

An Historical Appraisal of Nigerian Democratic Experience

Saad' Yusuf Omoiya

Faculty of Art, University of Ilorin, PMB 1515, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

*E-mail of the corresponding author: *omoyasaad2002@yahoo.com*

Abstract

The objective of interrogating Nigerian political experience through history is intended to provide another perspective to the existing effort of scholars in other fields, government documentations and available texts. Effort will be made to locate democratic tenets in the diverse political structures that are indigenous to the people, with view of providing necessary back ground for the sequence of changes witnessed in the political history. This will be followed by the sequential changes witnessed in the administration of the polity. It will cover the periods of the colonial administration. That is, pre amalgamation, post amalgamation and Nigeria after independence.

The paper will examine each of the phases of the Nigeria administration, the attendant problems and the consequences. By this, effort will be made to locate the problems with the view of charting the way forward to make Nigerians benefit from its human and material endowments.

1. Introduction

Nigeria, located in the western part of the African continent is as at today, the most populous black African country with over 150 (one hundred and fifty) million peoples (GCA TRAVELS, 1994). It covers a land area of 356,670 square miles (923,700 square kilometers) Nigeria is washed by the Gulf of Guinea, on the west, bounded on the north by the Republic of Benin and Niger. On the east, Nigeria is bounded by Cameroon. (GCA TRAVELS(1994).

The climate of Nigeria varies from south to north. While it is moist in southern part, it is dry in the extreme north with very cold harmattan. (GCA TRAVELS(1994). Both the vegetation and the season in Nigeria can be classified into two. For the vegetation, we have the Guinea forest and the savanna zone. (GCA TRAVELS, 1994). The seasons are, dry season, from the end of October to early part of March every year. The wet season also starts from the later part of March or early April in the year. Naturally, both the vegetation and the climate in Nigeria have great impact on the social, economic and the political lives of its population. (GCA TRAVELS(1994).

The cultural diversity of Nigerian population accounts for its unique socio-political settings in Africa. With over 350 distinct cultural groups with different history, social orientation and political system, its sustenance as an entity has remain a model from which examples of the impact of amalgamation initiated by the colonial administration can be drawn. The amalgamation of nations of the Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Nupe, Igala, Tiv and the Kanuri among many others into one sovereign state, without any form of consultation with the people, is bound to generate problems that will for a long time prevent proper integration, trust and understanding that are basic ingredients for good governance.

The problem of sectionalism, nepotism, tribalism and greed among other vices that have pervaded Nigeria political scene, since its attainment of independence on the 1st. of October, 1960 has actually continued to deny the state, leaders without sectional interest. It is the distrust and non-commitment of Nigerian leaders that has degenerated to the hydra headed problems simply refers to as corruption.

2. An overview of indigenous democratic tenets in Nigeria

The inherent democratic tenet in the indigenous political systems operated in different parts of Nigeria, accounted for their existence as entities and for centuries before the advent of colonial rule. For instance, the Yoruba political system under the Obaship,(Kingship) guarantees good governance and peoples representation through established institutions. The Alaafin (King) of Oyo, who was often praised as having the powers of life and death, is in practice, not so absolute in exercising his powers. (A.A.B.Aderibigbe 1965) The Basorun, who is the head of the Oyomesi, the committee responsible for the selection of the new Alaafin, is by Oyo constitution, empowered to order an Alaafin to abdicate the throne, when the Alaafin is considered to have violated the Empire's constitution. (A.A.B.Aderibigbe 1965) This principle of checks and balances inherent in African political system prevents absolutism and misuse of power by the leader.

In the emirate system of the northern Nigeria, the decision of the Emir is directly subject to the agreement of his Council. (J. O. Hunwick, 1965). The Emirate Council consists of the Emir himself, the Waziri, the Khadi, the Chief Imam and other prominent chiefs that vary from one place to another. (J. O. Hunwick, 1965). The importance and powers of the Balogun (War Commander) in Ilorin emirate remain unparalleled to the other emirate under the caliphate system. (S.A. Balogun, 1977).

