

FEDERALISM AND POLITICAL STABILITY IN NIGERIA: CURRENT PERIL AND FUTURE HOPES

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Abstract

As a device for the containment of intra societal pluralism, federalism offers good prospect for achieving political stability of especially heterogeneous societies. In Nigeria, adoption of this governmental arrangement dated back to 1954 when it emerged a federation of three regions defined by the three major ethnic groups. With over half a century of practice, this paper highlights how the practice of federalism has impacted on the country's political stability explicating on various perceptions of the system in Nigeria and those conditions and tendencies that gave rise to them. The paper argued that although there are some faulty lines in its practice, much of the diatribe on Nigeria's federalism stem not from insolvency of the system in engendering political stability but rather from a wrong appreciation of the values inherent it. The bottom line is that attitude and excesses of political actors lie central to the crises and contradictions of Nigeria's federalism. In spite of this, it is maintained that, there is yet no alternative to the federal system in Nigeria if the country is to remain a strong, united and politically stable entity.

Introduction

Nigeria is a country of extraordinary diversity (Human Rights Watch, 2006: 5) and as such, one of extraordinary complexities. This complexity is a reflection of the avalanche of ethno-cultural and religious groups co-habiting the territory and the intricacies of interaction among them. While no one is certain about the extent of its religious diversity, Nigeria's ethnic composition is estimated to be between 250 and over 400. This situation is quite unique much as it creates unique problems which often tend to defy known and existing strategies. Indeed, Nigeria's adventure into pluralism of ethnic and religious diversities owes its origin to the colonial conquest which permeated the entire continent of Africa beginning from the early 19th century.

The colonialists in their intra European struggle for the soul of Africa ended up creating entities with diversity of language and cultures and the attendant problems which later bedevilled post colonial Africa. In the case of Nigeria, the foundation of this unfortunate malady was formally laid in 1914 when Frederick Lugard amalgamated the two separate territories of North and South. Indeed, even the two territories themselves were neither monolithic but an agglomeration of many distinct groups which the British, for political and economic reasons, hound-wound together. The resulting Nigerian state by 1914 was thus an amalgam of disparate territories which, previously, had little or nothing in common except inter ethnic wars and trade. Even long after the amalgamation, the two territories were separately administered thereby creating disparities in their level of socio-political and economic development. In other words, it could be reasoned from this background that Nigeria as at 1914 had been implanted with enough seeds of discord that would mar its future political stability.

Perhaps cognisance of the existence of several latent threats to the future political stability of the emergent nation-state, both the British colonialists and even Nigerian nationalists were desirous of a system of government that would neutralise the potential threats and accommodate the divergent interests of the various ethno cultural groups. This desire eventually found expression in the federal system of government. This suggests that the adoption of federalism in Nigeria as a diversity management technique was neither the exclusive desire of the British colonialists nor the nationalist leaders alone. Indeed, it was a mutual but tacit agreement of the two parties (Muhammad, 2007).

In describing the popularity of the federal idea in the post 1945 period, Watts (2000) aptly captured the compromises that greeted the adoption of the federal system in many countries. In this, Nigeria is not an exception. According to Watts (2000:5),

...the creators of the new states approaching independence found themselves faced with simultaneous conflicting demands for territorial integration and balkanization. They had to reconcile the need, on the one hand, for relatively large economic and political units...with the desire, on the other hand, to retain authority of the smaller political units with traditional allegiances representing racial, linguistic, ethnic and religious communities. In such situations, where the forces for integration and separation were at odds with each other, political leaders of nationalist independence movements and colonial administrators alike found in the “federal solution” a popular formula, providing a common ground for centralizers and provincialists.

Going by the above discussions therefore, it could be reasoned that Nigeria’s adoption of the federal system was not as a strategy to manage problems of pre independence period but more importantly as an enduring strategy that would help detonate a major source of threat to the future political stability of an independent Nigeria. Given this background and against the fact that operation of the system *per se* started far back as 1954, what is the continued relevance of the federal idea in Nigeria? This is against the background of hiccups experienced so far with the system and its attendant implications for political stability. Further to the above question: what are the sources of the present worry over adaptability of the system to Nigeria’s situation and what are the future hopes for a politically stable Nigeria through the practice of federalism? Before probing further, theorising federalism and political stability is essential.

