



**NIGERIAN
JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND PRODUCTION**

ISSN 1596 6615

NIJOREP

Volume 3 No. 3, September, 2003



**A JOURNAL OF THE NIGERIAN RESEARCHERS
FORUM**

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THE POLITICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE NIGERIAN SYSTEM

Fatile, Jacob Olufemi

Abstract

There are several ways in which the topic can be approached. The paper did not confine itself to any one approach but freely utilized the insights of the various approaches. For instance, the paper considered the institutional approach which zeroes in on the formal organization of government, enabling rules and procedures and how all of these affect political behaviour. The paper also considered another approach which focuses on the discourses of federalism, constitutional reforms, sharia, presidential pre-eminence and revenue allocation in order to monitor changing public perception of government as well as the relationship between discourses and rumpuses over the decision of some states to adopt sharia law, governmental conflicts have also broken out between the executive and legislature. It was therefore suggested that there is need for a greater understanding, tolerance, negotiations, dialogue, lobby and compromise among the various arms of government.

Introduction

Over the years, scholars have agitated their minds with the structure and distribution of power within a given system using various approaches. One of such approaches is the institutional approach. An institution has been conceived as "offices and agencies arranged in a hierarchy, each agency having certain functions, and powers (Dyke, 1965:136). Institutional approach focuses on the formal structures and agencies of government. Enemu (1999:20) argued the political science research which is informed by this approach usually describes and classifies the agencies of government such as legislature, the judiciary, the executive agencies, party system etc Such studies also examine the constitutional and legal arrangements of government. In this paper attempt will be made to examine the relationship among arms of government. There is no doubt that the ways and manners in which these parts perform their functions or relate in accordance with the constitution make the system stable or unstable.

This topic can also be approached by looking at the relationship between the rulers and the ruled in a given society. Albeit there are variants of this approach but the centrality of the approach is that the elites, that is, the rulers, are the most important segment in the society and, therefore, the people involved in decision-making (Okege, 1998:4). Consequently, understanding the constitution of the elite, its structure, formation, activities and changes in time and space constitute a basic criterion for understanding and appreciating power relations in a given political system.

The group approach pioneered by Bentley (1969) conceives of society as a mosaic of numerous interests by its crosscutting membership. Exponents of this approach posit that the form of politics of any society is ultimately determined by the interaction among groups within the society and the competition among such

groups to influence government in the allocation of societal resources and exercise of power. Yet another perspective from which the topic can be considered is to look at the Nigerian federal system, constitution making, Sharia, minority rights, religious crisis, presidential pre-eminence, revenue allocation, in order to monitor changing public perceptions of government as well as the relationship between discourse and political behaviour (Olukotin, 200:1).

This paper shall not confine itself to anyone of these approaches but shall freely use combinations of approaches and methods in the course of the discussion.

Historiography of the Nigerian State

It is pertinent at this juncture to sketch out the evolution of the Nigerian system from its pre-colonial origin to its current phase. One basic fact of Nigerian history was the prevalence of autonomous societies ever before the advent of the European colonial power. The advent of Europeans affected the fortunes of these states and was wholly responsible for the fall of the forest and coastal kingdoms. From the occupation of Lagos in 1851, the main emphasis in Nigerian constitutional development has been towards unification and development of common nationality. The first attempt to build a nation by our colonial masters started in 1906 when the colony and protectorate of Lagos was amalgamated with the colony and protectorate of Southern Nigeria (Udoma, 1994:39).

The second attempt to build a nation in Nigeria was made in 1914 when the two administrations of Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated named the colony and protectorate of Nigeria. The 1914 amalgamation gave the Northern and Southern provinces a common political head. Nigeria between 1914 amalgamation and 1939, resembled a federation of two groups of provinces. The amalgamation of major government departments as education, police and prisons proceeded gradually between the 1920 and 1930s (Tamuno, 1972:395). The third attempt was made in 1951 when the Federal Constitution was introduced but it soon became clear that the three regions with their wide differences in characters and development could not work together well in a closely-knit federation. From 1951 to 1960, Nigeria leaders negotiated soberly form a federal constitution based on the parliamentary system of government. The feelings among Nigerian was strong that whatsoever the odds, the new Nigerian nation would prove a unique success.

