DIALECTICS OF NATIONAL QUESTION AND RESTRUCTURING IN NIGERIA: A RETHINK

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Abstract

The paper examined the nexus between the National Question and Restructuring in Nigeria with a view to x-raying the centrifugal forces militating against fostering unity in diversity in the country. Relying on secondary data and employing content analysis, the paper found that the political elites are practising politics with bitterness; and have been exploiting the great diversity of the country to their advantage to the detriment of the majority citizens. This culminated to the country becoming enveloped in multifarious violent conflicts that is threatening to tear the country apart. Consequently, the paper recommended among others that Justice and equitable distribution of resources by political office holders and stamping out corruption among others will go a long way in reducing poverty induced conflicts to the barest minimum; and Strict adherence to the tenets of democracy such as accountability, transparency, rule of law and being responsive to the citizens' yearnings and aspirations, coupled with diversifying the economy will enhance socio-economic development and political stability in Nigeria.

Key Words: National Question, Restructuring, Security, Fourth Republic.

Introduction

Incontrovertibly, issues revolving around the national question and restructuring are not recent phenomena. Going down memory lane, in the colonial era, unitary system of government was introduced and constitutional developments were periodically carried out; and regionalism, revenue allocation formula and minority issues in the three regions were all administrative challenges that the colonial government faced. At the verge of gaining independence by Nigeria, the Lyttleton constitution of 1954 introduced a full-fledged federal system of government in order to effectively cater for the great diversity in the country.

With the advent of independence in 1960, the colonial legacy of a heterogeneous country characterised by three major ethnic groups, over 250 other ethno-linguistic groups, and three religions, namely, Christianity, Islam and Traditional religion among others, created "primordial attachments that offers opportunities for social cohesion at the communal level, but creates social conflicts at the

national (state) level, as the arena for socio-political and economic competition" (Dunmoye, 2012: 19).

The journey of Nigeria in the postcolonial era has been a tortuous one owing to her inability to foster unity in diversity, which is a cardinal principle of federalism, hence issues bordering on the national question and restructuring have refused to leave the front burner. This led to a compelling need to give a second thought to the persistent problems that stunts the ability of the country to move forward in terms of reaping the benefits of a federal system of government.

The paper is divided into six sections. The first section is the Introduction already discussed. The second part has to do with the Conceptual Clarifications, while the third segment is made up of the Literature Review. The fourth section comprises the Theoretical Framework. The fourth aspect is on the National Question and Restructuring in Nigeria. The sixth segment consists of the Conclusion and Recommendations.

Conceptual Clarifications

National Question

National question is oftentimes seen as a debate on whether Nigeria should remain as a nation state or disintegrate. On the other hand, national questions (pluralised) means that Nigeria is faced with a myriad of problems such as defective federalism, and other age long injustices. In other words, national question (singularised) has to do with "how to order the relations between the different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groupings, it also entails equal rights and privileges, access to power and equitable share of national resources"(Tell, 2002: 62 cited in Olasupo, 2005: 138). It follows therefore that in this paper, national question has to do with those factors that are threatening to disintegrate the country.

Restructuring

Restructuring entails drastic changes in an organisation or system with a view to improving its activities". Restructuring implies, re-engineering, re-organising, redesign, realignment, transformation, reconfiguration, reshuffle, reshaping, reschedule, reform, revamping, reconversion, adjustment among others" (Berry, 1989 cited in Kamal and Kamal, 2017: 196).

According to Kabir (2018: 8),

> Restructuring means different things to different people with different perspectives. To the poor, it means equitable distribution of wealth; it is fair representation in appointment to key positions to politically disadvantaged groups; it is provision of amenities to rural populace; it is state creation or break-up to politically excluded ethnic group or region, it is mindset re-engineering or value re-orientation to others, etc.

In Nigeria, as a result of sharp practices such as corruption, nepotism, ethnic chauvinism, religious bigotry, regionalism, inequitable distribution of resources and political exclusion of some groups among others, some Nigerians are agitating for more equitable change ranging from political to socio-economic restructuring which is the fulcrum on which this paper is hinged.

Literature Review

Barongo (1980: 64) aptly pinpointing the origin of primordial attachments to the colonial era, which eventually culminated to the current challenges of national question and restructuring, coupled with the manipulation of the heterogeneity of the society by the political elites to satisfy their economic needs as follows:

> For the successful politician however, being in control of the resources and thus able to manipulate them to the advantage of his supporters augurs a bright political future. Thus, politicians representing certain ethnic and sectional interests engage in cut-throat battles in order to control the management of the scarce resources. The manner in which the regime uses discriminatory devices in the allocation and utilization of these resources inevitably alienates some sections of society and intensifies ethnic and elite conflicts. The consequent tension in inter-ethnic and inter-elite relationships frequently leads to political instability.

