

POLITICS AND THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

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ABSTRACT

As a concept, politics is the science of administration of human society. Fundamentally, its practice is to enhance peace, social order, stability, growth and development in any society or nation. However, the effect of politics on Nigeria is a negation of the above identified goals of politics. Rather than peace, unity, social order, growth and development there have been chaos, disintegration, instability, and social disorder. This paper therefore advanced the argument that the idea of politics and its ideals have been wrongly conceived by the political elites and this is responsible for the problems of injustice, disintegration, and lack of growth and under development in the contemporary Nigeria nation. To resolve these problems, the paper argued for a return to the traditional conception of politics.

Keywords: Politics, Nigerian nation, social order

INTRODUCTION

Politics according to the traditional philosophers is to create an enabling environment for social cooperation, social order, justice, progress and development. It is meant to prevail on the naturally egoistic nature of human kind that is capable of causing anarchy in a nation. Since a nation consists of different ethnic groups, culture, language and religion, its political administration must be properly construed. Thus, politics, which has been described as the science of the art of administration, is very vital to any nation. If we grant the above as the true purpose of politics, then, the question that agitates the mind is: has politics been able to perform these functions in the Nigerian nation?

As rightly observed, violence, instability, social-disorder, injustice and under-development characterized the contemporary Nigerian society. The objectives of politics in enhancing social cooperation and public good have not been achieved. What then is responsible for the non-realization of the traditional functions of politics in Nigeria?

NATIONALITY AND NIGERIAN STATE

The idea of "Nationality" is a spiritual sentiment or principle arising among a number of people usually of the same race, resident in the same territory, share a common language, sometimes the same religion, similar history and tradition with common political associations and common ideas of political unity (Sabine & Thorson, 1973). This term also applies to people who feel the sense of nationality. In this case, nationality is a concept that applies to any portion of humankind who are united by common sympathies that do not exist between them and any other group. Such group of humankind co-operate with each other more willingly than with other people. They desire to be under the same government of their own.

It is in the second sense that the Nigerian nation should be

understood. In which case, the term nationality becomes essentially a sentiment of unity resulting from many factors including community of races, and languages, geographical unity, community of religions, common political aspiration, and historical development. However, the whole factors identified above need not all be there at the same time for Nigeria to exist as a nation. For instance, the contemporary Nigerian nation shows that language, religion and even historical development are of doubtful importance.

The term 'nation' was never used during the pre-colonial and the colonial era, when the various parts or societies that now constitute Nigeria were existing independently of the others with every necessary organs such as political system, economic, language and so on, that can make a society to exist and function effectively. At independence, the term became more associated with the political connotation of Nigeria when the people become united for the purpose of common government. But each of the constituents of the Nigerian nation could be regarded as a nation-state because they exist at the initial stage as nationalities. For instance, there are the Igbo nation, Hausa nation, Yoruba nation, and so on. Therefore, whenever the term “state” or “national-state” is used as we sometimes do to qualify Nigeria, we are simply referring to many nationalities and nations that occupy a common geographical territory and share a common government.

At the formation of the Nigerian nation, like every other nation, the need and quest for a political order became a necessity to forestall different theatres of war, chaos, and other forms of actions that can have negative effect on the nation. This quest is also to allow for collective administration of the various entities that constitute the Nigerian state. It is this that led to the idea and the development of modern politics. Before independence, the indigenous political system flourished. This explains how each of these nationalities was administered.

The need to administer public affair (politics) is necessitated

by the nature of human being, which is characterized by various needs, wants, desires, and the scarcity of resources to meet them. It is the acquisitive tendency in human being that led to human struggle over the distribution of the scarce resources. It is Important to know that politics which can be defined as the art of the science of administration is the consequence of living together that is meant to create some measure of order and justice, and also to provide a framework within which we can live in freedom according to our individual desires. It is meant to foster moral virtue among the citizens and in the state. It is in this respect that the 'art' of politics remains relevant to the Nigerian nation. But then, a critical observation of the state of politics in Nigeria shows that politics has failed to achieve its purpose in Nigeria. It is therefore necessary to examine the reasons for its failure and the effects of political practices in Nigeria.

Many reasons have been adduced for the formation of a political society. According to Thomas Hobbes (1946), the society exists in order to ensure peace so that the individuals can freely pursue their life goals without infringing upon other people's interest. To John Locke (1952), the main purpose for establishing a society is to ensure that the life, freedom and private properties of the individuals are protected. According to Rousseau (1966), the society is a devise by the rich and powerful to protect themselves and their properties against the attack of the poor, and to legalize the inequality they have created among men.