Pacifically in 1954, federalism was fairly established. Each subsequent constitutional conference was concerned with matters of detail- should there be more states to allay minority fears of domination by the bigger ethnic group? How should revenue be allocated? Should police be a federal or regional issue? Where will be federal capital be located? Should Lagos be part of western region? Should each region be granted self-government separately, etc? These were issues that the British could not care less which was they were answered, but issues aroused much controversy among the leaders and between the regions that

resolution (or non resolution) determined the nature of the federal constitution and federal politics thereafter, (Eleazu, 1977:70).

The Nigeria Independence Act of 1960 passed by the British parliament in July 1960 ushered Nigeria into a status of an independent country. It then became the only country in Africa to come to independence with a fully operating federal system (Watts, 1970). Under the new constitution, both the federal and regional governments adopted the bicameral parliamentary system of government. Despite the fact that provisions were entrenched to safeguard certain constitutional issues such as those concerning the federal framework, legislature power, fundamental right, the courts, citizenship and revenue allocation. "The parliamentary constitution did not contain adequate provisions for positive socio-economic transformation and national integration" (Political Bureau, 1987:31). Rather, it merely encouraged regionalism, and the major political parties' the NCNC, the NPC and AG were all ethnically based to the detriment of the country's political stability (Akinboye and Anifowose, 1999:238)

Thus, Nigerian at independence 'inherited a weak socio-political structure, a defective and unbalanced federation, an intensification of ethnic consciousness' and rivalries, a subverted indigenous ethos of government and culture, and above all an inexperienced leadership (Political Bureau op. cit). it is important to stress that ethnic politics and politicking has been a major problem compounding the task of nation building in Nigeria. besides, the pattern of establishment of political parties and electoral behaviour in the first and second republics and even under the current republic were a good case in point. also due to insufficient time granted Nigerians in the management of their own affairs prior to independence, the leadership bequeathed to the nation by the British authority lacked national consciousness and consistency. They were equally inexperienced in the art of governing a large complex state as Nigeria. The major political parties in the country were engaged in the struggle not only to win and retain power but also to control the centre, which was recognized as having the dominant resources in spite of its weakness politically. Hence all available means were employed to "grab" power including blatant rigging of election, manipulation of census figures, violence, arson, corruption and acts of brigandage. These continued till the army seized power in January 1966 when it became obvious that the political class had lost control of governmental affairs.

The Nigeria state as it emerged in 1960 was essentially neo-colonial and like in all post colonial societies its problems stemmed from the fact it was not established by an ascendant or dominant indigenous bourgeoisie but by a foreign imperialist bourgeoisie class. Since 1960 in Nigeria, the dominant mode of production is capitalist though the remnant of feudalism and communalism continues to linger, the production forces are dominated by foreign capitalist interests predominantly British. Also given the state control and appropriation of economic activities, the implication of this complex class structure for the body politic is very significant and very obvious (Ake, 1996). Because of its over compromised and weak character, the Nigerian state failed to resolve these

various class contradictions. It opened the economy to foreign exploitation and was therefore incapable of satisfying the interests of the emerging entrepreneur class. Not only that, it was unable to lay down the rules for and arbitrate competition for political office and its spoils of office.

Presidential System Predicated on the U.S. Model

The American presidential system of government is an outstanding example of the non-parliamentary executive. All executive power, subject to a few limitations are vested in a single chief executive, the president who exercises wide constitutional and discretionary power (Lapalombara, 1977). He is elected for a fixed term, and except in the case of some definite crime being judicially proved against him, he cannot be removed before the expiration of this term of office.

