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FEDERALISM, DEMOCRACY AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION UNDER NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

Abdulrasheed A. Muhammad

Abstract

Federalism and democracy are ideals which most plural societies perceive as capable of solving their multifarious problems. This can be explained partly within the putative virtues of federalism and the known ideals of democracy and, partly, because both are mutually reinforcing in their capacity to reconcile divergent interests and accommodate differing views within a liberal framework. This is in addition to preserving individual and groups right to self-determination. The adoption and practice of this system in Nigeria can therefore be situated within these pleasurable contexts. To this extent, the adoption of federalism and democracy in Nigeria is premised on their potency as strategies for managing the multifarious concerns expressed by various groups, which have been carefully couched in a diplomatic language called, the national question. However, through a content analysis of relevant data and observable trends in the country especially since 1999, this paper argues that the appropriateness and efficacy of these principles as answers to the question leave much to discuss. The bottomline is that the cause of their adoption in the first place has ever remained the consequence.

INTRODUCTION

Virtually all nation-states are at different moments involved in one contradiction or the other that often produces conflict. These contradictions may be due partly to the nature and circumstance of formation and emergence of the state and partly due to the nature of intra and interclass relations within the state itself. At times as well, it may be due to a combination of both factors. But whichever way it occurs, such contradictions

represent basic concerns of the people to which they perpetually sought a solution. In most African countries generally, such basic concerns stem from the contradictions engendered by their colonial experience. Colonial experience in Africa had produced a legacy of culturally variegated societies in most countries. Colonialism yoked together various ethnic entities, most of which were capable of standing alone without regard to their ethnic or cultural backgrounds. As a result, colonial boundaries rarely coincide with the distribution of the various linguistic, ethnic or religious communities (Watts 2000:5). Thus at independence, most African countries emerging from colonial experience were faced with the problem of accommodating their diverse cultural elements within a stable national community because each ethnic /cultural group continued to make conflicting demands on the larger state. Apparent inability to reconcile the conflicting demands produced further contradictions amounting to basic concerns requiring urgent solution which has come to be labeled the national question. It is within this purview that Nigeria's case can be situated.

Nigeria emerged at independence in 1960 as a plural society par excellence having been composed of different ethno-cultural and religious groups with the attendant fears and suspicions of domination and feeling of exclusion among the various groups. These concerns and crave for enduring solution in the country therefore, sum up the national question. The federal arrangement, which was an attempt to reconcile regional and religious tensions and to accommodate the interest of the country's diverse ethnic groups (McCaskie 1997; 725), represents an institutional mechanism expected to tackle this question. But having been adopted and operated since the period prior to independence and ever since independence, except the brief period of January-July 1966, the Nigerian Federalism appears to be in anemia a situation which has largely been blamed on the prolonged years of military authoritarianism in the country. Consequently, there appears to be high hopes placed on democratic rule with its emphasis on constitutionalism and enhancement of individual and group rights as central to both the successful practice of federalism and resolution of the national question.

However, since the enthronement of democracy in the country in May 1999, more questions appear to have been generated in the polity. It is against this background that this paper seeks principally to examine the adaptive capability of Federalism and democracy as capable of offering solution to the national question in Nigeria.

Federalism and its Virtues

Federalism is a governmental system aimed at addressing government problems bordering on maintaining unity while at the same time preserving diversity. It has been offered as an institutional solution to the disruptive tendency of intra-societal ethnic pluralism (Long, 1991:192). This is because it involves the organization of the state in a manner that would promote and preserve the existing diversities within an over-arching

national entity. It provides a technique of political organisation that permits action by a shared government for some common purposes and autonomous action by regional units of government for purposes that relate to maintaining regional distinctiveness (Watts, 2000:3). Thus, federalism is believed to be capable of mediating the potential and actual conflicts arising from the heterogeneity within a nation-state (Akpata, 2000:8). Or as Elaigwu puts it,

> *It is a compromise in a multinational state between two types of self-determination. The determination to maintain a supranational framework of government which guarantees security for all in the state-nation or nation-state on the one hand, and the self-determination of component groups to retain their individual identities on the other. (Elaigwu, 1994:72; 2000:38.)*

