

RESTRUCTURING OF THE NIGERIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Restructuring and reforms has been a feature of the Nigerian system right from inception. This arises from the way the country was conceived and delivered by the colonialist without considering the ethnic contraction of the country. Post colonial Nigeria has witnessed series of political reforms in the quest to reposition the country for equity, unity and peaceful co-existence of all sections of the country. In terms of political systems, the country has attempted the parliamentary system inherited from the colonialist, the unitary system, federalism and the presidential system of government. Series of conflicts and crisis has erupted due to these political reforms over the years. Most of the conflict has always been ethnic based due to either a call for restructuring or marginalization of a section of the country or rejection of a particular system of government. This work analyses the issues and challenges of restructuring and reforms in post colonial Nigeria.

Keywords: Restructuring, Equity, Marginalization, Challenges, Conflict

Introduction

Nigeria's independence on 1st October 1960 was heralded with fanfare and expectation of greatness and development of all sections of the country. There was more to this fanfare and huge expectations. The main issue was how to maintain unity and cohesion of the over two hundred and fifty ethnic and linguistic groups of the country. This arose from the fact that before independence some sections of the country had faulted the amalgamation of Nigeria by the British. Lack of consultation and consent of the people that inhabited the area has been the bane of the amalgamation since its inception.¹ People owe their allegiance to their ethnic groups instead of loyalty to the nation. This manifested itself even before independence where political parties were formed on ethnic lines, for example the Northern People Congress (NPC) and Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) were formed specifically for the interest of the people of Northern Nigeria. The division of Nigeria into three regions and thereafter, the creation of States further ignited ethnic consciousness, acrimony, and loyalty to ethnic nationalities². Since independence there has been a call for the restructuring of the Nigeria's political arrangement. For instance the adoption of unitary system and the abolition of nationalism in 1966 by General Aguiji Ironsi was condemned by the northern group. This resulted in crisis in the country. Attempt to resolve the conflict led to the Aburi Accord which gave birth to the adoption of the federal system of government which the then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, abandoned its implementation

resulting in the secession attempt of Eastern region and the outbreak of the 1967-1970 civil war³.

In the second republic, the adoption of the presidential system of Government leads to a high rate of corruption and embezzlement of funds by politicians. The result was sudden intervention by the military which lasted till 1999 when power was returned to the civilians. Since 1999, there has been a call by sections of the country for restructuring of the present system of government. Government has not responded to the people's need especially the people of the Niger Delta region. This research paper examines the restructuring efforts of the Nigerian government, the issues and challenges of this reform on Nigeria's self acclaimed most populous black nation and giant of Africa.

January 1966 Coup and the Unitary System of Government

Nigeria operated Parliamentary system of government with a regional structure of three regions at independence in 1960. The parliamentary system was inherited from the British colonialist. The system was headed by the Prime Minister as Head of Government, whereas, the Governor General which was actually ceremonial represented the Queen of England. Nigeria became a Republic in 1963. Under the Republican Constitution, the office of the President was replaced with the Governor General who formally represented the Queen of England. However, the president was still ceremonial, the real governmental power rested on the prime minister⁴.

On 15th January 1966, Nigeria witnessed a military coup staged by young military officers headed by Major Chukwuma Nseogwu which altered both the Constitution and the political arrangement of the country. The coup was successful in the North but failed in both the west and east. Following the revolution and the consequent unstable nature of the country, Major General J.T.U. Ironsi, the then supreme commander of the Nigerian Army, took over the control of the country. The first republic of Nigeria ended as a result of the revolution with General Ironsi becoming the Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Nigerian Army⁵.

The first attempt to restructure the Nigerian system was carried out by General Aguiji Ironsi following the issuance or promulgation of decree 34, the unification decree on may 24 1966. The aim of the decree was to replace the parliamentary system which contains a federal structure with a centralized system. Therefore, under the unitary system, the three regional structures were to be abrogated. The restructure of the country by Gen Ironsi was highly criticized and condemned by the northern Nigerian people. It should be noted that the northerners were highly aggrieved following the killing of eleven prominent personalities from the north including the Sadauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello and Prime Minister Abubakar Balewa in the January 15, 1966 coup led by Major Chukwuma Nseogwu and other military officers of Igbo origin.

The emergence of Gen. Ironsi as Head of States and the fact that most of the coup plotters were from the Igbo ethnic group led to suspicion by the northerners that the coup was targeted against them⁶. This led to the counter coup of July 1966 by military officers of Northern extraction. In that coup Gen. Ironsi was assassinated along with some military officers from the East and West. Meanwhile there were severe riots in the north by northerners resulting in the killing of people of eastern region in retaliation of the assassination of their illustrious sons in the January 1966 coup. The pogrom and the mass killing of easterners in the north degenerated into ethnic and religious conflict which threatened the cohesion the Nigerian State.

