

**DEMOCRACY AS A POLITICAL IMPERATIVE FOR SUCCESSFUL
IMPLEMENTATION OF REFORMS:
A FOCUS ON SOME SOCIO - ECONOMIC REFORMS IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This paper is a critical analysis of some on- going socio-economic reforms in Nigeria. It begins with a definition of the concept of reform and discusses types of reforms, highlighting specific reforms in Nigeria. The paper highlights the successes and failures of the on-going reforms and attributes the failures to their undemocratic nature. Against the background of the political context of reforms, it illustratively notes that democratic reforms are usually more successful than authoritarian ones. The paper provides a contextual explication of democracy, on which basis it recommends some strategies for successful and effective implementation of reforms in the country. These include, among others, democratization of the processes of policy and programme initiation and implementation, adoption and institutionalization of democratic norms and values, minimal economic romance with imperialist Western organizations and increasing socio-economic, political and legal empowerment of the people such that they can freely and effectively challenge the excesses of political leaders and public office holders.

Keywords: Democracy, Political Imperative, Socio-economic reforms.

Introduction

The Encarta Dictionary (2006) defines reform as: “ *to improve something by removing fault, to change and improve something by correcting faults, removing inconsistencies and abuses; to get rid of unacceptable habits or adopt a more acceptable way of life and mode of behaviour...*” By implication, to reform something is to make it better or more effective. This presupposes that what is being reformed is not acceptable or satisfactory in its present form or state. Every reform process is therefore a practical expression of man’s consciousness of inadequacies in the existing state of affairs in his social and material life.

Reform, as a social activity, is as old as man himself and the stupendous and progressive changes which mankind has gone through from pre-historic to modern times have been driven by various forms of reform at various stages of societal evolution. Classical examples of historic reforms in the life of mankind include the changes from:

- simple / subsistence society to complex/market-based society
- slavery / slave trade to freedom
- manual mode of production to mechanical mode
- human or animal form of transportation to mechanical form
- repressive social control system to restitutive one
- limited franchise to universal adult suffrage
- one universal catholic church to multiplicity of churches
- traditional education to (Western) modern education
- authoritarian political system to democratic one, etc

The driving force behind all these changes and, by implication, the policies and programmes that gave rise to them at various stages in the history of mankind has been man's desire to enhance his comfort, guarantee peaceful co-existence with one another, improve the quality of his life and satisfy his other needs

Typological schemes of reforms have, in their fluidity, tended to vary with writers. While some writers have tended to typologize reforms on basis of their scale, others prefer a classificatory scheme based on the targeted areas of the reforms. Two major types of reforms are identified on basis of the former scheme namely *isolated /sectoral /partial reforms and holistic or total reforms*. Partial reforms are isolated forms targeted at specific institutions or areas of society at different times. On the other hand, total reforms are holistic forms that implicate various institutions and segments of society at the same time. No definite number of types of reforms can be identified by the use of the second classificatory scheme because of the complex and kaleidoscopic nature of society. Example, however, may include *social reform, economic reform, political reform, civil service reform, banking-sector reform, health reform, educational reform, etc* Systemically, it can be argued that the distinction between these types of reforms is more theoretical than practical, since a reform in a particular institution or segment invariably reflects in varied degrees in others.

Although Nigeria has experienced a good number of reforms since its inception, these reforms, especially the military and post-military ones, do not seem to have created remarkable impact in the quality of life of the people. This situation provides the background against which this paper seeks, among other things, to:

- i attempt a brief overview of reforms in Nigeria
- ii assess some current socio-economic reforms with a view to highlighting the undemocratic basis of their failure
- iii examine the political and democratic context of reforms
- iv make recommendations towards successful implementation of socio-economic reforms in Nigeria in the present and future

A Brief Overview of Reforms in Nigeria

For the purpose of this paper we are, perhaps, introducing another typological scheme of reforms based on the nation's experiences. This is the colonial type introduced by the nation's former colonial masters. The colonial administration, which lasted up until independence in 1960, directly or indirectly, introduced large scale reforms which touched on every aspect of our national life, ranging from social to economic. At the social angle, its reforms included the introduction of a new mode of worship, new mode of dressing, new value system, new mode of communication and transportation and new way of life.

Economically, its reforms included the introduction of new economic activities, improved methods of farming and other agricultural practices, and transformation of the subsistence economy anchored on communalism into a market one founded on capitalism. Its political reforms included the replacement of traditional political systems with the Western (British) parliamentary one, new public service system, the introduction of juristic constitution, etc. The total effect of these colonial reforms can be said to have been an admixture of the “good” and the “ugly”. But no matter how ostensibly humanitarian and altruistic they seemed, the reforms had sought to realize, and actually realized colonial objectives which were generally acknowledged as essentially economic.

