

Federalism and Political Restructuring in Nigeria: Analysis of the Rationale and Challenges

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Abstract: *Necessitating this research paper had been the persistent call from sections of the Nigerian polity for the restructuring of the Nigerian State especially with regards to her federal system of government. The paper sought to highlight the rationale and challenges embedded in the consistently persistent calls for restructuring in the country. It was emphasized that in order to ensure that the Nigerian system doesn't collapse, political restructuring becomes necessary to provide sufficient room for the co-existence of centrifugal and centripetal forces inherent in the country. The paper therefore recommends state creation and emphasis on regionalism as approaches that will help foster Nigeria's federalism and create room for integrating forces rather than those forces that seek to disintegrate the federation.*

Key words: *Federalism, Political Restructuring, Nigeria,*

Introduction

In an attempt to reconcile federalism as a theory and in practice vis-à-vis political restructuring within the Nigerian context, Tamuno, in Kunle, Rotimi, Adegun, and Georges (2004:13) stresses that “neither history nor economics has given the cause of “federalism” in Nigeria a smooth ride. He argues that federalism, is that form of government where the component units of a political organization participate in sharing powers and functions in a cooperative manner though the combined forces of ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity, among others, tend to pull the people apart. These force that we can refer to as

centrifugal and centripetal forces in any political society make political restructuring imperative so as to maintain unity in diversity in the system.

Alapiki (2005, 49-65), contributing to the debate on the nexus between state creation and national integration in his article titled, “State Creation in Nigeria: Failed Approach to National Integration and Local Autonomy” demonstrates how the fissiparous tendencies bearing on the Nigerian national polity make the policy of using state creation to achieve national integration a failed strategy. The paper shows how the outcomes of state creation exercises in Nigeria have failed to assuage the

ry force that instigates new state demands. It contends that the prospects for national integration and local autonomy depend on the emergence of a purposeful national leadership and proper political restructuring of the federation designed to generate a national image that has more appeal than the regional ones.

The objective of this paper is not to provoke the controversy, of course, types of federalism, differences in terms of forms ("strong" or "weak"), periodic variations in terms of "strength" or "weakness" across the globe, but to emphasize the rationale for political restructuring in the Nigeria federal system as well as the challenges associated with it. This will be treated in the following Sub-headings;

1. Concept of Federalism (brief conceptualization)
2. Political Restructuring in Nigeria
3. Rationale for Political Restructuring in Nigeria
4. Challenges Associated with Political Restructuring in

Nigeria

5. Conclusion

6. The Way Forward

Concept of Federalism

Without mincing words, federalism is context dependent. If we acquaint ourselves with the work of Wheare and other pundits in the field of federalist studies like Livinston, Morris, Etzioni, etc we will no longer fight over definitions and descriptions. While, Wheare and his contemporaries give federalism a legal conceptualization that has relevance in democracy and rigid legal institutions, Livinston and his contemporaries give it a sociological connotation in terms of environmental, socio-economic and political processes. Some others like Amitai Etzioni give it a power view.

Wheare (1963) in Obiajulu and Obi (2010:222) posited thus; "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". His definition of federalism was predicated on the American federal structure, which he regarded as a model, arch-type or paradigm of federalism per excellence. It

also provided some formal institutional requisites and conditions, which according to him, America possesses as put together by Kalagbor (2001:230) to include the existence of an independent judiciary and supreme court system, a multi-party system, preferably a two party system; rigid and written constitution, division of powers and functions; financial autonomy; independent electoral systems for both levels of government; and bicameral legislature.

This postulation of Wheare's classic formulation of federalism has been variously criticized for being too rigid, legalistic and inflexible. In fact, Livingston has also pointed out that Wheare's neglect of sociological variables in his definition of federalism is faulty, because sociological factors are essential in the understanding of the dynamics of federalism. Wheare's view of America as a model of federalism gives the impression that American federalism is without problems (Kalagbor, 2001). Another major weakness of Wheare's classification is his confusion in seeing his institutional criteria as defining characteristics of federalism, which are not, because not all federal systems of

government possess these criteria.

