

The Nigerian State and the Political Economy of Restructuring

Vincent Eseoghene Efebeh

Abstract

No issue commands a more significant and broader consensus in Nigeria in recent times than the call and need for restructuring the Nigerian Federation. The agitations for fiscal federalism or outright restructuring became louder in the last decade because of the need to correct the perceived inequalities in the Nigerian polity. They thus put the Nigerian State on the right stead of development. This paper examines the reasons that necessitated the agitation for the enthronement of fiscal federalism in Nigeria and the challenges facing its actualisation. The paper adopted the secondary method of eliciting information. The paper found that the restructuring of the polity may not be for the good of the “greater number” but for the ruling elite who have taken control of the agitation itself and dominate governance at all levels. The paper suggests that corruption has to be drastically reduced for restructuring to benefit the masses.

Keywords: Political economy, restructuring, political class, benefit, State, Nigeria.

Introduction

In recent years, the agitation for fiscal federalism, or what has become known as restructuring by its agitators, has become widespread among Nigerians. The quest for this change is championed by politicians, political analysts, public affairs commentators and even academic scholars, who see the need to restructure the current federal structure, which has been described as a creation of a British masterstroke (Ekpu, 2011). Before the amalgamation of North and Southern protectorates in 1914, each protectorate succeeded, with the agricultural resources available to sustain each of these protectorates' political, economic and social well-being. The colonial masters, having encountered economic challenges in the North, decided to merge these entities, previously ruled as separate protectorates, into what became known as Nigeria. The rationale was to pool the rich economic resources of the southern protectorate to augment inadequacies in the North (Ndoma-Egba, 2000). These political tactics adopted by the colonial government laid the foundation of disaffection, injustice, inequality and acrimony that has become the order of the day in the body politics of contemporary Nigeria. The British, who patched these non-identical tribes, never thought of the workability of the “unholy marriage” and the State of the newfound ‘family’ after independence. In terms of culture, religion, language and geography, the entity called Nigeria has been described as a mere geographical expression and the mistake of 1914 by the duo of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Sir Ahmadu Bello, respectively (Eresia-Eke & Eberiyé, 2010).

However, the federal system of government was adopted in Nigeria in 1951 following its introduction, as contained in the Macpherson Constitution of 1951. It was more of a quasi-federalism at that time (Nwankwo, 2002). In 1954, Nigeria was constitutionally elevated to the full status of a federal system, with a clear-cut division of powers between the central and regional governments. At this period, the three regions that constituted the Federation were able to meet the developmental needs of their people, developed and did things at their own pace until the federal arrangement was tinkered with by the military government in 1967. One of the remote causes of the civil war in Nigeria was the mass killing of Igbos in the North (1966), the Census crisis (1962/63), the Action Group crisis (1962), the national election crisis (1964), military coup d'état and the counter-coup (1966), worst still, the civil war (1967-1970),

which led to the distorted fiscal viability of the federal structure handed by the 1954 Constitution.

The military government of General Yakubu Gowon, to halt the secession bid of the Eastern region, created twelve unequal states from the existing four regions (namely – North, East, West, and Mid-West regions), with the North having the greater number. However, the military government's action met the needs and aspirations of some minority groups, who had accused other major ethnic groups of discrimination and neglect (Ojo & Adebayo, 2008). This marked the genesis of Nigeria's myriad of crises such that there became general mutual distrust among all the ethnic groupings in the country, as well as terrorism in the North, kidnapping in the East, West and indeed the entire country, militancy in the South, unemployment, political thuggery, politically motivated killings and various other agitations resource control and the restructuring of the polity. All indications point to the need to fine-tune the current federal structure, which harbours inherent inequalities and seems not to hold any promise for the future for many in the Nigerian project. Added to this is the problem of lack of financial viability of most of the federating units because they have become lazy such that they cannot think of how else to generate revenue for their survival other than the monthly allocations from the Federations Account. This practice is in sharp contrast with the principles of fiscal federalism. In the face of these facts and judging by the nature and character of those at the forefront of the agitation (Politicians and political jobbers) for the restructuring of the Nigerian State, it leaves one with the mindset of scepticism. Against this background, this study sought to examine the agitation for the restructuring of the Nigerian State in order to determine the likely beneficiaries of a restructured Nigeria. The paper will also establish if restructuring the polity was enough to solve the numerous problems confronting the Nigerian State.