The post- colonial reforms are two-pronged in nature, embracing the military and the civilian. The first Republic witnessed reforms introduced by Nigeria’s first political leaders or nationalists such as Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Akanu Ibiam (all of blessed memory) and many others. Their reforms (with the exceptions of, perhaps that of Awolowo) did not depart drastically from those of the colonial government under which they certainly underwent intensive tutelage. They (reforms) were less structural and more contextual or orientational, in the sense that the affected structures or institutions, especially their ideological foundation, remained largely and essentially unaltered, while adjustments were made in terms of ownership, personnel or actors, implementation modalities and, perhaps, ultimate motive and objectives. They were, therefore, cosmetically or superficially indigenized, perhaps, to reflect the new independence status of the country, while still being rooted in the neo-colonized polity.

Some notable socio- economic reforms and programmes recorded in Nigeria since independence are the Agrarian Revolution in the first Republic; the structural reforms and 3R Programme of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation of the military under retired General Gowon; Indigenisation Programme of the 70s, Buhari’s War Against indiscipline (WAI), Shagari’s Green and Ethical Revolutions of the 80s; Babangida’s Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), also of the 80s, which centered essentially on economic liberalisation, together with Mass Mobilization for Economic Recovery and Social Justice (MAMSER), its social component; Abacha’s Banking reforms, War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAI-C), and Vision 2010 (Obasi and Erondy, 2000); and the present National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) introduced by the former president, Olusegun Obasanjo.

A critical examination of these programmes and their related policies shows that some were mere replications of previous ones in semantic disguise, while some were more painful in effect than others. Amadi (2004) underscored one major difference between past and present reforms. According to him, the past reforms were

...heavily focused on the role of government as the major impetus and manager of economic development”, while...NEEDS, playing to the dominant tune of global capitalism, has changed the direction and content of economic reform by anchoring reform on the dominant role of private business.

Critical Assessment of the Current (Obasanjo's) Reforms

The current reforms are encapsulated in the hydra-headed programme of the former Obasanjo Administration christened *National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS)*. The programme was developed as a panacea to the lingering or chronic socio-economic decay which Nigeria has suffered. It is also a means of ultimately attaining the objectives of the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). NEEDS, according to the Government, provides a frame work for nationally co-ordinated programme of action (including federal, state and local governments) aimed at institutional reforms, development of the private sector (or minimization of government involvement), poverty reduction through economic empowerment, and value re-orientation (National Planning Commission, NPC, 2005). The current reforms, especially as they relate to Government operations and as initiated and first implemented by the past Obasanjo Administration include:

- Liberalization of key sectors of the economy which, of course, implied increasing capitalism
- Privatization of public enterprise, a corollary to liberalization which, according to the Government, was necessitated by the lack-lustre performance of the enterprises
- Restructuring of the Public service which was believed to be bloated and therefore needed to be “down sized”, or is it “right sized”, ostensibly to save cost, minimize government spending and increase efficiency and effectiveness
- Review of Government budgeting and taxation laws in order to instill sanity and fiscal discipline in the process.
- Restructuring governance and related institutions to make them vibrant
- Debt management perhaps, to minimize the pains of debt burden on the economy as well as on the people
- Economic empowerment programmes aimed at reducing the high incidence of poverty
- Due process, said to have been formulated to check recklessness and arbitrariness in government business and transactions (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, FMI NO, 2005; Okonjo-Iweala and Osafo- Kwaako, 2007)

The objectives of the reforms include, among others,

Re-invigoration of the economy, Faster development of infrastructure; Poverty Reduction; Job and wealth creation; Entrenchment of fiscal discipline in public budgeting and expenditure; Motivation of the private sector to achieve greater performance and growth; and Restructuring of public service for greater efficiency and effectiveness. (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2005 <http://www.nigeria.gov.ng/reformsoverview.aspx>; Ekpenkhio,2003)