The Nigerian society does not exist simply to protect the interest of only a fewer strong and powerful members and to guarantee their freedom to amass to themselves the country's wealth as they can at the expense of the vast majority of the citizens. It exists to cater or provide the basic needs for every member; to promote brotherliness, exalt justice and truth, unity and peace. In other words, it exists to encourage moral virtue in both the

leadership of the nation and the citizens in order that social order, unity, growth and development are attainable. Thus, strict adherence to the virtues of justice, honesty, truth, peace, dedication, love and so on could be argued to be the determinants of social, political and economic development of the nation, as we observed from the adopted anthem and national pledge that can be taken as the ideology for the nation.

It is the duty of the Nigerian political society to prevent the strong, greedy and unscrupulous individuals from exploiting and over enriching themselves at the expense of the weak ones. Also, to ensure that every Nigerian gets a fair share of the resources that belongs to all. For this reason, we can argue that, the political obligation for the existence of the Nigerian society is to ensure the promotion of public interest as against private interest. But how is the Nigerian nation fairing in relation to necessary condition of social morality that is the underlining factor in politics?

NIGERIAN NATION: DEMOCRACY AND FEDERALISM

It suffices to say that at independence, the desires, goals, aims and objectives to have a democratic system of government was adopted for the nation and the idea of a federal structure, which came up in 1963 when Nigeria became a republic. The desire for true political ideology must have been informed by the cultural nature, or the pre-existing tradition and the geographical proximity of the individual parts that now become a nation.

Democracy, which has commonly be defined as the government of the people by the people and for the people was adopted because of the belief that it gives every member of a society equal claim to self-direction and right to liberty and equality (Raphael, 1987). The strength of this view lies in the condition put forward by Osuji Chuks^{<1>} that:

Democracy is most likely to be the ultimate of man, especially

in view of its cardinal endearing ideals of the belief in and the acceptance of the supremacy of the people, the dignity of man, the rights of the citizens to free will, self expression, free choice among existing association, freedom of choice among contemporaneously competing alternatives especially in the political game and social justice.

What the above quotation implies is that democratic government is based on the consent of the governed. It is concerned with how political decisions are made, the procedure that enables ordinary citizens to participate in the making of such decisions. If we bear the above in mind, it is an obvious reason why Nigeria, which consists of various ethnic groups, with tens of traditional languages and different cultural backgrounds has to adopt a parliamentary democracy. This is to enable every part constituting the nation to have a say in their governance. The objective and aspiration have been to have at the heart of the nation's political arrangement unity, peace, truth, love and altruism that are democratic virtues which to their mind, if imbibed, will sustain the nation called Nigeria.

The underlying idea of course is that if a large number of people participate in the making of governmental decisions; their decisions would be the one that produce liberty, equality and justice for the greatest number of citizens. These underlying ideas can be drawn from the familiar descriptions of democracy as 'government of the people by the people and for the people.' Furthermore, democracy underscores certain assumption about human nature, mainly that the ordinary person is rational enough to use his political influence for the purpose of fostering democratic values. It also requires that the majority know their rights and obligations and also their responsibilities as citizens. They can stand up and demand for their right when due from the officials and must keep an eagle eye on officials to ensure that they perform their duties

constitutionally and efficiently. To enable this, democracy dictates that government should not only be responsible to the people but that political power itself should emanate from the popular will of the people.

The supreme power is vested in the generality of the citizen. In other words, the people possess the right to withdraw their support for any candidates or representatives, if they do not perform to expectation through what is called 'recall'. Also, the citizens have the right to disobey any order or refuse to comply with any policy that appears dictatorial, which is not in the interest of the citizens without any form of victimization.

Despite all the above-identified true features of democracy that made Nigeria to adopt it as a political ideology, it is observed that this ideology has not been fairing well. The political elites have not assisted in actualizing these democratic objectives. The principle of federalism that was also adopted was meant to bridge the gap between the few privileged ones and the less privileged and ensures the observation of the values that are entrenched in the adopted ideology that is democracy.

What is of interest to us at this juncture is whether the adoption of the two concepts of Federalism and Democracy have been effectively utilized to achieve the objectives and purposes of politics in Nigeria as well as the aims of creating the Nigerian state. Have the good values inherent in federalism and democracy helped in the development of the 'good life' for the Nigerian citizens? What influence have they exerted on the idea of public morality, which encourages the promotion of public interest, more importantly, when it is known that there are minority ethnic groups in Nigeria whose minds are always preoccupied with fear of domination by the majority ethnic groups.

