Federalism, Politics and Governance in Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

A fundamental mechanism of evaluating the level of civilization or civicness of modern political systems is the level and extent to which they are well-organized. The political organization of states most often, reflects the structure of governmental authority, level of administrative efficiency and the attendant power relations. Based on the structure, it is convenient to determine the extent to which authority is dispersed or concentrated in a particular political system. One of the most enduring modes of political arrangement in the world today is federalism. Federalism presupposes that national and states/or regional governments should stand to each other in a relation of meaningful autonomy resting upon a balanced division of powers and resources. Each state/or region must have power and resources sufficient to support the structure of a functioning government, able to stand and compete on its own against the others.

The attraction for federalism borders on its perceived integrative tendency, which makes it capable of serving heterogeneous societies well in situations of crisis. In the words of Roberts and Simbine (2003:89):

> …when socially and culturally distinct people find themselves together in
> the same polity through circumstance of history, to live peacefully together
> and govern together, they have to strike a balance, which must be acceptable
> to all the parties involved. Federalism, the system which shares power in
> such a way that each recipient unit assumes a separate existence and
> commands relatively exclusive authority over some clearly specified sphere
> of state activity, in principle, ensures such a balance.

However, in spite of its integrative tendency, Odukoya and Ashiru (2007:76) are quick to point out that federalism does not necessarily posses the magic wand or formula that instantaneously resolves the problems and contradictions of heterogeneous societies. Rather they argue that the socio-economic and political specificities of different societies, coupled with constant and continuous engineering, re-engineering and adjustment is needed, if the goals of federalism is to be achieved (Ibid).

It is in light of this, that this study examines the entire gamut of Nigeria's federalism. In specific terms, it interrogates the interface between federalism, politics and governance in Nigeria. The rest of the study is divided into four sections. Section one is on the conceptual background. This is followed by an overview of Nigeria's experiment with federalism. The third section is a critical assessment of federalism politics and governance in Nigeria. While the fourth and final section concludes the study.

CONCEPTIONAL BACKGROUND

Federalism represents that form of government where the component units of a political organization participate in sharing powers and functions in a cooperative manner (Tamuno, 1998:13). It refers to a political system where there are at least two levels of power; a central government otherwise called the federal government and other states labeled variously as states, region, republic, canton or union. In the words of K.C. Wheare, the foremost theorist of the classical concept of federalism, in his seminar work titled, Federal Government (1963:10) argues that:

> By the federal principle, I mean the method of dividing powers so that
> general and regional governments are each within a sphere, coordinate and
> independent.

The thrust of Wheare's conception is the emphasis on decentralization, through the devolution of powers to different geographical level within the federal arrangement. This position is in line with the submission of Gibson (2004:5), that the notion of decentralization is far more important than as to whether it is a "particular political or constitutional order". Arguing from a sociological perspective, William Livingston submits that:

> The essential nature of federalism is to be sought for not in the shading of
> legal and constitutional terminology but in forces economic, social, political
> and cultural that makes the outward forms of federalism necessary. The
> essence of federalism lies not in the constitutional or institutional structure

> but in the society itself… Federal government is a device by which the
> federal qualities of the society are articulated and protected (Livingstone,
> 1952:22)

He went further to pinpoint the distinguishing characteristics of federalism which he located in the territorial demarcation of diversities. According to him:

> The diversities may be distributed among the members of a society in such a
> fashion that certain attitude are found in particular territorial areas, or they
> may be scattered widely throughout the whole of the society. If they are
> grouped territorially that is geographically, the result may be society that is
> federal if they are not grouped territorially then the society cannot be said to
> be federal, but in the former case only can this take the form of federalism of
> federal government in the latter case it becomes functionalism, pluralism or
> same form of corporatism. (livingstone1952: 23)

To Daniel Elazer, the ideals of federalism flourish more, in an atmosphere that guarantees deliberative and consociational processes. He observes that:

> Federation can only exist where there is considerable tolerance of diversity
> and willingness to take political action through conciliation even when the
> power to act unilaterally is available (Elazer, 1977:26-28).

Elazer acknowledged diversity among the component units and believe that their coming together must be on the basis of their willingness and voluntarism rather than imposition of the arrangement on the people. Elazer also takes cognizance of the inevitability of strains and stresses in the group relation and therefore the need for compromise and reconciliation. In the view of Carl Friedrich, federalism emphasizes:

> … a process rather than a design… any particular design or pattern of
> competencies or jurisdiction is merely a phase, a short run view of a
> continually evolving political reality… if thus understood as the process of
> federalizing it will become apparent that federation may be operating in both
> the direction of integration and differentiation Friedrich (1964: 2-3).