By 1900 when the British government formally established colonial rule on the colony of Lagos, protectorates of the south and the north, it was actually bringing together and for the first time, diverse peoples with distinct identity. By 1906, the British colonial administration formally amalgamated the colony of Lagos and the protectorate of the South (Ikime, Obaro, 1977). Perhaps, the success recorded by the amalgamation of the colony and protectorates of the south, accounted for the 1914 amalgamation of the colonies and protectorates of the south and north which was named Nigeria.

The justification for the colonial policy on amalgamation can be located in its desire to minimize the cost of administering the vast land mass and diverse cultural groups. Nigerians were neither consulted nor involved. For these facts, the problems associated with the democratic system initiated by the British can be located as the ban of its administration.

3. The introduction of electoral system and its impact in Nigeria politics

The mobilization of elite in West Africa to launch the National Congress of British West Africa must have been brought about by both internal and external factors. The congress was considered to be a viable body by which Africans in Gambia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast (Ghana) and Nigeria will press home their demands, to participate in the affairs of their environment (Ikime, Obaro, 1977). In 1920, the Congress sent a delegation to London to hand over to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, a petition which demanded:

- the establishment in each territory in British West Africa, of a Legislative Council, half of which would be elected while the other half would be nominated
- the establishment of a House of Assembly composed of the members of the Legislative Council and six other “financial” representatives elected by the people to control revenue and expenditure.
- the appointment of Africans to judicial offices and;
- the establishment of a West African University (Francis Adigwe, 1979).

Even though the request of the Congress were formally turned down by the Secretary of State, Lord Milner, the British Colonial Governor in Nigeria, Sir Hugh Clifford, censured the demands of the Congress (Francis Adigwe 1979). He accused the Nigerian members of the delegation not only of being unrepresentative of the Nigerian people but also being ignorant of Nigerian conditions. He further asserted that the claims and pretensions of the delegation were at variance with the natural development of real national independence which, in his opinion, should be the goal of all true patriots in Nigeria (Francis Adigwe, 1979).

Certainly, for Sir Hugh Clifford’s increased apprehension of the influence of the Congress on the people, by 1922 he abolished the Nigerian Council together with the old Legislative Council to constitute new Legislative and Executive Councils (Francis Adigwe, 1979). The new Legislative Council which was made up of forty-six members, twenty-seven of whom were official, while the remaining nineteen were un-official (Francis Adigwe, 1979). Three of the elected seats were allocated to Lagos while the remaining one was allocated to Calabar. In total, thirteen Africans were in the new Council (Francis Adigwe, 1979).

The electorate for the elected members from Lagos and Calabar were to be male adults who were British subject or British protected persons having ordinarily resided in the particular area for a period of twelve months and having a gross income of £100 per annum (Francis Adigwe, 1979). For both the Northern and Southern protectorates, they were represented in the newly constituted by the Lieutenant-Governor, Senior Residents of the provinces and the European representatives of Kano Chamber of Commerce and Mining Industry (Francis Adigwe, 1979).

The introduction of the elective principle naturally brought about increased political activities to Lagos Island and this in turn, led to the emergence of political parties. The role of Sir Herbert Samuel Heales Macaulay in the formation of the Nigerian National Democratic Party, which operated between 1864 - 1946 deserves a mention. In 1925, Herbert Macaulay established “The Lagos Daily News (Francis Adigwe, 1979). The “Nigerian National Pioneer” was established by Mr. Kitoye Adisa, while in 1926 Richard Barrow in collaboration with Sir Adeyemo Alakija to launch “Nigerian Daily Times” (Francis Adigwe, 1979). The increased political activities in Lagos and Calabar, eventually

led to the emergence of other political parties such as the Nigeria Youth Movement and the National Council of Nigeria and Camerrons (Francis Adigwe, 1979).