By public morality we mean the set of normative rules guiding the interaction of men in society. It can also be seen as the

behaviours members of a society manifest and the activities they engaged within reaction to the principles designed to regulate social behaviour and practice. The principles of public morality are those that seek to regulate social behaviour and practices that would have profound effects on the people living together in a community and consequently affect their communal interactions.

From our understanding of the idea of public morality, we can infer certain phenomenon from ideas of democracy and federalism that qualify the two under the principles of public morality and why they were adopted as political principles. One, there are certain fundamental characteristics that are inherent in the principles of democracy that underline the idea of good government in any nation. Some of these characteristics are order, which is well spelt out by the constitution in terms of the roles and responsibilities of every aspect of the government to the citizens and that of the citizens to the government; rule of law, which creates an atmosphere for justice and equality; freedom of expression and association, that allows for the exercise of individual right in the nation as well as oppositions; free, fair and periodic elections, which oppose political corruption and many others.

The point here is not that democracy (indirect democracy) and federalism is absolutely the best form of ideology and system of governance, rather our argument is that the pursuance of their inherent virtues are necessary moves towards the realizations of the end of politics in any society that adopts democracy and its attending virtues. If one of the reason for establishing a political society is the enhancement of the "good of all," then it is imperative to say that the need to prevent certain ethnic group, association or individual from acting as lords over others, and to prevent the less privileged from being oppressed by the opportune ones led to the creation of the Nigerian nation. Thus, democracy provides the opportunity for the less privileged, or the minority groups to be

well catered for like every other member of the society. It is in this regard that democracy is described as "a system of government in which the majority of the people rule but the rights of the minority are protected" (Morrow, 1988).

Leadership under democratic system of government is expected in Nigeria to gain compliance through the consent of the Nigerians and not through the use of force. It ought also, to allow individuals and groups to freely compete for positions in government in an orderly manner. This means that free and fair elections must be held on a regular basis, and that all adult citizens have the right to participate in how they are governed. The rights and freedoms of every Nigerian ought to be protected by the constitution of the country. The constitution indicates how decision makers are to be selected, establishes the nature of the relationship between the people and their government and it equally states how political leaders are to be held accountable.

Furthermore, Nigeria, as a federation and democratic nation, ought to emphasize the political equality of all citizens and guarantee that their fundamental rights and freedom are not only protected but also viewed as sacred. The government ought to balance the rights of one individual or group against the rights of another individual or group. The dignity of all individuals and protection of the civil and human rights of all citizens, especially those of minorities that suffer from racial, ethnic religious and other forms of discrimination ought to be the responsibility of the government.

If we grant all the above inferences drawn from the nature and characteristics of democracy and federalism, we can assert that both democracy and federalism exhibit characters that tend towards the realization of a politically moral nation, that is, a nation where the interest of the public is considered paramount to that of the individual, a nation where leadership is accountable to the

public, and the public (that is, citizens) see every reason why they have to support and obey those who represent their interest in the art of governance; a nation that operates a system of government, which acquires its power through the consent of the people and forbids cheating, inequality, dictatorship, cruelty, treacherousness deceit and political corruption. This position provides support to the claim that both democracy and federalism aim at encouraging the observation of ethics of politics in order to enhance political order in a society.

Perhaps, it is important to reiterate here the important question of whether politics has achieved its purpose in Nigeria. Or, have democracy and federalism as a political ideology justify the purpose for which they were adopted in Nigeria? Have the leaders performed any substantial commendable or positive roles in the democratization process? Did they act in the spirit of true democracy and federalism? The various events that had unfolded since independence and despite the various constitutional and judicial attempts at resolving crises of corruption, social disorder and political instability there seem to be more questions than answers to the above raised questions.

NIGERIAN NATION AND GOVERNANCE SINCE INDEPENDENCE

A cursory look at the political events in Nigeria after independence makes one to wonder if the political elites have a true conception of the idea of politics. It is quite true that the path of any nation to full maturity and prospect is not without its problems and difficulties, but the difficulties or problems become more compounding when those that consider the idea and need for maturity constitute the same set of people working against their desire. This is because those who still maintain a genuine heart for the growth of such nation will have to battle with two forces, those

forces that are internal and those that are external. This remark describes the problem confronting the political activities in Nigeria nation since independence.

