

FEDERALISM AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN NIGERIA: THE FOCUS ON ELECTIONS IN THE FOURTH REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

This study examines elections as contending issues in Nigeria's federalism leading to political instability. The objective of this paper is to argue that elections have been a destabilizing factor in the practice of federalism in Nigeria. The study adopted qualitative research design using documentary content analysis. It sourced its data from secondary sources mainly newspapers, academic journals, official government publications and internet based sources. This study is also anchored on integration theory developed by Lieber (1973) to explain that elections have been the source of political instability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The findings revealed that federalism was adopted in Nigeria to foster unity in diversity between different nationalities that made up the country. However, evidence has shown that there is over centralization of powers at the centre to the disadvantage of the sub-governments at the lower levels. This culminated into intense desire to control the centre by the regional, religious and ethnic groups leading to unnecessary tensions, regional agitations, clamour for zoning, true federalism, structuring, identity politics, political violence, ethno-religious armed conflicts, insurgency and quest for self-determination. The paper further revealed that the quest for power at the centre and the conducts of elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic have been the major destabilizing factor causing political instability and regional agitation in the federalism. This can be seen in the way and manner political actors from 1999, approach elections into political offices as matter of life and death thereby introducing regionalism, religion, ethnicity as the basis for qualification to be elected into political offices. It also revealed that failures to entrench credible electoral process led to election of ethnic, regional and religious bigots into political offices that failed to manage the diversity of Nigeria. It is therefore, recommended that only credible elections can usher in trusted leaders that can provide good governance and genuinely address the quest for structuring and practice of true federalism.

Key Words: Governance, Federalism, Political Instability, Election, Democracy

Introduction

Nigeria is a conglomeration of numerous ethnic groupings before its political and cultural integration dated from annexation of Lagos colony in 1861 to amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 leading to independence from the British in 1960. Federalism was adopted before independence for effective management her multi-nationalities through negotiations and compromises on issues of political and national importance (Umoh&Adeyi, 2019). It is generally accepted by many as necessary for managing the country's ethnic

diversity as reflected in the adage “unity in diversity” (Majekodunmi, 2015). The adoption of federalism is to foster unity amidst diversity of religious and ethnic pluralism. However, the practice of federalism comes with huge challenges for selecting political representatives through credible elections. Instead of being a blessing for accommodation, it has been problematic particularly during national elections. The focus of this paper is to argue that elections have been a destabilizing factor in the true practice of federalism in Nigeria leading to political instability. The study adopted basically qualitative research design using documentary content analysis to provide inside into the discussions on federalism and political instability in Nigeria with focus on elections in the fourth republic. It drew its data from secondary sources mainly newspapers, academic journals, internet sources and official government publications.

Conceptual and theoretical Considerations

The concept of federalism has been conceptualized by different scholars in accordance with their experiences and understanding. However, one thing that is common is the belief of power sharing between the national government and the sub-governments. This was why Lemco (1991) equates federalism as a political system that ensures the preservation of the unique characteristics, identities, traditions, and cultures of a heterogeneous population. Leff (1999) defines federalism to mean an institutional arrangement whereby authority and functional competences are shared among different levels of government. According to Akindele, Olaopa and Obiyan (2002) federalism is a system in which the power to govern is shared between national and state governments, creating what is often called a federation. Further, Bulmer (2017) opined that Federalism is a system of government that establishes a constitutionally specified division of powers between different levels of government. In the same vein, Chinwe (2018) refers to federalism as a political system/process where powers are shared among component units that are independent and autonomous in the constitution of the country. Further, Federalism is a means of ensuring peace, stability and mutual accommodation in countries that have territorially concentrated differences of identity, ethnicity, religion or language (Bulmer, 2017). Odisu, (2015) argues that Federalism fosters unity in diversity, symbolizes decentralization of power and operates within the prism of self-respect for one another. It is generally accepted that the major goal of federalism is to thwart threats to individually independent but militarily weak states or federating units as well as

guaranteeing their collective security. Federalism as a system of government seem to have been more generally accepted as the best system of government for managing multi-ethnic states in order to allow each of the constituent units enough elbow room for autonomous development (Anthony, 2019).

