



## The Relevance of John Locke's Civil State in Nigerian Democracy

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### ABSTRACT

*The human society is very dynamic with its accompanying dark times as well as flourishing periods. This dynamic reality affects governance in the society. Little wonder, many philosophers, especially political thinkers devoted much of their thoughts on the affairs of the society: its organization, growth and governance. John Locke's notion of 'Civil State' indicates a refined society with its defined characters: protection of lives, respect for human rights, efficiently organized for development. It is an organized state, where the people voluntarily surrender their power to the government in a social contract for the sole purpose of protection of lives and development of the society. However, that has not brought to perfection the democracy that Locke and the society of now require. The problems of war, anarchy, underdevelopment, chaos, rivalry and power struggle persist. These breed uninhabitable environment and unfavorable living. Even with the proposals of many philosophers of politics, states still experience deficiency in governance. This remains a problem that engineered this study. The objective of this write-up is to show some relevance of John Locke's proposal to Democracy, particularly in Nigeria. The characters of Civil State as seen in John Locke should be beneficial to Nigeria Democracy. Among the findings of this study is non adherence to the core principle of democracy and the glaring pathway John Locke has offered toward recovering of true democracy by nations. The purpose of the study is to find the best way to navigate the affairs of the state with more efficient result with our current realities and peculiarities in view. This write-up, will be of great significance to the democratic governance in particular and leadership in general. It will be of important to the Nigerian state that is currently derailing away from the true tenets of Civil State and democracy. This write-up through a comparative analysis will critically discuss and pragmatically substantiate John Locke's concept of the 'Civil State. This paper concludes that that Locke's Civil State remains a vital framework for strengthening Nigeria democratic institutions and ensuring accountability.*

**Keywords:** John Locke, Civil State, Democracy

### INTRODUCTION

In our contemporary society, democracy is obviously the most popular and acceptable system of civil governance. Such acceptability stem from the promises it offers: respect for the rule of law, human dignity and the people oriented government. The quest for responsible governance and respect for human rights have propelled many nations to key into democratic system of government. Nigerian Democracy is not without glaring loopholes like human right violations, election manipulations, lack of rule of law, corruption, under-development. One can simply say that Nigerians are just surviving but not living democracy. This forms part of the findings of this write-up. With the Civil State, Locke proposed for a society that enhances human living by protection of lives and properties. In the Locke's Civil State, the people through social contract agree to come together to form a government and plan its governance as it suits them. Locke's emphasis on natural rights, consent of the governed, rule of law and limited government provides a philosophical foundation for modern democracy. The many characteristics of the Civil State offered by Locke are very importance in reshaping the already dilapidating Nigerian Democracy. Thus, the focus of this write-up is to outline those characters in Locke's Civil State and see to what extent it could help reshape the Nigerian Democracy.

Thus, the significance of Civil State in the Nigerian Democracy cannot be over emphasized. It serves as a blueprint of true democracy with the emphasis on security, freedom, equality, elections, rule of law, checks and balance. In this write-up, the Nigerian democracy will be x-rayed in juxtaposition with Locke's Civil State. The study concludes that Locke's civil state remains highly relevant as a normative

framework for strengthening democracy, promoting good governance, and ensuring citizens' welfare in Nigeria.

### **The Concept of Democracy**

Democracy is taken from '*demos*' – people and '*kratein*' – rule, in all meaning the rule of the people. This system of government suggests that people are actually the ruler. They formulate policies and make laws that suit them. They choose their leaders and participate in governance. The famous definition of democracy by Abraham Lincoln rightly explains it as government of the people by the people and for the people.<sup>1</sup> J.S. Mill opined that democracy is rendered as a form of government in which the people or some numerous portions of them exercise their governing power through deputies periodically elected by them.<sup>2</sup> Here, the people are at the centre of governance and their welfare is the priority of government. Therefore, when John Locke talked of a Civil State, he was speaking of a society ruled by laws for the welfare of the people; he was talking of democracy. Democracy in its earliest form was direct democracy as was practiced in Greek city states of Athens. Here all citizens participate directly in decision-making process and governance. The evolution of democracy brought about the emergence of the modern liberal representative democracy. This is a system of government where citizen elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf. These representatives are accountable to the people. This explains the reason for the emergence of a Civil State; its influence and relevance to democracy. Civil State as proposed by John Locke embodies characters of a representative democracy. In further evolution of democracy, Jurgen Habermas proposed deliberative democracy where decisions are made for the good of the people based on quality communicative reasons rather than mere numbers - conversation where everyone involved is concerned to reach an understanding with one another as communicative action.<sup>3</sup>

The same freedom that prompted the formation of social contract in Civil State, applies to democracy, making it possible for individuals to participate freely in its development process. Civil State is about rule of law. Such rule of law compels the executives, legislature, judiciary to keep all hands on deck in leading the people to prosperity and socio-political excellence. This serves as an example for any well-meaning democracy to use the elements enumerate in John Locke's Civil State to fine-tune its journey towards progress. John Locke in the Civil State has offered pathway towards the attainment of the true character of democracy. Such pathway will serve as a yardstick to nations, particularly Nigeria in their democratic journey.