In a similar vein, Oyovbaire (1980: 17) succinctly posited that the complexity of conflicts in Nigeria which originated from the double strategy of domination and exploitation by the colonial government gave rein to:

> Various dimensions of inequality of access to resources and in the distribution of the national product; inequality of access to power, justice and equity; various types and degrees of hatred, anger, and vice; ethnocentrism and chauvinism, existence of more than two publics and hence public distrust, avarice, bigotry and arrogance; the problems of spurious nationalism, institutional fragility, economic underdevelopment linked with low levels of technology, productivity, organizational skills

and perverse values. Every one of these features cuts across the horizontal as well as the vertical formation of the country.

Primordial sentiment which was the voting pattern in the First Republic repeated itself in the Second Republic as observed by Uche (2007: 62) in the following words:

> The politicization of ethnicity in spite of the constitutional break-up of the old regions into nineteen states… inevitably, political parties and leaders continued to play the only political tricks and campaigns, which they can easily muster and exploit for their individual and class interest – projecting themselves as champions of their respective ethnic homelands. In the process, campaign slogans were targeted at arousing ethnic sentiments with little or no emphasis on socio-economic and political issues concerning the development of the country.

Poignantly, Tedheke (2009: 61) threw more light on how the political elites manipulate Nigerian citizens through primordial sentiments in order to satisfy their selfish economic interest as follows:

> Richard Joseph was able to link the Nigerian crisis in general and democratic crisis in Nigeria in particular to the struggle for wealth by the landed aristocrat/comprador/rentier political elite. Hence issues of regionalism, population, ethnic blocs, language, religion and level of economic attainment have all become spheres of contest complicating the socio-cultural differences. This has equally rendered the issue of revenue allocation one of uncommon intensity... thus ethnic consciousness is superimposed over the interests of the downtrodden and thus serves to camouflage the more fundamental and 'objective' interests of competing elite or classes.

The annals of bad governance associated with primordial sentiments in Nigeria was amply highlighted by Aliyu (2017: 16-17) as the flamboyant display of illegally acquired wealth by politicians, which alienated a considerable percentage of the populace and fans the ember of cleavage and long muted but dangerous primordial sentiments such as ethnicity and religious bigotry. He further observed that the multifaceted persistent eruption of violent conflicts in the country is threatening to tear the country apart and Nigeria is at the threshold of collapse.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts the Marxian Political Economy approach. Marx and Engels (1877), the proponents of the theory opined that politics and socio-cultural systems are influenced by the economic structure known as substructure, hence the root causes of conflicts in human societies is the economic structure (Patrick, 2009: 6–7; Mohammed, 2011: 49).

The theory's position on the economic determinacy of political and socio-cultural activities "helps us to argue that because of the high level of poverty and corruption in Africa or third world countries, people tend to see access to political office as an escape route from poverty... these tendencies induce violence and instability" (Aule, 2015: 8). In other words, politicians in Nigeria view political offices as means of amassing wealth, which is of economic value. This explains why more often than not, politics in Nigeria is considered as a do-or-die affair or practised with bitterness.

National Question and Restructuring in Nigeria

Owing to the failure of Nigerian leaders especially political office holders to resolve agitations bordering on the national question, there were, and still are clarion calls by some citizens of the country for restructuring of the polity. However, in the Fourth Republic, fruitless attempts were made to resolve these contending issues by organising a National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) in 2005 during President Olusegun Obasanjo administration. It was viewed by many people that the conference was meant to serve the interest of the then President and the political elites. This was corroborated by Surajudeen (2005: 220) as follows:

> Again, the manner of conduct of the conference showed that it was meant for a selected few in the society. The manner in which some memoranda submitted by the people were totally jettisoned and replaced by some strange document originating from the presidency is a pointer to the fact that the inauguration of the conference was to fulfil the "hidden Agenda" of the administration. Not only this, the calibre of people that dominated the conference signified "an old wine in a new bottle".

> What would have been a good opportunity for the country to replace the old colonial state with an indigenous state capable of nurturing its own structures and institutions was again turned to another neo colonial misadventure at the expense of Nigerian people.

While Nigeria largely depend on the oil sector for its revenue, the negative social effects of the oil industry on the people of the Niger Delta region include "high

wave of inflation, moral bankruptcy, incessant litigation due to oil industry acquisition of land and emerging trend of environmental refugees and the social menace of youth occasioned by interrelated factors" (Aghalino, 2011: 118). Although the oil industry has attempted to perform some modicum of social responsibility, its effort is not good enough.

Some politicians in Nigeria operate at the whims and caprices of their godfathers, which is a major debacle to political stability as they are usually embroiled in illegal means of achieving their political ambitions, manipulation of public policies and turning young citizens to hooligans and thugs among others; and relegating the citizens' welfare and interests to the background (Alabi and Sakariyau, 2011: 291-294).