Livingston cited in Obiajulu and Obi (2010) notes that the essence of federalism lies not in the institutional or constitutional structure but in society itself.

Federal government is a device by which the federal qualities of the society are articulated and protected. This view is at times referred to as the sociological notion of federalism.

Etzion takes a strictly political perspective in his understanding of the federal principle. To him,

power is necessary not only in terms of resource sharing, it is equally important to understand federalism as a principle of dealing with group relationships and interaction,

in the context of power sharing. Federalism in this context is an attempt to cope with the problem of power in the process of unification of political communities.

To this perspective, when groups as states are aggregated into a collectivity, the most important concern to them is how much power they have which is a major determinant of the amount of resource they get in relation with other. This is to ensure that political power is not hijacked by a major group

or groups in society.

Irrespective of however federalism is conceptualized by different scholars, it represents a system of government that emphasizes unity in diversity, division of powers between levels of government and limited autonomy to the constituent units. It shapes and is shaped by the environment it is practiced.

Political Restructuring in Nigeria

“Restructuring the Federation” is a term which has gained wide currency in the nation’s political discourse, having been popularized through its indiscriminate and lugubrious use by the most vocal sections of the Nigerian elite. Like all popular concepts, it has hardly ever been clearly defined and its nebulousness has been congenial to the slippery nature of its proponents. “Restructuring” has come to represent, in reality an omnibus word for all forms of adjustments, alterations and cosmetic manipulations aimed at changing the formula on the basis of which economic resources and political power are shared or distributed among the Nigerian elite. Each section traditionally defends the area of its comparative advantage at any given time,

standing by the status quo when it serves its purposes and asking for “restructuring” when it does not (Sanusi, 2015).

Just like every other federal system in the world, political restructuring is a sine qua non for sustainable federalism in Nigeria. Kunle et al. (2009) opines that it has become increasingly clear in the wake of the new globalism that ensued after the cold war that federal systems, no less than non-federal ones, are faced with two key demands - namely those of nationalism and democracy. According to him, while it is true that it has hardly been easy to manage federal systems, including these so-called classic ones built, according to Max Frankel, from below, even those ethnically-segmented federations like Nigeria that lack both democracy and development are often at great pains not to disintegrate.

In 1979, the editors of an important work published in Nigeria, *Readings on Federalism* that brought together in one volume views of some of the leading scholars in Comparative Federalism worldwide claimed, in their preface, that;

one of the things which was stressed by several participants from other countries (aside Nigeria)... was the fact that several federal states are either engaged in, or

about to begin, the process of reviewing their federal systems in order to retain their relevance to their societies (Kunle, et al., 2009:3).

They also added, perhaps foreffect, that "the need to review each federal system was not seen as a sign of weakness or as something to apologize for". This is because, whereas federalism "promises...that federal institutions may be designed to meet the particular needs of the communities establishing them", the promise is often honoured more in its breach than in its delivery. In general, federalism's minimalist promissory note to permit nations and peoples forming the union, their own nationalism and self-determination is more easily endangered in a non-democratic federal system than in a democratic federal polity. In general terms, one of the several variables apart from a civic political culture that draws the linkage between the democratic idea and democratic practice is political restructuring. This is one concept or notion that means different things to different political leaders in contemporary federal systems more so in those where (as in post-June 12, 1993 Nigeria) most nationalities seek a "radically restructured federation in which the power

of the federal state is reduced" (A.O. Olukoshi and O. Agbu, 1996:87 cited in Kunle, et al., 2009).