To this end, Avbuere (2019) contends that a state is therefore regarded as federal when there exists more than one level of government and each level having its own constitutionally proscribed powers and responsibilities. In the case of Nigeria, Federalism was adopted as a mechanism to enhance accommodation and unity in diversity. Between 1954 and 1966, Nigerian federalism under colonial and civilian regimes functioned fully despite its imperfections. As noted by Ekeh (2000) the differences between the South and the North and between majority and minority ethnic groups in Nigeria quickly led to the choice of federalism in 1954 as an avenue for allowing the different regions of Nigeria to rule themselves in their own unique ways. Ali (2012) opines that this dynamism was informed by the desire to have a balanced federation where all nationalities will have self-fulfillment and actualization. In the same vein, Babalola (2013) agrees that federalism was promoted in Nigeria by the British colonial authority, first for administrative convenience, and later as a basis for constitutional reform and for economic reasons. He also advances that most significantly, the federal solution was necessitated by the desire to achieve 'unity in diversity'.

On another note, scholars have maintain that election is one of the elements for measuring liberal democracy and the extent to which the electoral process produces the exact will of the people is important (Danbaba, 2019). Johari (2010) defines election as the process of recruitment of representatives by the choice of the voters. For Eijk and Franklin (2009), elections serve a legitimizing function; allocate power to office-holders; serve the function of holding those office-holders accountable for the manner in which they have used their power since the previous election, recording popular approval for their actions or kicking the rascals out. While Agbu (2016) asserts that elections provide the medium through which the different interest groups within the nation-state can stake and resolve their claims to power through peaceful means. However, elections, determine how political change occurs in a democratic state, and where this fails, the result is usually chaos. Therefore, election is a process of

choosing leaders by voting a person or persons in accordance with laid down rules and regulations to hold political offices for a stipulated period.

Further, Morrison and Stevenson (1971) argue that political instability is a condition of political arrangements in which institutional structure of authority breakdown and the expected compliance to political authority is replaced by political violence. According to Alesina, Ozler, Roubini, & Swagel, (1992), political instability is the propensity of a government collapse. For Jong-A-Pin (2008), political instability is the changes in, or challenges to the political system. Further, Fagbohun (2013) sees political instability as a sign of breakdown in democracy while Ibeanu (2015) argues that political instability is the level of incapacity of a ruling class to maintain class rule within the existing political order. This is in line with explanation of political instability in “new states” by Claude Ake cited in Ibeanu (2015) who proposes that it is located not in the functioning of political structure and characteristics of political system but in the exchanges among the political actors. It is within this context that this paper conceptualizes federalism as a sovereign political entity in which the governing powers are shared between the national government at the centre and the sub-national governments and each has defined roles and control over its activities. It can be noted here, that federalism exhibits different characteristics practically the world over, and its practice either fiscal or true federalism depends on the behaviour and character of the ruling elites. It is within this perspective that the paper conceptualizes political instability as an aggregation of harmful behaviour of political and nonpolitical actors to endanger democratic governance.

Among the diverse approaches which constitute analytical tools for social phenomenon in the social and management sciences are the theory of National development, functionalism etc, and this study is anchored on integration theory. The theory is builds on the works of Lieber (1973) who posits that integration is forming parts into a whole or creating interdependence. He argues that integration essentially implies a relationship of community or strong cohesiveness among peoples in a political entity. According to Nye (1968) integration involves mutual ties and a sense of group identity and self-awareness. Building on the premise that integration enables leaders in constituent units in a given society to benefit something from other units outside theirs which ordinarily they would not if they were left alone. This implies that the theory of integration is relevant to this study because it captures

the rationale for the advocacy for federal system of governance Nigeria where each unit may benefit from others. However, the manipulation of electoral processes particular by political, religious, ethnic and regional elites in the quest to capture state power renders the reasons for the adoption of federalism useless. This was why Onifade and Imhonopi (2013) argue that the integration crises facing Nigeria is manifest in the minority question, religious fundamentalism and conflicts, ethnic politics, indigene-settler dialectic, resource control, youth restiveness and militancy.

