

Nigerian Federalism and Nation Building **By**

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Abstract

Most large and heterogeneous nation-states of the world tend to adopt federal system of government mainly because it helps to foster unity and makes possible the mutual co-existence of different nationalities within the same nation-state. In the Nigerian situation, instead of federalism to foster unity, it has become a tool of division, increasing the gap between 'the have and the have not'. The peculiarity of the Nigerian federation has made it a strong hindrance for nation building and several scholars have continued to question the Nigeria federalism. Others are of the view that Nigerian is practicing unitary system parading itself in a federal arrangement. Compared to other federalism in different nations of the world, Nigeria federalism looks more like a unitary system of government. This paper, however, seeks to examine the issue of Nigerian federalism by analyzing its peculiarity and its effects on the Nigerian state in the process of nation building. It concludes that the problem of Nigeria is not federalism but the workability of the federal association. Moreover, the challenge of federalism in Nigeria in relation to nation building, however, lies in the hand of political actor or leaders who are the key players in the federal

sector. Nigerian leaders have allowed personal greed and ethnic biases to colour their actions and process of governance thereby hindering the process of nation building.

Introduction

The peculiarity of every society or country determines the choice she makes in adopting a particular political ideology or concept. In this view, most plural or heterogeneous society tends to toe the lines of adopting a federal system of government. Good examples of these nations are U.S.A, Canada, South Africa, India, Pakistan and a host of others.

The entity now called Nigeria is a creation of the British colonial administration in West Africa. In the beginning, there was nothing like Nigeria, we had the Bini, Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, kalabari, Idoma, Urobo, Itsekiri, Ibibio ,Fulanis, Kanuri, Nupe, Brass, Ogoja, Tiv and many other ethnic groups dwelling in the territory now called Nigeria. In order to enhance effective colonial administration, this led to the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914. This incident, Afigbo refers to as a marriage of convenience between incompatibles.¹ The North looked down on the south as uncivilized, pagan, undisciplined, rowdy and nakedly materialistic. The South returned this contempt with compliments regarding the north as feudalistic, conservative, uneducated and as a tool for the imperial master.

With this background, there was a need for adopting a political institution or ideology that can solve the problem of the people. That is, the peculiarity of the people, ethnic diversity, plurality of the culture and religion. Thus, in the Nigerian situation the adoption of federalism was inevitable. As some scholars have put it “federalism in this context is a means of solving the problem of social diversity common to most countries”.² Nigeria adopted federalism as a result of her heterogamous nature.

The adoption of federalism in Nigeria was to foster or promote national unity and also enhance nation building in a multi ethnic society. However, the reverse has become the case in Nigeria because federalism has brought more division than unity to Nigeria, thus this paper seek to address the issue of Nigerian federalism by analyzing its peculiarity. For proper analysis, the paper is divided into the following sections, introduction, conceptual clarification of the term federalism, Nigeria federalism in relation to nation building and conclusion.

Conceptual Clarification of Federalism

Federalism is derived from a Latin word “foedus” which means “Alliance treaty” or an oath of allegiance, and by implication emphasis the right of those who share in the covenant to make their own decision. It is a decentralized administrative system of government designed to cope with size, differences, and peculiarities of the regions or ethnic groups. In a federal system, there are, at least, two levels of government of that is, the Centre and sub-national unit(s). The relationship between the units that is, the Centre and the component units is not superior to inferior in a federation.¹² The Centre and the units work together to achieve the same aim. But the fact is that the Centre cannot change the constitution as it relates to their units without the participation and concurrence of the component units in this process.³ From the above statement, it can be deduced that Nigerian federalism is faulty because most of the constitutions have been imposed without the participation of Nigerians.

Nigeria Federalism In Relation To Nation Building

As asserted earlier, the peculiarity of a country or society determines the political concept of such country⁴. Most large nation states such as the United States of America and Nigeria have settled for federalism mainly because it makes possible the mutual co-existence of different nationalities within the same nation-state⁵. In the Nigerian situation, instead of

federalism to foster unity, it has become a tool of division, increasing the gap between the 'have and the have not'. The peculiarity of the Nigerian federation has made it a strong hindrance for nation building. In a country where there is no unity, everyone is recognized by its own ethnic group, religious group and regions; the attainment of national unity is only but a dream in the present structure put in place. And when there is no national unity, there is no nation to build.

