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**THE CONTRADICTIONS OF NIGERIAN FEDERAL STRUCTURE AND THE CRISIS OF
DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: LESSONS FOR AFRICAN DEMOCRACIES**

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ABSTRACT

The creation of the Nigerian state just as in many other African countries has remained one of the most controversial legacies of colonial rule in Nigerian. Many autonomous nationalities were fused together without consideration to their ethnic, socio-cultural and political configurations and consent. The arrangement has remained and has created a lot of suspicion, tension and in most cases outright conflict on religious, political and ethnic lines. This paper examines this problematic and discovers among other issues that, apart from the destructive legacies of colonial rule and the politics of capitalist neo-colonialism in Africa, many years of military autocracy and repression have also helped in deconstructing the tenets of democracy to institute militarized ideologies of personal and dynastic rule, corruption, dictatorship and the suppression of the citizens especially the minority groups and opposition political parties. To resolve this misnormal and create a viable and an inclusive democracy that will guarantee the corporate existence and survival of the republic and by implication serve as example to other African countries, this paper recommends amongst other policy options, a new orientation on the part of leadership on the basic tenets of democracy which will bring out the social contract character of the state and adherence to responsive and responsible character of leadership that will ensure cooperation from the federating units.

INTRODUCTION

There has existed a clash of ideological options between a quest for worldwide inter-dependence of collective cultures and identities for fast development and that of the desire for smaller, self-governing political units that are more responsive to the individual citizens in line with their cultures and group goals. Sub-nationalism in terms of linguistic, cultural, political and religious ties has provided this sense of identity and self-determination especially in heterogeneous societies like Nigeria. The disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, Zaire, Somalia, Sudan and the emergence of mini-states have brought to a glaring point the weaknesses of artificial federal systems. This is mostly due to the fact that, hitherto suppressed identities are exploding as the quest by the "minorities" to participate in the governance process is rising as against the colonial legacy of domination and suppression.

According to Elaigwu (2000), Nigeria as a heterogeneous nation has struggled with the "arranged" federal structure and has witnessed command violence in forms of riots, civil war, coups and counter-coups, ethno-religious conflicts in the bid to concretize the nation building process and corporate development. The resultant factor is instability which has staggered

Nigerian democratic and development process and has in response deepened the negativities of poverty, diseases, hunger, illiteracy and general backwardness. A more common feature of Nigerian federalism which this discourse seeks to unravel is its fragility and its attendant consequences in terms of ethno-religious, cultural, political and regional sentiments of suspicion, tension and outright violence and the attempts towards reverting these agonies for effective national development and integration. It is worthy to note that, this problematic is not limited to the Nigerian federal structure alone but it affects all federating African countries which were affected by the evil of colonial artificiality.

Conceptualization of Variables

Federalism

Federalism is an arrangement whereby powers within a multi-national state are shared between a federal or central authority and a number of regionalized governments in such a way that each unit including the central authority, exists as a government separately and independently from the others, Sagay (2006:34). Federalism is a mechanism for effecting desirable compromises in a multinational state. It is a formation of a union among members without obliterating their identities at sub-national level (Elaigwu, 2000:12).

Federalism can also be seen as an attempt to reflect the diverse political, social cultural and economic interest within the framework of broader unity. Ramphal, former Commonwealth Secretary-General observed that; federalism presupposes "the need for cooperation in something coupled with a right to separate action in others. Common wealth report (2002).

Eleazu (2000:10) conceives federalism as a "means where similarities are harmonized and differences accommodated". It can be said to be an ultimate expression of the mutual consent of the component units to come together not as superior and subordinate but as coordinate and independent units that work cooperatively towards the fears of political and economic domination of the "minorities" in order to keep a federal system one and united.

Federalism therefore exist in the midst of multi-pluralism and diversity to neutralize the differences and create harmonious cooperation devoid of domination and marginalization with the central aim of ensuring peace and security as well as near equal development among the federating units, which submits some of the rights and privileges despite their being autonomous to the cooperate existence of the overall polity.

Democracy

Democracy and its theories are traceable to the ancient Greek city states which classified government according to the number of participants in the decision making process. According to them, the system and practice of democracy ranges from rule by one person (monarchy) through rule by few (oligarchy) and by many (democracy). They further contended that the few individuals who control a nation's key financial, industrial and communication institutions constitute the ruling elites usually in small number that govern modern society. George-Genyi (2008:4). The conceptualization of democracy is quite intriguing and complex because it is conceived differently by different people. Generally, a

democratic government is propelled by the collective ideas, energy, wisdom, understanding, knowledge and perceptions of the people rather than the mystical construct "swinging and wriggling in the mind of his Excellency" (Odofin 2005:94).