Perspectives on Nigerian Federalism

The Nigerian federation is neither a contract between the states nor is it a voluntary union of a number of originally independent states. Prior to the colonial era, the entities were empires, kingdoms, chiefdoms and village republics of varying territorial sizes and organizations with varying degree of autonomy and interdependence. The need for a federal structure of government was orchestrated by the advantage of a larger market as source for raw materials and depots for finished products and the imperative for mediating groups and ethnic conflicts among the diverse socioeconomic groups. Therefore, Federalism was imposed as a means of governing diverse people of a large geographical area.

The federal structure of governance was introduced in Nigeria through the Richardson constitution of 1946 which formally institutionalized the 'national division of the country' into three equal regions namely the West, East and Northern regions. The federalism did not address the democracy of equality rather emphasized the proportional representation of the federated regions of which structural disequilibrium was visible. The Northern region was greater in size and population than the two other regions together thereby facilitating the hegemony of the Northern region over the other regions in terms of leadership. However, the Nigerian federalism at inception projected a level playing ground for all actors and stakeholders. There were clear divisions of powers between the federal and regional governments. Items classified as 'exclusive' belonged to the federal government while the concurrent list involved both the federal and regional levels of governments and the residual belonged to the regions. The political instability which plagued Nigerian politics from 1954 (when federalism was adopted) to January, 1966 (when the military took over) is sometimes attributed to the federal nature of the constitution, which is said to encourage 'regionalism,

tribalism and corruption' (Kirk-Greene, 1968). On the contrary, also Mohammad (2008) observes that these changes have only resulted in more imbalances in the federation one effect of which is that it accentuated the centralisation and concentration of power at the centre and this has denied the federating units the opportunity to develop independently. Ironically, under a civilian regime between 1979 and 1983, a weak federal system was practiced as a result of the influence of the preceding military governments and the fact that the constitution in place was a child of the military government leading to the operation of a unitary-federal system (Elaigwu&Uzongwe, 1996, Agbu, 2004). In line with the military's command structure, Nigeria's federal system has been over-centralized to the extent that it reflects more of a unitary arrangement than a federal one (Elaigwu, cited in Majekodunmi, 2015). Adeyeri (2011) argues that Nigeria's federal system has oscillated between the excessive regionalism that marked the First Republic (1960-1966) and excessive centralisation of the military, and relatively, the post military era. Babalola and Onapajo (2019) opine that Nigeria exhibits a system of federalism wherein the federating units have no clear independence from the center; rather, they are dependent and subordinate. This negates the federal principle that enjoins independence among the governments that make up the federation. This is in line with the view of Koller (2002) that Nigeria's federal system is highly centralized in all its ramifications. Jinadu (2002) also asserted that in the case of Nigeria, where federalism is a strategic device to accommodate ethnic diversity, the centrifugal pull of the political mobilization of ethnicity is a fundamental problem, raised by the rational calculation of the cost of federalism by the covenantal parties.

Oyedele (1999) argues that even for a long time past, federalism had never existed in Nigeria in the real sense of it. Akinyemi (2011) was of the opinion that the practice of true federalism in Nigeria was only between the periods 1954 to 1966 because the period in question was characterised by large devolution of powers to the regions. Matfess (2016) identifies three aspects of the 1999 Nigerian constitution stand out as particularly problematic: the centralization of the police at the federal level with limited sub-national oversight, the ambiguous concept of indigeneity, and the overlapping, often contradictory land tenure systems endorsed. Mohammad (2008) relates the problem with the manifest skewness in resource distribution between the component units. The federal system in Nigeria has been chronically manipulated, often promoting regional interests over national ones (Lewis, 2006).

