 13, further provides for the engagement of civil society in the anti-corruption programme. To date, the activities of various civil society organisations are visible in Nigeria as they continue to hold the government to account over its stewardship in the nation. Some of the prominent civil society organisations in Nigeria today are: Oodua People’s Congress, Arewa People's Congress, Ohanaeze Ndigbo, Pan Niger Delta Forum (PANDEF), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, Nigeria Labour Congress, Red Cross Society, Boy Scouts of

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<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, note 26

Nigeria, Girl Scouts of Nigeria, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) among others.

### **3.0 Roles of Civil Societies in Democracies**

While some authors<sup>29</sup> find it convenient to discuss the roles of civil society in Nigeria's democratic governance using the theories of civil society, we have decided to approach the discussion under this heading from a plain and simplified perspective to ensure better engagement and clearer understanding of the roles of civil society organisations in the democratic experience of Nigeria. The following are some of the roles of Civil Society in enhancing democratic governance in Nigeria:

#### **3.1 Enthronement and sustainability of Democracy**

Civil Society Organisations have played pivotal roles in the enthronement and sustainability of democracy in Nigeria. Organisations like Campaign for Democracy (CD), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR) and Civil Liberties Organisations (CLO) were at the forefront of the restoration of civil rule in Nigeria and its continuous sustainability. It is on record that between 1993 and 1999, in collaboration with the Nigeria Labour Congress, which is another civil society organisation, these groups fought the Nigerian military to a standstill. They mobilised students and workers for civil disobedience, strikes, and protest marches across the country. Many in their ranks were killed and maimed, while some lucky few were able to make good their escape into exile.<sup>30</sup>

When Ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration whose tenure was between 1999 and 2007, attempted a tenor elongation for himself, by trying to amend the Constitution, he was met with stiff resistance by the civil society organisations, particularly the National Civil Society

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<sup>29</sup> Abah Danladi & Adihikon Tanko, 'Civil Society And Democratic Governance In Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Historical Reflection' <[microsoft word-civil society and democratic governance in nigeria \(ymaws.com\)](https://www.ymaws.com/microsoft-word-civil-society-and-democratic-governance-in-nigeria)> 6 October, 2024

<sup>30</sup> Muhammad Abdullahi & Abdulkarim Baba Gaba, 'International Journal of Administration and Development Studies, Volume 7, Number 1, March 2017. <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332848764\\_role\\_of\\_civil\\_society\\_organisations\\_in\\_promoting\\_democracy\\_and\\_good\\_governance\\_in\\_nigeria](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332848764_role_of_civil_society_organisations_in_promoting_democracy_and_good_governance_in_nigeria)> 6 October, 2024

See also AJ Omede and AR Bakare, 'The Impact of Civil Society Organizations on Sustainable Development in Developing Countries: The Nigerian Experience. An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia. 2014, Vol. 8 (1), Serial No. 32, 205-227.

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332848764\\_ROLE\\_OF\\_CIVIL\\_SOCIETY\\_ORGANISATIONS\\_IN\\_PROMOTING\\_DEMOCRACY\\_AND\\_GOOD\\_GOVERNANCE\\_IN\\_NIGERIA](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332848764_ROLE_OF_CIVIL_SOCIETY_ORGANISATIONS_IN_PROMOTING_DEMOCRACY_AND_GOOD_GOVERNANCE_IN_NIGERIA)> accessed 06 October, 2024

Coalition against Third Term (NACATT) steered by Bamidele Aturu led to the abandonment of that unwholesome agenda by the then President.<sup>31</sup> Other civil society organizations that participated in this protest are: Peoples Problems and Solutions (PPS) organization, Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, and individuals like Prof. Wole Soyinka, former governor and factional chairman of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), Chief Bisi Akande, Prof. Ropo Sekoni, Dr. Joseph Oladokun, Solomon Olufelo and Adeola Odusanya, among others.<sup>32</sup>

In another development, the decision of the Nigerian government under President Goodluck Jonathan to remove fuel subsidy in 2012, was challenged by civil society on grounds that it will spell a major setback for the country's nascent democracy. It is equally on record that towards the sustainability of Nigeria's democracy, civil society organisations in Nigeria unanimously supported the Honourable Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) inaugurated on August 28, 2007 by late President Yar'adua. Civil society submitted a plethora of memoranda to the ERC offering suggestions on how Nigeria can break the chain of her electoral malaise. Indeed, a significant number of the 22-member ERC was drawn from the civil society groups.<sup>33</sup> In addition, Civil society played a prominent role in ensuring the credibility of the widely acclaimed 2011 elections by embarking on a nationwide voter education, using all available means including traditional and social media avenues. Other civil society organisations deployed thousands of observers to follow through and report on the electoral process.<sup>34</sup>