Arising from the above, Dahl cited by Diamond argues that;

democracy is a system of government that meets three essential conditions: an extensive competition among individuals and groups (especially political parties) for all elective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force; a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies at least through regular and fair election, so that no major (adult) social group is excluded and a level of civil and political liberties, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organizations sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation (Diamond 2002:14 – 15).

Democracy therefore requires institutional mechanisms, established procedures and organizations such as political parties, legislatures, and interest groups through which public opinion is translated into government policy. For democracy to be sustained in any society certain conditions are imperative, prominent of which is the economic factor which is very critical in determining the sustainability of the democratic project. It is claimed that political democracy and liberty becomes realities only when they are supported by economic and social democracy, Odofin (2005:95) has asserted that extreme differences in the distribution of wealth may impede not just the sustainability of democracy but its continued existence and stability. Unless democracy is used as means of responding to the acute needs of the people such as food security, shelter and clothing, the people would not be strong enough to support democracy. Democracy only makes sense when there is a guarantee of the people's freedom, liberty and economic emancipation. Increasingly it has been shown overtime that the material poverty of majority of Africans is at the root of sporadic outbursts of ethno-religious and political conflicts on the continent (Egwu: 2002:7). A situation that has made statehood difficult to stabilize and achieve the goals of cooperative statehood particularly in Nigeria.

Ntalaja (2000:45) had earlier buttressed this fact when he stated that, democracy only makes sense when it is used as a continuous process for promoting equal access to the good things of life, and the promotion of fundamental human rights like the dignity of life, freedom of speech, and association amongst others. We can therefore argue that, democracy makes sense only when it is use to attack and eradicate material poverty, illiteracy, hunger and ignorance which are antithetical to the stability of any society. It is to be noted that the institutionalization of democratic rule in Africa has faced much of these challenges and the political elites have continued to exploit this conditions to manipulate divisive and destructive tendencies that have stalled democratic stability, good governance and development in Africa.

The Nigerian Federal System: An Overview of its Origin

A federal system of government reflects the compromises in a multinational state which originates from the desire of the associating members to form a union without necessarily

obliterating their identities at sub-national levels. Federalism is therefore to guarantee the security of all and protect the self-determination of all, hence the greasing oil of federalism is nationalism as reconciled by the centrifugal forces of sub-nationalism and centripetal forces of the federal centre. According to Ramphal (1979:41) why it is self-evident that the foundations of federalism must be anchored on nationalism,

...It cannot be ignored that at the heart of nationalism lies the concept of self-determination. It is, however, a concept of double application, particularly in a federal context: for in relation to federalism, secession is the claimed concomitant of self-determination, which can therefore help to destroy federalism just as it serves to build it.

Nigeria as a polity evolved and was federalized not through the consciousness of its peoples just as in other African states. The dilemma associated with this "false" and "forced" nationalism can be seen in the overwhelming criticism and hostilities that the polity has experienced over the years between the amalgamated entities. Nigerian's federalism which was concretized by the Lyttleton constitution of 1954 became the most appropriate system of managing the artificiality of the polity which was fused together based on economic interest without taking into account the fears of political and economic domination of the "minorities" in order to keep Nigeria one. This desire was expressed by Sir Tafawa Balewa when he said that: *I am pleased to see that we are all agreed that the federal system is, under the present conditions, the only sure basis on which Nigeria can remain united... to use in Nigeria therefore, unity in diversity is a source of great strength, and we must do all in our power to see that this federal system of government is strengthened and maintained.*

It is worth mentioning however that, federalism in modern Nigeria is aberration of core federalism. The centre dominates and dictates for the federating units, the autonomy of the federating units is not secured thereby creating more ethnic and regional cleavages and contestations to and against the centre. The result of this is the formation of ethnic and regional militias which have become the main discord of the Nigerian federal system.

The Nigerian "project" has generated a lot of misgivings and enthusiasm. While the "dominating" segment see it as a panacea for collective development, the "dominated" see it as an undesirable oppressive mechanism in which the way out is secession as threatened and is still been threatened by Biafra or a creation of sub-regional forces like the South-South Forum, Arewa consultative forum, Middle Belt, and the East, With its members paying more loyalty to it than the centre. It is worth mentioning that the artificiality called Nigeria today was a home of hundreds of peoples with different traditional customs, languages, politics and levels of administrative, cultural and economic development. As earlier mentioned, the desire to protect economic interest to keep the people docile for maximum exploitation, thus the protectorization of the people was consummated in terms of the River-Niger Coast 1887, the Northern Nigerian protectorate in 1906 and subsequently the "mistake" of 1914. The resultant creation reflected in what Tsuwa (2006:5) citing Nnoli:

A ram-shackled polity conveniently labeled Nigeria, a configuration where what some wanted is neglected by what others wanted and what emerge is what nobody wanted.