The Nigerian federation has become a tool in the hands of the federal government for rubbing the general populace of their right and place in the administration of the country. A major problem of the Nigerian federation is that of ethnic representation. In a scenario where a section of the country, because of the ethnic affinity feels or sees itself never having an opportunity of forming a government or even participating in the government, such a section will never have a sense of belonging to the country. This is because the political parties or military group that controlled government are often composed disproportionately of member of a particular ethnic group, it may be difficult for those in control to find capable and popular cabinet member from other ethnic groups who would be prepared to join them and accept their leadership⁶. Most coup d' etats have ethnic undertones as were the case with January 1966 and the counter coup of July 1966. In a scenario where a particular ethnic group has monopolized the leadership of the nation, each leader tended to identify himself with his ethnic group and interest rather than national interest. Some groups have taken the leadership of the country as their inheritance or birth right. This does not go down well with other groups, who feel alienated from the administration of the country and has thus continued to work against the federal government. For instance, there is high level of youth migration in some particular states of the Nation; Edo State is among the highest migrant state in the country. This is because the people do not have a sense of belonging in the country and there is no means of livelihood. Moreso, the people have decided to seek for greener pasture

elsewhere. The Nigerian youth has been bastardized to the extent that they do not know their place in the federation, thus, most of them have continued to rebel against the federal government, while others have taken to migration and many lives have been lost in the process of migration and militancy. By and large, where there is marginalization, ethnicity, sectionalism and favoritism have taken the place of national interest and unity, the process of building a nation is greatly hindered and this has continued to pose a great threat to the process nation building.

Another peculiar problem of the Nigerian federalism is the distribution of national powers among the different tiers of government. In Nigeria, we have a super strong government at the centre and very weak government in the states or component unit. In a true federalism, the relationship between the different tiers of government is not that of superior to inferior. However, this is the situation in Nigeria where the federal government is superior to other component of the government⁷. The state is so weak that it depends on the federal government for over 80% for her revenue allocation. This situation is as a result of military intervention in the governance of the country for a long period. According to K.C Whare, a federalist theorist, "The fundamental and distinguishing characteristic of a federal system is that neither the central nor the region governments are subordinate to each other, but rather, the two are co-ordinate, and independent"⁸.

Moreso, in a federal system, there is no hierarchy of authorities, with the central government sitting on top of the others. All government has horizontal relationship with each other. Thus, there is no federalism under military rule. In a situation where the state government is struggling from the strong hand of the centre, there will always be crisis or power tussle among the different tiers of government and in such a scenario, national unity cannot be attained. While the Federal government wants to lord it over the state, the state is also struggling for its own autonomy from the

firm grip of the federal government, thus, in a state of anarchy the process of building a nation is greatly hampered.

Another major issue in Nigeria federalism is the problem of federal character. In the 1979 constitution, federal character was introduced. In the place of merit at the federal civil service, ethnicity has replaced merit. It is no longer about your qualifications but about where you come from. This has furthered divided the country. This quota system and federal character was introduced during the second republic when the Northern leaders found out that they were backward in Western Education, while the North had political power, the South had the bureaucratic and technocratic power⁹. This was an uncomfortable position for the ruling Northern People Congress (NPC). Though the federal character was introduced to enhance representation; but the truth is that it has brought more division and has bastardized the federal bureaucracy, while the minority has been pushed aside as if they are irrelevant.

Federalism in the First Republic

In 1960, Nigeria became an independent sovereign nation with effect from October 1 under a constitution, which established federalism. However, federalism in Nigeria can be traced to the colonial period. The Lyttleton constitution of 1954 which formally made Nigeria a federation by dividing government powers between the two levels of government. However, under this arrangement, the regions were so powerful; thus the central governments were working on almost equal footing. The regions at the first republic were largely autonomous and they possessed the residual power in the federation and functioned almost independently. The revenue arrangement was such that it ensured that the regions had resources to carry out the immense responsibilities. Under the 1960-1963 constitution, a true federal system made up of strong states or regions and a central or federal "State" with limited powers was instituted. Each region had its own separate constitution, in addition to the federal

government constitution. Each region also had its own separate coat of arms and motto different from the federal government. Everyone understood its boundaries, revenue allocation on system under the 1963 constitution was strictly based on derivation¹⁰.