Attempt at Federalism: The Aburi Accord, State Creation and the Nigerian Civil War

The unitary system of government introduced by the unification (Decree 34) decree of Gen. Ironsi was short lived following his assassination in the July 1966 coup usually called the return match⁷.

Another restructuring of the Nigerian political system took place after the July 1966 coup which brought Col. Yakubu Gowon to power as Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Nigerian Army. The assumption of office as Head of State resulted in friction between the head of state and Col. Ojukwu. This affected the smooth running of the Supreme Military Council, (SMC). This rift escalated following the mass killing of people of Eastern Region in the North. There was that mutual suspicion by Col. Ojukwu who refused to attend the SMC meeting in the midst of officers of northern region. Col. Ojukwu was the military administrator of eastern region.

In order to prevent conflict in Nigeria from escalating into crisis Gen. Joseph Ankrah, the Ghanaian Head of States decided to host the meeting of the Nigerian Supreme military council in the city of Aburi in Ghana. Col. Ojukwu decided to attend the meeting after assurance of his safety in Aburi was given by Gen. Ankrah. The Aburi conference provided another platform for the restructuring of Nigeria. The aim was to fashion out a system that would entrench mutual trust and cohesion of all sections of the country. It was also an attempt to resolved issues of conflict which had polarized the relationship among military officers with the hope that it would pave the way for the future settlement of Nigeria's political problem. At Aburi the SMC agreed that:

1. The Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces who doubled as Chairman of Supreme Military Council and the Head of Federal Military Council (SMC) directly governed the Army.
2. The Military headquarters with each region to represent was to set up under a Chief-of-Staff.
3. In each region, an area command under an Area Commander was to be established.
4. The SMC was to deal with matters of appointment and promotion of people in executive posts in the armed forces and the police.
5. Military Governors during the period were to have control over area commands in their regions for purpose of internal security⁸.

The agreement reached at Aburi for Nigeria was faced with the problem of interpretation and implementation by both Col. Ojukwu and the Head of States Yakubu Gowon respectively. Decree 8 was tactically designed to implement the Aburi Accord. The decree came into effect on March 17, 1967. Isawa Elaigwu captured Decree 8 thus: "Nigeria became more confederal than it ever been since 1954. By its terms, the Decree (which was the sole prerogative of the Federal Military Government, by Decree No. 1 1966) was to come into operation only with the concurrence of the Head of the Federal Military Government and all the Military Governors. Both the executive and legislative powers of the Government of the Federation were vested in the Supreme Military Council. The Federal Executive Council was to discharge only those functions which were specifically delegated to it by the Supreme Military Council (SMC)". The Head of State and at least 3 Military Governors, for the first time, were concurrently made in line with Section 69 (b) of the Constitution, for essential matters such as the trade, commerce, industry, transport, armed forces, the

Nigerian Police and higher education. This provisions, made the Federal Government to be highly dependent on regional governments. It was observed that the actions of the Federal Government could have paralysed the objection of any two of the regional governors. Basically, this was a confederal arrangement for the federal government to solely depend on the regional governments⁹.

Colonel Ojukwu refuses to accept Decree 8, and therefore pass Edicts that enable the Eastern region to seize federal properties of the defunct Eastern region. In the words of Colonel Ojukwu's secretary "the Decree 8 faithfully implemented the Aburi decisions. Col. Gowon also admitted that the positions of the regional governments were actually strengthened with the Decree. It is believed that Col. Ojukwu should have first accepted the terms of the decree. He was however driven by emotion, tension and sentiment of his people and therefore rejected Decree 8 which had many advantages for him¹⁰.

The rejection of the terms of the Decree 8 by Col. Ojukwu prompted the Head of States Col. Gowon to create 12 states with two from the eastern region thereby breaking Col. Ojukwu's strong hold in the eastern region. The two states were Rivers and south eastern states. The creation of states further escalated the conflict between Col. Ojukwu and Col. Gowon resulting in the later declaring the secession of eastern region from Nigeria and the civil war ensued and lasted for 30 months with Nigeria emerging victorious¹¹.

Restructuring after the Nigerian Civil War

After the Nigerian civil war, the belief was that Nigerians had learnt lessons from the war and that there will be relative peace and stability in the Nigerian system. Ethnic differences and agitations was still a big issue in the country. The military system of government was still ongoing after the civil war in 1970. The first post civil war attempt to restructure Nigeria was during the administration of General Murtala Mohammed. Mohammed continued with the politics of state creation initiated by his predecessor General Gowon. He created additional 7 States which included Anambra, Bauchi, Benue, Imo, Niger, Ogun and Ondo; this brought the total number of states to 19¹². State creation was not in the agenda of subsequent leaders in Nigeria including Olusegun Obasanjo in 1976, Shehu Shagari and Muhmmadu Buhari.