Political restructuring seems to be informed by the poor praxis of an admittedly formal federal system. In other words, the clamour for restructuring is more stringent in countries with a federal form of government and perhaps also a federal constitution - but with a unitary practice. As William Riker (cited in Stepan, 2007:24) has noted, "what counts is not the rather trivial constitutional structure, but rather the political and economic culture". The political and economic culture of a federal system in terms of the aggregate premises - both value and factual - of governance can, to varying degrees, depending on the nature and character of the federal state, be antithetical to the wishes, aspirations and goals of individuals and nationalities. Thus, the argument of J.J. Linz (1997a:21), that "federalism can only assure that nobody could be fully unhappy but certainly not that everybody will be happy with the solution". However, when a neo-patrimonial federal logic makes happy only state officials and

their acolytes, even if the latter cut across ethnic, religious, regional, class and gender cleavages, pockets of dissent, dissidence and contestations will naturally emerge. Olukoshi and Agbu (1996:97) in Kunle (2004) have, on this score, contended, rightly in our view, that;

It is... necessary to recognize that the crisis of Nigerian federalism is not just about bickering 'tribes' but also about social injustices that are rooted in cross-national class and gender conflicts.

Expressed differently, while federalism has brought several nations within the Nigerian polity together, actual federal practice has hardly been able to keep them together happily (Kunle, et al. 2004).

Before we forge ahead, let us quickly ask one cynical question. What is restructuring? The answer to this question will give us the key way to understand and provide the rationale for its importance in Nigeria federal system.

In defining the word 'restructuring', it is important to define the word 'politics' and in this sense, we will like to refer to the definition of politics by William Riker (1986) in Ostrom (2000) as being practiced globally as "structuring the world so you can win and making other people like it." Though this is the global definition of politics, we have to redefine it in Africa in the light of conducts

and behaviours of leadership vis-a-vis that of the grassroots in Nigeria. Therefore, politics should be redefined as restructuring the public sphere and political economy, domesticating democracy through polycentric planning. Then restructuring can be defined as the process of setting up error correcting institutional mechanisms for true democratization, where democratization is a colossal restructuring of the mentality of those in leadership position and the led (people).

The above raises another question. The question is: what measures can we put in place if we need to restructure Nigeria? In order to restructure, we need to learn some lessons from the experience of the United States of America where scholars and intellectuals got involved in deliberation. For example, and relevant to the Nigeria's context was an approach taken by the authors of *The Federalist* (Hamilton, Jay and Madison [1788] 1961) and the participants in the Philadelphia Convention where they presumed an essential connection between ideas and deeds – theory/knowledge and actions/realities (Ostrom 2000:9). In the opening paragraph of *The Federalist Papers*, Hamilton, Jay and Madison ([1788] 1961:33) posed the fundamental puzzle in human

societies, “whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force” (Ostrom 2000). If we understand society as a system of human cooperation, this Hamiltonian puzzle can be formulated as two questions: Are human beings capable of cooperating with one another to organize a free, peaceful, and prosperous society? If the answer is affirmative, under what conditions can they cooperate to achieve such a goal?

In relation to Nigeria, the Hamiltonian puzzle can be formulated as four questions: Are Nigerians capable of cooperating with one another to domesticating democracy for ensuring freedom, peace and prosperity? Are there some roles Nigerian citizens should play in the process of domesticating democracy for building peace and prosperous society? What are these roles? How can people-oriented developmental programmes be planned to allow citizens at community level to be involved in decision making, rule-monitoring and enforcement of sanction on rule infraction? Answers to these questions are contained in the application of some problem-solving models and strategies

that will be treated in subsequent sub-headings.

Rationale for Political Restructuring

Irrespective of the existence of other forms of logic, the main drive towards institutional reforms in a federal system is the recognition, however arrived at, that existing state institutions, particularly at the centre, are inadequate to apprehend, comprehend and resolve immediate and new challenges.

To all appearances, political restructuring in a federal polity is intended to achieve certain specific objectives. They include the following as put together by Kunle et al. (2009);

1. Restructuring is meant to serve as a steering mechanism to properly give focus and locust to attempts at collective identity and distributive politics.
2. Political restructuring is intended to lay an institutional foundation for a more just and a more equitable sharing of the political space by multinational groups cohabiting in a federal polity.