The callousness and corruption perpetrated by most of the democratically elected leaders since independence and the military that persistently seize political power are the foundational problems that cause the failure of democracy and federalism in Nigeria. Suffice it to say that the failure of democracy and federalism caused by the political leaders manifest in tribal hostilities, religious sentiments, political mistrust, political intolerance and in general what can be referred to as political corruption. They are veritable indicators that sometimes create the wish for political transformation and re-engineering. The problem of political immorality often creates series of crises, which many times degenerate to a state of lawlessness as experienced in 1966 when the first civilian government was ousted by the military. The military came to power with the ulterior motive to correct the misdeeds of the civilians, but it is very pathetic that the correctional missions of the military were truncated by corruption.

There have been more of military rule in Nigeria than democratically elected civilian rule. An overview of the Nigerian nation reveals that there have been series of military rule that have spread over a period of thirty years and a civilian rule of nineteen out of the forty-nine years of Nigeria independence. The same features characterized all the years of the military rule, and so we need not to delve into an analysis of each military regime. But we must be quick to say that of the eight military rulers, six came to power through coup d'état these are General Aguyi Ironsi, January 15, 1966; General Yakubu Gowon, July, 29, 1966; Brigadier Muritala Mohammed; July 29, 1975; Major General Mohammed Buhari December 31, 1983; General Ibrahim Babangida, August 27, 1985 and General Sanni Abacha November 17, 1993. However

we are not oblivious of the aborted coups of LT-Colonel Bukar Dimka of February 13th, 1976 and major Gideon Orkar of April 2nd, 1990. The other two military rulers General Olusegun Obasanjo and General Abdu-Salam Abubakar came to power after the death of their predecessors that is, Brigadier Murtala Mohammed and General Sanni Abacha respectively.

It is instructive to note here that the phenomenon of military incursion into politics and attempt to control government is not limited to Nigeria. Such attempts have occurred in almost every country of Africa. Also, a major point that must be emphasized is that the main reason and mode of military acquisition of political powers is uniform across the globe. They come to power through the use of force and always claim that their involvement in politics is for corrective purposes. The major threat they pose to the society is the destruction of stability, the truncation or elongation of delay in democratic society. They are also found guilty of various forms of corrupt practice while in office (just like their civilian counterparts).

The array of facts paraded for the justification of their incursion and truncation of democratization process in Nigeria have clearly shown that the soldiers are always on a correctional expert mission. But what can we say, when a correctional expert with his chain of corrections tends to go ad-infinitum. The entire military regimes that we have had over the years exhibit the same traits and suffer the same criticisms. They acquired power through illegal and immoral means. In this case, they do not deserve either any form of obedience or command or any form of political obligation from the citizen. They ruled by decree through which obedience to their orders was ensured with the use of force.

All the military regimes were on top of the various political corruptions that they accused the civilians. They were dictatorial, given the various forms of draconian rules that were promulgated

through military decrees. No military regime allowed for absolute freedom of expression and association, and there were limitations to the exercise of fundamental human right. Their regimes were characterized by unlawful detention, killing of innocent people and lack of respect for the rule of law. As a matter of fact, public immorality was always on the highest level during the military era. Generally speaking, both the democratically elected leaders and the non-elected military leaders in Nigeria pay lip services to democratic principles. Leaders feed fat and others lives in abject poverty. Tunji Lardner's assertion corroborates our position when he asserts that since Nigeria independence; "The gate to the nation's well-stocked warehouse, have been bolted against the common man. The gatekeepers and their cohort's feeds fat and the people are hungry". <2>

Lardner's assertion describes the effects of the miss conception of the ideals of politics by the leaders, either the military whose primary responsibility is the protection of the society against external attack and who did not allow democracy to thrive as a result of their incursion into politics; or by the civilians who had the opportunity but failed to lead the nation to a promise land as claimed by Tafawa Balewa when he asserts shortly after the independence that; "bring your trowels and donkeys and follow we to the promise land". <3> The reasons for their failure was echoed by Chinua Achebe as the, "Seminal absence of intellectual vigour in the political thought of ours founding fathers, a tendency to pious, materialistic wholeness and self-centred pedestrianism". <4>

The negative influence of the various forms of political behaviours of the leaders and citizens on the social, political and economic life of the nation raises a fundamental question as to whether the nation would not have fared better under colonialism. Sometimes we are tempted to express the same feeling like Ayittey, (1992) that:

Not many people thought that we would be fighting for the same basic rights that we fought for. We kicked the British out and replaced them with our brothers and sisters who turned out to be more brutal than the British.

Ayittey's assertion describes the feeling of an average politically and economically conscious person. This feeling aroused from the official recklessness, political corruption, political manipulation, abuse and violation of human rights, denial of freedom of expression, self-centeredness that result from lack of adequate understanding of the true meaning and essence of politics by the Nigerian political leaders. These misdemeanours have threatened the existence of the Nigerian political society.