Equally, Jinadu (2002) argues that the problem in Nigeria is beyond the customary ones of the seesaw between dual or divided sovereignty, of national government preeminence, or of secession in a federation. It fundamentally concerns the perception of domination by other ethnic or sub-ethnic groups on the part of some ethnic or sub-ethnic groups, and the exclusion of the “dominated” groups from national or unit-level government, and from national or unit-level government patronage. Babalola and Onapajo (2019) argue that the problems of Nigeria should not be traced solely to the issue of federalism. Rather, the problem of Nigeria is about deficiency in development and the need for good governance. According to Bouchat (2013) many of Nigeria’s problems can be traced to its political economy because it represents the bread-and-butter issues that may sow internal disharmony. Control of state resources is a sure means to wealth and power in a rentier state, and the more avenues to resources, the more the revenues can be tapped (Falola, 1999). This was why the desires to control the centre by the ethnic political elites are a matter of do or die.

Daniel (2015) contends that the bizarre federal system operated in Nigeria has also facilitated the emergence of violent religious and ethnic militias, while politicians exploit and exacerbate inter-communal and inter-religious tensions for selfish reasons. He maintains that the deeply flawed federal system in Nigeria and failure of successive administrations to evolve an integrated Nigeria has left the nation continuously trapped in the vicious circle of poverty. He recommended that the prospects of genuine nationhood and development in Nigeria lies in a swift adoption of true federalism and the building of a strongly united, cohesive and integrated Nigeria. However, the difficulty here is who will implement the agitated true federalism owing to the behavior and manipulative tendencies of the elites to rig themselves into political power. It can also be noted that the call for true federalism means that the present structure is not properly working and is poorly managed and therefore the need to ensure credible electoral process that could usher in patriotic leaders. According to Achebe (1983):

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land, climate, water, air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal examples which are hallmarks of true leadership.

Roy (2004) has asserted that bad leadership has been the greatest problem inhibiting Nigeria from realizing her full potentials as a leading nation in Africa. Political competition is organized around personalities and parochial appeals, which are typically pursued through the use of money, intimidation and the compromise of election authorities (Lewis, 2011). Politicians are indeed nationalists by day and tribalists by night (Mkandawire, 1999). There is much pressure to reconstitute the federal system, devolve powers, provide for a more equitable distribution of natural-resource revenues and other revenues, and use states to advance ethno-religious identities (Majekodunmi, 2015). Over the years there is fear and distrust among the political elites and this is why the call for the practice of true federalism has become a tool to deceive electorate during national election.

Federal Election as a cause of Political Instability in Nigeria

Since independence in 1960, electoral violence as a result of electoral malpractices and manipulation has constantly characterised the electoral processes in Nigeria causing unnecessary tensions and instability. Elected representatives are expected to rise above their regional differences for the good of the entire nation (Feldman, 2009). However, Onimode (1983) notes that, “After flag independence, political power was handed over to reactionary bureaucratic bourgeoisies who were more anxious to manipulate state power to strengthen their tenuous legitimacy and fragile economic base”, than to address any national issue. Anifowose (1982) argued that, the mayhem of 1964 was based on the desire to control the centre between Northern People’s Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG), Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) and National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC). The desire to win elections at all cost culminated in stiff competition between the parties and the emergence of United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) and Nigeria National Alliance (NNA). The political maneuvers that followed led to series of attacks, counter attacks and assassinations of perceived political opponents. The elections had to be suspended for several weeks and when the elections finally held, each of the regional parties openly harassed, intimidated its opponents in the campaigns (Gberevbie & Oni, 2014). There were accusations and counter-accusations of political harassment in the North during the electioneering campaigns (Dudley, 1982). Thuggery, violence, victimization of political opponents and widespread electoral fraud was alleged, and NNA won the elections (Gberevbie & Oni, 2014). The electoral process witnessed great violence, harassment, kidnappings, intimidation and