3. Political restructuring is a

better appreciation of the need for tolerance and respect for civil and civic rights of both aggrieved ethnic majorities and marginalized ethnic minorities.

Number one above suggest that the aim of political restructuring is to correct perceived structural defects and institutional deformities. To tinker with political structure is perhaps suggestivethat whilst democratic practice may not yet have firm roots, the democratic idea has some form of expression. The importance of the latter ideal in a federal system can hardly be over-emphasised, particularly where there are not only actually existing irredentist movements but also nationalities being driven to agitate for separatist identities.

Number two argues that the strategic objectives seem to be the solidifying- or perhaps merely engendering- of a sense of national community. Within this context, political restructuring is an indication that some spirit of political bargaining, however circumscribed, does exist, notwithstanding whether or not the decision to

restructure the polity by the ruling class or clique was voluntary or otherwise.

The position of number three is that in underdeveloped and poor federal polities where, as in Nigeria, the federal structure is perceived as a device for the elite to take advantage of state largesse this 'civic rationality' comes into sharp focus. Whenever it is given free rein, the federal system as well as the nation-state, as the case may be, the state-nation become legitimated, in one and the same breath, in the eyes of the civil society and the multinational groups. Where, on the contrary, civic rationality or logic is conspicuous by its absence, disintegration of the wretchedly-wedged federal polity will sooner or later loom large on the political horizon (Kunle, 2009:5).

Challenges Associated with Political Restructuring in Nigeria:

A Discourse

In order to discuss the challenges associated with political restructuring in Nigeria, it will be necessary to look at Nigeria political structure from a historical perspective.

For purpose of convenience, we are going to start off this section by looking at the structure of 1966 political structure in Nigeria and the challenges associated with it that made restructuring imperative. In the other section, we defined the structure, for our purposes, in terms of two principal elements:

1. The delineation of individual parts and
2. The nature and limits of their interconnectivity.

We can therefore say, that the “structure” of Nigeria, in 1966 was as follows:

- a. A country made up of four regions. One of them, the North, was a virtual monolith, bigger, geographically, than the other three combined and larger in terms of population, resources and income than any other region.
- b. A legal system which conferred all residual legislative powers on the regions, subject only to the paramount to the Federal Law in case of any conflict of interest with regional law. Federal government had exclusive competence in a very restricted list of subjects of a fiscal or semi-technical nature. The only politically sensitive areas among these were Defense,

Emergency Powers over regions and Foreign Relations. All other areas were either exclusively regional, or on the Concurrent list.

What we propose to do is to review the strengths and weaknesses of this “structure”, to guide us in our discussion of the challenges associated with restructuring the Federation. To facilitate analysis, it is broken into one of “objective” and “subjective” variables. The first deals with material issues, removed from secondary contradictions. The second deals with the complex interplay of ethnic and religious identities.

Objective Variables

First, the Federating units

1. We note that one of the major strengths of the structure of Nigeria in 1966 was that it was made up of economically viable and self-sufficient Federating units. It is indeed true, as later developments showed that each unit could even be broken into sub-units and with each remaining viable. However, this process which, in our opinion, should have stopped with the creation of 12 states by Gowon, continued in a ridiculous fashion until we find ourselves today with 36 glorified latifundia called states and a

Federal Capital Territory (Sanusi, 2015). Each state has a bloated civil service, a governor and his deputy, commissioners, state assembly, Judiciary, etc, such that its total revenue is insufficient for prompt payment of salaries and the states have to run to the Federal Government or to banks for assistance or loans.

We should note that the sine qua non for any viable “restructuring” is a viable “structure” which is, by definition, impossible if its constituent parts are not themselves viable.