The manner in which politics is being practised in Nigeria as a do-or-die affair in a bid to control sharing of the national cake, which is the fastest means of amassing wealth in Nigeria, constitute the driving force behind the violent ethno-religious and regional politics from the First Republic to the Fourth Republic. Owing to high rate of poverty and unemployment of the teeming youths, "in such circumstances, youths are exposed to all sorts of activities that enable the politicians to employ them as personal foot soldiers. Hence they are openly organized, armed, finance and directed by politicians in the furtherance of their own ends" (Ntim and Abdulmalik, 2014: 71).

The mounting pressure by some Nigerian citizens to rectify the defects in Nigeria's federalism and the areas of restructuring from different quotas include among others: resource control; devolution of more powers and resources to states; true federalism;   abolishing federal character and quota system; unicameral in place of bicameral National Assembly; resource control; rotational presidency; creation of state police; fiscal federalism; creation of more states; removal of state-local government joint account; fiscal federalism; autonomy for local governments; making the present six (6) geopolitical zones regions in place of the thirty six (36) states; removal of immunity clause for President and Governors; splitting Nigeria into Biafra, Oduduwa and Arewa Republics; people's constitution to replace military drafted constitution; return of parliamentary system of government in place of presidential system of government; and giving immunity to Senate President and Speaker of House of Representative (Kamal, 2017: 198).

These agitations have metamorphosed to security challenges in Nigeria such as ethno-religious conflicts, political violence, inter and intra communal clashes,

militancy, insurgency and terrorism among others. This goes to explain why Elaigwu (2005: 12) cited in Dance, Habakuk and John (2017: 116-117) echoed that:

> The violent protests in the Niger-Delta over perceived injustice in resource distribution; the itsekiri-ijaw violence in the Delta, the menace of Odua Peoples' Congress and the accompanying violence in Lagos and Shagamu; the formation of the Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC) and the Igbo Peoples' Congress (IPC); the MASSOB feeble attempt to resuscitate Biafra; the Sharia crisis and the demands for a confederation; the south-south demand for the control of its resources; and all the recent inter-ethnic/religious conflicts in various states across the country are all part of the bubbles of the Nigerian groups with the state of the federation.

On the whole, restructuring based on the aforementioned criteria without attitudinal change is a mirage. The character of Nigerian leaders and the followers shows that whichever step that is taken to restructure the polity without resolving fundamental divisive tendencies bordering on the national question is an exercise in futility. The following excerpts of Kabir (2018: 33), is quite instructive to the academia and the general public:

> Restructuring governance structures without addressing Nigeria's fundamental challenges as corruption, tribalism, will not achieve the desired results. By building a stronger sense of national identity, improving trust and confidence in Government; strengthening federal, state and local institutions; diversifying the economy; and introducing proactive measures to combat corruption; Nigeria could begin on the path to sustainable national development. It is not Nigeria that need restructuring but us that need to restructure our minds by change of our attitude. Attitudinal change as a must and a necessity. Mark these five truths: an envious man finds no peace, a liar has no manly virtue, a greedy man is not to be trusted, a miser has no power and a man of bad character has no glory. Do not hate one another, or envy one another or turn your backs on one another; rather be brethren as Allah's slaves. "We are people of many different races, tribes and religions, who are knit together by common history, common interests and common ideals. Our diversity may be great but the things that unite us are stronger than the things that divide us.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper took a cursory look at the nexus between the National Question and restructuring. An in-depth content analysis of secondary data revealed that right

from the colonial era to the postcolonial era, Nigeria has been battling with how to foster unity in diversity. The findings of the paper indicated that Nigeria's great diversity is not the problem. The problem is the attitude of the citizens of which there is sharp division along primordial sentiments. The political elites often exploit this great diversity by manipulating the majority poverty stricken citizens in order to satisfy their personal selfish economic interest. They are more often than not interested in occupying political officers in order to share the national cake than to bake it. The injustice perpetrated by the political elites over the years such as bad governance culminated to the current security challenges the country is facing which is threatening to tear the country apart. Against this background the paper recommends the following:

i. More credible elections devoid of electoral malpractices especially buying or selling of votes among others should be prioritised.
ii. Aggressive enlightenment programmes should be introduced across the country with a view to raising citizens' awareness on burying their differences and embracing one another as one nation state. This will promote national integration and high sense of patriotism.
iii. Justice and equitable distribution of resources by political office holders and stamping out corruption among others will go a long way in reducing poverty induced conflicts to the barest minimum.
iv. Strict adherence to the tenets of democracy such as accountability, transparency, rule of law and being responsive to the citizens' yearnings and aspirations, coupled with diversifying the economy will enhance socio-economic development and political stability in Nigeria.
v. The Nigerian government should beef up protection of lives and property in order to promote peaceful coexistence in the country and national integration among others.

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(A Publication of Tansian University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies)

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