killing of political opponents by the ruling regional parties, allegations and counter allegations by one alliance on the other of plots to rig the election (Metz, 1991). Following the announcement of the results, riots, arson and killings erupted as heartlands of the AG discovered that the election had only returned NNDP in the alliance of NNA to power (Gberevbie & Oni, 2014). The 1983 elections occupy a special place in the history of abuse of incumbency. Kurfi opines that:

each of the opposition parties used its local power of incumbency to retain power and/or to improve its position vis-à-vis other contenders and federal might was used to dislodge state governors in Anambra, Oyo, Kaduna, Gongola and Borno States, thus raising NPN's tally of governorships from seven to twelve States, reversing the power structure existing before the election when opposition parties had twelve against NPN's seven governors (Kurfi, 2005:97).

Nigerian politicians have become habituated to fraud, corruption, intimidation, and violence, as if they consider these the necessary weapons of political winners (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010). This anti-democratic behavior of politicians from 1999 prompted Omoruyi (2007) to aver that, the Nigerian politicians generally do not have faith in the ballot box ... the Nigerian politicians do not believe that democracy is anchored on a series of elections; Nigerians, especially those who call on Allah and God to show them the way do not seem to have faith in tomorrow and subsequent elections. These despicable behaviours of political elites in Nigeria have rendered the emergence of credible leaders very difficult.

Political leaders use their political power for acquisition and accumulation of resources through corrupt and dubious acts and by extension endangered the general populous by causing political instability. Control of state resources is a sure means to wealth and power in a rentier state, and the more avenues to resources, the more the revenues can be tapped (Falola, 1999). This was why the desires to control the centre by the ethnic political elites are a matter of do or die affair. Okorie (2003) captures the 2003 General Elections by stating that "politicians did everything possible to ensure success including kidnapping and assassination of opponents". The PDP led government under President Olusegun Obasanjo used the power of incumbency to dislodge the oppositions in Gombe, Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Jigawa, Kogi, Ekiti and Osun States 2003 and 2007. In the build up to 2007 General Elections, Obasanjo at a PDP meeting in Ogun State declared that, "This election is a do or die affair for me and the PDP. This election is a matter of life and death for the PDP and Nigeria" (Bello, 2007:1).

Governor Sule Lamido also stated at a celebrated defection of Governor Mahmud Shinkafi of Zamfara State from the ANPP into the PDP, that, “the only job we know is to destroy oppositions and we are here to do everything possible to dismantle the opposition” (Abimboye, 2009). Unfortunately, like most electoral contests in Nigeria, the 2007 elections assumed the features of warfare rather than open and civil competition for political power (TMG, 2007). This depicts a winner-takes-all combative spirit unsuitable for credible leadership selection.

The political elites do everything possible including all kinds of electoral malpractices to ensure the victory of their candidates. Youths employed by regional political elites, especially in Rivers State, carried out electoral violence with the aim of facilitating the electoral victory of their political patrons (Ebiede, 2017). This occurred during the 2003 general elections in Rivers and Bayelsa States. In 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 General Elections, youth political thugs like *Yan Kalarein* Gombe, *Sara Sukain* Bauchi, *Ecomog* in Borno, *Yan DaukanAmarya*, *Yan Daba* in Kano, *BaniIsrailain* Taraba were recruited to rig elections. The brutal killings of youth corps members serving in Bauchi State after declaration of President Jonathan as the winner of 2011 presidential elections was one among many of how the action of non-state actors destabilizes the federation.