From the inception of this "necessary creation", of Nigerian federal system, British ruled the nation (Nigeria) via three approaches; First was a combination of force and trickery, where they met resistance; second was the system of divide and rule; keeping the various ethnic groups apart and suspicious of each other; and third; the method of indirect rule where traditional rulers were subdued and made to serve as figure heads for the colonial administration. At independence therefore, the foundation of the Nigeria federal system was not properly laid. The North saw Nigeria as a patchwork of the South and vice-versa. Concretely, Nigeria according to Tolufashe (2004:76) was formed for the three major ethnic groups of Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba. The feelings, claims and concessions of the three groups were considered leaving the over three hundred ethnic groups out of the Nigeria equation. This was and is still the roots of the dilemma of the Nigerian federal system which has produced the nature of the country.

Interrogating the Contradictions of the Nigerian Federal System

The dilemma of the Nigeria federal system can be situated in the context of continuous eruptions of hostilities. According to Alubo (2003:5), all these are related to claims and contestations over identity as a basis of determining who is included or excluded from decision-making or opportunities in particular situations. A prominent factor of the Nigerian federal system is the "we" vs "them" factor, what Alubo (2005:6-7) argues is an effect of "ordering" and being "ordered", a system that creates layers of domination and being dominated. The majority-minority issue has continued to shape Nigerian politics, a situation where the majority keeps the minorities in their minds tightly under their wings. For instance, the opposition of the Sardauna of Sokoto to the independence of Nigeria as moved by Chief Anthony Enahoro in 1952 was a clear manifestation of the fear of domination. The attachment to ethnic and regional affiliation instead of national nationalism was again expressed by Dr. Oladejo Reimi, the Secretary-General of the South-South Assembly when he announced during the 2007 electioneering campaigns that;

Any Southern aspirant to the presidency who campaigned for the Vice Presidency would be ostracized, embarrassed, harassed, intimidated, persecuted, abused, disowned and so much tormented that he would be ashamed to go back to his village (The Nation 12 Feb. 2006:pg6).

The uprising of the south-south towards the presidency re-manifested itself in the 2011 general elections when the region pressured one of its own President Goodluck Jonathan to disregard the presidential zoning formula to contest for the presidency even though he was a signatory to the zoning agreement. The problem of minority-majority according to Tolofari (2003:34) remains the dilemma of the Nigerian federal system which to him can only be solved when the majority tribes publicly accept that they have denied the minorities rights and access to power, they have exploited them and subjected them to onlookers in the affairs of their own country. The elites as another dilemma of the federal structure therefore manipulate ethnic differences and whip up primordial sentiments to cause and sustain ethnic conflicts which frustrate nation-building and democratic consolidation. Closely related to the above is the problematic of "indigeneship" and "citizenship". The Nigerian federal system as

existing today was "cobbled" together from nationalities, tribes that had hitherto little or nothing in common. According to Otite (2002:5) Nigeria has several kinds of pluralisms, the core ones being ethnic, religious and political. The merging of these diversities together without consultation, account for the persistent questions of ethnicity; sense of belonging and crises of citizenship. This has led to agitations of self-determinations and formation of organizations like Ohaneze Idi Igbo, Arewa Consultative Forum, and Oduduwa, the South-south Peoples Assembly etc.