In Nigeria, the most radical innovation of the 1979 Constitution was the introduction of a presidential system of government as opposed to the parliamentary system which was introduced in the first republic. In his inaugural address to the member of the Political Bureau, Ex-president Ibrahim Babangida enjoined them to evolve a distinct political administration for the country instead of offering "a regurgitation of the political models of the so-called advanced countries"(Political Bureau Report, 1987). The president's concern was informed by the ignominious collapse of the first and second republics while operating the Westminster model and the American type presidential system of government respectively. These "imported" political institutions have proved futile to the exigencies of nation-building. The Bureau rather than constructing a new model of political administration undertook a thorough overhauling of the presidential system as practiced in the second republic. The Bureau finds nothing intrinsically detrimental to political models of advanced polities (Okege, 1992)- after all, Alexander Pope, has argued that "for any form of government, let fools contend, what is best administered is the best" and thus recommended the adoption of presidential system of government in Nigeria.

Analysis of the Functions Relationship of the Three Arms of Government

In a presidential democratic system, there are three co-equal branches, these branches are the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. The legislative branch of government has the power to make laws. All members of the legislature are elected by the Nigerian people in different locations to represent their interests. The legislature is made up of two chambers (houses)- the Senate and the House of Representatives. While members of the Senate are elected on equal numbers from each state, members of the House of Representatives are elected based on population of each state.

The legislative power of a state of the federation is vested in the House of Assembly of State. The elected councilors constitute the legislative arm of government at the local level. S. 7 (1) of the 1989 and 1999 Constitutions guarantee the system of local government by democratically elected local

government councils. This provision removes the ambiguity normally associated with implied power. Thus the power and resources of local government councils spring from the constitution in exactly the same ways as that of the federal and state governments. The legislative arm of the local government has the responsibility of making bye-laws for the progress and development of the local area. It approves the local government annual budget, could impeach the Chairman and Vice-Chairman for the act of gross misconduct. The executive branch comprises the President, his Vice-President and ministers, they implement the policies and programmes of the executive and enforce the laws made by the legislature. At the state level, the Governor, Deputy Governor and his commissioners constitute the executive arm of government. The Governor of the state is the Chief Executive of a state and he is responsible for the maintenance of law and order and good government of the state. The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria vests the executive power of a local government in the Chairman of that local government council exercised by him directly or indirectly through the Vice-Chairman or Supervisory Councilors of the Local Government or officers in. The service of that local government (Okege, 1998).

The judiciary is another branch of government empowered by the constitution to pass judgment on and interpret the law. The judiciary comprises all the courts of the country. In jurisdictional terms, the highest court of law in the federation is the Supreme Court. The Federal Court of Appeal was instituted to release pressure of appellate cases on the supreme court and accordingly, appeals to the Court of Appeal lie from the high court (federal and state). The Sharia Court of Appeal, the Customary Court of Appeal and Code of Conduct Tribunal. Appeals from customary courts lie to the customary court of appeal and from thence the Federal Court of Appeal similarly, appeal from the Sharia Court of Appeal are to lie to the Federal Court of Appeal.

The three arms of government work in harmony and interrelate in the function they perform. Each is established by the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria as a separate arm of government, distinct from, and independent of the other in terms of its personnel and power. This does not suggest that they exist in distinct cells (Okege, 1998). For instance, almost always more than a handful of the members of the legislature belong to the same political party with the President and this can be used to great advantage where party legally is strong.

Principles of Separation of Powers” and “Checks and Balances” in Government

Separation of powers is a concept which developed from the natural right theorist's concern with selfish or self-seeking nature of man. Since man is individualistic and self-seeking by nature, any centralization of political power in one man, or in a single body of man would lead to tyranny (Dunne, 1964).

Indeed, the doctrine of separation of powers has much longer history than its embodiment in the 1787 American constitution. Bodin in his book, the

Republic (1576) cautioned that 'the prince ought not to administer justice' in person, but should leave such matters to independent judges.

John Locke distinguished the executive from the legislative power and suggested the desirability of the separation. But he insisted that the ultimate authority rest with the legislative body as the representative of the people. He could argue thus in that each person has a natural right to defend his liberty and interest. Hence, the representative body of the people, being subject to electoral approval could be trusted with the highest authority (Dunner, 1964).