Report on the 2011 post election violence from Hafiz Ringim, former Inspector General of Police showed that “No fewer than 520 persons including six policemen died in Kaduna and Niger States. Of this figure, 518 died in Kaduna State alone. In the two States, 157 churches, 46 mosques, 1,435 houses, 437 vehicles and 219 motorcycles were burnt during the mayhem” (Babalola, 2011). Worst in the conduct of 2011 General Elections, were the gruesome murder of NYSC serving members in Bauchi State on account that a Southern President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan won the presidential election instead of a northern candidate, General Muhammadu Buhari. Southerners and members of the ruling PDP from the North were also targeted in the post election violence in Niger, Kaduna, Katsina, Kano, Bauchi and Gombe States. In the 2015 General Elections there were threats by politicians from the APC and the PDP. A stalwart of the APC, Bola Ahmed Tinubu had threatened that “it is going to be rigged and roasted; we are prepared not to go to court but to drive them out” (ICG, 2014). The APC National Chairman, Chief John Odigie-Oyegun warned that, the party will form a parallel government if they suspect President Jonathan of winning a rigged

election (Mahmud, 2015). The Publicity Secretary of the APC, Alhaji Lai Mohammed stated that, if the 2015 elections are rigged, the party will not recognise the outcome and will go ahead and form a parallel government (Ezeibe, 2015).

In the Niger Delta, Mujahid Asari-Dokubo, a founder of the Niger Delta Peoples Salvation Front (NDPSF), threatened violence if Jonathan was not re-elected (ICG, 2014). The former Katsina State Governor, Barrister Shehu Shema told his audience not to worry about his opponents, whom he referred to as ‘cockroaches’ and asked his supporters to ‘crush them’ (Aminu, 2014). In Sokoto the former Governor of the State, Alhaji Attahiru Bafarawa categorically said, “I don’t know why they are afraid of rigging when they know too well that they are products of the same mechanism. Let me tell them, that we will use force, rigging and our ballot papers to send them away... Wamakko’s time is up; we will take over the State by hook or crooks” (Auwal, 2015). EU EOM noted reports of 114 election-related violent events with more than 157 persons killed in the 2015 General Election (EU EOM, 2015).

In 2019 general elections, soldiers deployed frightened and intimidated voters, police and INEC officials particularly in Rivers. Electoral violence particularly by state and non-state actors featured in Akwalbom, Imo, Benue, Kaduna, Sokoto, Bauchi, Adamawa and Kano States. According to a report by SBM Intelligence, 626 people were killed during the 2019 election cycle, starting with campaigns in 2018 (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The electoral process in the Fourth Republic is characterized by turmoil and fraudulent practices that caused instability in sustaining the federal system of government in Nigeria. This is as a result of poor and bad leadership that created Boko Haram insurgency in the North East, banditry and kidnapping for ransom in North West, Herders/Farmers Crises in North Central, Militancy in Niger Delta, OPC in South West, IPOB in South East and general insecurity across the country. Claims and counter claims for who occupied the presidency between the North and the South and between sub-regions and the political actors have created tensions, insecurity and destabilization of the country thereby resulting into untold hardship on the citizens.

Conclusion

Federalism was adopted in Nigeria to foster unity in diversity between different nationalities that made up of the country. Evidence has shown that there is over centralization of powers at

the centre to the disadvantage of the sub-governments at the lower levels. This culminated to intense desire for control of the centre by the regional, religious and ethnic groups leading into unnecessary tensions, regional agitations, clamour for zoning, true federalism, structuring, identity politics, political violence, ethno-religious armed conflicts, insurgency and quest for self-determination. This paper argues that the practice of true federalism in Nigeria fails because successive holders of power in the centre from 1999 abused the electoral processes by deploying state machineries to rig elections thereby denying the citizens to legitimately select credible leaders. This can be seen during Obasanjo's administration from 2003-2007 and Buhari's regime from 2015-2020. Furthermore, the paper argues that the quest for power at the centre and the conducts of elections in Nigeria have been the major destabilizing factor causing political instability and agitation for the practice of true federalism. It is therefore recommended that only credible elections can usher in trusted leaders that can provide good governance and genuinely address the quest for true federalism.

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