Federalism and Political Stability: A Correlate

Federalism represents a unique form of governmental arrangement. This is because, it involves organisation of the state in such manner as to promote unity while at the same time preserving existing diversities within an overarching national entity.

Implicit in this is that it is a system which mediates the potential and actual conflict that often arises from the heterogeneity within a political entity. To this extent, the relationship between federalism and political stability is axiomatic. Perhaps this informed why Long (1991:192) asserted that federalism is an institutional solution to the destructive tendencies of intra societal ethnic pluralism. Although Long may have stressed the factor of ethnic pluralism, the relevance of the federal system encapsulates all forms of societal diversities be it ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religion. Moreover, factors engendering stability and/or instability in societies include several cleavage issues that often arise from time to time. Indeed, if we conceive of stability or better still, political stability as a condition of steadiness and firmness of political institutions and processes within the political system as well as absence of threat to an existing pattern of authority and behaviour, then it could be reasoned that political stability especially in plural society is a function of several societal factors within the entity. These include the extent of polarisation and opposing tendencies within the entity and the extent of adaptability of the governmental system to management of these divisions. It need be stressed that, while a situation of absolute stability may not be attainable in any society, relative stability of all organs as well as general acquiescence to rules is quite essential for the state to achieve its desired end. Thus for plural societies defined by divergent interests especially on territorial basis, the adoption of political arrangements and institutions that allow for cooperation and harmonious relations between and among groups becomes an imperative for relative political stability to exist. The cruciality of the federal system in this regard can, therefore, not be overlooked. This informs why various conceptions of federalism have revolved around management of actual and potential conflicts within a nation state. It must equally be said that while federalism may not be an elixir to all societal

problems arising from ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity which many had imagined it to be (Elaiwu, 2000: 35; Watts, 2000:3), it nonetheless attempt to manage them by accommodating the various diversities that are prone to engendering instability. This it is able to achieve by permitting the existence of different and, to a large extent, autonomous locus of power and guaranteeing of the right of self determination of various groups. But even the right of self determination itself, especially in a federal context, has been noted by scholars as one of double application (Ramphal, 1979: xxi). Ramphal went further that, in relation to the federal system, secession is the claimed concomitant of self determination, which can therefore help to destroy federalism just as it serve to build it. The idea here is that, self determination goes hand in hand with nationalism. Self determination of sub national units may therefore result in ultra nationalism of these units which may eventually lead to secession attempt by them as was the case in 1967 when the eastern region tried to secede from the rest of Nigeria. The current restiveness of Nigeria's ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta also shows a gradual drift towards this end. However, although the idea of self determination which is central to the practice of federalism may tend to be problematic at times, yet, there is currently no viable political alternative to federalism for territorially fragmented and culturally heterogeneous societies. Above all, the adaptability of the federal system to engendering political stability in the state depends largely on the operating context of the system as well as attitudes and orientation of political actors within the political system.

Two Contexts of Nigeria's Federalism and the Manifestations of Instability

Like all federal systems, Nigeria's federalism since its adoption in 1954 has been operating in both fiscal and political contexts. The fiscal context consists of the mode

of expropriation and distribution of resources while the political context relates to putting in place appropriate structures that would facilitate the self realisation of component units. One basic fact is that the operation of federalism in both contexts must be designed in such a way as to avoid marked inequality among the component units in power and resource matrix. Indeed, it has been noted that financial subordination of units or marked inequality between them in terms of wealth, population and land mass constitute potent destabilising factors in federations and may make an end of federalism (Wheare, 1963; Awa, 1976).