So far, the reforms have been carried out, with varied degrees of success or failure, or both, in the banking sector, petroleum sector, public service, power (electricity) sector, telecommunication, education, insurance, transportation, ports and customs, etc. Acknowledgeable measures of success have been recorded in the telecommunication, banking and insurance sectors. The telecommunication sector, in particular has offered a large number of fulltime and part-time employment opportunities to Nigerian youths; while the Banks now

offer improved services and guarantee greater security of the savings of their customers. Other specific successes of the reforms, as reported in government circles, include increase in the number of telephone lines in Nigeria from 500,000 landlines in 2001 to over 32 million (GSM) lines in 2007, attracting over one billion U.S. dollar a year in investment in the past four years, reduction in government spending on fringe benefits such as free housing and free vehicles, rationalization or “rightsizing” of the work force which is said to have minimized redundancy and wasteful spending, enhanced government pay scales, minimization of leakage of public funds made possible by the policy of due process or procurement reforms, relatively viable banking and insurance sectors, decline in the incident of bribery and corruption in certain sectors between 1999 to 2005, etc. (*Kaufmann et al, 2005; Okonjo-Iweala and Osafo-Kwaako, 2007*). Yet, some other vital sectors such as education, power (electricity), petroleum and public service are still be-devilled with confusion and uncertainty.

The above successes notwithstanding, some of the reforms are fallacious in their premises, faulty in their assumptions, exotic in their policy contents, undemocratic in their methodology and draconian in their implementation. Many of them were hardly canvassed or debated at the grassroots. They were rather elitist and government decisions foisted on the people. In some cases, some of the decisions were subjected to smoke-screen or spurious debates by groups of elites, assembled at various venues at different times by the government to give the resultant programmes the semblance of democratic and, by implication, legitimate ones. Perhaps, this explains why the proposed consolidation in the education sector which was to merge some Federal Polytechnics with their proximate Federal Universities faced, and is still facing, stiff opposition especially from the directly-affected stakeholders. Similarly, at the debate on the Private-Public Partnership Arrangement, in connection with Federal Government Colleges, which was perceived by the public as an indirect move towards the sale or privatization of these unity schools, expressed opinions weighed heavily against such a move; but those who were privileged to be there at the forum, including the author of this paper, left the venue at the end with no doubt in their minds that the then government was determined to carry out its “hidden agenda”. This meant that unity schools, established as a unifying factor with public funds and located on pieces of land donated by their host communities for a noble and national course, were slated to be indirectly sold to highest bidders for total commercialization. Of course, if this policy of privatizing the Unity schools had been pursued to its logical conclusion by the government, then the original purpose of establishing them would have been defeated. In running them, their owners would have placed premium on economic rather than social considerations. Consequently, the schools would have been beyond the reach of the average Nigerian in terms of cost. However, the Yar’adua Administration has, in apparent consideration of public opinion, put some of these proposals on hold.

Another evidence of the undemocratic nature of the reforms, especially with respect to the petroleum sector, was the nationwide 4-day strike action by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). The strike action was reported to have been caused by the sale by the Federal Government of some refineries and the unilateral increase in the pump price of fuel from sixty-five to seventy-five naira per litre. The Government argued that the increase in price would raise supply and eliminate the perennial scarcity of the commodity and the attendant hardship on the people. But the people could not be deceived again, since past increases did not bring about such results.

If people's reactions, through the mass media, to the unbundling reform carried out in the power (electricity) sector is anything to go by, then it is obvious that the reform in this sector has not made improved impact on the people and the industrial sector. This is true because epileptic power supply, and prolonged black outs and their adverse socio-economic consequences are still very much the rule rather than the exception. However, some people have argued that it is rather too early to pass judgment on the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN). Even in the area of telecommunication, where the greatest success is reported to have been recorded in terms of telephony density and employment, Nigeria is said to have the highest number of drop-calls and pays the highest tariff for cell-phone calls (Amadi, 2004). In spite of the reported success, the telecommunication (GSM) situation in Nigeria is still worse than the situation in the relatively poorer neighbouring states. Individual consumers and many business enterprises have continued to complain about the exploitative stance of the service providers, their lacklustre performances and the adverse effects of all this on their private and business lives.

With regard to the right-sizing policy of the Government, it was reported by Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, FRCN (2007: April 26) that about 5,000 workers had been disengaged, with the sum of ₦436m raked into Government coffers as one of the gains. However, on the surface, these may appear as gains; but when considered against the social cost of aggravated incident of unemployment and the insecurity implications, then the so-called gains may not, after all, be celebrated as such. Also, the euphoria that greeted the increase in salaries of workers and the dramatized monetization policy of the government has since petered out in the face of galloping inflation. Against the background of persistent power failure, rising poverty, increasing rate of unemployment, decaying educational system, poor infrastructure and increasing insecurity, Ibrahim (2007: April 23) opined that NEEDS may not achieve its purpose. One cannot agree more with Ibrahim.