The provisions in the constitution of 1946 by Sir Arthur Richard which came to effect on the 1st of January 1947 extended the electoral principles to the Northern region.

By the gradual implementation of the colonial policies, especially on the electoral process, the seed of discord have been sowed in the Nigerian democratic experience. The fears of Southern domination by the North was actually palpable and it thus explained why many meetings had to be midwived by the British administration, both in Nigeria and in Britain before an agreeable date, 1st October 1960, was picked for formal independence of the Nigerian State from the British.

4. The political trend and its failures in Nigeria since 1960

Given the circumstances of Nigerian's creation by the British Colonial administration and the gradual nature of the implementation of its electoral principles in different parts of the country, it is naturally expected that a good time will be required to forge understanding and truly united political system by the 1st of October, 1960. Nigeria as a sovereign state can be said to be compartmentalized into three main regions before independence. Each of the regions, North, East and West were actually Committed to themselves rather than to Nigeria as a State. The fragile unity in diversity must have encouraged each of the three regions to concentrate more on regional developments and programmes that will respectably sustain them, incase of eventual dismemberment of the Nigeria State. Projects such as the provision of basic amenities as good roads, hospital, industries and education were given priority by the respective region (Francis Adigwe, 1979).

In the area of revenue generation, each of the three regions in Nigeria opened up their area to both local and foreign explorers and traders to maximize their respective potentials. It thus explains why the Nigerian import and export earnings were specialized and diversified. For instance, the Northern Region specialized in export products such as Cotton, Groundnut, Tin and Colon bite among others. The Western Region specialized in Cocoa production, Rubber, Timber, Palm Cannel and Palm Oil (John N. Parden, 1986). The Eastern Region specialized in the production of Coal, Palm Oil, Palm Cannel and local fabrications (John N. Parden, 1986). The seeming mutual rivalry among the regions, in the provision of basic amenities for the people actually jump starts a great potential for the Nigerian State.

The disagreements that accompanied the 1963 elections and the 1963 population census, actually registered negative signals on the path of Nigerian growth. The fact that no single political party was able to have simple majority in the Nigerian House of Representatives, it therefore became necessary for the regional political leaders to embark on horse trading (John N. Parden, 1986). Thereby, negotiating alliances. The alliance between the NPC, the political party dominated by people from northern Nigeria and NCNC that controlled the East, made it possible for the First Republic Government to be formed in Nigeria (John N. Parden, 1986). It is however important to note, that the refusal of the West regionally based political party to be involved in the alliance that gave birth to the national government, opened a window of negative expectations. The subsequent arrest and trial of prominent leaders of the Action Group (AG) that was most popular political party in the Western Region, was certainly anticipated (K. W. J. Post and Michael Vicker, 1973).

The political tumult that accompanied various disagreements naturally opened up the Nigeria State to events that culminated into the 15th. January, 1966 military coup, that truncated the first elected civilian administration in Nigeria (K. W. J. Post and Michael Vicker, 1973).. The sectional interests read into the 15th January 1966 military coup, which resorted to the killing of the Premiers of both the North and the Western Regions but spared the lives of their counterparts in the Mid -West and Eastern Regions, certainly motivated the northern military officers to launch a counter coup on the 29, July 1966 (K. W. J. Post and Michael Vicker, 1973)..

The civil unrest and the sectarian killing of non indigene in different parts of Nigeria eventually snow balled into a Civil War, consequent on the decisions of the Eastern Region to pull out of Nigeria (Sir, Rex Neven, 1970). The civil war, fought for the unity of Nigeria, which was between 1967 and 1970 though ended on the declaration of no victor no vanquish, the scares it left behind still lingers on power sharing in the Nigeria politics.