In the fiscal context, there is no doubt that profound conflict exist among the component units of the Nigerian federation. At inception of the system, there was a large devolution of powers to the regions. Equally, each region enjoys considerable autonomy over its internal affairs in addition to having a regional police force and civil service. In terms of resource distribution, the principle of derivation occupied a significant place in the distribution formula. This followed recommendations of the Louis Chick Commission of 1953 which was set up to ‘assess the effect, on the public expenditure of Nigeria as whole, of the reallocation of functions between the centre and the regions’ (quoted in Elaigwu, 2005:252). Thus, derivation remained a major emphasis in federal revenue allocation between 1954 and 1966 when the military took over headship of the country, albeit some other commissions were set up whose recommendations led to some minor modifications in the revenue sharing arrangement. However, due to a number of factors that include the military’s adventure into Nigerian politics, the need to arrest the ever burgeoning powers of the regions and its concomitant weakness of the centre with the attendant consequence of being unable to give the country a sense of direction and above all, the seeming gradual disintegration of the federal structure, there was a gradual shift to some other

forms of consideration in revenue allocation as a strategy to arrest the situation. Beginning from 1966, therefore, the principle of derivation was greatly downplayed while other principles also became prominent. Other basis of allocation include, population size, need and, national interest. Ironically, this period coincided with period of oil boom and a massive decline in the value of cocoa and other export produce from other regions at the international market. In other words, there was a twist of fortune and faith as the south eastern region, with the oil boom, gradually became the life wire of Nigeria's revenue generation while the northern and western regions, the major producers of groundnut and cocoa respectively, receded. Thus, while the northern and western regions were indifferent to the new revenue sharing arrangement, the eastern region wanted federal allocations to the regions to continue fully on the basis of derivation. Ever since this period, the principle of derivation in the sharing formula has continued to suffer decline under Nigeria's fiscal practice while 'attempt to arrive at a national consensus on the revenue sharing formula in spite of several revenue commissions has hardly yielded any acceptable outcome' (Zabadi and Gambo, 2000:75). Ofeimun (2005) poignantly captured the fluctuating fortune of the derivation principle when he observed that:

From 100 percent in 1946, the Philipson commission recommended 50 percent for derivation in 1951; Hicks- Philipson recommended 50 percent, 100 percent was actually disbursed in 1953 when the Western Region pushed for it; in 1958, however, the Raisman Commission Set derivation at 50 percent; in 1960, it was 50 percent; by 1970, the regime of General Yakubu Gowon...reduced derivation share to 45 percent...In 1975, derivation fell to 20 percent. The Obasanjo / Yar' Adua administration fixed it at 25 percent... Shehu Shagari reduced it to 5 percent in 1981. Under Buhari, it crashed to 1.5 percent. General Ibrahim Babangida raised it to 3 percent ...it took the rise of Sara Wiwa phenomenon for consideration to be given to a 13 percent rise on the principle of derivation as proposed in the 1995 and now the 1999 constitution.

While it is instructive to note that a major reason for downplaying the principle of derivation in the allocation formula was to avert a major source of threat to the continued existence of the federation (regional preponderance) and achieve national unity, the aftermath has had great impacts on the country's stability which *ab initio* informed the initial action. Manifestations of this will be highlighted later.

In its structural and political context, Nigeria's federalism may be likened to a biological cell capable of dividing and reproducing itself (Dent, 1995). This is because, it has continued to witness continuous splitting of units. In 1954, it began as a federation of three regions but by 1964, it became four with the creation of the mid western region from the then western region. By 1967, the federal structure became subdivided into 12 states while by 1976, it was further split into 19 states. By 1989, it became a federation of 21 states, increasing to 30 by 1991 and by 1996 it had subdivided to become a federation of 36 states. In addition, the creation of more states has always been accompanied by the creation of additional Local Governments areas. Thus, from 301 in 1976, the country currently boasts of about 774 Local Government Area Councils. Implicit in the above description is that Nigeria's federal structure is predicated on a three-tier administrative structure – the federal, state and local governments. While it is not a misnomer to have, in a federation, more than two tiers of government in order to cope with the extent of diversities, the continued structural division, however, have not produced a satisfactory outcome for the component units. This is evidently so because every attempt at states and local government creation is usually followed by increase agitations for more.