2. A second objective factor in the structure of the First Republic which is, this time, a draw-back, was the lack of equity in the delineation of its constituent parts. The North was too large compared to the other regions and it was, in reality as well as perception, preponderant and overbearing. By his refusal to go down to Lagos and his decision to send TafawaBalewa to be Prime Minister, the Federal Government itself seemed subject to dictation from Ahmadu Bello in Kaduna. Northern politicians staunchly deny that the Sardauna controlled Federal Policy from his

Northern base. It is however, difficult to believe this fully, especially in view of certain instances of bias.

As an example, Mid-Western Region was carved out of both the Western and Eastern regions in 1965 ostensibly to fulfill the desire of the minorities for self government and free them from marginalization from the dominant Yoruba and Igbo. However, despite the very large area covered by the North and in spite of tensions and perennial crises led by the United Middle-Belt Congress and the Borno Youth Movement, neither the middle-belt nor old Bornu was able to obtain autonomy from subjugation to the old Sokoto Caliphate. The Tiv riots were brutally suppressed and Sardauna, officially a leader of the whole North, carried on for all intents and purposes as the inheritor of the mantle of UthmanDanfodio with little regard for the sensitivities of citizens of those areas like Bornu and to a larger extent, the Middle Belt which were never conquered by his ancestors and their Fulani protégées. The West and East can therefore be forgiven for taking all arguments proffered for creation of the Mid-West with a pinch of salt given that the same objective conditions obtained in the North, and no similar action was taken (Sanusi, 2015).

The lesson in all of this is that the Federating Units must be such as not to give any one unit or group of units, dominance over others. It is our opinion that this condition can only be fulfilled with a strong Federal Government. In a “loose” Federation, with a weak centre, the various units forming a historical block will just as soon conglomerate into something similar to what obtained in 1966 and negate the very purpose of their delineation.

We therefore take with us from the discussion above the following points:

1. That the first point of departure in restructuring Nigeria is the reconsolidation of its balkanized constituent parts into individual entities that are economically viable and amenable to smooth administration. Only such units would be able to carry out functions assigned to them.
2. That these entities must be balanced and none of them should be able to dominate or destabilize others, or make possible the unjust oppression of ethnic and religious minorities. This condition is best fulfilled where the monopoly of instruments of repression is in the hands of a broad-based and representative federal

government.

This, in turn, immediately leads to a number of other issues. First, the creation of states based primarily (or solely) on the desire to achieve ethnic or religious homogeneity only serves to provide a platform for effective domination of ethnic and religious minorities by more populous groups. There is no doubt that, especially with large groups, some states will turn out to be ethnically or religiously homogeneous e.g. Yoruba in the south-west, Muslim in the far north, Igbo in the south-east, Christian in the south-south, e.t.c. However, this should not be the primary objective and the tendency of “like” states to come together as a group perpetuates the sense that we are not one nation but a collection of tribes.

It is clear to us that the relations between various ethnic and religious groups contributed, as much as (if not more than) objective defects to the collapse of the First Republic. In 1999, the country is faced with the same generic problems although they clearly vary in concrete and specific historical form. These problems, which the nation has to address as an integral part of any restructuring, are the subject of the next subsection.

2. Subjective Variables

The former civilian governor of Kaduna State, Alhaji Abdulkadir Balarabe Musa, in a recent Newspaper interview, declared that the Northern Bourgeoisie and the Yoruba Bourgeoisie were Nigeria's principal problem. Of the two, he said the Yoruba Bourgeoisie is even greater problem because of their tribalism and selfishness.

We will take this as our basis for our analysis of subjective factors. Let us begin by stating that the bane of the Nigerian elite can be condensed into three elements:

1. Ethnic chauvinism and Religious Intolerance;
2. Selfishness and the inordinate desire for dominating others, and
3. Short-sightedness.

In view of the above, we contend that the for any national conference in Nigeria on Federal Structure to be successful, certain issues and the manner in which they are handled will to a large extent determine progress made towards our ideal political structure. These issues, inter alia are:

- The Sharia and religious intolerance in the North;
- The Yoruba elite and area-boy politics;
- Igbo marginalization and the responsible limits of retribution; and

- The Niger-Delta and the need for justice.