### **Nigerian Democracy Today**

A careful study of Nigeria's democratic experience has revealed that, corruption has been the fundamental problem of her democratic growth. Hence, Chinua Achebe observes that "corruption in Nigeria has passed the alarming and entered the fatal stage; and Nigeria will die if we keep pretending that she is only slightly indisposed".<sup>4</sup> That is why, despite the effort of the founding fathers who "were highly imbued with the noble vision of actualizing a prolific and vibrant political entity that would not only be a role model, but also metamorphose into a formidable polity that can stand the test of time and history"<sup>5</sup>. The reverse has remained the case. There are specifics that are against the principle of democracy, yet are done with impunity.

Elections in Nigeria are far from being worthy of the name democratic election. The electioneering campaigns are fought with irregularities, name-calling, and other insinuating remarks. Electoral integrity has been consistently tented with process marred by allegation of rigging, vote-buying, eroding public trust in the electoral system. The result is usually confusion, anarchy and electoral anomalies which eventually turn out to become a hoax travesty to democracy. Elections are manipulated to frustrate the will of the people. Such election hijacks are carried out through intimidation, inducements, threats, and falsification of election results. Elections are won by all means and the will of the people are steadily subverted. This is unlike what Locke offered in the Civil State where the choice of the representative are freely exercised.

Separation of power is unique to democratic government, thus Judiciary (that interprets the Law), Legislative (that makes the Law) and executive (that enforces the Law). Unfortunately, what is being witnessed among the three arms does not show clear independence. Our legislators have been described as rubber stamp because they assent to almost every proposal from the executives without scrutiny. The hope on the judiciary is lost. Judgments are treated with levity and are obeyed selectively by those in power. There is a clear absence of checks and balances among the arms of government. This makes the democracy in Nigeria to be faced with arbitrary use of power. This is against the democratic pathway of check and balances that Civil State offered.

Among the interest of any nation is the security of its people. Security is among the dividends that democracy offers. In fact, the major reason for Civil State is the security of life and property. Nigeria society has continuously witness losses, fear and anxiety. Many have questioned why our democracy does not yield its required result, democracy that fails on this has fallen short of its basic expectation. Furthermore, Nigeria faces persistent human rights violations, from police brutality to suppression of dissent. Locke's civil state demands that government prioritize citizens' rights, making reforms like judicial independence and police accountability essential. T

The Nigerian democracy is still struggling to adhere to the rule of law. Any democracy with few citizens that are above the laws breeds confusion. Democracy enhances the equal right of the citizens devoid of discrimination. Laws should not be bent to suit the rich, the influential and those in authority. The institutions whose duty it is to enforce and uphold the law should not be compromised. The weak attitude of the Nigerian institutions breeds laxity and undermines the whole intent of constitution: order and discipline. This is in contrast to what the Civil State offers. In fact, it was quest for rule of law that propelled the formation of Civil State to make it distinct from the State of Nature. Apparently, Nigerian Democracy "runs counter to excellence and in its practice, it speaks anarchy"<sup>6</sup> The features of democracy have almost if not wholly been changed in Nigeria. No freedom of speech, opinions are suppressed and the consent of the people plays no role. The voice of the populace is no longer heard in the hall of government. The people are thus numbed and passive yet we claim to be practicing democracy. It is now a system where the elites try by all means to seize power. It runs different with the pathways that Lockean Civil State offered. One could not help but wonder if the Nigerian democracy is different from those practiced in other climes. It is time the Nigerian people to reflect on the path of governance that suits them. John Locke has proposed a Civil State as a guide. Lockean Civil State reflects in details the character of democracy. As such, Lockean Civil State could be a guide to fine-tuning democracy as it is practiced in Nigeria today.