It is important to also stress that, the creation of states and local government is usually seen as a legitimising strategy of the military. But beyond this, it is for most Nigerians, a progression towards achievement of self determination. This is because,

even though military governments were the ones reputed for creating more states, except for the creation of the mid western region in 1964 by the Tafawa Balewa administration, states creation exercise is always preceded by agitations for it by the citizens themselves. Moreover, even under civilian administrations, there were usually agitations for states but perhaps the rudiments of constitutional requirements for creating more states often made it frustrating to embark upon. For instance, the Shehu Shagari administration (1979-1983) had received over 80 requests for the creation of additional states before it was overthrown in 1983. In other words, the military, by virtue of its penchant to disregard constitutional norms, tend to be quicker in acceding to demands for more states and local governments.

Similarly, states are important variables in federations and its utility in engendering development and political stability cannot be wished away. This as noted by scholars include, opening up new areas for development, breaking the hegemony of major ethnic groups and diffusing ethnic tension among others (Diamond, 1987; Suberu, 1996; Nwosu, 1998; Onyeoziri, 2001). However, at times, the extent to which state creation exercise satisfy these needs tend to be momentary. This is because Nigeria's experience has shown that the creation of new states from old ones automatically results in the emergence of new majorities and new minorities in the new state with the attendant claims of marginalisation by the new minorities. Apart from this, there was the tendency for people who hitherto belong to the same state to now see themselves as former brothers and rival within the federation. It was in order to 'reflect the nuances of the federation' (Nwosu, 1998:34), and give further expression to its federalism, that the federal character principle was adopted in the 1979 Nigerian Constitution as a directive principle of state policy. Accordingly, therefore, section 14(3) of the Constitution provided that:

The composition of the government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few state or from a few ethnic or sectional groups in that government or any of its agencies.

Similarly, in section 14(4), the constitution also provided that:

The composition of the Government of a State, a Local Government Council, or any of the agencies of such Government or Council, and the conduct of the affairs of the Government or Council or such agencies shall be carried out in such a manner as to recognise the diversity of the peoples within its area of authority and the need to promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all the people of the Federation.

These provisions were replicated in the same sections of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria.

Going by the wordings of the constitution, the expectation on the federal character principle was that it would pave way for a federal government that would be all-inclusive of all segments of the federation thereby assuring a stable federal polity. However, lofty as the federal character provision is, there was no executive agency charged with the responsibility of implementing it until July 2002 when the Federal Character Commission (FCC) was inaugurated. Thus, its implementation before this period by various government ministries and agencies was more or less haphazard with the consequence of a declining confidence of citizens in the principle as a means of achieving relative equity in the federation. Even till date and with the establishment of a Commission to oversee its application, there seem not to be too much hope in the whole process. For further insightful commentaries on the federal character principle, see Ekeh and Osaghae (1989), Onyeoziri (2001), Ojo (2005).

Giving the two contexts in which Nigeria's federalism has operated as discussed above and the dynamism that have characterised each context against the background of achieving one of the ends federalism – stabilisation effect by

reconciling opposing tendencies in a multinational state – one would be puzzled by the array of instability that have come to characterised the Nigerian federation. Conceived as a condition in the political system in which the institutionalised patterns of authority breakdown and the expected compliance to political authority is replaced by violence with the intent of changing the personnel, policies or sovereignty through injury to persons or property (quoted in, Elaigwu, 2000:36), there is no doubt that the practice of federalism in Nigeria has been punctured by political instability manifesting in the various and actual threat to its existence. These include an agonising 30 month civil war between 1967 and 1970; a number of ethno-regional induced coups such as January and July 1966 coups as well the failed coup attempt by Major Gideon Okar in 1990; communal clashes as between Ife and Modakeke in Osun state, Umuleri and Aguleri in Anambra state and, Ijaw and Ilaje communities in Delta state; deafening agitations for resource control especially in the minority Niger Delta; increasing wave of ethnic nationalism and ethnic militia groups (OPC, Egbesu boys, MASOB, MEND and a host of others); the Sharia law debacle and; increasing struggle for control of the centre among others. Yet, this trend has shown no sign of abating thereby casting a shadow of doubt over the adaptive capability of federalism in guaranteeing political stability in Nigeria. The extent of culpability or otherwise of the federal system in these crises is our focus in the next section.

Is Federalism the Problem?