These issues have made past and present political restructuring a difficult task in Nigeria. If these issues are not addressed through a political restructuring that does not emphasize the creation of more states or regional governments like before, the Nigeria state is on its way to collapse.

Former Vice President, Atiku in recent public speech, has recently posited that the agitations by many right-thinking Nigerians call for a restructuring and renewal of our federation to make it less centralized, less suffocating and less dictatorial in the affairs of our country's constituent units and localities. This should not be mistaken for a call for creation of more states but to make the system less centralized.

Conclusion

We are concluding this paper by stating clearly that restructuring the Federation is not a simple task, and should be considered only as part of the process of nation-building. The message here is that all Nigerians have a right to maintain their diversity but this should only be on the basis of respect of the same rights for other Nigerians. No nation can be built on the platform of inequity, intolerance and selfishness. No nation can be

built on an undemocratic environment with a weak center where the principle of leadership rest with prebendalism.

From what we have been hearing and reading over the media, what people have in mind when we talk about political restructuring is state creation and regionalism, which is a far cry from the 'restructuring' in the real sense of Nigerian realities. Our challenges and problems are predicated upon the problems of disconnect and 'parallelism' that engender institutional crisis. Even if we adopt regionalism and more states are created, these problems of disconnect, 'parallelism' and institutional crisis will still persist and consequently, mass poverty and human misery will be heightened. Nigeria has failed to assuage the very force that instigate new state demands. In fact, the prospects for national integration and local autonomy depend on the emergence of a purposeful national leadership and proper political restructuring of the federation designed to generate a national image that has more appeal than the regional ones.

If we adopt regionalism or even if we embrace 'stateism', 'townism', etc, these critical issues – disconnect, 'parallelism' and institutional crisis that were (are)

demonstrated by the actions of the elite (about 30% of our population) who were (are) deciding for the rest of the society will still constitute impediments to peace, progress and prosperity of each new formations emerging from regionalism. In essence, state creation or regionalism is not the way out of the present crises that are rocking the country.

Using the experiences of institutional design from Bloomington school of the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) and polycentric planning mechanism, it is obvious that the type of restructuring that Nigeria needs is not regionalism but restructuring that will enable us confront and address our complex, complicated and hydra-headed challenges and problems that are bedeviling our country. Restructuring and domesticating democracy require the application of polycentric planning and federalism as a problem-solving strategy; rather than as only a form of government. This requires proper understanding of American federalism, and defining our own federalism that will reflect collegiality through associational life and power of collectivity that exist among Nigerians within associational and democratic spaces.

The Way Forward

The type of restructuring that Nigeria needs now should involve: Domesticating democracy, restructuring the public sphere and political economy through Polycentric Planning; Domesticating democracy is by adapting features and elements of federalism/democratization to Nigerian realities through appropriate institutional arrangements that are self-organizing and self-governing within rule-ruler-ruled configuration; Restructuring the public sphere in order to resolve political crisis, and then linking this to how people can work together, from community level, to address diverse challenges.

Also, it should involve restructuring political economy through polycentric planning and error correcting potentials and institutional mechanisms for equitable distribution of resources; restructuring that can produce four fundamental imperatives of collective action – collegiality, mutual trust, reciprocity and shared community of understanding. Then it will be possible for leadership and the people at community, local, state, regional and federal levels to cooperate on electoral matters, especially when they (the people) perceive that the outcome of the interactions will be beneficial to them all.

In addition, it should be true restructuring that will produce “a shared community of understanding,” as the bedrock of democracy, and this will help in resolving grievances, marginalization, exclusion, etc of the past and every Nigerian will feel belonged.

Again, Nigeria needs true restructuring, which is a deliberate construction by molding different ethnic groups into a nation with emphasis on inclusion that practically emphasizes aspirations and yearning of the citizenry: food, employment, security, health, education, industrialization, peace, etc, at the community, ward and local levels.

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