The nature and character of the Nigerian State

The Nigerian State was created by the colonialists and imposed on its constituent nationalities and peoples to serve Western capitalist interests; to that extent, the Nigerian State can aptly be referred to as a product of imperialism. Its emergence is not due to any negotiated agreement among the various ethnic nationalities that were to be stakeholders in the national project. Consequently, imperialism has bequeathed institutions and patterns of accumulation and exchange to local hegemonists who have continued mediating opportunities for collective growth, national development, shared identity and democracy. It follows that Nigeria is a victim of its history, and the citizens perceive the State which emerged from colonialism as hostile, corrupt and an enemy which must be avoided, subverted, resisted and cheated without looking back. This is so because the Nigerian State does not exist to promote the common good of the people but to preserve and promote the interests of the political class. Thus, the evolution of the Nigerian State runs contrary to the Aristotelian natural evolution of society, which promotes the interests of the general collectives who claim it as members (Azuh & Duruji, 2015). The Nigerian State that emerged from colonialism became a rent-collecting state; in this case, just like the imperialist never got involved in the production process that could bolster the local economy, but relied on tax paid by the locals and the harnessing of raw materials for the industries and development of the metropole, so also was the Nigerian State that emerged at independence in 1960.

Thus, the Nigerian State does not play any productive role in economic activities; instead, it appropriates economic surplus and distributes the same bureaucratically in a non-value-added fashion. In this regard, the Nigerian State has been generally regarded as a 'rent-collecting-state', as she depends on tributes, taxes, rents, and royalties to accumulate funds for national development (Ibodje, 2008). Thus, politics in Nigeria is seen as a means of accumulating

wealth by the ruling class. The consequences are the privatisation of the State and its subsequent use for the pursuits of private interests. Falola & Ihonvbere (1985) alluded to this view when they posit that " in a distorted, crisis-ridden and backward peripheral capitalist society... where it has been the tradition of the dominant class to (localise) the unequal and exploitative relations of production, exchange and distribution, the state can hardly meet the basic needs of the people... the intra-bourgeois class struggle to win access to the state and thus preside over allocation of public funds prompts the manipulation of the means of coercion, the politicisation of the bureaucracy and armed forces and the use of ethnic, state and religious chauvinism".

It follows that access to political power automatically translates to access to the nation's treasury and the control of the economy generally. This also means that the politicians or the "fortune" soldiers in power and their cronies can loot the treasury with all impunity to the detriment of the entire system (Efebeh & Sanubi, 2017; Efebeh, 2018). This self-assumed 'almighty' status of the Nigerian ruling class is what may also play out at the end of the day in a restructured Nigeria, to the extent that corruption-laden policies that lack genuine intentions will be reeled out to undermine meaningful development using the instrumentality of the State, (Efebeh, 2019). This is how the excessive primitive accumulation of illicit wealth is kept alive by the ruling class, with the people at the receiving end of its negative impacts.

Issues in the Nigerian federal arrangement

The subsisting federal structure as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended, can be traced to the 1966 attempt to unify Nigeria with the introduction of a unitary system by the military administration of General Aguiyi-Ironsi, as contained in Decree No.34 of 1966, which abrogated the federal structure and replaced it with a Unitary one. Under this system, powers were centralised at the central in what used to be the Federal Government. The central government created component units and assigned functions to them; these functions are temporary and can be withdrawn at any time. This new system was, however, met with severe opposition and criticism, mainly by the Northern political class, who accused General Aguiyi-Ironsi of being biased, promoting possible Igbo domination as well as hatred (Uhunmwangho & Ekpu, 2011). The tension generated by this move led to the counter-coup of July 29, 1966, which saw the emergence of General Yakubu Gowon as Head of State. General Yakubu Gowon's government reverted Ironsi's administration's decision to the federal system. However, by 1967, the new General Gowon's administration once again tinkered with the federal system by creating twelve states out of the four regions available as a measure to quell the rebellious agitation and the succession threat by the government of the Eastern region under the leadership of Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu. In it, greater powers were reserved for the central military government, forming the present-day "centralised federal" administration system. In recent times, there have been contending issues arising from the peculiar nature of the centralised nature of the federal system that Nigeria practices, particularly in the face of the numerous challenges the Nigerian State faces. Some of the highly contentious issues are discussed as follows.