### **The Notion of 'Civil State' in John Locke's Philosophy**

John Locke traced the origin of the Civil State to the state of nature from where men unite together to give themselves a better life. He stated that this is done whenever men in the state of nature enter into society to make one people, one body politics under one supreme government, or else when anyone joins himself to, and incorporates with any government already made.<sup>7</sup> Civil State is rooted in his social contract theory. People in the State of Nature, enter into Civil State through consent, to surrender their right of enforcing the law of nature to the society for them to setup a lawful form of government they thought fit.<sup>8</sup> The agreement of entering into Civil State is not done by the free will of all the individuals concerned to surrender their right of enforcing the law of nature to the community. As A. Appadorai puts it that the state is created by Locke through the medium of a contract in which each individual agrees with every other to give up to the community the natural right of enforcing the law of reason, in order that life, liberty and property may be preserved.<sup>9</sup>

That is to say, in order to be free from the shackles and inconveniences of the state of nature, men thought it wise to put themselves into Civil State through a social contract. This they did through mutual agreement and voluntary union without any compulsion. This is because no one is subjected to the political power of another without his own consent. When the Civil State has been formed, it is then, left for the individuals in the society to put up any government of their choice. The beginning of political society depends upon the consent of the individuals, to join into and make one society; who, when they are thus incorporated, might set up what form of government they think fit.<sup>10</sup> The social contract in the Lockean view is not a means by which contracting parties forgo their liberty and then live in servitude as is obtainable in the rule of Hobbes' Leviathan. Rather the people forgo only their right of correction and hand them over to a common legislative power for the common good.<sup>11</sup> Locke's view of the social contract is that each individual involved in the contract must agree to give up all the power necessary to the ends for which they unite into society, to the majority of the community. This means that the original compact must be understood as involving the individual's consent to submit to the will of the majority. In his detailed proposal on the characters of the Civil State, Locke said that any Civil State must have among other things, these three arms of government: the legislative, executive, and the federative powers. There ought to be distinction or separation of powers between these three organs, "In order to protect the citizens from the tyranny of their rulers".<sup>12</sup>

Also, security of lives and properties was among the reasons for the establishment of a Civil State. In fact, this was the primary reason for the establishment of a Civil State: to have a guaranteed safety for lives and property. Before the advent of Civil State, citizens always live in fear for the lives and property.

It is such occasion of fear that made them come together to form a civil society that protects the people. This is important as insecurity breeds fear, anxiety and under-development. Thus, whatever government a Civil State chooses, must guarantee the security and make life of the people better.

One of the defining features of the civil state is the existence of established laws that apply equally to all members of society. Laws are created to protect the natural rights of individuals and maintain social order. The rule of law is what guides the actions of people in a Civil State. This according to Locke differentiates a Civil State from the State of Nature. The rule of law enhances peace and stability. It provides the enabling environment for development. With the rule of law, everybody is equal and the right of all is protected and defined by the law. People agree to come together in Locke's Civil State to choose officials to implement the laws on their behalf. This includes maintaining order and allowing the law to take its full course without preference. Such priority of the rule of law brings about sanity in the Civil State as everybody is bound by the law that guides the land. This is what Locke's Civil State brings to bare. Civil State is a well thought out society borne out of the need to preserve humanity, uphold human rights and foster developmental strides. Faced with myriads of insecurity, social unrest, and poor development, the Nigerian democracy becomes subject to redefinition and evaluation. The Characters of Civil State which precursor the realities of democracy becomes a focal point. Thus, the relevance of Civil State becomes imperative.

### **The Relevance of John Locke's Civil State in the Nigerian Democracy**

John Locke proposals remain relevant and a point of reference to many nations of today especially the democratic nations. This is considering many far reaching submissions, developmental benefits and governance strategies that his concept and character of Civil State offers. The many elements that comes with Locke proposal of Civil State boils down to: protections of lives and property, and to better the living condition of the people. As such, Locke offered a pathway for a successful democratic journey. Among the imports from Lockean notion of the Civil State is that, the individuals in the State of Nature, due to the inconveniences of the insecurity of their lives and property they encounter, contract among themselves to enter the Civil State for a better life. Hence, the Civil State provides for those inconveniences through the 'institution of common law by the common consent, to determine right and wrong... election of a known and indifferent judge with authority to determine all differences according to established law... institution of the general executive power to carry out right judgments'.<sup>13</sup> Locke made it clear that the purpose for which people contract among themselves and enter the Civil State, is for the protection of their lives and property. The primary role of government in any state should be the assurance of the security of the lives and properties of the citizens in that state. Therefore, it can be said that, "the inner gamut of Locke's political philosophy is the security of lives and property".<sup>14</sup> Locke's emphasis on protection of lives and properties sounds as a reminder to the fundamental responsibility of the government. Sincere effort should be put in place to nip in the bud on the growing rate of insecurity in the country as it is alien to the character of a Civil State. There is need for reorientation, reorganization and repositioning of the security agency. This will enable it to meet up to the requirements of public order, public safety and democratic governance. Civil State serves as a guide to the Nigerian democracy to prioritize security. Democracy in Nigeria should be so pronounced as to dissociate itself from all brute force, fear and insecurity associated with the State of Nature. A full democratic nation must secure its land head on. In fact, it is for this purpose of security, according to Locke that brought about the organization of a Civil State and subsequently a democratic nation.