Although some of the reforms were wrapped in smoke screens of democracy, there were essentially reminiscent of the military background of the former president, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, who introduced them. Those that seemed to have been ostensibly canvassed through Committees of the National Assembly had little or no input from the average Nigerian. Besides, policies that should have taken time to initiate, canvass, debate and publicize, were rather formulated and implemented in such a hurry and within such an impossible time frame that prompted many Nigerians to predict their failure with a high degree of accuracy. The policy that sought to merge Federal Polytechnics with their proximate Universities, for instance, did not outlive that Administration that gave birth to it.

Political Context of Reforms

Although NEEDS, which is the fulcrum of the reforms, has been described as "a highly participatory policy, from its initiation stage to implementation, which allowed inputs from many organs of government, civil societies NGOs, private-sector stakeholders, the Nigerian Labour Congress, among others" (Jibrin, 2004), the Nigerian Civil Society, with its leftist orientation, seems to view it as "...another version of neoliberalism imposed upon the country by sinister international institutions" (Harneit-Sievers, 2004). Indeed, the view is widely held among critical observers of trends in Nigeria and other developing countries that development policies of these countries are either copied from, or imposed on them by the developed countries through the instrumentality of international organizations (e.g. World Bank, IMF, etc) dominated and controlled by the latter.

The government, by the instrument of NEEDS, seems to be pursuing private- sector-driven economic development in absolute terms. Perhaps, this is why Amadi (2004) warned not only against absolute laissez-fairism (which does not exist even in advanced economies), but also against the failure by the state to put in place or articulate effective political institutional framework required to ensure the successful implementation of the goals of any reforms. Indeed, he argued that without a substantial reform of politics in Nigeria, “.... *any dream of substantial economic development with drastic poverty eradication is a mirage*”.

Studies exemplified by those of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Tendler (1997) indicated that privatization is not necessarily the answer to inefficient public service, especially when the social costs are high and unaffordable. Examples from some developing countries show that political reform in terms of “...*creating strong incentives and capacity for the people to police political leaders is a veritable check on waste, corruption and inefficiency in the public service*” (Amadi, 2004). This, according to Tendler, was exemplified by Cear’a, a Brazilian state, which over-came clientelism and inefficiency by organizing and empowering the people to effectively demand quality and efficient services (Amadi, 2004).

Not only has research established a relationship between political leadership and socio-economic development; but the World Bank has in its studies revealed that good governance is a sine qua non for socio-economic progress (Kolapo, 2007). In their study, as was also reported by Kolapo, Ndulu and O’Connell noted that Africa’s underdevelopment could be linked primarily to the governance models practiced in most parts of the African continent. (Kolapo, 2007)

It has been illustrated in this segment of the paper that political reforms are not made in a vacuum. Rather, they and their outcome reflect the political context in which they originate. Thus, authoritarian systems beget authoritarian reforms which are imposed on, rather than accepted by, the people. Conversely, democratic systems beget democratic reforms which, in such a context, are the product of the collective will, desires, decisions and efforts of the people. Democracy is not used here in the World Bank sense in which, according to Laakso (1995), it is reduced to “*a certain institutional design of decision-making, whose merit is not on emancipation but on functionality and effectiveness*”. It is used in its popular sense, the major ingredients of which include supremacy of popular will, equality before the law, rule of law, free and fair election of political leaders, respect for fundamental human rights, provision of adequate opportunities for individuals and groups to develop their personalities and potentials through unrestricted participation in the national scheme of things, and rational performance of their civic duties ... (Obasi & Erundu, 2000).

Recommendations

For successful and effective implementation of current and future reforms in the country, the following strategies and measures are recommended:

- Democratization of the process of policy and programme initiation and implementation
- Review and redefinition of the on-going reforms with a view to increasing their democratic contents in practice as much as in principles
- Adoption and institutionalization of authentic and popular democratic norms and values which will in turn engender democratic reforms

- Ridding our policies of foreign contents, or orienting them to our dynamic and local circumstances
- Curtailing the nation's economic romance with imperialist Western organizations which directly or indirectly underdeveloped Third World countries.
- Enthronement of respect for the rule of law at all levels of governance and national affairs and, most importantly,
- Increasing socio-economic and political empowerment of the people to the extent that they can freely, safely and effectively challenge cases of corruption and abuse of office on the part of political leaders and public office holders.

Conclusion

No country can develop beyond the moral level of its leaders and citizens. National development is all about collective mobilization and harnessing of human and other resources for the purpose of generating the material needs and services required to improve the quality of life of both the people and the nation itself. It is hoped that, if adopted, the recommendations made here will facilitate the initiation and implementation of desirable reform policies and programmes in the best interest of the nation's development.

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