At this period, due to some imbalances in the system, the region became more powerful that it even became more powerful than the Federal government. The major problems of the country at this point were the minority question.¹¹ The minorities felt they were not having true representation and thus they continued to advocate for creation of more regions or state. However, the operation of federalism in the period before 1966 was near perfect. Some of the major problems were that of the sizes of the region. For instance, the Northern region was much bigger than the rest of the country put together which was not healthy sign for a viable federation. More so, these regions were dominated by large majority ethnic group against which the minority ethnic groups either singular or together were almost helpless, marginalized and most of the time in state of open conflicts.¹² This led to confrontation which often led to riots and bloodshed in some areas. In a state of internal crisis and anarchy, there was lack of unit as the people continued to seek for creation of more states, hoping that this will solve the problems. In the midst of these, the military took over power and the coup was led by a particular ethnic group against another. In such a scenario where ethnic interest is more paramount to national interest, the process of building a nation is only but an illusion.

Federalism and Military Rule

It should be made clear at this point of our analysis that there is nothing like federalism under military rule. The intervention of the military in the Nigerian federation has bastardized the federal system. According to Yakubu Gowon, a former military head;

*Federations are not meant to be ruled under military governments, more so in the case of Nigeria where there are many and varied interest. By its nature, the military is a centred command and obedience based institution. Against this background a military Head of State having military governor in the state would be hard put to see the duty of his governors as any different in terms of their obligation and loyalty to him.*¹³

From the above assertion, it is clear that the operation of federalism under military government is faulty. On this faulty foundation, the Nigerian federation grew and this is why Nigerian federation is operating a system that look more like a unitary system of government. Be that as it may, it is important to point out that military rule and Federalism are both not coherent. By the military orientation, the military governor would be more inclined to obey before complaining. Therefore, distorting the basis of adopting federalism where the component or different tiers of government are to share political powers and exercise independent control over their area of political jurisdiction¹⁴.

The major element of military federalism included the suspension and modification of the constitution. Because military federalism has been more common than civilian federalism, this model made the federal government the “Master” in relation to the “dependent” state government. Thus, the long presence of the military on the political scene has so much coloured the Nigeria federalism that it now looks more like a unitary system of government. This is because the military do not operate a democratic constitution where power is shared between the levels of government.

Another major feature of Nigerian military rule was the continuous creation of states in the federation. This has resulted to the states being too small that none of them can pose any serious threat to the federal government. It is pertinent to note that from the above analysis, we have a very strong centre to the detriment of a very weak component unit.¹⁵ The Federal military government expanded its control over the economy to the

extent that in 1996 the state depended on it for up to 90 percent of their revenues. The federal government also took over such matters as education; which formerly belonged to the state and because state governor were appointed on military assignment by the president, the state had little autonomy except in deciding how to implement policies formulated by the federal government¹⁶. They introduced federal government secondary school, University, polytechnic etcetera just to foster unity among the people, but most of these strategies have not succeeded and have become a waste. Even the NYSC was introduced by a military Head of State to enhance unity and bring national integration; this has, however, succeeded to an extent. Many parents have refused to allow their children to serve in some particular parts of the nation because of the crisis inherent in such areas. Also uncountable numbers of Nigerian serving corpors have lost their lives to the brutal murder by Northners.

Moreso, the military is highly credited for the introduction of ethnic politics into Nigeria. The first military coup of 1966 brought into power Aguiyi Ironsi who is from the Eastern part of the country (of the Igbo ethnic group). Ironsi promulgated decree No.34 of 1966, which in effect brought the country to a unitary rule under him as head of the political and military administration. This did not go down well with the north. They retaliated with a bloody counter coup and assassinated leaders from the Eastern and Western regions.¹⁷ This, however, did not please the Eastern leaders who sought for secession from Nigeria. This led to the civil war between 1967 and 1970. However, on the eve of the war Gowon took a very wise and brilliant decision by dividing the Northern region into six states and the southern region into six states.⁴¹ Thus, Nigeria became a twelve state Federation.

