



Ethnicity and the Federal Character Policy in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

One of the questions that have continued to confront policy makers in Nigeria since the colonial days has been the issue of how to ensure fair play in a plural society characterized, as it were, by diversities and inequalities of various magnitudes and dimensions. Nigerian policy makers saddled with the responsibility of fashioning the best socio-political structure to take care of the problem of inter-ethnic rivalry and the dominance of government by one ethnic group or a combination of ethnic groups to the exclusion of others, decided to introduce the federal character principle. It is to address the perceived predominance of persons from few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in the composition of government or the appointment or election of persons to high offices in the state. This paper examines the issue of ethnicity in Nigeria, the federal character principles, how it has affected the Nigerian polity and makes some recommendations on the way forward.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a heterogeneous nation-state because it is made up of variegated ethnic groups which were independent of one another prior to colonialism. The different ethnic groups which were eventually brought together to form what is today known as Nigeria had different political, economic and social systems before they were colonized by Britain. The issue of national integration of the different ethnic groups which make up Nigeria has always been a major focus in the polity. Considering the fact that the inter-ethnic wars, resulting in the enslavement of captives by the victorious ethnic groups, the expansionist policies of the different kingdoms, empires and caliphates, and the ruthless exploitation of vassal states or territories by the conquerors in the pre-colonial societies cannot but confirm the fact that hostile groups were brought together to form the Nigeria polity. Ethnicity exists in Nigeria polity because there are different ethnic groups.

Theoretical Framework: The Integration Theory

The theoretical framework for this paper which is geared towards examining the issue of ethnicity and the federal character policy in Nigeria is the integration theory. The theory as explained in Smith (2003:200-203), is a theory of political integration which attached great weight to ethnicity in explaining separatism. In the Third World context, this emphasizes the fact that new states were frequently the arbitrary creations of colonialism. They consisted of a multiplicity of ethnic groups bound together under colonial domination and a common administrative and economic system which came into being, after the European powers had divided their tropical dependencies among themselves with scant regard to existing social and political boundaries.

Differences in religion and ethnicity were further exacerbated by the representation of these incorporated societies in tribal categories and by the unequal impact of colonial educational, economic and political experiments. With special reference to Nigeria, there were educational disparities between the Northern and the Southern regions. It is a common fact of history that at independence, the South, that is, (the former Eastern and Western regions) was ahead of the North in terms of Western education. It is noted that the nationalism which subsequently drew these communities/regions together was based solely on opposition to subjugation by an alien power. They were united only by the desire to throw off colonial domination. The states created by the achievement of independence are thus faced with the agonizing problems of winning the full commitment of their citizens which is taken for granted in most Western societies.

In equipping the state with a mystique of nationhood, the new leaders were faced with intense competition from diverse forms of sub-national loyalties, which is often referred to as cultural pluralism. The parochial loyalties may be based on ethnic identity, language, caste, religion or region and they are often founded on tribal communalities, which elevated the legitimacy of traditional community above that of the modern form of political association – the nation state. The “primordial” attachment to tradition is thus seen as an obstacle to development (Ademolekun, 1986:96). To check this trend therefore, the federal character principle of the federal government which is aimed at ensuring that public institutions and organizations in Nigeria are occupied by people who would reflect the demographic diversity and ethno-regional plurality that is prevalent in Nigeria was proposed and recommended by the 1979 Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) in recognition of the heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian society.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

What is Ethnicity?

Ethnicity is a social phenomenon which has to do with interactions among different ethnic groups (Nnoli, 1978:5). Ethnic groups are social formations which are distinguished by such communal factors as language and/or culture. They may not be culturally or linguistically homogeneous owing to the existence of the differences that provide the basis for the delineation or sub-ethnic systems. Ethnicity is characterized by conflicts arising from competition for scarce values in the society and also by a sense of oneness or common identity or consciousness vis-à-vis other groups in the society. It is usually in association with religious political and sectional factors. Some of the pathologies of ethnicity include nepotism, discrimination and corruption. According to Idahosa (1994). Ethnicity owes its continued vitality to the keen nature of the struggle for power and resources in a context of scarcity, insecurity and a lack of confidence in official norms and regulations. The widespread Nigerian view of the state as an entity composed of strategic offices which can be captured as the outcome of a competitive process – openly electoral or through the power of numbers and their collective influence – give renewed purpose to the constantly evolving network of religion and ethnicity.