The Nigerian economy was largely dependent on Agriculture before the discovery of oil in commercial quantity in 1956; and, subsequently, the oil boom of the early 1970s. This development changed the narratives of the workings of the Nigerian federalism in practice, especially as the central military government had to enact Decrees that empowered the federal government to own and control all the oil and gas deposits across the country, particularly in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where the oil was found. However, before the discovery of oil in 1956 and its subsequent exploitation in 1958, the mainstay of the Nigerian economy was

agriculture. In this regard, each region of the country was known and owed its growth and development at the time to peculiar agricultural products. The Western Region, for example, was known for the production of cocoa and used the proceeds generated there to fund free education across the region, built infrastructures across the region, including the Liberty Stadium in Ibadan, built the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University; built “Cocoa House” also in Ibadan; set up the first television station in the whole of Africa at Ibadan the Capital city of the then Western Region, among others. Northern Region was known for groundnut and hence the famous “groundnut pyramid” in Kano; the proceeds from the exportation of groundnut were used to build infrastructures in the Northern region, including Ahmadu Bello University and other investments. The Eastern Region had palm oil, on its part, controlled the revenue from palm produce export to construct the University of Nigeria Nsukka and other major infrastructures in the Eastern region (Lukpata, 2013). However, the emergence of oil as the mainstay of the Nigerian economy changed the economic narratives, especially with the introduction of a centralised federal system. In the face of oil being the mainstay of the economy, the federal government and states now abandoned agriculture and all the legacies and potentials for what has become known as “Petrol-Dollars”. The petrol-dollar money did not only make the Nigerian government at all levels abandon agriculture and other means of revenue generation, but it also brought about poor governance, laziness and monumental corruption on the part of the leaders. Thus, Nigerian leaders that emerged since the coming of petro-dollars lack vision, become profligate and lacking in decency of character and are boldly wasteful with resources while bereft of ideas on governance (Efebeh & Sanubi, 2017). Besides, the Niger Delta region from where the oil that generates the petrol dollar was left without meaningful development; in fact, the environmental impact of oil exploration and exploitation was left unattended, thereby causing the people of the host oil communities the means of livelihood through massive environmental pollution. This has generated global condemnation and led to the agitation for the outright control of resources by the Niger Delta people.

The controversy over which tier of government should get the highest share of the revenue from the Federations Accounts has been a primary contest amongst Nigeria's various tiers of government. Successive governments have been battling with revenue-sharing formulae suitable for all sections of the country. Several commissions were set up to find a lasting solution to this agitation, even before independence in 1960. Starting with the 1946 Philipson's Commission, the 1951 Hicks-Philipson Commission, the 1968 Chicks Commission, the 1958 Raisman's Commission, the 1964 Binns Commission, the 1968 Dina Committee, the 1977 Aboyade Committee, the 1980 Okigbo Commission, and the 1989 Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Commission. All the above Commissions came out with instructive and far-reaching revenue-sharing formulae for the Nigerian State. However, politicians and private citizens rejected them rightly or heavily criticised them. On a controversial note, since 1967, revenue allocation in Nigeria has been based on controversial variables such as Basic needs, minimum material standard, balance development, derivation, equity of access to development opportunities, independent revenue/tax effort, absorptive capacity, minimum responsibility of government, population, fiscal efficiency, social development factor, equality of states, landmass and terrain and internal revenue generation effort among others. However, revenue from the federation account is presently shared as follows: Federal 50%, State 24%, local 20%, and special funds 6.5%. The quest for revenue-sharing formulae capable of satisfying all sections of the country is an intractable challenge that continues to generate controversies (Uhunmwangho & Ekpu, 2011).

Besides the above issues are the problems of corruption which have hindered development in all facets and have subjected institutions to the control of the political class, aside from the

embarrassment it has on the Nigerian State. There are other problems, such as minority issues and secession threats arising from the fear of domination by the majority tribes or the perceived injustice and inequalities inherent in the structural makeup of the Nigerian State. Challenges that emanate from religious, ethnic and national unity palavers, state creation, and the dual loyalty principle of federal character controversies continue to dog the Federation. It is, therefore, the need to find a lasting solution to these legions of problems facing the Nigerian State that has led to the various agitations, including the need to restructure the political landscape in order to correct the perceived inequalities and inherent injustices in the structure of the nation in order to allow genuine and all-inclusive development to take place.