The point I am trying to make at this juncture is that due to military intervention in the first republic, ethnic politics became very deep in the Nigerian polity. Subsequent military heads of States were from the North and most of them tailored the country's revenue towards the development

of the North. In the so called exercise of state creation, the northern region has more states than the rest regions put together.

In the area of administration, between 1976 and 1984, the composition of the federal government was a negation of the federal character principle. Firstly, during the 19 states structure, the North had ten states while the other part of the country had nine. The supreme military council between 1979 had 15 Northerners to 8 Southerners (though the head was a Southerner). The federal government in the second republic had a preponderant northern dominant.⁴⁴ In 1984 SMC had 12 Northerners of the total of 20, and the executive, council 10 Northerners out of 18. The composition of successive Federal Government since 1976 have shown significant northern dominant. A country where the principle of Federal character or Federalism entrenches certain interest to the neglect of a particular group remains a potent threats to the stability of the nation.

Moreover, successive military junta adopted a revenue allocation formula designed to favour a particular region of the country to the detriment of others. For instance, at the end of Buhari's tenure, 49% of Federal Revenue went to the North, 10.9% to the East, oil producing states got 18.8%, Lagos and South west got 18.9% and FCT 2.4%.¹⁸ This formula can only bring disintegration and strife in the federation and this has been a great hindrance to national unity and nation building. Also at the end of Babangida's eight year rule, 52% of all Federal revenue went to the Northern region, 10.4% to the East, 18.0% to the oil producing states, 18.6 to the south west and Lagos, while FCT got 1% all totaling 100%. In essence, the Northern region with less population density, lesser contribution to the Federal purse but with large inhabitable expense of land and monopoly of federal power got higher percentage of federal revenue than state with higher population and superior contribution to the federal pursed. This arrangement is most unfair, and a complete negation to the principle of true Federalism. Thus, it has become a great source of agitation as it resulted to the Nigeria Delta agitation. They have

the natural resources that account for over 90% of the National revenue yet they are getting very low revenue from the federal government. This, however, has hindered the process of nation building in Nigeria.

By and large, it is important to note that the constitution of Nigeria after the first republic was written under military rule and they are all designed to favour the Centre and the North while the component unit remains dependent and weak. These constitutions have continued to favour some particular region to the detriment of others. In such a situation rebellion is inevitable and in the process of crisis and rebellion no process of nation building can thrive. Thus, the military intervention in the politics of Nigeria has done more harm than good to the general populace and has become a great hindrance to the process of nation building. The long presence of the military on the political scene has so much coloured the Nigerian federalism that it now looks more like a unitary system of government.

Federalism Under Civilian Administration

The civilian government who took over power from the last military Head of state both in 1979 and 1999 inherited the same structural imbalance that has been put in place by former military administrators. That is, a very strong Centre and a weak state government.¹⁹ Unlike the previous arrangement in the first republic of separate constitutions for the centre and each of the regions, the entire country now operates on one single document. One major implication of this constitution is that there was a power shift. Under the arrangement, the trend of power gravitates toward the Centre; the balance of power is, therefore, centripetal instead of being centrifugal.

The constitution of the country during civilian rule was drafted under military regime. For proper administration, it became the duty of the civilian leaders to correct the structural imbalance in these constitutions, but instead of amending the constitution, Nigerian politicians see

federalism as affording them an opportunity to exploit the national resources for their own personal gain. It avail them an opportunity “to have ours” and “do it our own way”. Nigerian politicians have complicated the contradictions and imbalances inherent in Nigeria federalism. According to Federal theorist, civilian federalism is the true form of Federalism but because of the faulty foundations of Nigerian Federalism; that is, the continuous intervention of the military in the governance. Federalism in Nigeria under civilian rule is questionable. The structural imbalance inherited from military rule is still very much inherent. Though attempts have been made to correct these faulty foundations of Nigerian federation, these attempts are yet to yield positive fruit.