For many Nigerians, federalism is an important mechanism for their self realisation. Indeed, self realisation and self determination are expected to lubricate the emergence of a stable and prosperous national community. Unfortunately, the contradictions engendered by the quest for self determination has constantly remain a source of worry. In an attempt to explain why this is so, scholars have advanced

arguments bothering on structural and operational defects in the practice of federalism. Salient among their arguments are the asymmetric territorial association of the federal structure and imbalance in power relations. According to Ojo (1998), Nigeria's federalism is one of an asymmetric territorial association in which one part is roughly equivalent to the sum of other parts put together. This asymmetric territorial association has been traced to the foundation of the Nigerian state. As noted by scholars, the northern protectorate with its 281,782 square miles constitutes more than three-quarter of the country (Crampton, quoted in Gofwen, 2004; Jinadu, 1994:6) and as such, the largest of the two protectorates. Yet, while the northern protectorate was retained as a region, the southern protectorate was latter split into east and west. Arguably therefore, it could be reasoned that this overbearing influence of the northern region in terms of population and land mass did permanently place it at an advantage on issues of joint deliberation. However, this argument need not be stressed too far. For one, Nigeria as a nation has continued to undergo deep structural division as reflected by the phenomenon of states and local government creation. The creation of states consequently has revealed that each of the regions is an agglomeration of many cultures who also tries to assert their independent existence. In this case therefore, the idea of one north and its being the decider on issues of joint deliberation is no longer appealing. Equally, it is not all issues that mirror a north-south divide. For as Akinyemi (2001:4) has pointed out, Nigerian politics has transcended the realm of Zero-sum game of what the north gains, the south losses or vice versa. Rather, it is a multiple sum game in which units would agree on some issues while they disagree on some others. For instance, issues such as having a state police, instituting the *Sharia* law and even control over resources, as volatile as they were, did not completely take on a north-south divide. In fact, the recent attempt by some northern state governors

joined by three of their counterparts in the west, to challenge, in court, federal government's abrogation of the onshore-offshore dichotomy in paying derivation strengthens this position. So also was the unanimous position of delegates to the 2005 National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) in which, all delegates with the exception of those from the south-south, jointly agreed to peg derivation payable to oil producing areas at 17 per cent. For the above reason, the question of asymmetric territorial structure as responsible for predominance of one group in decision making may have been over bloated. It could also be reasoned that the issue of asymmetric territorial association predates the adoption of federalism. Federalism was not adopted to rectify this but to give expression to various nationality groups inhabiting the lopsided regions. Moreover, the principle of federalism requires relative and not absolute equality of units. And since the system is a dynamic process, further strategies which are in tandem with federal practice are devised to make up for the relative difference between the units. The institutionalisation of the federal character principle in Nigeria points in this regard. Although there may be some difficulties with the operation of this principle as already noted by scholars (Ojo, 2005; Onyeoziri, 2001), but such problems are not directly created by the operation of federalism.

There is also the argument over impact of military rule on Nigeria's federalism as well as domination of headship of the federation by people of a particular ethnic extraction 'as if it is the exclusive birthright of that group' (Nwabueze, 19). Having ruled for a total period of 29 years (between January 1966 and October 1979 and between 1983 and 1999), there is no doubt that the military constitute a significant influence on Nigerian government and politics. One area where the military has suffered much diatribe is in the aspect of pioneering the centralisation of Nigerian

federalism. It should be stated, however, that, the pendulum of federalism usually swing either in the direction of centralisation or decentralisation depending on the peculiar circumstances of the polity. In other words, the circumstance of its emergence coupled with dynamics within the system is what determines the extent to which power is centralised or decentralised in the federation. Even older federations such as the US which started as a decentralised system has continued evolve through time towards centralisation.