What the above definitions suggest is that federalism is a governmental and institutional arrangement which seeks to maintain unity in diversity because power is shared between a central government and other component units each maintaining its (often different) identity within the federal union. Thus, a federal constitution becomes necessary where size, cultural and linguistic diversity, historical particularism and a considerable decentralization prevail (Bellof quoted in Ayoade, 1980:20). As noted by Zabadi and Gambo (2000:67), a general consensus seems to be crystallizing behind the view that federalism is adopted as a technique for managing conflicts by societies that are manifestly characterized by multiplicity of ethnic groups. By its nature, it guarantees equal rights of participation of all units in matters of joint concern including the process of amending the constitution. It is for this reason that Awa (quoted in Agbese, 1999:10) concluded that the basic rationale for adopting federalism is the quest to satisfy the demand of democratic theory. This is the crux of the traditional argument for federalism and wherein lie the virtues.

Democracy and its Ideals

The subject-matter of democracy has remained topical in the contemporary literature of political science. Even beyond the field of politics, its topicality has been gaining momentum. Ball and Dagger (1995:270) writes that, *"one of the most striking features of contemporary politics is the astonishing popularity of democracy. There are few people nowadays, whether major political leaders or ordinary citizens and subjects, who do not praise democracy or claim to be democrats".*

This astonishing popularity may however be attributed to the virtues which democracy

is believed to posses viz: popular participation, guarantee of fundamental human rights, welfarism, among others. Noteworthy is that democracy has evolved through different epochs in history, beginning with the era of direct participation by all citizens in the Greek city- states to the present system of representation. This was devised due to problems posed by direct participation. In other words, representation is the solution to the problem of numbers.

Also noteworthy is that democracy, through its various historical epochs has developed different variants especially in the 20th century such as social democracy, peoples democracy, liberal democracy and so on. In other words, it is a term that has come to be appropriated by various ideologies (Alemika 2000:71; Ball and Dagger 1995; 42). However, notwithstanding the appropriating ideology, what is observed is that the contemporary world has been characterised by the ascendancy of Liberal democracy (Izzah 2003:30) or what has been described as democracy third wave, or as Fukuyama notes, the end of history. This era of astonishing triumph and popularity of liberal democracy has generally been traced to the end of the Cold War and demise of the ideological war between the East and West blocs. As Fukuyama notes:

> *What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the cold war, or the passing of a particular period of post war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (Fukuyama 1990:8).*

Beyond Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy as "government of the people by the people and for the people," scholars have espoused various virtues of democracy in their definitions. These virtues include premium on the basic freedom and fundamental human rights of the citizens, such as equality and right of opinion and expression , right to property, free flow of information and the right of choice among alternative political positions; the rule of law, limited government and sovereignty of the people (Alemika 2000:71, Yusuf, 2000:115). Nzogola-Ntalaja summarizes the above elements into what he called 'universal concept of democracy underlined by three basic ideas: Democracy as a moral imperative, Democracy as a social process and, Democracy as a political practice (1997: 11; 2001:20). Democracy from these stand points is thus expected to lay foundation for a sustainable social, political and economic order. Equally, the above virtues raise democracy beyond the mere rituals of voting and elections to one that ensures 'co existence of a plurality of opinions guaranteed by freedom of expression under the rule of the majority (Kabongo, 1986:35). Consequently under a democratic government, various groups are expected to be able to articulate and press their demands thereby contributing meaningfully into policymaking process.

The presupposition from what has been said above is that democracy is a

system, which not only accommodates varying views in the society but equally allows for their self-expression and participation in the whole societal process. This thus brings it in congruence with federal practice. Federalism as noted earlier guarantees equal rights of participation of all citizens and units in matters affecting them. Equally, federalism by its nature is a form of constitutional government which sets limits on government of various levels in the state, and as such, incompatible with autocracy or totalitarian rule ' (Jinadu 1979: 21). To this extent, it is in line with democratic practice. Little wonder therefore that Jinadu (1979: 21), borrowing from Wheare remarked that democracy is a condition of federalism. The bottom-line argument from our review so far is that federalism and democracy by their inherent nature appear to be compliments and mutually-reinforcing in tackling societal and government problems that borders on reconciling opposing views. For this reason, they tend to lend a sense of appeal to most plural societies seeking to reconcile the basic concerns expressed by the various group/ cleavage levels within the state which according to Elaigwu (2000: 42) are usually couched in the form of diplomatic language, called the national question. The rest of the paper is devoted to examining the national question in Nigeria and the extent to which the two practices above have been apt as answers to this question. But before then, what constitutes the national question?