It is obvious that ethnicity does not exist in a pure form, but it is reinforced by the struggle for power and scarce values or resources, insecurity and the inability of the leadership to command the confidence of the people. The concept of ethnic group has been variously defined by different writers. Gordon (1964) defined an ethnic group as any group which is defined or set off by race, religion or defined origin or some combination of these categories. The definition is of limited utility especially when Nigeria is under consideration. In Nigeria, the sense of identification with an ethnic group is by far different from that with either race or a religious group.

Sandra (2006) also defined an ethnic group as consisting of interacting members, who defined themselves as belonging to a named or labeled social group with whose interest they identified, and which manifests certain aspects of a unique culture while constituting a part of a wider society. Ethnicity in Nigeria involves the identification of Nigerians with the dominant or subordinate majority or minority ethnic groups, all of which co-exist within the same society. The co-existence of these ethnic groups within the same polity has frequently led to the description of Nigeria as an accident of history (Okpu, 2001:16).

Exclusiveness is an attribute of ethnicity, this often results in inter-ethnic discrimination in jobs, housing, admission into educational institutions, marriages, business transactions or the distribution of social services. This factor of exclusiveness is usually accompanied by nepotism and corruption (Ukiwo, 2005:71).

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What is Federal Character Policy in Nigeria?

The term 'Federal Character' was coined by the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) which drafted the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The term gained wide currency and usage after it was embodied in the constitution. It is enshrined in section 14(3) of the 1979 Constitution thus:

The composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or sectional groups, in that government or any of its agencies.

Section 14(4) of the said constitution also stipulates that:

The composition of the government of a state, a local government council or any of the agencies of such government or council or such agencies shall be carried out in such manner as to recognize the diversity of the people within its area of authority and the need to promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all the peoples of the federation.

These constitutional provisions were respectively repeated verbatim in sections 15(3) and 15(4) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The CDC adopted the principle of federal character in recognition of the heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian society. The Committee decided to entrench the formula in the constitution to check these cleavages, ensure orderly progress of the country and to promote national unity, foster national loyalty and give every citizen of Nigeria a sense of belonging to the nation.

The idea of the federal character principle is however not new. It had operated informally during the pre-independence era when the nationalists agitated for participation in the administration of colonial Nigeria especially after Nigeria became a formal federation in 1954. During this period, the federal character principle was mainly concerned with legislative representation and equalization of inter-regional opportunities in education and appointments at the new federal level. But in this present formalized and institutionalized form, as entrenched in the 1979 and 1989 constitutions, the federal character policy is practised in virtually every sphere of federal, state and local government operations. The Federal Character Commission was set up to ensure the smooth application and operation of the policy in order to engender a sense of belonging in all Nigerians and strengthen the nation's unity and stability.

This Commission is empowered to work out an equitable formula for the distribution of cadres of post, to monitor, promote and enforce

compliance with the principle of proportional sharing of posts at all levels of government, and to take measures to prosecute heads of government ministries, bodies or agencies who fail to comply with the formula. The principle of federal character emphasizes the need for ethnic-balancing as a necessity in the evolution of Nigerian citizenship and for ensuring less acrimonious relationships among the various peoples of Nigeria. According to Saro-Wiwa (1985:7) the formula will make for a more equal federation to which more people will owe loyalty because they see themselves represented meaningfully therein.

Simply put, the federal character principle is aimed at creating a sense of belonging and participation by the diverse ethnic and political groups in the governance of Nigeria. It is an outcome of the anxieties and fears of domination that characterizes ethno-regional relation in Nigeria. It is aimed at ensuring that our public institutions are peopled in a manner that reflects our demographic diversity. It is a mechanism for accessing public goods and privileges in a fashion that is consistent with our ethno-regional plurality (Awa, 1982:90).

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It is very obvious that the purpose of the federal character principle in Nigeria is a laudable one. It is to ensure social harmony among all Nigerians and to promote stability and national integration. It is rather unfortunate that the federal character principle, while stressing the imperative of ethnic-belonging, invariably enthrones ethnicity and de-emphasizes the national aspiration. It tends to also strengthen the parochial, particularist orientations and primordial ethnic attachment of Nigerians (Agbodike, 2004). The federal character principle has been manipulated and channeled to serve the overall interest of the petty bourgeois ruling class. It is the members of this class who formulate and operate the principle. Under the guise of this principle, the members of the bourgeois class get themselves entrenched in power and exercise control over the machinery of the state apparatus. They strive to reconcile their class differences through the operation of an acceptable formula for the allocation, distribution and sharing of national resources and benefits among themselves. While they do this, they capitalize on the ethnic differences among the people to win the support of the masses in their areas. In the course of this elite game, members of this class climb to positions, amass wealth and enrich themselves.