Furthermore, one of our problems in Nigeria is interference among the institutions of government. However, Locke found it necessary that there would be separation of powers in the government of any Civil State. This will establish and define the different duties and prerogatives of the different arms of the government, to avoid unnecessary interference of one arm on another. The Legislative, the executive and federative<sup>15</sup> according to Locke, have their distinct functions to perform for the public good. Locke observed that it will be a great temptation to human frailty to always have the tendency to grasp power, if the same persons who make laws are also the same people who execute them. This is because they may exempt themselves from obedience to the laws they make, and suit the law, both in its making, and execution, to their own private advantage, and thereby come to have a distinct interest from the rest of the community, contrary to the end of society and government.<sup>16</sup> Locke meant that to achieve the due separation of power in a common-wealth where the good of the whole is so considered, as it ought, "legislative power is put into the hands of diverse persons, who duly assembled, have by themselves, or jointly with others, a power to make laws, which when they have done, being separated again, they are themselves subject to the laws they have made. Therefore, the executive is separated from the legislative

for the sole aim of executing the law, the Federative, which he calls natural “contains the power of war and peace, leagues and alliances, and all the transactions, with all persons and the communities without the common-wealth.

Although Locke created three arms of government that are different from our present day three arms of government which are: Judiciary (that interprets the Law) Legislative (that makes the Law) and executive (that enforces the Law). Our concern should be to make these arms of government distinct and independent. If we seek good governance, then Locke’s separation of power will be important to Nigeria Democracy. This will foster the principle of check and balances which Locke proposed. This is to avoid undue absolute power, excesses and defects. In fact, while the separation of power makes them distinct, checks and balances helps to make the arms well aware that they are subject to assessment and evaluation. This removes the sense of absolutism. It equally helps the people to know the policies of government and able to correct the government when necessary. This brings about consciousness of duty and responsibility. It is imperative to the Nigerian democracy to understand the tenets of separation of power in a Democracy – checks and balances. It implies that each power is adequately checked, as against being arbitrary over the people. “The idea is to checkmate the possibility of government leaders taking law into their hands, and thus ensure the rule of law”.<sup>17</sup> It enhances order and good relationship between the arms of government and the outcome for indeed they work for the common good of the people.

Also, human rights occupied the notion of Civil State. What Locke means by right is generally the right to life, liberty and estate. These rights are called human rights, because they arise from the indisputable qualities found in man alone, which qualifies as human person. Locke views that it is for the protection of these rights, which are inalienable that men contract among themselves to create a Civil State. In other words, for any state to achieve its primary role, the human rights must be upheld, and this can be done through social justice. The Lockean notion of human rights being inalienable and their protection being the primary purpose of the state is very necessary for proper understanding of the human rights and how they should be protected in Nigeria democracy. In Nigeria, “the human rights situation is to say the least deplorable”.<sup>18</sup> There has been a constant abuse and degeneration of citizen rights. Even when civil protest are organized to lay their complaint to bare, citizens always face harassment, imprisonment, shootings, death from the same institution meant to protect their rights. The most painful of this ugly situation is that, “the right to life which is the most fundamental and most important of all the others, have been flagrantly trampled upon in Nigeria over and over again.”<sup>19</sup> The protection of human rights is a veritable ground for any sustainable democracy. In other words, the Nigerian government should know that more is necessarily expected of it in ensuring the protection of the rights of the individuals in the state. This is the crux of democracy.

In the Lockean Civil State, the people agree among themselves to surrender their right of executing the law of nature, to a body of persons, for possible protection of their lives and property. This body constitutes the leadership that has the sole function of promoting the common good of the people. The leaders have their authority only on trust, so they do not have the right to act arbitrarily over the masses, or else they will be deposed by the ruled, who have put them in power. This, points to the power of the masses to hold their leaders accountable. It reminds the people in the Nigerian democracy to rise up to the duty without fear for constant demand of good and accountable governance from their leaders who are exercising the constitutional power of leadership on behalf of the people.