After eleven years in 1987, Geneal Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) created two States in 1987, namely Akwa Ibom and Katsina state. In 1991 he ceated additional nine states which included Abia, Enugu, Delta, Jigawa, Kebbi, Osun, Kogi, Taraba and Yobe. The 1991 restructuring resulted in a total of thirty States in Nigeria¹³. General Sanni Abacha became Nigeria's Head of State in 1993. During his regime there was widespread agitation for State creation. The only believe was that it can bring about economic development, peace and stability in Nigeria multi ethnic societies. Also, state creation was an instrument used by the military in power to make legitimate its government. In response to the agitations, General Abacha set up the national constitutional conference (NCC). The conference recommended the creation of State. In response to this recommendation, General Abacha created six additional States in Nigeria namely Ebonyi, Bayelsa, Nasarawa, Gombe, Ekiti, and Zamfara. This restructuring led to 36 states in the Nigeria federation. General Abacha left the Nigerian state prematurely due to his untimely dead in 1998. He was succeeded by General Abdulsalami Abubakar. General who did not create States neither did he elongates his tenure. He rather put up structures for the return of the military to barracks and restoration of full democratic process in Nigeria; he successfully returned the country to democracy on 29 may 1999. Even with the return of the country to democracy in 1999 there is still increase in militia groups especially in the Niger Delta.¹⁴

Restructuring Attempt During President Jonathan Era: The National Conference

The restoration of democracy in Nigeria on the 29th of May 1999 was heralded with fanfare and huge expectation of a new Nigeria with improved economy, development and unity of

all the component part of the country. Contrary to this expectation, the country witnessed an upsurge of complain and agitations by groups and opinion makers in the country. From the south - south, south east, south west, to all part of the north, people criticized the mode of operation of democracy in the country. The people of the oil rich Niger Delta agitation was based on the fact that the area was under developed due to government neglect of the area and the huge effect of oil exploration in the area notably gas flaring which destroy the natural ecosystem of the region. There was mass formation of militia groups in the region¹⁵. Nigerian society has nothing to gain from social ills, misconceived value perceptions and negative attitudes and conduct from all and sundry, irrespective of age of those involved, and call for a change of wrong character while recommending for the adoption of sound moral and value re-orientation to facilitate effective national development¹⁸.

These militia groups engaged in pipeline vandalization, kidnapping and hostage taking of oil workers and bunkering. Nigeria was losing huge barrels of oil due to pipeline vandalism and bunkering especially between 1999-2009, to solve the problem and allay the fears and agitation of the Niger Delta people, president Umaru Musa Yardu in 2007 launched the Amnesty programme for all militia groups and militant in the oil rich Niger Delta¹⁶. These programme of restructuring yielded positive results. Peace and stability was restored in the region through mass settlement of all militia groups and militant in the area. President Yardu in 2010, died while the amnesty programme was under implementation and the country was thrown into mourning. Dr Goodluck Jonathan, his Vice, was sworn in as the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian armed forces.

On 17th March 2014 in Abuja Nigeria, President Jonathan to set up National Conference after persistent calls for the country's political reform ¹⁷. 492 delegates represented a cross section of Nigerians, including professional bodies and groups. Headed by retired Chief Justice of Nigeria, Idris Kutigi as Chairman, Professor Bolaji Akinyemi, Vice Chairman, Dr Varie Azinge as Secretary, the plenary session lasted for weeks, while 20 committees set up to include finance and revenue among others. Major committees were devolution of power committee, political restructuring and forms of government and national security, environment, political and governance, law, judiciary, human rights and legal reform. Social welfare, transportation, agriculture, society, labour and sport, public service, electoral matters, foreign policy and diaspora matters, land tenure matters and national boundary, trade and investment committee, energy, religion, public finance and revenue generation, science and technology development and immigration committee. The conference lasted for 4 months; and made over 600 recommendations for the improvement of the political, economic and social structures and suggestions on how to improve the security of lives and properties of Nigerians. Thus, compelling many to argue that the Conference provided the road map needed to take Nigeria out of the woods when implemented.

Some of the recommendations of the Conference, were a band on State funding of pilgrimage and religious matters, two tier police system, independent candidacy and the devolution of powers and more revenue to States, creation of 18 new States and others. The conference equally recommended that the sharing of funds paid into the federation account among the three tier of government should be done in the following order: federal government 42%, State government 35%, and local government 22%. It also recommended an increase in the allocation for the social development sector to encourage accelerated development in all parts of the country. On the form of government for Nigeria, the conference recommended the modified presidential system which is a home grown system which combines the presidential system and the parliamentary system of government. Under the system, the President pick the Vice President from the legislature, the President select not more than 18 ministers from the six geopolitical zones and not more than 30 percent of his ministers from outside the legislature. To reduce cost of governance,

government at all levels should reduce the number of political appointees and use more staff members drawn from the civil service where occasion demands. To reduce cost of running the legislature, the conference supported the bicameral legislature and that all elected members should serve on a part time basis. The office of the president should rotate between the north and south among the six geopolitical zones while the Governorship rotates among the three senatorial districts of States.