TRADITIONAL NORMATIVE CONCEPTION OF POLITICS IN NIGERIA

As a matter of fact, the inability to understand and practice politics in the traditional sense has produced nothing but economic misery, political chaos, instability, and institutional and social decay. The traditional conception of politics indicates that the activities of politics ought to be guided by the norms of ethics. The traditional philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, J. J. Rousseau see social order to be vital to politics. This social order to Plato (1945) is usually formed in a properly regulated 'polis' and it is directed towards the common good of its members. But then, the theoretical design and practical implementation of such an order are impossible without virtue. Thus, in the Platonic interpretation of politics, virtue, which he explained to be justice, is an underpinning factor in the enhancement of an ideal state.

The ideal state is one where there is a good political order and political practice is directed towards the pursuit of common good of the whole community and is to the advantage of everyone. In the same vein, Aristotle (1962) conceives politics as that through which the citizens can achieve their end, which is happiness. He

holds that politics will inculcate into the citizens moral virtue that will enhance good behaviour towards other citizens and the state. Also, the citizens either as individual or collectively must also enable the state to attain its end which is the pursuit of common good and the interest of all citizens.

In a nutshell, politics, in Aristotle's view is meant to promote public good and preserve public interest. St Thomas Aquinas (1947) corroborated the position of Aristotle when he asserts that the essence of having a political society is to enable the maintenance of social order, peace and all that will enhance common good. This is because the society consists of evildoers and those who would be inclined to disturb the peace of the society. The state therefore, is created to prevent immorality that can degenerate into social disorder. In a nutshell, the need for normative principles to guide human action led to the formation of a civil society and hence the development of a political society and political power.

Thus, the above, traditional philosopher's position represent what politics ought to be and not what it is as seen in the Nigerian political elite's context. Thus, the conception of politics since Aristotle, if it is seen as "the activities of the individuals in so far as they impinge on the public realm made up of collective interests of the citizenry" (Owolabi, 1995) implies public morality. In the same vein, ethics, when it is seen as the conduct or ways by which men relate in the public sphere, connotes public morality.

The belief of these traditional thinkers, is that a well regulated state will form an order that will be directed towards the common good of its members and enable them to cooperate in the pursuit of ideals that were fundamental to humanity. Although, we recognize that the state should play a regulatory and, where necessary, repressive role, our contention in this paper is that the positive potentialities of politics, and the relationship between order and politics must remain the pivot of political practice in Nigeria.

This is because, the issue of social order, which is an important factor in the development of human society, is related to the need for coercive regulatory agencies, to repress behaviour that threatens the stability of society and jeopardizes beneficial human interaction.

Furthermore, the traditional conception of politics emphasizes the relevance of the principle of public morality, which seeks to regulate social behaviour and practices that would have profound effects on the people living together in a community and consequently affect their communal interaction. This is, because, social order, public good and stability cannot be achieved, if politics is seen as the pursuit of private interest. Since the political elites in Nigeria have interpreted politics in this way that is, as the pursuit of private interest the effect has been social crisis, instability, injustice and lack of growth and development. Thus, politics has failed in the realization of its fundamental functions of ensuring moral virtue, enhancement of social order and stability and the promotion of human goodness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper is a critical analysis of the conception of politics by the political elites in Nigeria. It argues the wrong conception of meaning and purpose of politics in Nigeria which has been responsible for her myriad political, social and economic problems. It therefore contends that for these problems to be resolved and the existence of politics to be justified in Nigeria, politics must be construed in the traditional sense. That is, as a service that deals with matters of public concern and the pursuit of public interest with utmost respect for moral ideals that are set for politics.

To resolve these problems of politics in Nigeria as a nation, the notion of politics and its practice in Nigeria by the political elites must conform to the traditional ideas of politics. This study argues for the return to the traditional normative conception of

politics not only because the various political and economic restructuring that have been carried out in the nation are without success but more importantly, it is only through this that politics can realize its true essence in Nigeria.

NOTES

- ¹This quotation is from Chuks Osuji's work "Approach to practical Politics" was stated by Tam David West in his article, "On the Travail of Democracy" in Sunday Tribune, July 10, 1988.
- ² See T. Lardners article "The Gate Keepers" in News watch Magazine, January 27, 1986
- ³This idea is curled from U. Patrick's "The Promise Land" in The News Watch Magazine, January 13, 1986
- ⁴ Chinual Achebe's idea was expressed in U. Patrick's article "The Promised Land"

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