5. The military, sectional interest and their negative consequences

The January 15th 1966 military coup in Nigeria opened the newly independent state to another phase of political changes from which the root of the present status of unsatisfactory governance can be located. Even though the five majors of the Nigerian Army who claimed to have led the coup also claimed to have believed that by the coup, solution

would be found to the Nigeria problems (Sir, Rex Neven, 1970). Among the cited problems were the Tiv riots, which was regarded as a product of oppressive rule by the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), the much published rape on democracy in the Western Region, where elections were said to have been massively rigged and pockets of palpable unrest in the polity (General Olusegun Obasanjo. 1980).

However, detailed evaluation of the military officers directly involved in the plotting of the coup and the pattern of the execution of the coup could not hide the heavy dose of a sectional interest, the Ibo agenda to dominate all segments of the Nigerian society. For instance, 12 out of the 14 military officers involved in the coup were of Ibo extraction (D.J.M Muffet, 1982). Also, the victims of the coup both military and civilian were either from the Northern region or from the West (D.J.M Muffet, 1982). The fears by the Northern Military Officers to be completely eliminated, among other reasons prompted the counter coup of 29th July, 1966 as a retaliation (D.J.M Muffet, 1982).

Also central to the July 1966 coup was the promulgation of Decree No 34 of May 1966 by General Ironsi. By the decree, the Regional administration was abolished for a unitary government (D.J.M Muffet, 1982). The Ironsi's administrative policy was viewed by the Northerners in Nigeria as further insult to the injuries inflicted on them. The killing of their political leaders and Senior Military Officers by the Ibo led coup of January 1966 (D.J.M Muffet, 1982). The delayed trial of the officers involved in the January 1966 coup, most of who were of Ibo extraction, was also seen as Ibo agenda (D.J.M Muffet, 1982).

Lt. Col. Ojuku's refusal to recognize the new status of Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, as the new Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Nigerian Army, translated to his refusal to be involved in the meetings of the Supreme Military Council, which represented the highest Council of the new military regime. The failure of the intervention of prominent Nigerians and even outsiders such as General Ankrah of Ghana, Late Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and late Dr. Martin Luther King made Gowon to impose total blockade in the Eastern Region (General A. A. Madiebo, 1970).

On the 27th of May, 1967 the Nigerian Regional administrative structure was replaced by twelve State structures. On the 30th of May, 1967 Ojuku declared the Eastern Region of Nigeria as the independent sovereign state of "Biafra". Actually, the capability of Ojuku to resist the Federal Government of Nigeria was underestimated. It thus explained why the Federal government initially decided to take "Police Action" to crush the rebellion (General A. A. Madiebo, 1970).

The thirty month civil war which suppose to be a good source of lesson from which Nigeria suppose to draw from, appreciate the fragility of the unity of its federating units, was quickly put behind with northern domination. It was not long that the civil war in Nigeria ended that crude oil became the major source of the state revenue. The dramatic changes witnessed in the country's earning made the then Head of state to say that money was no longer Nigeria's problem but how to spend it (General A. A. Madiebo, 1970).

By 1975 Nigeria witnessed another military coup, after Gowon had been advised from major sectors of the country to change the military Governors in the State (Daily Time, 1974). Even though the military Governors were appointed in 1967 when the twelve states were created, by early 1975, Gowon believed that the Governors had not had their breakfast, despite the people's agitation for their change (Daily Time, 1974). Peoples' agitation and accusation of the military Governors of being corrupt perhaps prompted the succeeding military administration led by then Brigadier Muritala Mohammed to embark on a holistic probe of the Military Governors. It is interesting that only two of the twelve military Governors were found not to be corrupt (The New Nigeria, 1975). The ten corrupt Military Governors were dismissed from their military career with ignominy (The New Nigeria, 1975).. Added to this, was the valuation of their assets, excess of which were forfeited to the Federal Government (Daily Time, 1974).