The National Question and its Contents

According to Onyeoziri, (2002:10), the national question is one that afflicts many political systems, hardly has a final solution, complex in nature and is historically contingent. That is, it derives from various historical processes and changes and as such has different manifestations which requires constant and continuous management. It is a major iconoclastic problem that deeply challenges the very foundations, history and culture of a group (Labinjoh, 2001:51). In other words, it is a major problem that usually threatens the very basis of existence of any nation.

Also, Nzogola-Ntalaja (1987:43) had argued that any scientific analysis of the national question must begin with a theoretical discussion of some problematic which borders around the ambiguities surrounding the concept and notion of nation especially in African pre-colonial and post colonial contexts. But while it is not within our focus to venture into polemics about the ambiguities, it need be stated that with regards to Africa, the issue of colonialism is one that is central to posing the national question. As noted by Nzogola-Ntalaja (1987:46), colonialism has complex impacts on the national question. These impacts include firstly, that it either resulted in the fading away of so many pre-colonial nations or their disintegration into a formless conglomeration of more or less related ethnic groups'. Secondly, by uniting different nationalities and peoples under a single territorial and institutional framework and the attendant greater level of inter-ethnic interactions, it thus created a common historical experience of exploitation

and oppression - economic, political, administrative and cultural. The resultant effect of the above description is intense inter-ethnic chauvinism, rivalry and conflict with its attendant struggle for self -determination by various groups in post -colonial African States. This tendency has largely been accentuated by evident marginalisation or exclusion of some groups from power matrix and resource distribution in some of these states.

In other words, while the issues engendered by colonialism mentioned above are central to emergence of the national question, they are not in themselves sufficient as causes for its emergence. Rather, the root causes are the competition among various groups for power and resources in post colonial Africa (Nzogola-Ntalaja 2001:16) and management of relations between these groups on the one hand, and the groups and the overarching political system on the other (Onyeoziri 2002:10).

The derivative from the review so far is that the national question is a phenomenon that has specific manifestations in time and across countries with some elements or forms of pluralism. The basis of its emergence especially in Africa can be linked specifically to the character of the state both in its formation and continued existence as such it can be analysed in both structural and economic contexts and relations. While the former relates to the existence of several sub-nations within the post-colonial African state system, the latter borders on competitive relations for access to national resources among these groups and the dialectics they engender. The national question is thus about how the nation is to be constituted, fundamental arrangement of its working, nature and pattern of its unity, integrity, autonomy and viability as a distinct prosperous entity (Adebanwi, 2001:152). Herein lie the basic concerns, which most states including Nigeria have continued to device answers/solutions.

With reference to Nigeria, scholars and commentators have attempted to capture the meaning of the national question and in the process espouse its various manifestations (see Elaigwu 2000 : 42-43; Agbodike 1998: 181; Abubakar 1998: 166; Onyeoziri, 2002 and Osaghae and Onwudiwe eds. 2001 equally parades a number of views on the concept as it relates to Nigeria.).

What is perhaps constant is the centrality of access to power and resources by all groups to the issue of the national question. Thus the national question in Nigeria amounts to the problematic about harnessing the loyalties of different ethno-cultural groupings and ordering relations between them in a just and fair manner, all to the health of the state. This requires bringing the various elements in the state 'under a form of constitutional government characterized by the rule of law and by participatory democratic politics which, in practice recognizes and accommodates the rights of the various nationality and ethnic groups' be it they social, cultural, political and economic (Jinadu 2003: xi). This envisaged solution finds expression in the practice of federalism and democracy.