### **3.2 Provision of Socio-economic Services**

One area in which civil society in Nigeria has done creditably well is in the provision of socio-economic services to Nigerians, in both urban and rural areas. Many times, this comes in the form of soft loans and agricultural incentives to members of the public. They also provide employment opportunities and basic social amenities like schools, clinics, pipe-borne water, and other essential services.<sup>35</sup> Many times, civil society has rallied support for victims of certain natural disasters and

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>32</sup> AJ Omede and AR Bakare, 'The Impact of Civil Society Organizations on Sustainable Development in Developing Countries: The Nigerian Experience. An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia. 2014, Vol. 8 (1), Serial No. 32, 205-227.

<sup>33</sup> J Ojo, 'Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria'. <<http://jideojong.blogspot.com/2011/08/civil-society-and-democratic.htm>> accessed 4 October, 2024

<sup>34</sup> AJ Omede and AR Bakare, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> Abah Danladi & Adihikon Tanko, 'Civil Society And Democratic Governance In Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Historical Reflection' <[microsoft word-civil society and democratic governance in nigeria \(ymaws.com\)](http://microsoft-word-civil-society-and-democratic-governance-in-nigeria-ymaws.com)>

even supported citizens in need. This can come in the form of providing the right education for farmers, teachers, and business owners, among others.

### 3.3 Civic Education

Civil societies in Nigeria have overtime and under various regimes and situations, provided the needed civic education for Nigerians depending on the area of focus of such organisation. In the build up to independence as already pointed out, the civil society educated Nigerians on the need to rise for the independence of their nation and to be self-governed.<sup>36</sup> Civil society has equally embarked on massive voter education in the country many times, especially during the 2011 general elections.<sup>37</sup> These efforts, no doubt, led to the massive turnout during the election and the credibility of the entire process. At other times, civil society organisations have embarked on citizenship education with respect to their rights and obligations under the Constitution. Civil society and democratic governance are interwoven, as civil society helps to promote overall development in a civil state. Specifically, civil societies enhance the sustenance and consolidation of participatory governance through:

Voter education, election observation, campaign finance monitoring, election tribunal monitoring, electoral reform advocacy, conflict mitigation, access to justice, public interest litigation, budget tracking, constituency outreaches, as well as research and documentation in thematic areas of democracy and governance Civil society as the third sector with membership across different facets of the society and associational group no doubt represent recipe for good democratic governance. As agents of social change, they are ready-made mechanism for curtailing and monitoring executive recklessness and abuse of public trust.<sup>38</sup>

The above summarises the entire gamut of the roles of civil society organisations in Nigeria and shows that the roles transverse every facet of Nigeria's national life. Civil society has effectively performed the function of checks and balances on the various organs of government, insisting at all times that the rule of law be complied with. However, one of the major defects of civil society

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6 October, 2024

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>37</sup> AJ Omede and AR Bakare, 'The Impact of Civil Society Organizations on Sustainable Development in Developing Countries: The Nigerian Experience. An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia. 2014, Vol. 8 (1), Serial No. 32, 205-227.

<sup>38</sup> AO Mercy, 'Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria', Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies (JETERAP) 2012 Volume 3(1)

in Nigeria's democracy is its elitist nature. Most of them with interest in governance or democracy issue are usually located in urban centers, while the few in rural areas lack the necessary financial and administrative savvy to entrench and promote good governance.<sup>39</sup>

One area where the civil society seems to be lacking in efficiency and needs to do more, has to do with the orientation of law enforcement agencies. The various law enforcement agencies in Nigeria have at various points, been accused of gross violation of human rights.<sup>40</sup> The level of impunity of the law enforcement agents in Nigeria especially the Police, is worrisome. Suspects die in detention and many disappear never to be seen again.<sup>41</sup> The scary stories of suspects at the Akwuzu SARS office in Enugu is another saddening one.<sup>42</sup> Instances of suspects prevented from seeing their lawyers and family members abound with the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, the Police and others. The need for civil society to hold the law enforcement agencies accountable for human right violations and to give them the direly needed proper orientation cannot be overemphasized.<sup>43</sup>