The far reacting investigation of the military officers and civil servants that aided them and their dismissal from various strata of government perhaps encouraged another military coup led by Lt. Col. Dimca. Even though the coup was not popular both within the military and the civilian population, the Head of State, General Muritala Mohammed was killed on the 13th of February, 1976 (Daily Time, 1974). The death of General Muritala Mohammed brought in his deputy who was the Chief of Staff Supreme Headquarters, then Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo to succeed him in office (The New Tribune, 1976). Obasanjo's administration actually continued with the agenda of Muritala's administration, especially on the transition to another civilian administration.

The victory of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) over the other political parties such as Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP) among others brought in Alhaji Shehu Sagari as the Second Republic President on the 1st. of October, 1979 (The New Nigeria, 1979). The element of Nigerian segmentation along Regional and ethnic divide that characterized the polity during the first Republic was still visible.

The political parties were organized along the old structure. Short of any of the political party, to have the required percentage to form government, again, like during the first Republic that NPC had to ally with NCNC to form the required percentage to form government, in the Second Republic, the NPN (a Northern dominated party) had to go into alliance with the NPP (the Eastern dominated party) to form government.

Perhaps for the euphoria of ensuring that the military administration was out of office, the Second Republic in Nigeria began with high hopes and expectations from the people. The other political parties were constructively critical of the Shehu Sagari led Federal Government and it was hoped that the people will have another change to elect a government of their choice by 1983.

The gamut of complaints and actual rigging that accompanied the 1983 general elections, both at the state and at the federal levels, created another opportunity for the military to launch another coup that brought in General Mohammed Buhari (A. Akinbobola, 2000). The constructive posture of Buhari led administration naturally rekindled people's hope in government (O. O. Okpe). The selective and discriminatory policy of the administration course of its operation made it to step on toes and this seriously affected its popularity (Ageda Dickson, 1993). This eventually brought in another military government led by General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida through a palace coup.

General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida's desire to run a populist government perhaps made him to introduce policies that did not officially recognized corruption but incorporated it into government system. For instance, provisions were made in the government budget to accommodate bribery. It was simply referred to as Public Relations (Ageda Eghosa, 1986). Other policies adopted by Babangida's administration directly touched all fabrics of Nigerians' life. The implementation of IMF suggestions to devalue the National currency, down size the Nigerian work force and operation of high tariff on the industries have aggravated Nigerian problems (Ageda Eghosa, 1986). The policies are cited as the source of woe of Nigerian political, social and economic problems.

The succeeding interim and military administrations after General Ibrahim Babangida merely worked on the transition agenda that brought in the Current Civilian administration in Nigeria. The eight years rule of President Olusegun Obasanjo from April 1999 to April 2007 focused on the reconstruction through restructuring of the economic, social and political orientation. The current civilian administration in the country is yet to show enough commitment to convince the Nigerian public that it can take the country to the promised land of hope and prosperity.

Conclusion

Given the natural endowment of Nigeria, in terms of human and material resources, it stands out in Africa as a potentially great country. Also on the score of Nigerian advantages are its fixed and pleasant climate, which encouraged specialized skills that are jointly beneficial to the whole state, its vegetation which provides varieties of both staple food for its population and cash crops for exports and an environment that is generally devoid of natural disaster such as hearth-quake, flood and wind disaster.

The identifiable problem with Nigeria is the low quality of its political leadership. This quality of Nigerian leadership is dictated by local sentiments such as tribalism, nepotism and greed. If quality individuals, especially elites, who can carefully digest issues and critically interpret their action or inaction, are encouraged to seek political office through election, Nigeria will be great.

With an improved leadership, the management of the state's natural resources will be better enhanced and this will translate to positive developments that will rekindle the hope of its citizens.

As the most populous sovereign state in Africa, Nigerian's economic potentials to the whole world are unparallel. The need therefore for the whole world to give necessary attention to Nigerian political problems, will certainly go a long way to provide both economic and social advantages to humanity.

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