The National Question Under Nigeria's Fourth Republic

With ethnic groups variously estimated between 250 and over 300 (Kurian 1971:1081; Barbour 1982:2; Otite 1990) in addition to a multiplicity of relgious groups, Nigeria is a plural society par excellence. This situation derives from its colonial experiences that saw peoples of different cultural and religious background being yoked together under the tight hegemony of the colonial state beginning formally from 1914, a fact which has been well documented in the literature (Labinjoh 2001:58; Abubakar 2001:229; Muhammad 2002:41). The inevitable consequence of this situation is the reality of coping with series of multifarious problems, which they engender. This is because the ensuring political arrangement lacked the internal acceptability and legitimacy required to produce a harmonious relation among the various groups. It is the various concerns that emerged from the disharmonious relations that have come to be labeled as the national question.

But worthy of note is that while the seed of the national question appears to have been sown right from the colonial era, it has ever been watered in the post-colonial period by the disharmony of interests among the various units /groups that made up the country as well as pervasive nature of the post-colonial state, largely characterized by prolonged authoritarianism. Providing insight to this assertion, Ekeh (2001:21) notes that British colonial rule and colonialism's most potent stepchild in Nigeria, military rule, are responsible for the social formations that have created awesome political problems that seem intractable. In other words, the national question is like a tree consciously or unconsciously planted during colonial rule, became burgeoned in the latter part but which in post-colonial era has continued to produce varieties of unpleasant fruits. The varieties of its unfortunate products are manifested in the various expressions of the national question such as marginalisation cries, calls for restructuring of the federation, self determination, resource control agitation, phenomenon of ethnic militias among others.

The bottom line argument here is that the national question in Nigeria often exhibits different manifestations in time and space. Space here is conceived in terms of each ethno-cultural group's perception of what constitutes or should constitute the national question. But noteworthy is that while there is difference in each ethno-cultural group's perception of what constitute the national question, virtually all tend to resort to violence and unorthodox means towards addressing the problem. Thus, the unprecedented emergence of ethnic militia and other groups championing the right of self-determination of their groups- a trend which has assumed a worrisome dimension since about 1999.

For instance, in the south-south and south-east, there have been several

uprisings from groups such as the Eastern Mandate Union (EMU) whose major goal is to address the 'perennial issue of marginalization and unjust character of the polity which sets different standards for different peoples, depending on their geo-political and ethno-cultural axis (Ibeanu 1999:41) and; the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) which along with other oil producing communities, demanded at the 1994/95 Constitutional Conference that communities from whose areas (on-share) oil was derived should be part owners together with the federal authorities of the resource and proceeds from it (Osaghae, 1998:12). Others include Egbesu Boys, Ijaw Youths Congress, Igbo Peoples Congress, Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra(MASSOB) among others (See Punch, April 17, 2001;Sept. 24, 2001). Similarly, late in 1999, ethnic nationalities of the Niger Delta under the auspices of the Niger Delta Consultative Assembly (NDCA), met in Port-Harcourt empowering a group to draft a Niger Delta constitution which according to them, would form the basis of their future relation with the rest of Nigeria (Tell magazine, 1999, November 22:16).

All the above are in addition to series of expressions of frustrations and anger with the federal union (The Guardian, April 17,2000).

Similarly in the west, there is the emergence of the Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC) which believes it has a mission of emancipating the Yoruba race from long years of domination by another section of the country (north) especially after the annulment of the June 12, 1993 general election believed to have been won by M.K.O. Abiola, a Yoruba man. Initially non-militant and headed by Dr. Fredrick Fasheun, the OPC later became a militant group with the breaking away of a faction led by Gani Adams. The Gani Adams faction and its militant posture now symbolizes the OPC, wrecking havoc on perceived enemies of the Yoruba race especially the Hausa-Fulani. Consequently, several attacks were launched on the Hausa-fulani communities at different times between 1999 and 2003 in various parts of the country. Equally, there were occasional clashes between the OPC and the Nigerian Police Force at different moments. For instance, one of such clashes was in February 2000 in Lagos - an incident which claimed over 20 lives and displaced thousands (The Guardian, November23, 2000).

