

## Civil Society and Democratization in Nigeria: A Historical Perspective

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### Abstract

*This paper focused on examining the historical struggles of popular civil society organizations in the movement for democratization in Nigeria. This in many ways is a prelude to its contemporary phase, which coincides with the era of the third wave of democracy. The central argument of this paper which is in congruence with historical studies is that past struggles that are linked to democratization are historical phenomena rooted in colonial/post-colonial unpopular policies of the Nigerian state. In doing this, the paper also attempted albeit in brief a theoretical examination of the literature on civil society- focusing on the liberal and Marxian schools of thought and the relevance of civil society to democratization discourses. The paper contends that the Marxian perspective more generally reflects the approach and interpretation of civil society in Nigeria's history of democratization. Overall, the study underlined not only the significance of history in shaping knowledge and enhancing understanding of contemporary struggles/movement of popular forces in Nigeria's political development but also the consistency and resilience of civil society in constructing that history especially that of democratization.*

**Keywords:** Democratization, Civil Society, Liberalism, Marxism, Popular Struggle, History.

### Introduction:

This paper examines the historical struggle of popular civil society organizations in the movements for democratization in Nigeria. The fundamental argument made here is that popular struggle by civil society in Nigeria is a historical phenomenon rooted in anti-people policies of the colonial and post-colonial Nigerian state. And that contemporary forms of popular struggles in Nigeria under the third wave (see Haynes, 2001a, 2001b; Huntington, 1991; Shin, 1994; Tar, 2010; Thomson, 2010:278), are reminiscences of age-long and subsisting resistance against undemocratic government and policies subsumed under democratization. A historical excursion is particularly germane and important for two main reasons. Firstly, it seeks to draw insight from and reaffirms one of the basic assumptions in historical studies of politics and economy- the assumption that every social phenomenon is dynamic and continuing.

For as Ekekwe usefully argues, "It is generally accepted that the past is in the present, just as the present is pregnant with the future. It helps us to make those linkages, and analyse the present from its historical or past antecedents" (Ekekwe, 2009:16). The struggles of civil society are both historical and contemporary, and therefore, tracing that history to link it with the present is more than apt. Besides, as Thomson reminds us, "A scholar who wishes to understand the present must know something of the past" (Thomson, 2010:9). Secondly, it aims to correct the somewhat erroneous impression in the literature on developing countries like Nigeria that the concept of civil society is "resurgent"- perhaps beginning from the 1980s at the wake of the third wave of democratization (Willems, 2012:12).

Echoing this claim Allen (1997:329) avers that "While it has a long history in political theory, use of the concept "civil society" has only been current in discussion of African politics for a decade and in particular since its close association with the analysis of African struggles for democratization since 1989". As civil society became closely linked to democratization during the 'third wave' (Carothers, 1999:19). As if to lend credence to the above Alexander in his "The Return of Civil Society", compellingly avers that the decade 1980-1990 of "world-historical upheavals against authoritarian and totalitarian rule, the wave of democratic revolutions unprecedented in modern history, has brought the idea of civil society back again" (Alexander, 1993:797).

A period and beyond marked by far-reaching political changes as “around 75 percent of the world’s nearly 200 countries have democratically elected governments” (Adetula, 2011:10-11; Bratton and van de Walle 1997, 1992:419; Diamond, 2005:13; Haynes, 2001a, 2001b, 2001e, 2005, 2012:1-2; Rakner and van de Walle, 2009:108; van de Walle, 2001; Wiseman, 1995). While this may be a plausible and tempting argument to make especially given the profound political changes recorded within the period under review, it is however imperative to place on record (as a way of rebuttal) that civil society is a historical phenomenon in the democratization process in Nigeria. As will be shown below, civil society in Nigeria has been at the forefront of the movement/struggle for popular empowerment, containment of the state, and resistance against state unpopular and anti-people policies even before the current democratization process. What is therefore posited is that there is continuity of importance in the role that these civil society plays in Nigeria’s political and democratic development- a role that perhaps, was overlooked or given scanty academic attention and, therefore, needs be brought into proper historical focus to fully appreciate its contemporary version.

However, before undertaking that brief historical excursion the paper shall engage the debate on civil society as espoused by the liberal and Marxian schools of thought from where I will weigh up the evidence of both views and select the one which seems most relevant for us here. In fact, the intellectual debate on civil society “provides a broad philosophical context” around which local debate in much of Nigeria and more generally Africa revolves (Tar, 2009a:21). The purpose is not to engage in a lengthy debate as such but to provide modest understanding of the concept of civil society and its increasing importance/relevance in contemporary struggles for popular empowerment in Nigeria. More so, civil society conceptually proves to be diffuse, hard to define, empirically imprecise, and ideologically laden, as well as analytically vacuous (Allen, 1997:329). This is also in keeping faith with the admonition that “The issue is not to determine a definitive definition, but rather to craft a concept of civil society that is intellectually and politically relevant to the context at hand” (Scholte, 2004:213). Finally, the paper concludes by restating the continuity of importance and relevance of the role of civil society as agents of change and popular empowerment in Nigeria’s current democratization process (Iweriebor, 2003:107).

