Until last year’s Arab Spring, “The only region left essentially untouched by [the] grand historical process of global democratization was the Middle East” (Diamond 302). In every region of the world, including Africa, there were efforts toward democracy. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, the legitimacy or liberal nature of democracy is dubious. Especially in Nigeria the government fulfills the minimum requirements for a democracy, reflecting a trend that Nigerian society is not at heart democratic. What is preventing a genuine democracy from existing in Nigeria now and what would a functioning democracy look like?

There are two significant, thematic problems underlying the political system in Nigeria: first, there is no outlet for a minority voice. It often goes either unheard or trampled. Second, there is no functioning system of federalism, or the balance between national and local government. Consequently corruption seeps into both levels of government through the wealth generated by the presence of international oil companies in the Niger Delta region. This engenders another problem: the Nigerian people have no means of checking the corruption of their government though they all see how prevalent it is in their system.

Nigeria gained its independence in 1960, after being released from British rule. By 1963 it had adopted a parliamentary constitution and divided the country into three major regions. These regions were “dominated by elite of the three largest groups (the Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo)” and though “Nigerian constitutional negotiators rejected arguments for a political federation of ethnic groups, ... [they] agreed on a federation of three political regions that paid attention to differences among [these] three ... groups” (Ejobowah 32). However, there are about 250 ethnicities in Nigeria, meaning 247 are largely unrepresented and disenfranchised.
In Nigeria, as in many large democracies, a tension exists between the central and regional governments. Nigeria is a former colony whose borders were contrived by conquering forces and not by “natural” means. In 1960, newly independent Nigeria decided to become a democracy. A conflict in ideology then arose between liberal constitutionalists who believe “the nation-state is considered to be the ‘arena of citizen formation and practice’” (Ejobowah 31) and the pluralist perspective that holds “membership is by birth into a family known to share in the community's culture and history, and requires active participation in the defence of the community and in ... return, individuals gain rights and security (physical, economic and emotional)” (Ejobowah 32). The majority of Nigerians are pluralists and prefer to invest in local communities for their rights. Different communities not subscribing to their national government results in ignored minority voices and subsequent abuse. Such actions increase corruption on both sides. Instead of checking each other, as a functioning federalism system does, governments ignore or undermine each other. In Nigeria both sides graft as much money as possible from the oil industry.

The discovery of oil in the 1950s would only inflame the problems of an already weak system. The boom of the oil market in Nigeria came around the time when the country was becoming less and less politically stable, “In the late 1950s, petroleum products were insignificant, amounting to less than 2 per cent of total exports. Between 1960 and 1973 oil output exploded from just over 5 million barrels to over 600 million ... [and] Government oil revenues ... [reached] over N10 billion [naira] in 1980.” (Watts 641) The amount of natural resources and the wealth that flooded in would have benefited a developing democracy, except for the political instability of the country. Instead of providing a structure to build a national
economy and raise the quality of life for many of its citizens, the Nigerian government at both national and regional levels became increasingly corrupt.

Corruption started with the national government. During and after the Biafran or Civil War in the mid-1960s, seven military coups resulted in erratic leadership at the national level. The inconsistency from one paranoid, secretive regime to the next enabled corruption. Through the 1970s and 80s the federal government, which owned the National Petroleum Corporation and a controlling interest in the state’s oil reserves, was increasing the percent of taxes and royalties (oil revenue) it received from international companies drilling in the area relative to the local governments, much to the dissatisfaction of people in the Niger Delta region, from where the oil was being extracted. In the late 90s there was the call for greater democratization in the federal government. In 1999, the country held its first free election in decades. For two terms a former dictator, Obasanjo, served after winning elections that were widely considered to be rigged. His successor was from the same administration – these leaders are (perhaps personally) benefitting from their political alliances. Since 1999, there may have been elections, but many in Nigeria believe that they are anything but “free.”