#### **4.0 Conclusion, Findings and Recommendations**

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<sup>39</sup> Abah Danladi and Adihikon Tanko contended that in terms of public re-orientations and political enlightenment and civic education, civil society organizations in Nigeria have not performed well. Nigeria is a populous country with thirty six (36) states and the Federal Capital territory, Abuja and further sub divided into seven hundred and seventy four (774) Local Government Areas. With over 170 million people, less than 30% of these are literate while over 75% resides in rural areas lacking access to basic social amenities. Although majority of Nigerians are domicile in rural areas, well-funded and articulate CSO which can educate the masses and conduct civic education are majorly based in urban centers mainly the FCT and in states and local government capitals. The effects of this elitist character of CSO could be gleaned in the staggering proportions of invalid or blank votes, ethnoreligious violence, and electoral fraud. See Abah Danladi & Adihikon Tanko, 'Civil Society And Democratic Governance In Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Historical Reflection <microsoft word-civil society and democratic governance in Nigeria (ymaws.com)> 7 October, 2024

<sup>40</sup> Abdul Qadir Muhammad, 'The Role of Civil Society Organizations in The Face of Contemporary Security and Stability Challenges In Nigeria' IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science <<https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2107060109>> accessed 22 May, 2025

<sup>41</sup> Abimbola Abatta, 'From Arrest to Demise: Nigerians Continue to Die in Police detention' Foundation for Investigative Journalism published 31 March, 2025, <<https://fij.ng/article/from-arrest-to-demise-nigerians-continue-to-die-in-police-custody/>> accessed 22 May, 2025

<sup>42</sup> Vanguard Newspaper, 'Awkuzu SARS: Nigeria's Most Dreaded Specialized Police Unit' 17 October 2020, <<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/10/awkuzu-sars-nigerias-most-dreaded-specialized-police-unit/>> accessed 22 May, 2025

<sup>43</sup> The latest of the sad stories is that of the boy who was hit and killed by police bullet in Ibdana Oyo State. The bullet was said to be targeted at the tyre of his father's car, who allegedly drove against traffic and when asked to stop by the Police, refused to stop. The question is what is the justification of shooting to enforce compliance with traffic laws and in such crowded area? TVC News 21 May, 2025, 'Death of Ibadan Schoolboy: Stray Bullet Kills Teenager in Ibadan

The paper considered the meaning of civil society, its origin and historical development in Nigeria with attention paid to the connection between the concept and democracy. The study went further to consider the critical roles of civil society in the democratic governance of Nigeria as a democracy with chequered history. The study concludes that the role of civil society in democratic governance cannot be over-emphasised and a lot depends on its effectiveness or otherwise. In the turbulent development of Nigeria's democracy and national life in general, the civil society has played a pivotal role in the area of national orientation, mobilization, provision of aid and amenities and more importantly, human rights advocacy.

The study found that the development of any nation's democracy depends largely on the effectiveness of the civil society of such a nation. It is also the finding of this study that administrative impunity, corruption and recklessness coupled with gross violation of the fundamental rights of the citizens will be made the norm where the civil society is not effective. The study further found that civil society organisations in Nigeria need to do more to further deepen democratic governance in the nation. The study makes some recommendations.

Despite the non-receptive attitude of successive governments to the activities of civil society organisations, the civil society organisations in Nigeria should defy the odds and demonstrate higher commitment to the development of Nigeria's democracy, particularly the legal frameworks. This commitment should be demonstrated in the interrogations of the laws and the process leading to such legislations. The practice of refusing to sample the opinion of Nigerians by the legislature before making sensitive laws can and should be regularly challenged by the civil society organisations.

One area that the civil society in Nigeria seems to be ignoring or not doing so much has to do with the orientation of law enforcement agencies across the nations. The level of impunity among law enforcement agents and the intentional violation of human rights in the course of their duties are novel and brazen. The civil society should do more in giving the security agents the right orientation and how to relate with the public and respect human rights in the course of their interactions with the people.

There is also the need for civil society to embark on nationwide orientation for Nigerians, especially at the grass root and educate the people on their civil and political rights. The people also need be educated on the need to end the sale of their votes during elections in the nation. It is

sad to note as data has shown that majority of Nigerians do not know their rights and those who do partially, do not know how to enforce their rights or seek redress when their rights are violated. The civil society can help in this regard.

Furthermore, the civil society needs to be more engaging in the nation's political landscape. They should be interested in the qualification and credibility of emerging candidates of political parties across the nation. This will help to weed the unqualified and incredible personalities in the political parties from emerging as leaders at various levels of governance like it is today.

Finally, the civil society should join forces with the judiciary in ensuring smooth enforceability of laws and maintenance of national order. One major problem of Nigeria is the citizens' refusal to obey laws made for their own good. The civil society can also help by orientating the masses on the existing laws on various subjects and the need to obey them for the collective good.