According to Hagher (2002:51), Tsuwa and Akuul (2006:3), a classical example of this is reflected in the citizenship contestation of the Tiv in Taraba, Nasarawa and Plateau States which has continued to be a source of sub-regional instability. Dudley (1978:23) therefore argues that, the sheer number of ethnic groups in Nigeria makes democracy and unification of the polity difficult. The distinction between, indigenes-settlers is in effect discriminatory and create huge barriers between people. These contestations also creates crisis either in the bid to prevent people from registering during voters and census registration or during elections, a condition that prevent integration of national economy and overall stability of the nation. Theoretically, scholars like Tuna (1999) Kukah (1993), Mustapha (1998) as cited by Tsuwa and Akuul (2006:5) have blamed the indirect rule system under colonial rule as sowing the seed of ethnic domination which has created the identity problem. We therefore posit that, the inadequacies that the "mistake" of 1914 (amalgamation) created by haphazardly joining districts, religious, cultures and tribes to form Nigeria has continued to create more diversities that have become a bane towards not only the integration and development of the polity but also the practice and the consolidation of democracy. This was reflected when many sectional leaders argued from inception about the status of the Nigerian federal system. For instance, Awolowo said "Nigeria is not a nation; it is a mere geographical expression. Sir Ahmadu Bello also argued that, Nigeria is simply the knitting together of many and varied communities by the British. These statements are manifest today as inter-ethnic intolerance has become chronic due to mutual distrust among the sub-nations. The disaffection of the leaders manifested in the first republic when political parties were formed on regional lines and the attainment of political position was also based on the same lines. Another dilemma of the Nigerian federal system is the nature of the Nigerian "man", the Nigeria citizen who is equivocators, issue doggers, bribe takers, exploiters of the weak and ignorant, oppressors, outright dishonest people, corrupters and pathological liars. This accounts for why the resourcefulness of the nation has become the reason for abject poverty, hunger, diseases, insecurity and conflict which has continued to generate constant anger among the population thereby weakening the federal structure as people resort to their sub-national identities for development thereby making the centre fragile and vulnerable to crisis of disintegration. Today, the question of resource control has become a serious source of conflict in the Niger-Delta and thus extending to other regions. Oil in Nigeria has become to the polity what blood is to natural body, paradoxically, the oil seems to constitute a source of friction that threatens democracy and corporate existence of the polity. Extraction and distribution of the revenue accruing to it has resulted to restiveness, kidnaps and killings etc a scenario that has threatened the Nigerian polity and its

development partners. Another problem associated with the issue of resources is its impact on the environment. The extraction of oil in Nigeria for example has resulted to environmental degradation and pollution which has reduced arable land hence the struggle for occupation of the little land left for production. Expectedly, the issue has always been manipulated by the political elite who use this to clamour for political power which will enable them control economic power. This usually leads to fierce political struggle that many a time destroy the electoral process hence crippling democratic culture. The crisis of the Nigerian federal system can also be problematized within the context of state collapse in Africa and the lack of capacity to manage diversities and plurality of competing ethnic identities. This collapse is stimulated by narrow framework of accumulation, heavy foreign domination and debt burden, absences of coherent and well-conceived indigenous industrialization strategy, the exclusion of opposition groups from governance and the waning legitimacy of the state has continued to create political tension and contradictions which undermine the nation-state agenda of a federal system. Nigeria faces this greatly and it has become a major scare in the cooperate existence of the people.

Manifestations of Democratic Crisis in Nigeria's Federal System

Manifesting from the contradictions of the Nigeria federal system is the attendant vulnerability of the polity to violence, conflicts, general instability and the collapse of democracy, a situation that has retarded the development process of the nation. The core elements of federalism which are, power sharing, autonomy, resources distribution, and minority rights have been distorted by the nature of the federal system and democratic practice in Nigeria.

The first manifestation of the crisis of federalism in Nigeria was the collapse of the first republic. The disagreement between the political parties which were founded on ethnic lines soon led to the 1962 Census crisis and then the 1964/5 electoral crisis which led to the arrest of many political activist and candidates of opposing political parties. This situation led to demonstrations, vandalization of properties, protests and total break down of law and order. There was therefore mutual lost of confidence of the citizens on those who controlled and utilized state powers. As Zartman (1995:5) argues, the authoritative political institution and actors had lost their right to rule. This lack of legitimacy turned Nigerian politics and democracy into what Mazrui (2005:6) called 'ethnocracy', a kind of politics which I conceive and tag as not only "ethniced" but the ethnic elements depend on "real" or "raw" power to achieve legitimacy. Since raw power became the major instrument in controlling state power and all that accrues to it in Nigeria at this time, the group within the power matrix that ostensibly enjoys the monopoly of violence, that is the military as Uroh (2007:58) argues became the major players, hence the January coup of 1966 which was also ethniced as well as the ravage coup of the same year. As well as the continued replication of the situation in 1983. The second manifestation of the problem of the Nigerian federal system was its incorporation into the committee of autocratically ruled states and nations that have experience civil wars. The many years of military rule and destructive autocracy noticed the usage of force on the federal system which was and is still regarded as the life-blood of the