### ***Understanding the Concept of Civil Society in the Democratization Process:***

The place of civil society in the democratization process especially in an increasingly globalizing world cannot be overemphasised. This much is acknowledged by both liberal and Marxist scholars though with varying if not contradictory reasons and assumptions (Tar, 2009a). This will be examined later. Lately much attention even in scholarly literature has been focused on civil society given its often key role in mobilizing forces against authoritarian and elite domination of politics (Bratton, 1994:1). In Nigeria as elsewhere in the developing world this attention some argue grew following the resurgence of democratization in the 1980s (Allen, 1997; Carothers, 1999; Haynes, 2012; Rakner, 2011). To lend credence to this development, it is argued that “In this third wave of global democratization, no phenomenon has more vividly captured the imagination of democratic scholars, observers, and activists alike than ‘civil society’ (Diamond, 1994:4). The current democratization wave was a process engendered on the one hand, by various external factors including: the end of the cold war and partial withdrawal of support by Western countries for authoritarian/military/single party governments; diplomatic and economic pressure by Western governments and intergovernmental organizations for political reforms; and creation of a democratic climate underpinned by communication revolution characteristic of globalization.

On the other hand, domestic factors were also important including: local/popular pressure against state mismanagement of politics and the economy, corruption of state officials, human rights abuses and lack of meaningful and people-centred governments (Abrahamsen, 1997; Adebaniwi and Obadare, 2011:311; Gyimah-Boadi, 1997; Haynes, 1997, 2001a, 2001c, 2001d, 2005; Ihonvbere, 1996; Obi, 2008a:7; Olayode, 2007:128; Ottaway, 1997:1-2). According to Lewis (2002:567-571), since the end of the cold war, there has been a global ubiquity to the concept of civil society among researchers and activists, a widespread assumption among policy-makers in different parts of the world of its global relevance to strengthening development and democracy. Ihonvbere while corroborating this stance underlines the contour of the global attention on civil society when he pointedly states that:

*The late 1980s witnessed a renewed interest in and struggle for democracy, accountability, human rights, and social justice. New political parties, human rights associations, pro-democracy movements, and other pro-people organizations, came to complement the struggles of students, workers, market women, farmers, professionals, and the unemployed.*

*These demands became necessary in the context of an unprecedented deterioration in the general conditions of living, increasing state repression and elite corruption, and a pro-democratic wind blowing across the globe (Ihonvbere, 1996:125).*

Now what is civil society to which there is supposed renewed interest and what is its significance in the current wave of democratization in Nigeria?

Like many concepts in social sciences, civil society originates or finds roots in European Enlightenment philosophy, the era of reason when society became highly individualized and atomized with each person pursuing his/her self-interest under the rule of law (Ekeke, 1998; Nwosu, 2006). Following the thinking of this period, civil society is conceived as constituting part of the realm of the private where the individual with others pursues his/her interests against which there are opposing forces especially from the state.

In terms of definition, there are as many definitions of civil society as there are authorities and contributions on the subject. The concept originated from the works of Hegel, Tocqueville, Marx and Gramsci and they all proffer varying assumptions of civil society based on their ideological and intellectual orientations. While the first two may be said to be rooted in the liberal paradigm, the last two took the Marxian (radical) perspective to civil society (Carothers, 1999; Cox, 1999; Haynes, 2002; Herbert, 2012; Makumbe, 1998; Tar, 2009a). Also, while the liberal view which finds much roots in the writing of Tocqueville emphasises the importance of voluntary associations in promoting liberal democracy through civil/civic associational life that builds consensus and cooperation, the Marxian perspective that draws inspiration from the work of Gramsci stresses the role of social institutions in challenging state power and demanding for change (Bratton 1994). As indicated earlier this paper does not intend to embark on an elaborate conceptual review but to provide insight on the concept that will enable an understanding of its contextual usage here.

Following largely from liberal thinking, civil society is conceived as an arena independent from the state (political influence) and market (economic influence) where individuals forge associational ties in pursuit of their interests (Tar, 2009a:24). It refers "to non-state and non-market forms of voluntary associations that are governed by communicative practices" (Hellner, 2009:124). Similarly, Thomson (2010:5) defines civil society as the organizations that arise out of voluntary association within society, found between the extended family and the state. Thus, civil society is viewed as an aggregate of institutions and bodies acting as an intermediary between the family and the state, its life is defined by distinctiveness and relative independence from the state and its objectives are essentially civil and public, while its activities are underlined by claims, contestations and popular struggles (Ikelegbe, 2001a, 2001b, 2005b).

Also, while stressing the inherent associational arrangement embedded in the liberal conception of civil society, Scholte (2004:214) states that civil society is a political space where voluntary associations seek, from outside political parties, to shape the rules that govern one or the other aspect of social life, bringing citizens together non-coercively in deliberate attempts to mould the formal rules and informal norms that regulate social interactions. This is not only to promote social capital needed for group political engagement but also to engender political participation beyond the sphere provided by formal political society, thereby, guaranteeing a reduced space for the state to impose its will on the larger society. Thus, civil society is an essentially participatory, broad-based and self-governing formation engaged in shaping public affairs, public policy and governance. It is a formation that is voluntarily constituted, non-state, fairly autonomous, largely self-generating and self-supporting, and is conceived with civil and public purposes. Civil society is the private realm of the citizenry, in juxtaposition with the state and corporate realm (Diamond, 1994; Ikelegbe, 2005a:243; Thomson, 2010:5). It is the associational life that allows for the development of social capital/trust which binds members together and motivates them to act collectively whenever their group interest is threatened by forces opposed to them (Fukuyama 2001; Haynes 1997, 2012).