The significant thrust of Friedrich postulation is therefore predicated on the belief that federalism is a dynamic rather than a rigid process. As no Nation or state has a stagnant nature, but rather, all states are regarded as neither unitary nor federal. It is believed that states belong to a spectrum which is at one end absolutely unitary and of the other absolutely federal. In this sense, the British unitary system has some elements of federalism while the American and Nigerian federal system have some attributes of unitarism.

Federal decentralization of power is therefore, akin to the principle of division of labour among different tiers of government. The division of labour is done by the state's constitution, which is usually written and which clearly indicates the specific areas of competence of these levels of government. The jurisdictional Competence of the tiers of government does not purport a water- tight division of power rather, in some cases and circumstances their responsibilities may overlap. Consequently, strain and stress may arise in their relation, a development that can undermine the smooth operation of the federal arrangement. But, through bargaining, compromise, reconciliation and cooperation, jurisdictional conflicts can be resolved. It is in this manner that federal systems can be described as epitomizing the basic ingredients of politics.

The mere presence of a federal arrangement of governmental powers and political structures does not however, suggest that federalism has taken root. It must among other things, be able to guarantee and allow for the preservation of regional autonomy and the right to self-rule without foreclosing the possibilities of shared rule (Odukoya and Ashiru, 2007:81).

Politics on the other hand, represents the nerve-centre of human peaceful and organized co-existence (Kolawole, 1997:1), as it deals extensively with the consequences and outcomes of human actions in the quest and struggle for survival, prominence and relevance. In specific terms, the concept has been variously defined as "the authoritative allocation of values" (Easton, 1957: 383-400), "who gets what, when and how" (Lasswell, 1936), the quest for power, order and justice (Merki, 1967:13), the art of influencing, manipulating and controlling others (Wright, 1955:130), a process of resolution of conflict, in society (Ranny, 1975:35-38), and a struggle among actors pursuing conflicting desires on public issues (Dyke, 1960:134). Similarly, Robert Dahl, conceives of politics as "one of the unavoidable facts of human existence (and) if politics is inescapable, so are the consequences of politics" (Dahl, 1970:1). Alfred de Grazia perceived politics or the political as involving "the events that happen around the decision making centers of governments" (De Grazia, 1965:24). To Ernest Baker, politics is the activity (negotiation, argument, discussion, application of force, persuasion, etc.) by which an issue is agitated or settled (Baker, 1962:116). William Bluhm on his part, captures the essence of politics in the following words:

> Reduced to its universal elements then, politics is a social process
> characterized by activity involving rivalry and cooperation in the exercise of

power and culminating in the making of decisions for group (Bluhm, 1965:5).

A critical analysis of the definitional exposition above would situate the varied definitional perspectives into two broad categories – the classical/ institutional and behaviouralist perspectives (Anifowose, 1999:2). The classical/institutionalists identify politics with government, while the behaviouralists conceives of politics as revolving around the notions of "power", "authority" and "conflict" (Ibid). Underlining these submissions therefore, is the fact that the concept of politics deals extensively with the entire gamut human social interactions. It captures the essence of peoples' wants, needs, sufferings, aspirations, expectations within a given human community. Ultimately, it also encompasses mediums, strategies and mechanisms for ameliorating situations and outcomes, attendant upon the inescapable consequences of political decisions and actions.

The concept of governance refers to the use of political powers to manage a nation's public affairs and to shape its economic and social environment in line with perceived notions of public interest and societal process. Governance is described by Boeninger (1992:267) "As the good government of society" it encompasses the just exercise of authority, the ability for problem solving, conflict resolution, the capacity for efficient management of resources for development and a high level of responsiveness to the needs and interest of the general populace. Good governance revolves around the structure and functioning of the state, its relationship with civil society and its role in development. The idea of good governance is not so much preoccupied with specific objectives and ends of states power in relation to the governed. As (Landell-Mills and Seraqeldin 1992:310) have emphasized, good governance depends on the extent to which a government is perceived and accepted as:

> Legitimate, committed to improving the public welfare and responsive to the
> needs of its citizens, competent to assure law and order and deliver public
> services, able to create and enabling environment for productive activities
> and equitable in its conduct.

It is important to explain at the outset that governance embraces far more than simply issues of transparency, accountability and the practices within government institutions. It embraces all aspects of the relationships between those who govern and the governed in other words civil society in the broadest sense and applies also to the internal and external practices of non governmental organization (NGOs). Indeed, this is the essence of the distinction between 'government' and 'governance'.

