

ABSTRACT

ENGENDERING DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS: ROLE OF NGOs By Joy Ngozi Ezeilo

Discourses of Democracy and Human Rights in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular prompt more questions than can ever be fully answered. Only those conversant with historical background and political climate of Nigeria – the country once termed “a mere geographical expression” can appreciate its complexities. The prolonged experience of military rule and militarism further serves to compound the problem. Militarism vitiates participation of people in governance, traumatizes civil society, and engenders gross violations of human rights, and disregards of rule of law thereby promoting executive lawlessness.

It is against this backdrop of complete failure of the state that NGOs, as members of civil society assumed a role in the struggle for democracy and human rights. With the successful transition on May 29th 1999, non-governmental organizations are faced with challenges and opportunities in the area of advocacy for peace and good governance hinged on full and equal participation of all citizens.

The events of the past four years particularly the ethno-religious conflicts, the clamor for sovereign national conference to renegotiate the Nigerian state’s- nature and structure, the rejection of the 1999 constitution by many on the ground that it lacks legitimacy and has not answered the citizenship questions amongst others are pointers to the fragility of Nigeria’s nascent democracy. A critical look at the institutions of Nigeria’s democracy confirms that fear. The possibility of military intervention in Nigerian polity remains high without a fundamental transformation of the political order engineered by NGOs and other members of the civil society.

For women these questions become even more significant in an environment that reinforces socially and culturally gender stereotypes, grounded in public vs. private sphere dichotomy. Women’s role in the struggle that culminated in the transition to civil rule is yet to translate into improved political space and respect for women’s human rights. The 1999 constitution in language and content is gender biased. Women and other marginalized groups are still demanding for inclusion and social justice.

The goal of this paper presented from the perspective of a Nigerian feminist human rights activist who has been involved in the pro-democracy struggle are three folds:

- First, this paper will attempt to assess the role of NGOs in the democratization process, particularly the struggle against military dictatorship that truncated many times the democracy project and precipitated human rights abuses.
- Second, the paper will postulate the perceived role of NGOs in sustenance and consolidation of the democracy and human rights project.
- Third, the paper will submit that a strong civil society is indispensable to democracy and democratization processes because of its readiness to struggle for basic freedoms, equality and social justice, and advocate for popular participation through community empowerment.