Referring to the virtues of civil society in relishing associational life in a democracy, Tocqueville one of the leading figures in the liberal conception of civil society avers that:

*An association consists of simply in the public assent which a number of individuals give to certain doctrines and in the engagement which they contract to promote in a certain manner the spread of those doctrines... An association unites into one channel the efforts of divergent minds and urges them vigorously towards the one end which clearly points (de Tocqueville (1836) 1994:192).*

Thus, civil society is seen as an association formed by people for the achievement of common purposes outside of the state and guaranteeing protection against the tyranny that might result from electoral contest (Cox, 1999:6). This is regarded as a “top-down” approach or perspective in understanding civil society “where states and corporate interests influence this version of civil society towards making it an agency for stabilizing the social and political status quo” (Cox, 1999:10). Here, civil society is also considered vital in promoting and sustaining liberal democratic culture but with active involvement of political society (Bratton, 1994; Cox 1999; Haynes, 2002:96). This culture includes; transparency, accountability, public policy monitoring and redress; making democratization process responsive to people’s needs; broadening of the political space; creating a political system that emphasises the rights and obligations majority of the people; legitimizing the political and public policy processes, building social capital, and promoting public service delivery; protecting citizens especially the poor, minority groups, and women against the excesses of the state (Bratton, 1994; Bratton and van de Walle, 1992, Diamond 1994; Ikelegbe 2001a; Scholte 2004).

Furthermore, in much of liberal democracies it is argued that a healthy democracy is founded on pluralities of organized social groups through which citizens learn the arts of associational life together, practices the procedure of democratic governance, and articulate and express group interests to policy makers. For it is through civic or civil organizations and with political society that people participate in politics, development and democracy (Bratton, 1994:11; Diamond, 1996). All this helps to build norms and network that create a stock of “social capital”, needed for the “deepening of democracy” (Fukuyama 2001; Haynes 2002:98, 2012:4-5; Putnam 1993). To put it pointedly, the liberal notion of civil society is one that understands it as both bolstering and supporting the democratic process. It essentially assumes that “democracy... requires a vibrant and autonomous civil society and an effective state capable of balancing the demands of different interests groups” (Mercer, 2002:7). Moreover, it is accepted wisdom that civil society is indispensable for democracy, so much so that one of the best ways to achieve democratization is to strengthen civil society (Gifford, 2000:495).

Beyond the above, it constitutes part of the thinking particularly after the end of the cold war that civil society can be an institutional framework for the spread and transfer of liberal democratic values and norms across the world especially in non-Western countries like Nigeria (Omotola 2008, 2009a; Rakner, 2011:1111-1112; Tar 2009a). Therefore, the nurturing of civil society is widely perceived by Western donors and intergovernmental institutions as the most effective means of not only holding rulers to account to the citizens but also establishing the foundation for a durable and consolidated democratic government (Chazen, 1992:282). This accounts in most part for the “popularity” of the concept in the analysis of contemporary social transformation in the developing world and its “necessity” in promoting liberal democratic culture. Allen acknowledges this much when he aptly argues that:

*Civil society has become a popular concept in both the analysis of social bases of recent political change in Africa, and external policy support processes of liberal democratic political reform... Its popularity and continued employment rest on the its ideological underpinning, notably on claims that civil society is necessarily distinct from the state, in opposition to the state, and the source of liberal democratic values and pressures. It is thus the proponents of liberal democratic reform, notably those external to African politics that ‘need’ civil society (Allen, 1997:32-329).*

What emerges from this and which is particularly interesting is that there seems to be a coincidence in terms of liberal interpretation of the third wave of democratization in the developing world and the so-called “resurgence” of civil society in social discourses, including the “democratic aid” it receives from Western countries such as United States of America, Britain, Canada, France and donor agencies in encouraging ‘partnership’ and ‘good governance’ (Abrahamsen, 2000; Adetula, 2011:10-11; Hearn, 2000, 2001; Herbert, 2012:238; Lynch and Crawford; 2011; Makumbe, 1998:306; Mercer, 2003; Tar, 2009a). Allen again captures this increasingly dominant liberal policy thought:

*A key element of policy towards civil society has been the diversion of resources from the state (seen as bad by external donors) to civil society (seen as good). This reflects a fundamental rule in current democratic and development theory and practice that holds in disdain existing official state arrangement and seeks to get government off the backs of the people by elevating private and public non-state actors (Allen, 1997:332).*

Similarly, Lewis (2002:576) corroborates the above by stating that:

*Within policy discourse, the framework of good governance has brought support for civil society as part of a policy package transferred to Africa and elsewhere by official donors and NGOs. For example, it has taken the form of support for monitoring of elections and voter education by civil society organizations and to “capacity building” works in relation to local NGOs through the provision of organizational support and training (Lewis, 2002:576).*

Importantly also, Hearn in his study of Uganda, Ghana and South Africa argues that the idea of such ‘benevolent’ support from Western donors is a means or strategy through which such donors can intervene in key policy areas (Hearn, 2001). According to her, civil society bodies such as women organizations, national NGOs, human rights groups, business associations, private institutes, youth and student organizations, and professional media associations are the targets of such democratic aid and assistance projects (Hearn, 2001:43; Rakner, 2011:1111-1112). Corroborating this, Mercer examined the ways in which the IMF, World Bank and international donors in Tanzania “engages civil society in a performance partnership in the interest of ‘good governance’ which serves to legitimize continued adjustment” (Mercer, 2003:741; see also Lynch and Crawford, 2011:295).