In the Nigerian case, Nigeria's federalism began on a decentralised note because considerable powers were devolved to the regions. However, we must not lost touch of the fact that such arrangement also had its problems bothering on the ever burgeoning powers of the region. Thus, the excessive regionalism of the period was already drawing the country close on the verge of disintegration before the military took over the reigns of power in 1966. Interestingly, the mood of most Nigerians at this period favoured a centralisation of power as a way of breaking the hegemonic tendencies of the regional governments that was responsible for the level of disarray in the country then. In the same vain, the creation of more states from existing ones was seen by many as desirable in order to give recognition and sense of belonging to the already frustrated minorities in each region. The military, by creating more states and moving the country towards a centralised federal structure, was merely giving formal backing to what Nigerians themselves desired. The euphoria that usually accompanies states creation exercise in the country attests to this. Similarly, the need for the federal government to be fully in-charge of affairs and to function better required transferring jurisdiction over some issues (for instance, the Police Force) to the federal government. Expectedly, the widening responsibilities of the federal government and corresponding reduction in those of the component units

also require matching each with commensurate resources. Little surprise, therefore, that more resources is retained by the federal government. However, like every policy decision, there must be intended outcomes as well as unintended outcomes. The fact of some unintended consequences must, however, not be allowed to obliterate the positive aspects of the policy option.

Related to the above is the argument that the country has remained largely unstable because of domination of its political leadership by people of a particular ethnic extraction. But while at the surface level, there may be a predominance of people from a particular section (the north) as Heads of State and in some other key posts, however, probing into bureaucratic representation revealed that this is firmly under the control of the south. For instance, while the north may have dominated political leadership (cumulatively, the north has produced 9 out of 12 Heads of State between 1960 and date), the bureaucracy is manifestly in favour of the south, the region which has persistently alleged marginalisation. Indeed, going by the 1996 federal staff audit, the entire northern region is said to have provided less than 20 per cent of workers in all categories at the federal level (Ojo, 2005:105). Even till date, there seem to have been no improvement in this trend especially when we juxtapose the figures of 1996 and 2005 for officers on grade level 15 and above. See table below.

Federal Officers on Grade Level 15 and Above

Zones	1996	2005	Zones	1996	2005
North-West	339 (12.2%)	969 (10.6%)	South-West	820 (29.6%)	2202 (24.1%)
North-East	291 (10.2%)	883 (9.7%)	South-East	437 (15.8%)	1751(19.2%)
North-Central	456 (16.4%)	1589 (17.4%)	South-South	429 (15.5%)	1660 (18.2%)

Total	1086 (39.1%)	3441 (37.7%)	Total	1686 (60.9%)	5613 (61.5%)
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Source: Ojo (2005) and Federal Character Commission (FCC), Abuja

Similarly according to the 2005 federal staffs audit (the latest from the FCC), the entire northern geo political zone has about 38.4 per cent of officers on grade level 07 and above in the 158 federal Parastatals covered by the report as against the southern geo-political zone's 61.2 per cent. In this case, the question may be asked, who is dominating who?

The inference from our analysis so far in this section is that, although the practice of federalism in Nigeria has been marred by series of punctuations resulting in calls for alternative model of governance or what is referred to as 'true federalism'. It is however contended that the problems experienced so far are not a misnomer in a federation as to warrant its abandonment. Moreover, previous experiences in Nigeria have revealed the greater danger of a unitary system as well as the likely outcome of a weak centre. For instance, the unification decree of General Aguyi Ironsi, which, *ab initio* was unpopular among all sections of the country, was one of the major factors that precipitated his removal from office through a military coup in July, 1966. Similarly, the excessive regionalism and the seeming weakness of the centre are part of what accentuated the secession attempt by the eastern region and the consequent war of unification between 1967 and 1970. In other words, going by experience, there seem for now, to be no alternative to federalism in Nigeria. Even the call for the so called 'true federalism' leaves much problematic. The question is, what makes a federalism true when in actual fact there are no two forms of federalism that are the same? This is because, the nature of federalism in any context is, largely, determined by peculiar circumstances and forces within each entity that made the adoption of federalism compelling. As Jinadu (2003: xiii) has pointed out, there is no pure or true

form of federalism. Rather, what exists is a federal spectrum along which there are variations. Perhaps it may be reasoned that even the call for ‘true federalism in Nigeria suffers from some conceptual consensus as to what constitutes true federalism. Indeed, the array of interpretation roughly coincides with preferences of each region. This include, demand for right of states to control the mineral resources in their area as in the south-east and south-south; freedom to practice the *Sharia* legal system in the northern part and the demand for establishment of state police Force popular in the south-west. Ironically, while each group hold on to its own interpretation of ‘true federalism’, they are at the same the antagonistic of the others position.