Although philosophers and political scientists such as Bodin, Locke, Rousseau, Jefferson and the authors of Federalist Papers in the 17th and 18thCs had the conception of the doctrine of separation of powers in their various writings, but the theory of separation of powers was only clearly formulated for the first time by French political thinker and jurist, Baron de Montesquieu in his book entitled "Esprit des Lois" the Spirit of the Laws-published in 1748 (Ojo, 1973). Montesquieu drawing inspiration from what he believed to be English practice, distinguished three powers of government, executive, legislative and judicial. He not only believed that each could be separated from the others, but that no single body should be superior to the other in power. Hence, each would act as a check on the other two. In this way self seeking men in any branch would be blocked by jealous men in the other branches (Dunner op. cit).

Simply put, the doctrine of separation of powers involves clear separation and natural dependence of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Given this doctrine the executive cannot control the legislature, because he will not be a member of it in the first place as to influence its proceedings. On the major defeat of a government measure, therefore, members should be able to serve as true watchdogs of the people, without let or hindrance, and refuse to allow the executive to exercise undue powers. It is within the province of the court to stop the executive if the latter goes against the letters of the constitution and to declare its action ultra virus i.e. null and void and of no effect (Okege, 1998). It should be noted however, that an absolute, complete, total or watertight compartmentalization of the three arms is a mere theoretical construct and religious adherence to it may ground to a halt the machinery of government.

Montesquieu advocated the doctrine of checks and balances to be a corollary of the doctrine of separation of powers in practice. He believed that a systems of checks and balances serves to lubricate the doctrine of separation of powers by making it workable (Olawale, 1979).

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria empowers the National Assembly to investigate certain aspects of expenditure by the executive if they fall outside the purviews of the appropriation bill (Budget). While the executive appoints ministers to run the various departments of the government the Senate must first approve of their nominations. Similarly, while the judiciary is independent of the executive and the legislature, members of the court must be

nominated by the executive and approved by the legislature before taking office. In these ways, the three branches serves as a check and balance on each other.

On several occasions in the past, the courts have declared the actions of the executive unconstitutional. In 1979 when Alhaji Shugaba Abdulraham Daman, the majority leader in the Borno State House of Assembly challenged his forced deportation to Chad Republic by the then President Shehu Shagari, the court said the action of the president was illegal and unconstitutional.

In Nigeria, the local government consisted of the legislative and the executive arms as well as other career officers. Despite the existence of magistrate and customary court, Chijioke (2000) asserted that the 1999 Constitution does not appear to have made any clear-cut provision for judiciary arm at the local government level.

The career officers at the level include the following the Secretary, the Head of personnel management, the Treasurer, the Clerk of the legislative house also known as the council clerk, legal officers etc.

The Clerk is like the general administrator at the local council. Unlike the elected lawmakers, he or she is civil servant and provides the legislature with basic administrative services that enables the local council to perform its duties and responsibilities. The clerk must be neutral could serve as an adviser to the Speaker of the House. He or she circulates to members a paper known as the order paper, setting the business of the day before the commencement of the sitting. The clerk keeps minutes of the proceeding of the council. He prepares form day to day on "order book" showing all business appointed for any future day and notices of motion down for future day discussion. He is also responsible for keeping the vote's records, bills and other document of the house (Olakunle, 2000).

It is instructive to note that presently in Nigeria, the local government administration has changed from presidential to parliamentary system of government under party politics. That is, they are democratically elected councils on party basis. Thus, there is a fusion of legislature and executive power, that is, some member of the local government council (the legislature) are also members of the Executive committee (the cabinet) otherwise known as the finance and general purpose committee (Chijioke, op cit.). Besides, the Local Government chairman is the chairman of both the Council and the Executive committee. All the above stated features are in contradiction of the doctrine of separation of powers. Chijioke (2000) however argued that these should not be seen as a contradiction really because in countries where parliamentary system is practiced, the interest of any of the other organs is never jeopardized so long as these organs operate within the ambits of administrative law.

Revenue Allocation in a Federal System of Government

A federation is a form of political organization within which the general and regional governments are co-ordinated in the sense that neither level of government is subordinate to the other in legal authority. (Wheare, 1964: 35-36).