As it is in other parts of the country, so also it is in the north. Apart from the controversy generated by the introduction of the Sharia legal code in some parts of the north in 1999/2000,there have been killings and maiming of southerners in the north at times as a reprisal of happenings in south. Even the hitherto peaceful middle belt became a 'hot bed' with the rise of various groups wanting to liberate their ethnic extractions from what they considered prolonged years of maginalization by the northern oligarchy. Notable among them are Middle Belt Movement (MBM), Progressive Movement, Middle Belt Youth Forum (MBYF)_ and Middle Belt Forum (MBF) among others. Some of these even believe in radical approach as a means of addressing their

concerns. For instance, George Ohemu, Public Relation Officer of MBF was reported to have said:

> *We believe that as long as the middle belt is not recognized as region in its own right there would be no peace and the region will not have full development the way it is required... the minority problem has been partly addressed in the south-south, in the north, it has not and we see this as double standard that must be reversed (Newswatch, October 8,2001 p.60).*

Perhaps as a product of a bottled-up anger, Middle Belterns and Hausa-fulani were engulfed in a clash that raged the city of Jos in September 2000 over allegation of domination by the Hausa-fulani and vice versa. The north for instance, was said to have been complaining about some appointments made in the current civilian administration on the grounds that the beneficiaries are Middle Beltens and not core northerners. These include the appointment of Lt. General Theophilus Danjuma (rtd) as Defense Minister; Ibrahim Ogohi as Chief of Defense Staff; Lt. General Victor Malu as Chief of Army Staff among others (see Newswatch, October 8, 2001 p.61). The Obasanjo administration was thus accused of marginalising the core north and promoting the Middle Belters. This accusation perhaps sensitized the Middle Belterns the more and further pitched them against the northerners.

Events however reached a climax when a Hausa-Falani person was appointed coordinator of the National Poverty Eradication Programnme (NAPEP) in Jos north local government. The said coordinator was accused of recruiting his kith and kin at the expence of 'traditional indigenes' of the area. Consequently, crisis broke out between the Hausa-Falani who were considered settlers and those who claim to be aborigines of the area with many lives lost and properties destroyed (see Newswatch, October8, 2001). All the above are in addition to intra-ethnic conflicts occurring in various part of the country: Ijaw versus Ilaje; Tiv in Benue and Jukun in Taraba states in October 2001 and Tiv versus Jukun in Nasarawa state among others (see, Newswatch October 29, 2001; November 5, 2001).

With the above descriptions, it could by reasoned that if federalism was adopted in the country to reconcile concerns expressed by various groups, why has such not been transcended? Equally, if prolonged years of military rule has been a contributory factor to the disharmonious relations, the advent of democracy appears not to have provided succour. To this extent, it may be argued that both federalism and democracy have failed in Nigeria as 'political arrangements for resolving or containing what is generally referred to as the national question' (Jinadu 2003:xi) in the sense that their putative virtues have remained elusive in the country. The dismal failure of these practices as mechanisms for managing the national question manifests in the events and occurrences in the country since 1999, which to a large extent appears to have

defied known and exiting solutions. From the rise of ethnic militia contesting the right of monopoly of arms with the state as in the case of Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) and Bakassi Boys in the southern part (The Guardian, August 3, 2000.), to various groups championing the cause of internal autonomy and self-determination of their various groups as in the Niger Delta region, who use various means from the most pacific to most virulent' (Tyoden 2000:185) to air their views, to other groups and individuals pouring invectives on the country's democracy and federal practice, it appears 'hell' is let loose on it. Between 1999 to date, the level of social disarray is dismal while the spate of crises is monumental. For instance, between 1999 and January 2000, no less than fifteen instances of ethnic and related violence have occurred in the country with thousands dead (see The Comment, January 30 2002 P.2). Several others have occurred thereafter. The whole episode is rather suggestive of the description of Chinua Achebe, one of Nigeria's literary legends' "Things fall apart; and the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world' thereby re-enacting the scenario of 'everybody unto its mother's breast' (Albert, 1998:57) in the country.