NIGERIA'S EXPERIENCE WITH FEDERALISM: AN OVERVIEW

The formal adoption of the federal principle in 1954 in Nigeria was preceded by two conferences held at the instance of the British authorities. The first was the 1953 London conference which was attended by some Nigeria leaders; the second was the 1954 Lagos conference. In the 1953 conference, a federal system was agreed upon. This was consolidated in1954. An exclusive list for the federal government and a residual list for each the regions were dawn up with a provision that incase of conflicts, the federal law should prevail. The colonial government's attempt at integrating the various nationalities in a manner that would achieve higher levels of mutual, national identity and consciousness (Osadolor, 1998:34) provided a major incentive for the adoption of the federal system in Nigeria. This policy was essentially, adopted as a mechanism of accommodation, which gave the component units equal and coordinate juridical status. Commenting on the nature and extent of this arrangement, Dudley (1966:18) noted that;

> …regionalism which covered the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and the main
> agencies of savings – the marketing boards and was to extend to an
> administrative regionalization of the police in 1959. In terms of federal-
> regional relationships, this meant that the central government was relegated
> to the role of playing second fiddle to the regions.

The form of federalism that emerged in the 1950s was bottom-heavy, with the regions ceding some measure of authority to the federal government, while retaining major economic and political authority for themselves. This arrangement allowed the three regions, and subsequently the Mid-Western Region when it was created, to employ principles of government that were acceptable to their people, such as voting rights for women in the South.

However, the nature of politics that became evident soon after independence (characterized by the undue desire of each regions wanting to dominate), saw the transition in Nigeria's federalism to one of supremacy of the centre over the regions. As Ekeh (2007:34) pointed out;

> Traditions of national politics are acquired from continuous practice and
> usages. In the political history of colonial Nigeria, such practices were
> lacking because British colonial rulers banned politics and even criminalized
> them. The small window of the 1950s for practicing politics was clearly
> inadequate for establishing a tradition of national politics. Instead, at
> independence in 1960, the dominant tradition of politics was expressed in

> notions of conquest of the opponent's powers. Threats and violence replaced
> discussions and compromises.

In nowhere was this more evident that in the hegemonic project of Northernisation pursued by the North. The objective basis of this project was the huge size of the region in terms demography, which made it bigger than the East and West put together. As such, there was the belief among the northern oligarchy that it was necessary to maintain the status quo of northern domination of the country's political affairs, by ensuring that northerners were always, permanently in charge.

The incursion of the military into the country's political arena, through the 1966 coup d'etat, dramatically altered the nature and face of federalism. The military, on assuming power abolished the federal system, replacing it with a unitary system which ruled from one single capital. This trend was sustained and reinforced by successive military regimes, such that by the time the military handed over power to a civilian administration in 1999, Nigeria's federalism had become top-heavy, with power residing at the centre almost exclusively. According to Ekeh:

> Whereas each of the constituent units of the federation had its own constitution at the end of the negotiation for independence in the 1950s, in addition to a federal constitution, the central Government of Nigeria now permits only one Constitution, a Constitution that was imposed by military fiat, and policing functions are restricted to Federal responsibilities. Education has virtually been taken over by the Federal Government, with the huge absorption of state universities in 1976-1979 causing a diminution of standards at this crucial level of education. The Federal Government is so laden with responsibilities, that it is overburdened. At best Nigeria is now a dysfunctional federation (Ibid).

The strain and stress that has been brought to bear on the nation as a result of this dysfunctional structural arrangement, has no doubt, impacted significantly on the nature of politics and governance in Nigeria.

FEDERALISM, POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

One way of measuring the success or failure of governments in modern societies is to assess how successful such governments are in developing conditions necessary for satisfying the basic needs of the people they govern (Ayo, 2000:19). In addition to this, is the ability of such government to mobilize or generate adequate resources, as well as the optimal utilization the said resources in a manner that facilitate opportunities for genuine and sustainable development (Stohr, 1981:1-2). However, the capacity of government to achieve these objectives, is essentially, predicated on the style or approach adopted in the pursuance of these goals (Taylor, 1992:214-258). In Nigeria, a prominent characteristic feature of the country's federal arrangement is that of over centralization of power and resources at the centre. This centralism has not only manifested itself in the political and administrative realms, but also in the allocation and distribution of resources. Undue concentration of power and resources at the centre has created a crisis of governance, with its attendant fallout of frustration, insecurity, alienation and subjugation.