Professor C.J. Friedrich (1963:3) described a federation as "a union of group selves united by one or more common objective but retaining their distinctive group-being for other purposes....."Federalism is therefore a device for maintaining unity in diversity.

In a federation, there are levels of government, federal, regions/state and "local government as the case may be. Also there is a division of powers, functions and responsibilities among the levels of government and each level of government should have sufficient financial resources to carry out its constitutional responsibilities and that financial dependence on one level of government on the other jeopardize the survival of federalism (Yekini, 1992:8-9)

The problem of how best to allocate or distribute the total revenue in a federal system among the component parts is a controversial issue in Nigeria and indeed in all countries that practice the federal system of government. Two issues are involved in the allocation of federal revenue.

The first centres on how to divide the total revenue between the federal government on the one hand and component parts on the other. While some experts argue that the federal government must have the lion share of the total because of its huge responsibilities, other experts are of the opinion that, if a true federal system must obtain, then the component units, (i.e. state or regions and Local Government) must have the larger percentage. This will tend to make them to a certain extent, financially independent of the government at the centre.

The second issue in revenue allocation relates to what criteria to take into consideration in distributing the total accruing to the component states (whether the percentage is higher or lower than the federal government) the two key central criteria usually employed are derivation and need criteria (Buhari, 1992:172 173).

There is no doubt that allocation is a thorny issue in Nigeria. Agitation for more autonomy for the local government in recent years has led to an increase in the share of local Government to about 25%. In Nigeria, the neglect suffered by the grassroots in order to take up the responsibility of administering the districts on behalf of the central or state government. To perform the basic functions they need financial resources.

There is a dynamic and notable change in the fiscal re-adjustment with a deliberate increase in the revenue accruing to the local government. Thus the path to a true financial autonomy of the local government as full fledged third tier of government has been set. It is also a demonstration of commitment of the Nigerian government to grassroots development and its recognition of the constitutional status of the local government both in theory and in practical sense.

Conclusion

Nigeria's return to constitutional rule in May 1999 ushered in a period of both relief and anxiety. The end of military dictatorship brought with it the hope of the supremacy of the role of law and the enjoyment of fundamental freedoms.

At the same time the installation of a democratic government on extremely weak political structures and social institutions brought to the fore the question of security in an atmosphere where Nigerians have again grouped their voices clamouring for autonomous nationality of their own down in the south. Then ,Ijaw youths fighting for the "correction" of some wrongs they have suffered rose from the eastern flank against the rest of Nigeria. In fact Olukotun (2000) observed that conflicts have arisen in the Niger- Delta where a mark- up in the revenue allocation to oil producing states has failed to arrest communal unrest sabotage and pipeline vandalisation.

As the nation was trying to clean itself of the debris of these crises, Sharia controversy led to the crisis that convulsed the nation. The nation was tightly gripped in the claws of monumental and intense crisis. Nigeria is a multi-religious state, which is a function of the cultural homogeneity of the country. The recent argument over the constitutionalism or otherwise of Sharia has brought to the fore the beauty of democracy but essentially on trial is the supremacy of the Nigerian constitution and the fundamental freedom of conscience it protects (Olakunle, 2000:3). Observers believe that the Sharia controversy would remain a litmus test of Nigeria's nascent democracy and the strength of its federal principles. The diplomacy of crisis management of President Obasanjo is also on trial as the world keeps on watching what may at best be another "No victor no vanquished" slogan in the Nigeria political landscape.

Conflicts have also broken out between the Executive and the legislative arms of government. So bad did this latter conflict get, that President Jimmy Carter warned... that it might lead to the fall of the 4th republic (Olukotun, 2000:6). Members of both arms should realize that they are representing the people who have had their economy bastardized over the years and more importantly, they should not be overzealous. They should think more of how to add to our current production and revenue of government and not how to share it as the case is turning out to be. There is need for a greater understanding, tolerance, negotiations, dialogue, lobby and compromise. Politics is all about all these variables and if they are understood by both arms, all of us will be better for it .It is important to state that issues raised and discussed in this paper represent only a tip of the iceberg in the array of salient national questions that need urgent resolution for Nigeria to move forward and onward to national growth and development.

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