Restructuring of the Nigerian State and the likely benefactors

The restructuring of the Nigerian State is bound to bring with it fiscal or what may be called 'corporate' federalism, as argued by its proponents. If this has to be reordered, the powers to generate and control revenue or resources in a federal fiscal system are vested in the various government tiers or levels—local and/or the regions or states. These component units then pay an agreed percentage of their income to the central or federal government. This implies that the federating units or regions, as the case may be, can lay claims to the resources inherent in their states or region and harness the same; the regions then pay royalties to the central government. In other words, the various federating units are empowered by the constitution to tap and harness their economic and natural resource endowments, concentrate on internal matters and pay royalties or taxes to the central government.

On the other hand, the central government is expected to concern itself with such issues areas as defence, protection of the country's territorial integrity, customs, currency issuance and external affairs. This meant autonomy for the federating units and thus left the units with more money to develop at their pace without interference from the central government. This was the nature of the federal system in practice in Nigeria before the military government of General Yakubu Gowon tinkered with it in 1967 on the eve of the Nigerian civil war in a bid to eliminate tension among the aggrieved parties. Twelve states were then created out of the four regions that made up the Federation. The creation of states led to a significant distortion in the federal arrangement that had held sway in the Nigerian State before 1967.

It thus follows that; the nature of federalism in Nigeria can aptly be described as "centralised federalism", where more significant percentages of the power in the Federation are concentrated at the central. According to the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended, under schedule two (2), sixty-eight items (68) were assigned to the central authority leaving states with 30 items. A clear indication of a command and rule system foisted on Nigeria by the military administration that distorted the existing federal system and promoted disunity and ethnic bickering (Adeyeri, 2010). In practical terms, the Federal Government statistically controls 50 per cent of the revenues accruable to the Federation from the 'national pool'; the States of the Federation get 24%, and the Local Government shares 20 per cent; Special funds 6.5%. Thus, on monthly bases, Federal, State and Local government officials meet at the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, to share the revenue collected from the Federations Account. Apart from the fact that this practice is a negation of the principles of federalism, it has created a super-ordinate and subordinate kind of relationship among the three tiers of government, making the central government of Nigeria an all-powerful federal government that has the power to lord it over the other tiers of government. Besides, this has effectively compromised the states' autonomy, which makes a federal arrangement attractive to a multi-ethnic as well as multi-cultural country (heterogeneous society) like Nigeria. The various tiers of government – federal, State and local governments have also become lazy,

lacking in innovation and ideas of how to generate revenue outside oil and truly develop; this is so because of the 'easy money' that goes into their various Accounts from the Federations Accounts monthly, (Efebeh, 2018). This monthly allocation is calculated based on mundane items like land mass and population rather than on the productive capacity of states and or derivation as it used to be prior to 1967. This clearly indicates that the Nigerian State's structural configuration and operationalisation do not encourage the severe business of deliberate creation of wealth. However, in the collection and, subsequently, allocation of wealth collected through rent from Oil Multinationals. Nkemdiche (2018) aptly alludes to this line of thought when he posits that, ... *by sheer military fiat, Nigeria's hitherto four regions were converted to a 12-State command structure wherein national wealth was collectivised and shared ... Nigeria thus unwittingly went from being a wealth-creating to wealth consuming nation.* The alteration of the federal arrangement resulted in a lack of interest in other productive sectors of the economy, especially with the Oil boom that began in 1973. The erstwhile near-global agrarian giant went from exporting agricultural products to being a net importer of all sorts of food items with a very debilitating effect on the balance of payments account of the Nigerian State.