The above were the recommendations of the 2014 National Conference. However the report of the conference was not implemented by the Good luck Jonathan presidency. During his campaign for the office of the president, one of his campaign agenda was restructuring of the country's political system. It was that manifesto on restructuring that endeared Nigerians to the presidential bid of Gen. Buhari but on assumption of office till the end of his administration he carefully avoided the issue of restructuring.

Issues and Challenges

A cursory look at the Nigerian system from inception indicates that there were some policies adopted or some political systems operated since inception that were creating chaos and igniting criticism and agitations by some sections of the country. Some of the issues generated serious concern to the extent that some sections agitated to break away from the polity. Right from independence in 1960, different government have sought for ways of repositioning Nigeria in such a way that all sections of the country will be satisfied and unity and cohesion of all the sections of the country maintained. The current political systems in Africa are adopted system imposed by the colonialist during the colonial era. Some of these political systems included the presidential system, parliamentary system and the unitary system of government.

Before colonial rule African kingdoms and empires operated indigenous political system based on African culture. These indigenous systems were simple and were less expensive and promoted unity and cohesion of all the component part of the empire and kingdoms. In assessing the potency of these indigenous political systems of governance Utin states that:

“African societies had unique political system of governance long before the European colonialist penetrated the area. This is evidenced in the formation and organization of societies into various kingdoms and empires.. the system enhanced stability and cohesion of the larger African communities..because of the efficiency of these indigenous system in Africa, the colonial authorities retained them and utilized their authority in their sphere of influence¹⁷”

It is however unfortunate that African leader abandoned these indigenous system and adopted foreign governance system that are strange to African culture and heritage. These foreign systems are very expensive to run; it breeds corruption, under development, ethnicity, ethnic militia, ethnic agitations, ethnic majority and minority syndrome, secession, civil unrest, and civil wars¹⁹. For example, ethnic agitations resulted in the bid for secession in 1966 by the people of eastern region culminating in a civil war which lasted from 1966-1970. Similarly the people of the Niger Delta region usually regarded as minority in the Nigerian federalism in reaction to the neglect of the region by the federal government and operating oil companies resorted to various form of violent activities including formation of ethnic militia which engaged in oil pipeline vandalism, kidnapping and hostage taking of oil company workers, illegal crude oil refinery known as bunkering in the local parlance and violent disruptive activities in all part of the Niger Delta.

The clamour for restructuring of Nigeria intensified immediately after independence in 1960. At first a weak centre and strong regional government operated in the country¹⁸. While this was ongoing, some sections of the country criticized the regional system resulting in violence in all part of the country. Gen. Aguiji Ironsi on assumption of office introduced

the unitary system of government, making the centre stronger than the region. This ignited reactions in the country resulting in violence in some part of the county. This trend culminated in a civil war.

This article is of the view that it is high time Nigeria take a stand and devise a suitable political system that will suit our culture and our resources. A system that will be less expensive, enhanced unity and peaceful coexistent of all the component part of the country. The reports of the national conferences held over the years should be assessed and a concrete system of government adopted for the country. Such a system can be given an African name deviating from the foreign political system. The potency of the system may attract other countries to adopt the Nigerian political system.

This paper also proffered that State Governors can promote the development of States instead of waiting for the federal government. For instance State Governors can collaborate to solve a common problem. For example the problem associated with increased in price of fuel can be handled with the introduction of a new transport system that will not use petrol. Two States can established a railway system that will link two States and therefore breakaway from the monopoly of reliance on premium motor spirit. The State in the Nigerian federal system are semi autonomous and therefore can engaged in indigenus development of their State, this will touch the lives of the citizens instead waiting for the federal or blaming the federal government for its underdevelopment.

Conclusion

This paper on restructuring of Nigeria has bring to the fore the attempt by various government in Nigeria to search for a suitable structure of government that will entrench peace, unity and development of the country. Issues and challenges of restructuring have been highlighted. Needless to recap the various efforts of government in this regard, this is embedded in this article. However, this article proffered that the present administration of President Ahmed Tinubu should assess the 2014 national conference on restructuring set up by former president Jonathan. The content of that conference contain a blue print that can change the political landscape of Nigeria for the better. From there a Nigerian political system can be devised that will suit the content of Nigerian governance culture.

Endnotes

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