country's viability and stability as a multi-ethnic political community. According to Seberu (2005), the military degraded and vandalized the federal system both as a constitutional design for sharing jurisdictional competencies between national and sub-national levels of government and as a political device for accommodating the country's diverse ethnic constituencies. The military also suppressed the pressures and movements of minority aspirations for resource control, democratization and good governance, this situation of repression of rights of the groups forced the gap between federalism and democracy wider than it had existed. Ake (1989:45) therefore argues that, the *political soldiers* failed not only because of their *misgovernance* and institution of corruption but also of the increasing scale in social contradictions in Nigeria, a situation they could not manage hence the 30 months Nigerian Civil war with its catastrophic consequences. During the second republic, there was oil driven, multi-state pressures fueled by ethno-distributive pressures that according to Bach (1989:23) exacerbated the corrupt nature of politics and governance in the country. The personalization of rulership by the leadership of Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (1985-1993) and Sani Abacha (1993-1998) distorted the federal character as it destroyed local self-rule and shared rule but instead created a degenerated crisis of proliferated states creation and revenue allocation. These divisions weakened the powers of the constituent units and led to the centralization of not only power but also the capacity to make the whole society vulnerable to suppression and exploitation of allocations and privileges. Because of the imperfections in the federal structure during the military years, democracy on its return in 1999 was greeted with the clamor for power-shift, regional politicization via the zoning system, allocation of resources via the federal character. The cry for sovereign national conference, the eruption and consolidation of ethno-religious militia groups that have taken a violent connotation, the cry against marginalization and exploitation by minority groups etc. The above scenario has created a deconstruction of democracy in Nigeria where the state is oppressive and the ruling class is autocratic and insensitive to the needs of the majority who suffer in the midst of plenty. The inequality in sharing the spoil of the Nigeria federal structure has continued to form the basis for the crisis of democracy, governance and development in Nigeria. Power for example despite the issue of "national character" has not been shared fairly as some region (North) have almost monopolized political power. This has created a feeling of exclusion and frustration which has reduced the loyalty to the federal system thereby threatening the unity of the nation. Zabadi and Gambo (2000:12) therefore observed that, this has created operational imperfections in the operation of the federal government as its presence is more manifest in other regions. This situation had and is still creating a problem for collective democratization to tri-polar faint lines in the society, which its consequence was the subvention of democracy by the military in 1966 and the escalation of sectionist agitations. The problem of resource allocation and unit autonomy have also become a reoccurring problem in the Nigerian federal system, the restiveness in the Niger Delta region, the Boko Haram terrorist uprising in the North East and the struggle between the federal and state government over federal allocation has created developmental problems for the states and their peoples. The hostility and acrimonies that greeted the issue of resource allocation and control as projected by the oil producing states and their communities have made open the accumulation of these resources by few members of the

federal kitchen cabinet "cabal", a situation that has made majority of the people hungry and frustrated, most a times resulting to deaths. On the eve of decolonization in Africa, the departure of the colonial powers was accompanied by the internecine, armed ethno-political conflicts between majority or "favoured" ethnic groups, which wanted to maintain control of the inherited state, and disadvantaged usually not always numerically minority ethnic groups, which wanted to capture or reconstitute the inherited state on more favourable terms, or failing, which, to secede from it. Jinadu (2005:16) argues that, the inherited psychology of mutual fear of ethnic domination based on stratified citizenship created by colonial rule remains a central aspect of ethno-political conflict in post-colonial African states like Angola, Chad, Burundi, Rwanda, Nigeria, Sudan, Senegal and Uganda amongst others. He added that, the crisis of democracy in these federating countries is situated within the one party ideology and the drift towards state repression and closure of political space, and consolidation of authoritarian and personal rule. In most African countries therefore, the degree of political and administrative morality is very low, so electoral corruption is quite a visible feature of the democratic system. Thus the imperative of a transparent electoral system has become one of the major pre-occupation and prerequisites for democratic practices. The tendency of political leadership to undermine the interest of their people constitutes danger to democratic stability. Democracy must be seen by all African federating systems as a necessity, an imperative but not an exclusive of a few. To avoid the ever disintegrating treat faced by Nigeria as well as to avoid the resource curse condition of Nigeria and its checkered democratic experience, Africa states should perceive their amalgamation and consider the situation as a responsibility for seeking collective sacrifice from all the segments of the society. The crisis in the political process as expressed often in election crisis is not the problem of democracy but the inability of the political leadership to exploit the opportunities offered by democracy for the development of its people.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria operates a federal system, however, the inadequacies of the federal system has continue to endanger the cooperate existence of the polity not only due to the artificiality and haphazard nature of its arrangement but also due to the failure and collapse of the state apparatus in ensuring democracy and good governance. To ensure cooperate existence and peaceful co-existence of the Nigerian nation therefore, this paper recommends amongst other issues that, the majority-minority, citizen-settler issues need to be addressed to give all and sundry a sense of belonging as to ensure tolerance. The state should be more responsive and responsible to create a sense of commitment and sustenance of the federal system.

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