Why the Answers Faltered

Nigeria has been operating federalism for over half a century and it has perpetually remained in anemia. It has since independence experiencing epileptic democratic rule. The democratic experience in the country often has either remained in the abysmal state of stagnation as between 1989-98 or swung in the direction of regression as experienced between 1960 to 1966. Even the current democratic regime is already showing symptoms of going the way of earlier ones with the series of politically-induced violence occuring. In other words, federalism and democracy as operated since 1999 have not succeeded in reconciling Nigeria. The reason for this to some extent can be linked to the country's immediate past of authoritarianism. The point has been that many Nigerians become frustrated under military's unitary federal structure. The frustration, which was mounting without any antidote of moderation, reached a climax towards the tail end of the military regime with an imminent and seemingly uncontrollable outburst. Unfortunately, the period of the outburst coincided with the new democratic wave in the country. In such a context, the new democracy becomes a victim of the already bottled-up anger with various manifestations thus given the impression of 'lawlessness as democracy' (Nigeria Tribune, January 7, 2002:14). At another level, it could be reasoned that there is a mismatch between people's expectation and performance of the system. Many would have expected that democracy will not only provide opportunities for redressing the imbalances in the practice of federalism in the country and the high level of decay under the military, but that federalism and democracy constitute 'solutions to all sorts of problems that confront them' (Izzah, 2003:3). Though in reality federalism and democracy cannot constitute solutions to all problems but their failure to function properly

or as expected therefore creates more problems and contradictions within the state.

Yet, another argument could be hinged on the fact that there is a wrong perception of the workings of the federal system by the government coupled with sole reliance on constitutionally-defined structures in its operation. The point has been argued that a successful operation of the federal system requires a renewal of the idea of federalism, which can only be achieved through interactive processes. In other words, the logic of federation operates more through processes than structures (Chapman 1993: 72). Reliance an constitutionally defined structures alone can therefore not really engender success of the federal system but rather provides the most minimal framework. The point that is being emphasized is that perhaps the Nigerian government has lost the sight that, while federalism in Nigeria is operated to satisfy some divergent interests, interests do however change. It therefore follows that emergence of new group of interests or the revitalization of old ones could provoke fresh tensions and challenges, which might constitute new agenda for reform (Burgess 1993:105). The inability of the state to respond adequately to some of the emerging interests therefore naturally provides good ground for more contradictions to emerge.

One other cause of failure could be noticed in the pervasive corruption and lack of accountability that characterised the current democratic regime. Accountability of elected representatives to the electorates has been described as central to the success of any democratic rule (Mabogunje 1999:5). The rate of corruption, lack of transparency and accountability and, absence of consultation with the electorates in some policy matters have the tendency of not only increasing the peoples frustration but as well make any attempt at fostering unity and national cohesion sterile. This trend has remained manifest since the enthronement of democracy in the country in 1999.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore the problematic of the national question in Nigeria and the adaptive capability of the opportunities offered by the country's long operated federal system and the new democratic era in managing it. One fact is basic and that is that the national question is inextricably linked to the whole process of liberation in colonial and postcolonial states (Nzogola-Ntalaja, 2001:1). Liberation on the one hand from the disruptive and overarching authority of the colonial state, which has long been achieved and on the other hand, liberation of various groups from what may be termed internal colonialism by hegemonic ones in the post-independent states, the latter being a major consequence of anomalies in the former. Thus the Nigerian state has been preoccupied with finding a solution through the practices of federalism and democracy. The malfunctioning of these systems however has not just been creating conditions for conflicts but equally reflects the magical scene of 'the more you look, the less you see'. This is evident because the operation of these systems has not only

failed in addressing the basic concerns which prompted their adoption in the first place, but their faltering practices have been generating more questions and contradictions than they are meant to reconcile. This is further compounded by a mismatch in the perceptions of the rulers and the ruled. Against these backgrounds, this paper recommends that:

1. There is need for the government and the citizens to redefine their perception and make their expectations conform to existing realities.
2. The government should avoid reliance on constitutionally defined structures alone in addressing impulses from the system.
3. Leaders need to be more transparent and show a high degree of accountability in governance.

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