Furthermore, Hearn (2000) argues that turning to liberal democracy and spreading it across the world was considered by the West especially the United States as not only a better way to absorb social dissent and contain movements towards radical change but also a better guarantor of political and social stability. Accordingly, “the goal remained the same, social stability... It is about creating the political structure that most effectively maintains the international system. It has no more to do with radical change than its predecessor- authoritarianism does” (Hearn, 2000:816). The end result of this strategy is to build “partnership” or “cooperation” between the state, donors and civil society in the broad project of development and democratization as well as making liberal democracy the “only game in town” (Linz and Stepan, 1996). So, “civil society has a key role in creating among the population an adherence to the values of liberal democracy and an acceptance of the rules of the game” (Hearn 2000:826, 2001; see also Bland et al 2013:359; Mattes and Thiel 1998).

Commitment to liberal democracy by civil society is not about reconstructing the social order to empower ordinary people but about effective system maintenance (Hearn 2000, 2001). People are called upon by the donors and their partnering governments to have faith in and be committed to the liberal democratic process claiming that it is a slow but sure way of bettering their lives in the future if the process is not obstructed or truncated by acts of opposition and dissent. This claim with the activities that go with it has an inherent subtlety that diffuses opposition to Western intervention in and influence over the politics and economy of the recipient countries by making such intervention and influence look benign or without any negative consequences.

Moreover, civil society has been emphasised in new democracies experiencing ‘democratic rollback’ (Diamond, 2008), with a view to ‘deepening’ or consolidating the process, that is, embedding democracy in a society such that “the likelihood of democratic reversal or even destabilization ... is remote” (Heller, 2009:124; see also Haynes, 2005; 2002). Accordingly, civil society “provide a space in which citizens can meaningfully practice democracy on a day-to-day basis; anchor the legitimacy of political practices and institutions in vigorous public debate; and serve as a countervailing force to the power-driven logic of political society” (Heller, 2009:123-124). Indeed, as it is usefully observed “democracy requires as a precondition a space where various groups can express their ideas about how society and politics should be organized” (Chandhoke, 2001:162). This is in sync with the thinking of ‘democratic theorists’ that the deepening of democracy hinges on the flourishing of a civil culture replete with ample intergroup tolerance, trust in institutions, and readiness to compromise (Schmitter, 2010:22). What is more, democracy under the ‘third wave’ ‘reflects the importance of consistent pressure from ‘below’ on authoritarian regimes normally focused through civil society organizations’ (Haynes, 2012:3).

In much of Africa including Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa to mention but a few it is claimed that ‘the opening up of democratic spaces’ demonstrates a situation “where the last decades have witnessed the emergence of a dense and vibrant civil society and independent media and much greater political freedoms” (Lynch and Crawford, 2011:291). Consolidating or deepening democracy helps in “strengthening people’s ability to hold public servants accountable for their action; and fostering democratic change by expanding social pluralism” (Marcussen, 1996:406 quoted in Allen, 1997:336; see also Rakner, 2011:1111-1112).

This not only flows from and reinforces the liberal “democratic assistance” perspective but also affirms “the widespread perception that civil societies in poor countries are indeed “fragmented”, “weak” and “unorganized”... that these societies are incapable of becoming civil”, and therefore needed to be assisted and partnered (Mercer 2003, 2002:11; see also Beckman 1989:90; Haynes, 2005, 2002:96-98).

Interestingly, the thinking assumes not only that both the state and civil society share similar idea and vision of society in which there ought not to be any contradiction or confrontation, but also that capitalism and liberal democracy are intrinsically connected. That is, capitalism and liberal democracy co-exist and strengthen one another (Beckman, 1989:91; Fukuyama, 1993:94; Plattner, 2010, 1998). As Baker (1997) lucidly avows, this idea of civil society does not envisage it as a potentially democratic sphere in its own right through which alternative visions of democracy might be pursued by it as different from that of the capitalist state. However, this assumption or argument is more apparent than real. As Abrahamsen usefully puts it:

*The notion of close affinity between capitalism and democracy is almost as old as liberal theory itself, and it is a commonplace of Western political discourse to regard democracy as the characteristic political form of capitalism... But while it is obvious to all but the most dogmatic that capitalism and democracy do have a number of features in common, their relationship is far from straightforward (Abrahamsen, 2000:76).*

This ‘notion of close affinity between capitalism and democracy’ that produces in effect the common good in state-civil society relations flies in the face of the deep-rooted schism characterizing the relations between the state and radical civil society in the developing world like Nigeria. It also obscures the historically established contradiction between the vision of the state for society and civil society struggle for democratization. Also, liberal constructions of civil society and its relations to democratization face the danger of ignoring “cultural relativism” defined as the way in which different societies evolve different institutions including the state and civil society to reflect their immediate socio-economic and political set-up (Tar, 2009a). It is this that provides the plank for the re-conceptualization of civil society along the Marxian perspective, which more generally reflects the approach and interpretation of civil society in Nigeria’s history of democratization.

In the Marxian sense, civil society is largely a contested space that reflects the struggles within wider society especially between the state and exploited classes (Mercer, 2002). The Marxian view of civil society popularized by Antonio Gramsci sees civil society as “a domain in which existing social order is grounded... a realm in which new social order can be founded... and an intellectual tool for fermenting change” (Cox, 1999:4-5). Civil society to Gramsci is an “ensemble of private groups” that challenges the coercive power of the state as an emancipatory instrument for the exploited classes and groups (Gramsci, 1978:12; Herbert, 2012:239-240). He thinks of civil society in a dialectical sense, first as the realm in which the existing social order is grounded- the one that aligns itself with the state as a partner in the maintenance of the status quo, and second, as the realm in which a new social order can be founded. He viewed civil society mainly as a counter-hegemonic force contending with the oppressive and exploitative structure of the state. His concern with civil society was, first, to understand the strength of the status quo, and then, to devise a strategy for its transformation. Civil society was to act as a guide to action, a social agency for revolution (Cox, 1999). It is linked to the idea of “social movements” or “organized resistance” against structures of domination and exploitation (Lewis, 2002:574). Thus, civil society is “the force for societal resistance to state excesses and the centrepiece organizationally, materially of social movement and protest for reform and change” (Ikelegbe, 2001a:2-3).