Also deriving from our analysis in this section is that while there seem to be some imperfections in the structural make up of the country, this, however, is not a creation of the federalism system neither is it strong enough to send Nigeria’s federalism to the canvass by engendering political instability. Rather, federalism is only meant to help reduce the potential effect of such imbalance. In other words, sources of instability within the Nigerian federation need not be confined to the issue of structural imperfection alone. Rather, several other variables could help account for this as the next few lines shows.

Where Lay the Problem?

There is no doubt that the increasing instability and tension in the Nigerian federation has cast doubt over its adaptability to solving Nigeria’s plurality problems. But as has been noted in the last section, moving beyond conventional argument can help reveal the real underlying basis of tension. In this light, it is argued that variables such as absence of astute political leadership; unnecessary scepticisms as well a

failure of good governance constitute the main culprits in the travails of federalism in Nigeria.

In any political system, be it federal or otherwise, the role of astute political leadership cannot be downplayed in its march towards greatness. It is the leaders that gives direction to and as well engender commitment on the part of the people towards achieving national greatness. Moreover, since politics is concerned with the authoritative allocation of values in the state, leadership prowess and sagacity are needed to achieve a desirable end. Indeed, the history of older federations such as US and the former Soviet Union, has amply demonstrated the difference which astute political leadership can make in making federalism work. Unfortunately, Nigeria is not so blessed in terms of leadership capability. This is because, owing to a combination of factors, the emergence of a true national leadership in Nigeria has been difficult. Virtually all its leaders since independence have acted in one way or the other that portray them as advancing ethnic or sectional interest. Even the citizens in most cases perceive them as and their actions through the lens of ethnicity or other sectional affiliations. This tendency is further reinforced by the attitudes of Nigeria's political class who in their intra class struggle for political power to consolidate on their primitive accumulation of wealth developed a penchant for aggravating existing cleavages by interpreting politics in terms of survival of ethnic or regional entities. Indeed, the series of leadership crises experienced since independence axiomises this perspective. Also in this context, the practice federalism only serves to advance individual rather than societal interests.

Unnecessary scepticism, negative thoughts about the federal system and lack of ideological commitment to its maintenance constitute another plague on the practice of federalism in Nigeria. No matter how well constituted a federation may be,

it becomes a failure where the citizens and their leaders are not ideologically committed to its maintenance. For one, in every federation, there are bound to be new impulses, new interests and new demands to which the federal system is expected to respond to. But this must necessarily be accompanied by the commitment and political will to accommodate these changes in the general interest. This perspective was poignantly captured by Ramphal (1979:xix) when he asserted that:

For a federation to be able to resist failure, the leaders and their followers must feel federal – they must be moved to think of themselves as one people with one common, self-interest – capable, where necessary, over-riding most other considerations of small interests...’the good’ for any must be consciously subordinated to or compatible with ‘the good for all’. This then is tantamount to an ideological commitment not to federation only as a means...but...as an end, as good form its own sake, for the sake of answering the summons of history.

The experience of the US system in the early years of its formation attest to this as documented in the federalist papers. However in Nigeria, the ideological commitment necessary to make federalism work is grossly lacking. This is because, right from its formative years, Nigerian leaders have been demonstrating a lot of scepticism about it. This finds expression in various appellations that have been used to describe Nigeria’s unity and its federal structure such as Tafawa Balewa’s ‘the mistake of 1914’ and Obafemi Awolowo’s description of Nigerian federalism as ‘an abominable and disruptive British heritage,. Unfortunately, since these were nationalists and founding fathers of the federation, their perceptions have come to colour the orientation of many citizens who also tend to see the country’s federalism in this light. Till date, this scepticism and unwarranted diatribe on Nigeria’s federalism has not abated. In this context, many positive aspects and future prospects inherent in federal practice become obscured from the people. Indeed, federalism in Nigeria, in addition to encouraging politics of innovation in policy formulation and implementation among

component units, have also helped to divert struggles for political and economic control away from the centre to other locus of power such as state and local governments. However, it takes a meticulous mind to reckon with some of these achievements.