Again, the extraction of crude oil, upon which the Nigerian State survives, has been marred in all kinds of controversies. It has caused massive environmental degradation of the lands and rivers of the host oil-producing communities across the Niger Delta region from where the oil wealth emanates; this environmental injustice has, however, caused the people of the host oil communities their means of livelihood. Another major issue that the oil extraction business throws up is the lack of infrastructural development in the Niger Delta region and health hazards emanating from oil exploration and exploitation (Jike, 2000; Tamuno, 2011; Efebeh, 2017a; Efebeh, 2017b; Efebeh & Sanubi, 2017). The other reasons which made restructuring inevitable in the Nigerian State, according to its proponents, are the problem of North/South dichotomy and such divisive policies as the politics of population census, the politicisation of the herders/farmers crises, the insecurity that it generates and the high rate of corruption among the political class. The perceived injustices, inequalities, and inherent contradictions in the Nigerian State engendered the agitation for restructuring the polity. The lack of spirit of oneness and the skewed structure of the federalism has led to various agitations, including that of outright control of its resources by the Niger Delta people who have been at the receiving end of the environmental impact of oil exploration and exploitation.

However, the proponents of the restructuring project have always argued as though all of Nigeria's problems are structurally inclined. In actual fact, restructuring the polity may be one of the solutions to the many problems bedeviling the Nigerian State. The problem of accountability, purposeful, and visionary leadership that is selfless and upright is a significant factor. Aside from the structural imbalance, the missing link in the Nigerian project has been leadership and prebendal politics. These two monsters have held the Nigerian State down since inception, and the situation seems to aggravate by the day. This paper shares the sentiments of the school of thought that believes that the structural configuration of Nigeria is lopsided and harbours inherent inequalities that are capable of breeding mutual distrust amongst the ethnic groups that make up the Nigerian State and that such distrust is inimical to genuine development and the building of an egalitarian society. However, with purposeful, altruistic leadership, Nigeria could still have developed beyond what is presently obtainable, even with the so-called defective federal structure. The "centralised federalism" would then have been the Nigeria brand or model of federalism that the Nigerian State has to showcase to the world; after all, there is no one single perfect federal system in the world as every practising federal State has to model federal system to soothe their domestic needs and peculiarities.

Although a restructured Nigeria is bound to shrink the powers of the central government and thus increase the powers and influence of the states, especially in the area of revenue generation and allocation of resources, it is, however, a truism that it is the same political class whose psychological being is seriously skewed in favour of the primitive accumulation of resources of the people for personal aggrandisement that will emerge as the leaders of the states. It is this same political class who have held the Nigerian State to ransom since independence, who have plundered the commonwealth of the people, that ran the Nigerian State as though it is a private estate, drew a defective constitution that cannot move the Nigerian project forward that may continue to run the affairs of the states. To that extent, therefore, the restructuring of the polity may not yield any meaningful result that would benefit the Nigerian people so long as the present political class still runs the affairs of the State with the same mindset and with a criminal disposition. Except something radical is done to change the current order, a restructured Nigeria may not benefit the people but the political class.

Concluding remarks

The vital issue of autonomy makes the federal government system attractive to heterogeneous nation-states like The United States of America, Canada, Australia, Germany, Nigeria and India, to mention a few. This paper has shown the seemingly urgent need for restructuring the Nigerian polity to give all the parties to the Nigerian project, that is, the various ethnic nationalities from across the six geo-political zones, the sense of belonging required to build a genuinely viral nation. The paper also emphasises that the distortion of the federal system in 1967 by the military government brought discontent amongst the people as a result of the lopsidedness of the system so created. This skewed federal system brought with it structural contradictions and regional inequalities and has all added up to stultify development and growth in all facets. Added to these numerous problems is the twin issue of the need for more innovative leadership and corruption. This situation has led to various agitations against the existing order, such agitations as resource control, state creation, outright secession, and sovereign national conference and then to the restructuring of the existing political structure to allow for all regions or states of the Federation to harness resources that are found in their domain and pay royalties to the central government.

As appropriate as a federal system for a multi-cultural nation like Nigeria is, without good managers of resources [human and natural] in terms of leadership, meaningful development will continue to be a mirage. To this extent, therefore, a visionary leader with integrity, who will not compromise on what are the interests of the State on the altar of friendship, political hangers-on, political godfathers, religious or ethnicity, who is ready to abide by the rules of law, who can lay premium on merit rather than mediocrity is what is required to move the Nigerian State to the next level in addition to restructuring. Otherwise, merely restructuring the polity without the leadership angle to it will amount to an elusive quest. Thus, the Nigerian political class would have to be accountable to the people by playing by the rules and institutionalising corporate governance; only then will restructuring the polity not only make meaning but will engender meaningful development in all facets.

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