Though a separate and independent entity from the state, civil society also interacts and engages the state by offering alternative viewpoints and constraining the powers of the latter especially when it endangers the interests of ordinary people. Accordingly, civil society “consists of autonomous societal groups that interact with the state but limit and constrain its powers” (Callaghy, 1994:234 quoted in Allen, 1997:330; see also Haynes 2012:4). This much is amplified by Haynes when lucidly argues that:

*Civil society as encompassing of the collectivity of non-state organizations, interest groups and associations such as trade unions, professional associations, further and higher education students, religious bodies, and the media, which collectively help maintain a check on the power and totalizing tendency of the state... Thus civil society aims to balance the state tendency to seek ever greater amounts of power by achieving a measure of power in its own right. Civil society, in short, functions as the citizen’s curb on the power of the state (Haynes, 1997:16, 2012:4).*

The Marxian (radical) perspective fundamentally adopts the “bottom-up” approach to understanding civil society. Here, civil society is “the realm in which those who are disadvantaged by globalization and democratization processes can mount their protest and such alternatives to official policies and reforms” (Cox, 1999:10). Civil society is the sphere of organized social life, associational and professional solidarity, activism and engagement with the agencies of the state for social transformation (Shaw, 1994:647). Civil society is not only distinct from the state but also in conflict with it (Heller, 2009:126). It is at the heart of the democratization process or struggle for empowerment of the poor. Ideologically, civil society is necessarily opposed to the state, not simply in the sense of confronting authoritarian regimes, but also primarily in the sense of constraining the scope and action of the state (Allen, 1997:331-335). Civil society comes into being when people construct “a sphere other than and even opposed to the state... including, almost always unsystematically, some combination of networks of legal protection, voluntary association, and forms of independent expression” (Cohen and Arato 1992:17-18, quoted in Bratton, 1994:3). It consists primarily of popular movements/forces that following the negative effects of state policies are raising fundamental questions bothering on the socio-economic and political order and policy-framework, seeking fundamental change in the state of affairs (Obono, 2007, 2011). And in the context of an increasingly globalizing world with its neoliberal framework and attendant contradictions, Ikelegbe (2001b:439) notes that “civil society is seen as a momentous new formation of social movements, which have in several countries enabled the accommodation and representation of particular social and political interests”. This conceptualization of civil society is more instructively linked to unpopular policies of the state and its governance structures. It is to capture the growing disconnect between the policies of the state and the needs, aspirations and expectations of ordinary people (Allen, 1997). This notion of civil society is potently expressed in the increasing opposition against the contradictions of neoliberal economic reforms and multiparty democracy being implemented in Nigeria. Accordingly, civil society represents both the terrain of constructing the hegemony of popular empowerment as well as its vehicle (Adesina, 1992:52-53).

While not disagreeing with Ikelegbe’s avowal above, it is however, apt to mention that the ‘social movements’ (as shown below) referred to are not ‘new’ per se, they have always been there from the colonial history of Nigeria but were given passing and not too loud mention to be noticed, perhaps, because they never constituted a fundamental threat to the status quo as at then and were incipient. What it is now and which has merited attention from the social science and policy-making communities is that these social movements have become widespread in the post-Cold War era or ‘third wave’ of democracy. This concern flows in two contradictory directions. Firstly, it fuels the “democratic assistance” or “democratic aid” programmes of Western donor countries and international agencies in developing countries argued above, aimed at transferring and spreading the liberal democratic culture, thereby, eschewing “radical idea” and making the world more peaceful and stable for capitalist development. And secondly, it revives the Marxian (radical) scholarship on the contradictions and danger of the capitalist enterprise, by focusing on social movements in Nigeria who in the context of the third wave of democracy are reinserted into the political arena as agents of change. To conclude this section, it is contended that democratization has brought civil society in focus, but one that is interpreted differently by liberal and Marxian scholars. It is the latter’s perspective that is more appealing here because it pays attention to history and the daily struggle and resistance of exploited classes against unpopular policies of the Nigerian state. It is within this purview that civil society continues to be useful and relevant in the democratization process in Nigeria. The paper now turns to examining the historical struggles of popular civil society organizations in Nigeria’s political development.

### ***Civil Society in Nigeria a Continuing Phenomenon in the History of Democratization:***

The liberal argument on the “resurgence” or “return” of civil society in the 1980s and 1990s associated with the democratization process in Africa is one that this paper debunks especially because it denies or fails to reckon with the historic and dynamic role civil society has played in the past against the unpopular policies of the Nigerian state. While not completely discountenancing the contributions of liberals to understanding the contemporary place of civil society to democratization, it is however, apposite to underscore following Makumbe that “while the political developments of the late 1980s and 1990s in most of sub-Saharan Africa have tended to give the impression that civil society in Africa is synonymous with anti-statism, the truth is that the African experience of civil society is focused on the people’s struggles against despotic rulers, repressive regimes and governments that violated both individual and their collective rights” (Makumbe, 1998:305). And this dates back to the colonial period when civil society bodies emerged to challenge the colonial state (Sklar, 1983).