The last fifteen years have seen the expansion of corruption on a local level. After the state’s persecution and eventual execution of the beloved environmental and human rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, pressure was put on oil companies to spend more money developing the communities from which they extracted oil. Corporate “strategic philanthropy” (or funding specific projects to develop an area) has risen, and many companies invest “millions of aid-for-oil dollars in return for oil concessions” (Barnes 11). Often this manifests itself not in specific projects, but in companies throwing money at local governors without ensuring that the people ever see it.
Rampant corruption at both the local and national levels have provoked various forms of resistance from Nigerians. Ken Saro-Wiwa was the most famous. He wrote of the devastation to the Niger Delta region committed by companies such as Shell Oil and to the Ogoni ethnic minority at the government’s hand. The Niger Delta has become symbolic of all the environmental and human rights abuses in Nigeria. International studies claim that “the [Niger] Delta[,] is one of the most polluted places on the face of the earth” (Watts 641). Oils spills, industrial equipment, and rising temperatures in the Niger River have killed millions of fish and consequently the industry that existed there. Now what remains of the local “fishing community ... [are] fuel storage tanks the size of cathedral domes [and] ... the superstructure of a liquefied natural gas plant [that] juts higher than any tree in the forest” (O’Neill 2). Local Nigerians are forced out of work, raising the national unemployment levels. It is difficult for families to survive – not only is their industry gone, but their source of food, too, and their ancestral homeland. The “nonviolent” route of Saro-Wiwa’s resistance after his execution in 1995 and “Gandhian tactics were, in some quarters, seen to have failed catastrophically” (Watts 652). Any attempt at nonviolent resistance as a means of democratizing the nation are viewed as futile.

After Saro-Wiwa’s death, the formation of rebel groups such as the Ijaw group the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) have pioneered violent resistance through property damage (tapping oil from the pipelines, destroying drills and other equipment) and kidnappings. After the emergence of MEND in the early 2000s, a plethora of other groups belonging to other ethnicities inhabiting the Delta have also formed. Members of MEND, who “got their start by being supported (financially and with arms) by politicians in the oil-producing” regions as thugs to intimidate voters in one of the many rigged elections, have come to “[resemble] an ‘American gangland’ ... by 2007 it was a vast protection racket run by young,
unemployed and poorly educated criminals for whom life is cheap” (Watts 650). Rather than fighting to democratize their nation, these groups tend to contribute to corruption by taking ransoms from oil companies or the government, thus convoluting resistance and spreading violence.

A unified force to challenge the regional and federal levels of government would ultimately need to transform the Nigerian constitutional and institutional system. In 1979, Nigeria adopted a separated, presidential system in a revised constitution. In this system, the separated branches of government work together, but also self-regulate corruption through one branch checking the power of another. This system also gives various outlets for the minority voice to be heard, especially if the legislative branch to has slightly more power than the executive or judicial. More power to the peoples’ representatives requires reconfiguration of representation, though. A two-house legislature where the representatives are determined by population and equal representation are typically effective. Nigeria needs a legislature in which the ethnic groups have equal representation, or at least one that reflects the new regional boundaries that have evolved over time. The more ethnicities represented, the more minority groups will have a voice.

Nigerian federalism as it exists now is in shambles (not that it was ever good). Having a national constitution that affords rights to the regions and having local constitutions will create a federalist system. Furthermore, both federal and regional governments need to pass anti-corruption legislation that creates an institution which holds everyone accountable to the rule of law. This may be a reformed judicial system, a national litigation process, or an independent evaluation system. At any rate, the government needs to have codified statements that enforce the idea that it has “a social responsibility owed to the people as citizens, not [just] as inhabitants
of oil-producing areas” (Ejobowah 43). Free and fair elections, social infrastructure, and economic and environmental health will follow.

The task of re-imagining and rebuilding a whole government is challenging – and it is only truly enforceable if the society unites and commits as a whole to the ideas written into their constitutions. Perhaps, with that in mind, a democracy is not what Nigeria wants or needs, though its people aspire for a system of governance which would end the violence against them and their homes. International support for the efforts of the Nigerian people to secure a safer, freer state should not be discounted. A common trend that Nigeria shares with Tunisia and Egypt is that a people can only go oppressed for so long before they finally rebel.
Bibliography