The question remains, is Nigeria practicing true federalism? In a situation where some particular groups are more represented than others. For instance when the “big three” are satisfied, (the three major ethnic groups that is, the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo) there is no cause for alarm. Other groups are marginalized; there is no balance representation and some groups have continued agitate for true representation and adoption of true federalism in order for them to be allowed to run their affairs themselves. This situation has continued to pose a great threat to the stability of the nation and the process of nation building.

Fiscal Federalism

The problem of who to have what in the sharing of the national cake has continued to raise more controversies and problems to the Nigerian government. It has continued to threaten the political harmony and stability in Nigerian. Thus, one of the most crucial debates that have faced the Nigerian state and which constitute a major problem to the Nigerian federation till today is division of resources.

A very crucial issue in fiscal federalism is the criteria for sharing national revenue. Should the allocation be based on derivation? Who should

control what type of tax? The problem of imbalance in revenue generation between the state and the Centre, differences in population, uneven development, industries, natural resources etc has remained unresolved problems in the revenue allocation of the country²⁰.

However, it is instructive to note that the federation units within the Nigeria federation lacked any measure of fiscal autonomy as they are solely dependent on the central government for revenue. Following the oil boom, Nigeria became an economy depending on crude oil for over 90% of its income, thus, making the Niger Delta region crucial to Nigeria future. Its petroleum resources sustained the military government and is also sustaining civilian rule. But the local population felt-rightly marginalized and deprived of a just share of the benefits. Meanwhile, oil is wreaking havoc on the environment and on agriculture as a means of livelihood. Through successive legislations, including the petroleum and land use acts, the federal governments have gradually taken total control of oil revenues, thereby denying the Deltans fair share from their own natural resources.

One important fallout from the centralization of oil revenues is that the importance of derivation as a revenue allocation principle has declined. This, in turn, led to a most unjust inequitable revenue sharing formula to the advantage of a particular region and the detriment of the others. A critical analysis of both previous and present allocation formulae, would reveal that it revenue allocation has become a focal veneer for legitimizing Northern hegemony. For instance, in the 1995/1996 fiscal year, Kano State alone got N15,555.6m over 15 billion as statutory allocation, while much more populated and productive Lagos state got N,144.9m from the same account. This, evidently smacks off injustice in the sharing formula and underscores the fact that, Nigerian federalism is far from a truly federal fiscal system. The sharing formula of the federal revenue has become a great hindrance to national unity and the process of nation building²¹.

In accordance with the constitution, the percentage allocated on the basis of derivation in the vertical allocation formula is 13%. This arrangement obviously lack justice equity and fairness, hallmarks of a true fiscal federalism. These cumulative acts of deprivation set the stage for continuous crisis in the Niger-Delta which has become a hot bed of militant and violent crisis and agitation over the control of revenue accruing from the region. It is instructive to note that the structural imbalance of the Nigerian federation has continued to hinder the development of national unity in the country. In a situation where the federal government is rubbing 'Peter to pay Paul', the marginalized group will never have a sense of belonging. This is however, a great hindrance to the process of building a nation.

Conclusion

In a heterogenous society like ours, federalism is a suitable compromise to foster unity among multinational states. During the period of regionalism, most ethnic groups mainly referred to as minority were agitating for creation of states as they thought that creation of states would put an end to marginalization. But with the creation of states and introduction of a federal structure, the situation has degenerated from bad to worst. Federalism has widened the gap between the have and have not in Nigeria while states creation has weakened the power of other units. The central government has become very strong at the detriment of very weak state government. The issue of fiscal federalism that is sharing of the nation's revenue and resource control has resulted into so many disagreements between the states and central government. Scholars have continued to question the Nigerian federalism. Thus, federalism which was meant to foster unity and nation building has brought more divisions and ethnicity to the Nigeria the polity. Compared to other federalism in different nations of the world, Nigeria federalism looks more like a unitary system of government.

Finally, it should be noted that federalism is not the problem of Nigeria but the workability of our federal association. It is an essential ingredient for Nigerian unity. It is a premise upon which we can build a nation. The problem of federalism in Nigeria in relation to nation building however lies in the hand of political actor or leaders who are the key players in the federal sector. Our leaders have allowed personal greed and ethnic biases to colour their actions and process of governance. Thus, they have shifted from true federalism to a unitary system in a federal arrangement, thereby preventing national unity and nation building.

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