Locke’s insistence on consent highlights Nigeria’s challenge with electoral malpractice. Many leaders gain power through flawed elections, undermining legitimacy. Strengthening electoral institutions aligns with Locke’s vision. It is through the periodic elections that the people carefully and willingly elect leaders. By this process, the people surrender some of their rights to such leader and empower them to act for the interest of the people. True democracy entails freedom of choice. The Nigerian democracy must emulate and live to its reality. Electoral choices of the people ought to be respected and the electoral process must be credible to guarantee the choice of the people. This is what Civil State entails and this is what democracy represents. It is the government of the people and the people chooses who leads them. The Nigeria democracy must have some introspection and restore power back to the people. This is what John Lock outlined in his analysis of a Civil State upon which democracy is enthroned.

In addition, the Nigerian democratic leadership remains the most prominent problem among others. As Chinua Achebe puts it thus, “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership”.<sup>20</sup> This means that, “Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of leadership”.<sup>21</sup> Hardly do our political elites know that leadership is for service, and not for selfish aggrandizement. As George Ehusani observed, that Nigerians have been stripped naked by corrupt, selfish, greedy and callous elites.

They have been humiliated, pauperized and reduced to a state of destitution by the combined forces of military dictatorship, political subterfuge, economic profligacy and `moral degeneracy.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the Lockean notion of leadership in the Civil State sounds very much recommendable to the Nigerian democracy: a leader who was chosen by the people to carter for their welfare. This makes for proper understanding of what leadership means. In line with that, leadership is all about courage, honesty, sincerity, truth and being trustworthy. The type of leadership that Nigeria needs is that, which can successfully establishes and consolidates civil democratic rule. Democracy is not just to be sung and preached, but most necessarily to be practiced for the common good of the citizens. Democracy involves a government that is responsive and responsible to the electorate. This was the aim of John Locke in the formation of leaders in Civil State.

Morestill, one of the takeaway from Lockean political philosophy is the need for unity in decision making. Such unity is made manifest in his idea of social contract. The people unanimously agreed to form a government. Such unity involves no coercion. Such unity fosters peace and progress. That is unity in decision making – to freely decide in unison to surrender ones' right for the good of the society. Such unity is lacking in our Nigerian democracy of today. Nigeria must unite above tribe and region and form a one united front to genuinely confront destroyers of the Nigerian democracy. Thus, Locke with his idea of social contract that is built of united decision-making becomes a reference point. It will become a remedy to the Nigerian society divided along tribal, regional, religious and ethnic sentiments. The establishment of rule of Laws and its strict adherence is a prerequisite for any Civil State. All men are equal before the law. The rule of law must prevail no matter whose ox is gored. Little wonder, Locke emphasized that the reason for the formation of a civil society is mainly for an established, settled, known law received and allowed by common consent to be the standard of right and wrong. The law in this note is supreme since it is not made for any particular group's interest. This is very relevant in Nigeria as it will help to instill order and sense of responsibility in the system. If everyone observes that the law is no respecter of person, Nigerian will do the right thing without being forced. It will enhance decency and discipline in the polity.

Locke's notion of Civic State should serves as a guide to democratic governance especially in Nigeria where the true tenets of democracy are increasingly being lost. Lockean Civil State highlights the importance of citizen consent, accountability and protection of rights. Nigerian democracy should reflect on its democratic journey in the light of Locke's Civil State and be practical to the realities and tenets of a true democracy.

## CONCLUSION

John Locke's civil State remains highly relevant to Nigeria's democracy. His principles provide a philosophical and practical framework for addressing Nigeria democratic deficits. While Nigeria has adopted democratic structures, the failure to fully implement the principles of accountability, rule of law, and protection of rights has hindered its progress. Locke's ideas provide not only a critique of Nigeria's democratic shortcomings but also a roadmap for reform. By aligning governance with the principles of the civil state, Nigeria can build a more just, stable, and participatory democracy. Strengthening electoral integrity, judicial independence and civil liberties will align Nigeria's democracy more closely with Locke's vision of a government that protects rights, derives legitimacy from consent, and remains accountable to the people. Locke's teaching embody characters that depict a true democratic setting. Little wonder, it can be said that John Locke is the theoretical architect of democracy, as it exists in the modern world today.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, this write-up contextualize the importance of Locke's teaching to democracy in Nigeria. It identifies the pathway that the Civil State offered that are relevance to democracy, particularly Nigeria. Nigerian democracy has to reflect within itself and define it choices through the tenets of democracy. Democracy has it principle. These principles are the unique identity of democratic practice. Until the true spirit of democracy – ultimate welfare of the people is lived out in Nigeria Democracy, the people will continue to yearn for solution. Adopting Locke's Civil State offers a coherent practical roadmap for strengthening Nigeria Democracy.

## ENDNOTE

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- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 75 – 77.
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- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.
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