Corrupt tendencies and failure of good governance also constitute another major factor in the wrong appreciation of the federal system in Nigeria. This is because endemic corruption by political office holders both at federal, state and local government usually deny the citizens opportunities of having the basic necessities of life. Most often, resources meant for this are diverted to private accounts through contract inflation and other unwholesome practices. In most cases as well, citizens focus their search light on corrupt practices at the centre whereas the lower levels are equally culpable. The unfortunate situation is that because people look more towards the federal government to provide them with amenities, lower levels of government tend to parade the erroneous view that their inability to engender good governance in their areas is due to failure on the part of the federal government to provide enough resources. Taking the particular case of the Niger Delta region, where close to 90 per cent of the nation's revenue is generated, the level of underdevelopment and infrastructural decay in this region is quite appalling. At the centre of castigation for the dilemma of the Niger Delta is the federal government. But we may pause to ponder that, while the federal government's effort in attending to the problem may be grossly insufficient, what has been the role of states and local governments in the region in complimenting efforts of the federal government. This observation is necessary against the background of recent reports that local governments in the Niger Delta have cumulatively since 1999, mismanaged over 50 billion dollars bearing in mind that the implementation of the Niger Delta master plan, which would ensure that

the region 'becomes economically viable and Africa's most prosperous region' would gulp the sum of 50 billion dollars (The Punch, February 4, 2007). Also sometime ago, governor of the oil-rich Bayelsa state was removed from office and arrested for involvement in money laundering to the tune of over 50 billion Naira. Perhaps if these mismanaged funds had been committed to developing the region, the current restiveness and insurgency by militia groups from the region may be uncalled for. Yet, the rain of invectives over the Niger Delta issue has continued to be on the federal government and the federal structure.

Conclusion: Future Hopes

In this paper we have tried to examine the adaptability of the federal system in engendering political stability in Nigeria. Analysis has revealed that stability or instability in the society is a function of the extent of societal polarisation and how they are managed. Thus, by virtue of its inherent value of reconciling opposing tendencies, the federal system holds better prospect in helping to stem a major source of political instability. This value was not lost on Nigeria's founding fathers when they tarried along with the British colonisers to establish a federal framework. Nigeria's federal structure since inception has also witnessed several fiscal and structural reformations in line with new realities as they emerge. Although this is not without some deficits but like in all political organisations, there is no perfect policy. But while Nigeria's federal structure may not have succeed in solving all its political ills, it is nonetheless, what has keep the country together. Moreover, even non federal systems are faced with similar problems bothering threat to its very existence. Therefore, inability to have a perfect stability in the political system, in spite of years of practicing federalism, should not be taken as bankruptcy of the system. Equally, the attempt at explaining the current tension pervading the system through emphasis

on structural imbalance may be one sided. While there may be such imbalance, there is the need to cognate on some other cogent factors that gives life to it. As argued in the text, absence of astute political leadership, corruption and lack of basic essentials of life coupled with promotion of negative thought about the system are the major bane of federalism and instability in Nigeria. It is in the light of this that this paper submits that, in spite of structural deficits and some other problems, federalism still hold better prospect for political in Nigeria if the factors that accentuate instability can be attenuated. It is therefore suggested that attention and more efforts should be directed to how to have a national political leadership that would be able to inspire citizens to think and act federal. This necessarily involves moderation, sincerity and compromise on the part of political actors in the process of competition. Second, political education and enlightenment of the citizens and, the need to propagate the positive virtues of federalism are essential. This would help erase negative thoughts and scepticism about the system. Hence, all hands would be on deck to realise the positive intents of the federal architecture. Third, governments at all levels need to promote good governance and the values of transparency and accountability. This is against the background that lack of accountability and prevalence of corrupt practices aggravates poverty and increases frustration among citizens. In this context, violence and conflict as a way of seeking vengeance becomes an attractive option. There is no doubt that achievement of all the above are positive sign posts to a stable and prosperous Federal Republic of Nigeria.

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