Indeed, Nigeria has had a vibrant civil society in which the mass media, trade and professional unions, students' associations, human and civil rights groups have been able to act as an effective counterweight against the state (Ibrahim, 2003:29). The struggle for expanding Nigeria's democratic space and the promotion of the welfare of ordinary Nigerians demonstrates "a wide spectrum of actors"- labour unions especially Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), and Trade Union Congress (TUC); professional associations such as Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), Campaign for Democracy (CD), National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), among others (see Abimbola, 2002:39-40; Bradley, 2005:64-67; Kew, 2004:101-131; Olayode, 2007:136). These groups have not only been active in the democratic struggle but also tend to contest the relations of domination and arbitrariness of the Nigerian state (Ibrahim, 1997, 2003; Nwoke, 2009; Tar, 2009a, 2009b). They have been an active mobilizational and agitational force in Nigeria's history and political development (Ikelegbe, 2005b:241). Bratton in a broader African context lends voice not only the historic existence of civil society in Africa before independence but also acknowledges its capacity to mobilize popular support, when he avers:

*Far from being stunted in sub-Saharan Africa, it is often vibrant. While many pre-colonial cultures may have lacked states, they certainly did not lack civil society, in broad sense of a bevy of institutions protecting collective interests... Africans invented forms of voluntary associations during the colonial period as a response to the disruptive impact of urbanization and commercialization... they gave collective shape to new occupational identities (peaceful movements, labour unions, professional associations). Many of these voluntary associations became explicitly political by giving voice, first to protest the indignities of colonial rule, and later, to the call for independence (Bratton, 1989:411).*

Thus, the struggle by civil society in Nigeria for democracy clearly predates the upheavals in Eastern Europe and third wave of democracy in the late 1980s and 1990s. The struggle for popular empowerment had been a continuing phenomenon since the immediate independence years (Bradley, 2005; Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), 2000:199-201; Olayode, 2007:134; Tar, 2009a, 2009b). And the struggle of Nigeria's popular civil society organizations is influenced and engendered by the exploitative, hegemonic and dominant character of the state (Osiki, 2009:156; Tar, 2009a; 2009b).

Colonial rule especially its attendant harsh economic conditions imposed on the people by the colonial state was the initial basis for civil society activism in Nigeria. Colonialism made civil society particularly labour, professional, women, and student organizations, and the media active in the politics of the colonial era. Repressive colonial policies- forced labour, dispossession and commercialization of peasants' lands, increased taxation including on women, and urban-biased development became sources of local resistance which helped in no small measure to nurture and strengthen civil society organizations in Nigeria. As a matter of historical fact, the rise of labour struggles and, indeed, other associational entities, is closely rooted in the process of colonial conquest, dependent capitalist and class formation (Tar, 2009a:89-125, 2009b:167). Thomson argues following a more general African experience but one that resonates in Nigeria that:

*It had been civil society that had actually overthrown the colonial state. Associational activity... trade unions, professional societies and community organizations had all contributed to make the nationalist movement the powerful forces that they were (Thomson, 2010:276).*

Iweriebor reminds us that colonialism induced labour and youth activism in Nigeria leading to the formation of the labour union, Nigerian Youth Movement, and the Nigerian Union of Students (NUS) to mention but a few. According to him, colonial exploitation of Nigerians was the catalyst for activism "as a component of the larger Nigerian anti-colonial freedom movement" (Iweriebor, 2003:113). The establishment of the modern state by the British colonialists led to new social class formations including the new modern labour force used for the development of the capitalist system in Nigeria. This created segregation and engendered contradictions in the colonial economy that nurtured associational life among the exploited working class to challenge the obnoxious policies of the colonial state including forced labour, taxation, imposed agricultural development programmes, etc (Ake, 1981; Ekeke, 2009; Tar, 2009a). So, "a domain of resistance populated by several indigenous groups often led by urban professional and wage labourers" emerged "to challenge the colonial state" (Tar, 2009a:90). Civil society activism was a consequence of an anti-state struggle of indigenous people trapped by the contradictions of the developing capitalist system in Nigeria (Willems, 2012:15).



Recall the Aba women riot of 1929 instigated mainly by the imposition of tax by the colonial government, a policy that was considered exploitative and insensitive to the plight of women as homemakers, and which was vehemently challenged and resisted by women organizations in the Eastern region of Nigeria. Also, the Egba women revolt and the workers' strike of 1945 followed the anti-workers policy of the colonial state aimed at suppressing workers rights and worsening the conditions under which they worked (Adesoji 2003; Korieh, 2003; Momoh, 1996:154). Ibrahim rehashes the history of civil society struggles:

*The dynamism of trade, professional and students unions in Nigeria is one of the clearest signs of the democratic drive embedded in its civil society. For example, Nigerian students have played a very significant role since 1934 when they established the Lagos Youth Movement (LYM), the core on which the first nationalist party, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) was built. In the post war years, the West African Students' Union (WASU) played a galvanizing role in the independence movements... Nigerian students have continued to play a significant role in the country's democratic struggles (Ibrahim, 2003:29).*

Historically, Nigerian students have been at the forefront of various political struggles beginning with the formation of the West African Students' Union (WASU). The students brought pressure to bear on the emergent nationalist parties to demand from the colonial state political concessions and formal independence (Momoh, 1996:159). In Nigeria, the students' movement constitutes a critical hub of democratic movement in the country (Adejumobi, 2000:206). Nigerian students especially at the tertiary level in the past were notable for anti-colonial agitations and making representation over rights and liberties of ordinary people as well as championing the cause of democratization (Adejumobi, 2000; Momoh, 1996). Adejumobi captures the historically framed contours of Nigerian students' activism:

*Given the historic antecedents of the students in popular struggle in colonial era, they have come to interest themselves in the question of political power and its management. Their actions are therefore often directed towards problems of corruption and profligacy of the leadership, economic mismanagement and political mis-governance, the deteriorating living standards of the people and the problems of the educational sector... with the onset of economic crisis, the students' movement launched not only a consistent and sustained campaign for educational reforms, but also sought to forge alliance with democratic groups, trade unions and professional associations in order to have a common and broader platform against misrule and challenge the unpopular policies and programmes of the state (Adejumobi, 2000:207, 204).*

Nigerian students under the banner of WASU in 1960 at independence, marched to the Parliament in Lagos to forcibly stop the Prime Minister- Alhaji Tafawa Belewa led Federal government from constituted Nigeria into a military base for Britain through the infamous Anglo-Nigeria defence pact. This pact in the thinking of patriotic Nigerian students was another subtle way the British wanted to re-colonize the country albeit through security control and arrangement (Nwoko, 2009:141-142). Similarly, in 1978 attempts by the military junta of Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo to commercialize education through the introduction of tuition and other fees were challenged by the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), the students' umbrella body. In fact, NANS formerly called National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) was formed in 1956 but banned by the military Government of Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo in 1978 following a protracted confrontation against the government over issues bothering on students' welfare and management of state affairs (Olugbade, 1990:40-41). NANS led nation-wide protests against the commercialization of tertiary education, code-named "Ali Must GO"- after the then Minister of Education, Ahmed Ali. The commercialization policy was not only formulated against popular opinion but it was also to increase the burdens of parents and students who were already over-burdened by the deplorable and parlous state of the country's economy, resulting in mass poverty. NANS particularly argued that "the crisis of the education sector itself is a reflection of the crisis-ridden, neo-colonial capitalist economy of Nigeria whose production is geared primarily for profit not the satisfaction of the needs of the people. The capitalist ruling class has continued to shift the burden of the crisis onto the back of the working people and the youth" (Adejumobi, 2000:213).

Furthermore, through different but less obvious means, the Federal Government under the influence of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) decided to relinquish its social responsibility to the Nigerian people through the education policy of 'University Autonomy'. This policy strategy is to ostensibly among others make the universities managerially, administratively and most especially financially independent. The aim really is to drastically reduce government subvention and financial obligation to the universities, thereby, abdicating its responsibility to the development of the Nigerian university system.

Beyond this, Okoko (2004:4) argues that this policy is ‘mischievous’ and is “premised on the need to regulate what is taught to ensure that academic staff teach what they are paid to teach as well as rid the university system of radical trade unionism”. Interestingly however, conscious Nigerian students under the leadership of NANS rose up and resisted this policy. They demonstrated their utter rejection of this policy through peaceful rallies. They warned the Federal Government not to succumb to external pressure to abandon the poor but remain committed to human capacity development by investing substantially in the education sector. Similarly, the anti-SAP protests by Nigerian students are still fresh in our collective memory. It happened in 1986 when students challenged General Ibrahim Babangida’s administration’s IMF and World Bank inspired Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) with all its stringent conditionalities and neo-liberal trappings. This anti-people policy was seen by conscious Nigerian students and the entire radical civil society community including the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and organized labour as an attempt by the World Bank and the IMF to castrate the Nigerian economy, impoverish the people further, deepen dependency and stifle the democratization process. In all this, the students like other radical civil society bodies, emphasised the organic link between their struggles and the toiling people of Nigeria as well as against imperialism and its local surrogates (Momoh, 1996:160). For as Olugbade incisively encapsulates:

*The nature and processes of the anti-colonial movements have therefore left a legacy of strong student unionism, student political activism and radicalism. It is this historical circumstance which tends to orient university students to the defensible belief that they are the guardian of the conscience of society (Olugbade, 1990:40).*

The SAP-orchestrated increase in the prices of petroleum products in April 10, 1988 was greeted with wild cat strikes by Nigerian workers throughout the country. This was followed by anti-SAP riots of students of Nigerian universities. In May 1989 rioting over SAP became widespread, even as workers of the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) the sole energy producer and distributor threw the whole country into darkness for days in protest (Nnoli, 2011a:25). It will be recalled that many Nigerian students lost their lives during the protests against SAP due to the heavy clampdown by the Nigerian state. Jega aptly interjects to explain:

*At the initial stages of the implementation of SAP, some organized civil society groups, notably labour movement, the students, and professionals, were able to mobilize using brands of nationalist, patriotic and class-based identities... university students organized under their national association, NANS, to agitate for collective demands and to oppose state education and other economic policies perceived as detrimental to the Nigerian people. Similarly, workers under the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) to advance collective economic and political interests, while professionals such as lawyers and university lecturers, under Nigeria Bar Association (NBA) and the Academic Staff union of Universities (ASUU), respectively, struggled, agitated against, or otherwise impacted upon state policies (Jega, 2000:32).*

The advocacy of these organizations was against the “conditionalities” of the IMF (including privatization of state public utilities, deregulation and/or de-subsidization, down-sizing of public institutions, and devaluation of the naira) during the so-called 1986 national “debate”. The critique of state policies of SAP by organized labour and civil society bodies was very vociferous and it hinged fundamentally on not only the “imposed hardship” of the policies on the livelihood of labour and its affiliate unions, women and impoverished Nigerians but also its erosion of national sovereignty. This resulted to an unprecedented wave of labour and popular repression by the Nigerian state (Adesina, 2000:144; Ikelegbe, 2001a:8; Victor, 2007:424). Victor elucidates:

*The period since the beginning of the 1980s was marked by a steady deepening economic crisis, with adverse and far-reaching consequences on various sectors of the Nigerian economy and living standards of most Nigerians... The inherent implication of SAP’s implementation was the mass retrenchment of workers in the public sector and the adoption of appropriate pricing policies for public enterprises. That in turn made citizens pay more for the essential services rendered by the public enterprises. The cumulative effect of all these was to lead to some economic crisis that translated at the political level to increased public contestation on one hand and massive repression on the other (Victor, 2007:423).*

Just to emphasise, organized labour’s role in popular struggle in Nigeria spans through Nigeria’s history beginning from the colonial era, to the prolonged period of military rule, and to the contemporary time of globalization. As Momoh (1996:163) historically captures “The emergence of the organized labour and trade unionism in Nigeria by 1912 coincided with the emergence of the Nigerian state under colonial rule. Trade unionists took active part in the nationalist struggles; some of them were either initiators or activists in left-wing politics of Nigeria”.

In fact, the anti-colonial struggle was led by Nigerian nationalists (including Azikiwe, Awolowo, Bello, Enahoro, to mention but a few) with heavy support of intellectuals, urban workers, the press, women organizations, and the peasantry, which constituted what in the history of the decolonization process is referred to as the “anti-colonial coalition” (Animashaun, 2009:54). According to Tar with specific reference to labour:

*The Nigerian labour is a forerunner of socio-economic and pro-democracy struggles in Nigeria, providing the foundation for efflorescence civil society... The labour movement is often described as the ‘veteran’ of democratic struggles in the country. It spearheaded the struggles, and endured stiff repression from the state, particularly in the early days of the struggle (1970s-1990s) when the state was under military control... Indeed, the history of trade union movement in Nigeria and elsewhere is closely knit with the struggles for democratic values such as human rights, welfare, wage, and equal franchise (Tar, 2009b:165).*

Furthermore, when General Ibrahim Babangida’s military regime annulled the June 12 1993 elections adjudged to be the freest and fairest elections in the annals of Nigeria’s history, organized labour alongside other civil society groups mounted serious opposition to the regime’s decision, which brought the country to “a historic political stalemate”. The massive protests by civil society including NLC, NUPENG, NBA and other pro-democracy organizations led not only to the “hurried” and “unceremonious exit of General Babangida from government (Kew, 2004:125-127; Onyeonoru and Aborisade 2001:44-45; Nnoli 2011a:25; Tuman, 1994), but also provided a window of hope for the survival of the country which was at the brink of disintegration at the time.

In summation, historically civil society especially trade unions fought against colonial rule and exploitation of the Nigerian state during the colonial period. The activities of trade unions or labour movement under the umbrella of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in coalition with other civil society groups including pro-democracy and human rights groups during military dictatorship of the late 1980s and the 1990s hastened the return to democratic rule in the country in 1999 (Adejumobi, 1999a; Adetula, 2011:10; Bradley, 2005; Nnoli, 2011a; Nwoko, 2009:139; Obi, 2011:370, 2008; Yusuf, 2009). Civil society has been at the forefront of the economic and political development of Nigeria as well as the betterment of the lot of Nigerian workers and the impoverished majority of Nigerians (Adesoji, 2003:42). The organized labour in Nigeria has for a long time developed a reputation for radical and militant defence of workers’ rights and advocacy in issues that concern the working population and ordinary Nigerians (Adesina 2000:143; Adesoji 2003; Ihonvbere 1997; Obono 2011:95-96; Tar 2009b:167, 2009a:94; Yusuf 2009:156). This radicalism reached its crescendo under military with its marshal decrees, imposed hardship occasioned by SAP, pathological corruption, misrule and insincerity of the military leadership towards genuine democratization (Abimbola, 2002:39; Animashaun, 2009; Ibhawoh, 2001; Ikelegbe, 2001a, 2001b; Kew, 2004:125-127; Mercy, 2012:61; Obono, 2011, 2007; Onyeonoru and Aborisade, 2001). However, as noted above the activism of these civil society organizations has always been visited with state repression. Despite this, however, these organizations have remained consistent, undaunted, resilient and resolute in the struggle against anti-people economic policies of the state (Adesoji, 2003; Ake, 2000, 1992; Animashaun, 2009; Ihonvbere, 1997; Ikelegbe, 2001a; Nwoko, 2009; Obono, 2011, 2007; Osiki, 2009; Tar, 2009a, 2009b). Indeed, this is replicated in the contemporary era of neoliberal orthodoxy. This is an issue for another day.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I have argued from the above that civil society occupies a prominent place in global discourse(s) on the third wave of democratization as reflected in the contributions of the liberal and Marxian schools of thought. The brief historical overview of popular struggle of civil society in Nigeria’s democratization process undertaken in this paper not only rejects the claim of “resurgent” civil society, but also underscores the fact that the struggle is historical and linked in many ways to its contemporary version. It is equally obvious “that there are a number of democratic assets embedded in the country’s civil society and their force and relevance lie in the relative autonomy they enjoy vis-a-vis the state” (Ibrahim 2003:32). It is these assets that are continuously being explored by and reflected in the resilience, consistency and activism of civil society under the third wave of democracy. Little wonder, Adejumobi (1999b:11) states that what is new in the present conjuncture is the renewal and/or continuation of the political struggle of civil society organizations towards what Nzongola-Ntalaja (1997a, 1997b) aptly referred to as struggle for “second independence”, which is another phase of democratization.

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