The federal character principle satisfies the quest for representativeness and proportionality in the allocation of resources and in making of appointments among various interest groups. However, in the application of the formula as noted by Bodunrin (1989:307) “choices are often made on the basis of criterion other than merit”. For instance, the quota system as applied in education leads to lowering of standards against national interest. In the army, it leads to the production of sub-grade soldiers and officers. In the civil and public services of the federation, standards and professionalism are

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compromised and endangered. By eschewing meritocracy without recourse to standards, the quota system becomes morally reprehensible and an act of injustice.

It is however noted by Ohonbamu (1968:130) and Kirk-Greene (1971:186) that if only the merit criterion is used for appointments, most jobs would naturally be taken over by the most enterprising and/or educationally advanced ethnic group. Thus, to ensure that the other tribes or ethnic groups do not feel deprived or cheated, the principle of federal character should be used to give them a sense of belonging. Be that as it may, in the civil and public services of the nation, it has been noted that as a result of the undue application of quota and lack of regard for merit in the application of federal character principle, standards and professionalism are being compromised and endangered and it has also created some measure of tension and frustration among some public servants, particularly in the south, whose career expectations are adversely affected by the need to reflect the federal character and who see the measure as a ploy to deprive them of jobs for the benefit of the Northerners. All these make the service an arena of sectional struggles and competition and it makes people to lose confidence in the impartiality of the government and the neutrality of the service as an instrument of state policy (Ayam, 1987:91-102).

It is seen that ethnicity sacrifices merit, efficiency and effectiveness in resource management on the altar of mediocrity. It encourages inter-ethnic bickering, hatred and non-tolerance and abhors even development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the obvious shortcomings and the controversies surrounding the notion and application of federal character and the issue of ethnicity in Nigeria, this paper highlights the following recommendations:

1. The federal government should provide a general policy framework that will allow every ethnic group self-determination and rights to development at their own pace. Every ethnic group should be allowed to use its own resources and capacities in such a way that they will achieve consistent improvements in their environment, resources and occupations. When this improvement is targeted at the real need of the people, then they can begin to witness some transformations from within.
2. In an attempt to assuage the mutual suspicions and ill-feelings created by North-South balance, which has been achieved with the creation of additional states, this must be done with caution in order to ensure the viability of the states in terms of discharging their statutory and other functions for the common good of all and the orderly development of the country.

3. Efforts should be made through appropriate legislations to remove “indigene syndrome” engendered by the federal character principle and the discriminatory policies, laws and regulations which legalize its operations. It is very disheartening to see fellow Nigerians some of whom were born and may have lived in a place all their lives, being thrown out of jobs and discriminated against because they are not indigenes of the area. Every citizen of Nigeria who settles in any part of the country should be treated as an indigene of the place and endowed with residency right as is the case in the United States of America.
4. The federal character principle should be applied with less stringency but with fairness among ethnic groups, states and local governments; this is to avoid cleavages and divisions where none ought to have existed.
5. Furthermore, the principle of merit should not be completely sacrificed on the altar of the federal character principle. The appointment of persons to various positions should be made from the best available in any group or section in the country. Recruitment to positions which require specialist training such as those of medical practitioners, pilots, architects and engineers, should essentially be based on merit. This can be done by giving equal access to education to all Nigerians, to bridge the educational disparities between North and South, and to give opportunities for further training and education to serving staff.
6. The Nigerian masses need to be given equal opportunities for employment, equitable share in the distribution of the resources and benefits of the state in terms of education, access to goods and services provided by the government and improved condition of life as a means of redressing the mass feeling of insecurity. It is only when these crucial issues are addressed that majority of Nigerians can develop a sense of national identity that transcends parochial loyalty, ethnicity, religion and language.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, one very important fact worthy of note is that, as long as Nigeria remains a federation, the need and the clamour to balance the diverse interests in the country will always be there. The federal character principle has been employed to take care of these diverse and sometimes conflicting interests. What is therefore necessary is to seek ways and means to make it less rancorous and problematic and to channel it in such a way as to ensure the overall peace, unity, stability and progress of the

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country. Ethnic differences and sectional interests should not be seen as an unmitigated evil, rather, efforts should be made to overcome them in the march to a stable and integrated nationhood. Nigerians should see the Nigerian nation as the cord that ties them to a common destiny, and they should be made to stress more of those things that unite them rather than those that separate them (Uroh, 2004).

The federal character principle should ensure that modalities are worked out by which its beneficiaries can make reciprocal contributions to the overall common good, progress, stability and national integration of the country. It should not concern itself only with the inter-ethnic distribution of national resources, privileges and benefits.

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