Given the concentration of resources and real powers at the centre, the competition for control of the federal government has tended to be vicious, corrupt, politically and ethnically explosive (Suberu, 2005). This unmediated struggle for power and influence at the centre has occasioned the emergence of a governing elite class that have elevated primordial and self-interest over and above the common good and general will of the Nigerian people. The obvious outcome has been a corrupt, undemocratic and self-seeking leadership and style of governance by this elite class that is more interested with the sharing of the country's resources than with the ideals of good or effective governance – equity, fairness, justice, transparency and accountability (Ihonvbere, 1995:9-13). Similarly, the over-concentration of resources has virtually reduced Nigeria's federal system into a conduit for the dissemination of centrally collected oil revenues to sub-national communities and constituencies. This oil-centric distributive federalism in which all governments in the federation derive an average 80 percent of their budget from a common national pool of oil revenue (the federation account) (Suberu, Op.Cit), have made the states and local governments mere appendages of the central government. Their capacity for innovation and pro-activeness have been greatly undermined, in terms of rising to the challenges of developmental aspirations of the people within their areas of jurisdiction.

This form of centralized system of revenue sharing, further destroys the nexus between expenditure authority and revenue raising responsibility of sub-national entities, thereby, undermining the development of the multiplicity of point of political and economic power that constitutes a defining feature of democratic federalism. Given Nigeria's diversity, this economic and political centralization has engendered considerable frustration, cynicism and apathy, which has been the basis for violent conflicts and clashes among the various ethnic groups and communities in the country. As such, Nigeria ethnic and regional groups in the country believe strongly that they must control the federal government or the presidency in order to feel secure and thrive in the Nigerian

federal arrangement. This has engendered and promoted a culture of corruption, economic inefficiency and stagnation at all tiers of the Nigerian federal system. Commenting on the endemic nature of corruption in the Nigerian polity, Caccia (1993: 82), posited that:

> Not only does theft go on in the state apparatus, but the state is itself the main apparatus of theft. In Nigeria, not only do officials steal, but stealing is official. It is the very principle of Nigerian class rule and subservience to the west.

The pervasive nature of political corruption has engendered stagnation, chaos and instability in the Nigerian federation, thereby, intensifying inter-group contestation, frustration, violence and disillusionment in the body polity. The attendant negative political consequences of Nigeria's over-centralized and corrupt fiscal federalism have been most evident in the intractable and unwittingly protracted syndrome of youth militancy and violence in the oil-rich Niger-Delta, "from which much has been taken but little has been returned, except environmental disaster, economic destitution and political repression" (Diamond, 2001:xv). Commenting on the interface of federalism and the orgy of violence perpetrated by ethic militias in Nigeria Akinyemi (2003:18) submitted that:

> The Nigerian case provides a classic case study of the rise of ethnic militias as a function of the breakdown of federalism. Frankly, I would have preferred the term 'national militia' to ethnic militia because even the use of the term 'ethnic' is one of the consequences of the belittling of federalism by belittling the raison d'etre of federalism.

THE WAY FORWARD

In fashioning a way forward out of the country's present precarious situation, it becomes important to stress that only productive political and administrative remedies, rooted in the country's indigenous culture and experiences stand a credible chance of succeeding. The need for empowering the people in a manner that allows them to take charge of their lives and destiny becomes the viable option for engendering the principles of good governance and development, is now, far more necessary than ever. This would involve building on traditional institutions of collective decisions-making which are based on bonds of solidarity and values systems that are familiar to the people. For as Ayittez, (1991:477) rightly noted:

> When, if ever, black people actually organize as a race in their various population centers, they will find that the basic and guiding ideology they now seek and so much more are embedded in their own traditional philosophy and constitutional system, simply waiting to be extracted and set forth.

This ideal of civic engagement has a way of opening up the political space with avenues and opportunities for meaningful discussion and engagement. The principle of civic engagement underscores the most basic principle of democratic governance; that is sovereignty resides ultimately in the people. "It is about the right of the people to define the public good, to determine policies by which they will seek that good, and to reform or replace those institutions that no longer serve" (Adewumi, 2006,). According to Rasheed (1996:62):

> Without the effective involvement and participation of the poor in the design, implementation and monitoring of the policies, programmes and projects that are targeted and meant to eradicate their poverty and enhance their contribution to overall national development, one can hardly expect these efforts to bear fruit.

Similarly, the need to devolve and deconcentrate power to other component units of the Nigerian federation as prescribed the federal principle is imperative. In this regard, the local governments should be allocated more powers in view of its closeness to the people. This should necessarily be accompanied by increased resources, so as to be able to cope with responsibilities that would naturally accompany devolution. The existence of minority groups in Nigerian federation makes it imperative that mechanisms that allay minorities' fear of domination and oppression be created, enshrined and guaranteed. A constitutionally guaranteed autonomy for sub-national units will ensure that these units operate as points of social and cultural pluralism that could serve as bridges between the people and the central government (Erich, 1994:67). Adequate opportunities for financial solvency will no doubt the capacities of these sub-national units within the country.

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