

The Fluctuating Fortunes of Civil Servants in Nigeria

Samuel O. Oyedele

*Head of Department, Department of Public Administration,
Faculty of Management Sciences, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara Nigeria
Email id: samolaoyedele@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

All countries of the world, no matter the political system they operate, depend heavily on their civil services for effective and efficient management of their public affairs. The civil servants, who man these civil services, are equally important in the formulation and implementation of public policies for the good of the citizenry of the countries. However, over the years in Nigeria, the importance of civil servants, particularly the top civil servants and the role they play in the process of governance has not been clearly brought into public lime-light. The level of this recognition varied from one government to the other. This paper examines the involvement of top civil servants (permanent secretaries) vis-à-vis the involvement of the political executives (ministers). The paper concludes that the two government functionaries should receive adequate recognition so that they can perform their roles in a complimentary manner for the smooth running of government business for nation building and national development.

Keywords: Permanent Secretary, Minister, Fluctuating Fortune, Civil Service, Role, Governance and Finance

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, as elsewhere in the world, the civil service of a country is the engine room of the nation's government. In terms of its importance as an institution of the state, the civil service is perhaps the most important institution of government today. Its importance is such that even other bodies (such as the military and the parastatals) which are also used to implement specific aspects of government policies are themselves guided and controlled through the civil service (Philips, 1992). The civil service of any country is, therefore, the primary and primate instrument of the government of the country. In view of the importance of the civil service to any country, the Nigerian Constitution has bestowed on government, the duty of promoting the political, economic, social, education, foreign policy and environmental objectives of the country. The process of formulating and implementing these objectives is called governance, while the organ employed for such purpose is the civil service (Olagunju, 2006). On the other hand, civil servants

are a body of men and women who translate law into action throughout the country. Civil servants are employed in a civil capacity and belong to the executive arm of government.

However, in spite of the importance and centrality of civil servants in the process of governance, civil servants in Nigeria have often not been recognised as the major pillars of government. Instead, the political executives such as the ministers and commissioners have in most cases become the focal point of many regimes in Nigeria over the years. The extent of the involvement of civil servants in governance has, therefore, been underestimated. Their involvement in governance has also been overshadowed by the activities of the political executive members. The earliest writers on public administration in America such as Woodrow Wilson, John Pfiffner and Frank Goodnow made a clear distinction between politics (political executives) and administration (civil servants). They believed that administration consists in the execution of policy and that administration begins only when policy making ends.

However, as a result of administrative reforms introduced into the American public life and the rapid increase in the role and size of government all over the world over the years, this earliest American writers' belief gave way to a situation where the career civil servants came into public policy lime-light. Today, civil servants are not limited to public policy implementation alone, they are actually highly involved in the formulation and implementation of public policies perhaps even more than the political executives (ministers) themselves. In spite of the important role of the civil servants today, the extent of their involvement in shaping public policy and governance generally have 'fallen' and 'risen' over the years in Nigeria from the colonial government through the several years of military rule and during civilian governments.

The focus of this paper is, therefore, on the fluctuating fortunes of top career civil servants in terms of the major role they play in governance and the recognition accorded to them in this regard over the years vis-à-vis the ministers. The paper is divided into four sections to achieve this objective. The first section examines the role of the career top civil servants in governance. The second section undertakes a brief historical survey of the fluctuating fortunes or the recognition of the involvement of civil servants in shaping and implementing public policies and governance generally over the years while the third section examines the latest recognition of the important role of career top civil servants in governance by the new President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari. The concluding remarks are in the fourth section.

THE ROLE OF TOP CAREER CIVIL SERVANTS IN GOVERNANCE

As noted earlier, the place of the civil service as perhaps the most important institution in any country cannot be overstressed. This is to the extent that its performance affects the life of all the citizens of a country. Thus, the quality and competence of the civil service cannot be ignored

by any government which desires to fulfil its campaign, promises to the people particularly under civil rule. The civil service has the burden of planning for and dealing with the problems of growth and development of any country in order to transform the country's natural resources into goods and services that would meet the rising legitimate expectations of the citizenry under civil rule. The bureaucracy functions as a control tower for the flow of information arising from its countless routine operations. It is always there, even when countless governing coalitions come and go. Thus, it is always there to carry out programmes and administer laws that are the cumulative legacy of past and present government coalitions. Thus, the bureaucracy has a vivid institutional memory (Asogwa, 2007). Continuity which the civil service provides is very crucial for the effectiveness of public administration world over. Indeed, there is a strong belief that a country is a close reflection of the effective and efficiency of its civil service.

From the importance of the civil service to the smooth running of countries of the world, it follows that the civil servants who work in the civil service are equally important in the achievement of the many tasks before the civil service. Indeed, because government activities world over have grown in size and also in complexity, there is a need to have different expertise and experiences for the various activities of government which can only be found in the civil servants. The civil servant is a servant of the country employed in a civil capacity. He is concerned with purely civil and non-technical affairs of the state as distinguished from military, judicial or police capacity. A state reaches the citizen through the civil servants who are trained, skilled and permanent body of professional officials, and who have adopted government service as a career (Bhagwan *et al.*, 2012). Civil servants are expected to conduct themselves in a manner that is consistent with their office and their profession. Most of them swear to a code of conduct that articulates the standard of conduct expected of public officers and spells out the rights and duties of individual officials (Adamolekun, 2005). The career top civil servants, that is, the permanent secretaries are usually responsible for directing the day-to-day affairs of a ministry. They perform a pattern of routinised activities involving decision making, planning, advising, coordination, negotiation, conciliation, arbitration, command and data gathering through which the government carries out its responsibilities. In modern times, the activities of governments all over the world extend to many, if not all areas of a society's life (Nnoli, 2000).

One of the primary and fundamental roles of civil servants is to advise the government on how best to formulate good and realistic programmes as well as how best to implement these programmes and offer possible alternative courses of action and their implications for the government and the society. It can even be said that the civil servants are more involved in the activities of policy making and implementation than the ministers. Moreover, because the civil service of any country ensures social stability and continuity in government business, the civil

servant, by virtue of his security of tenure, represents the principles of continuity in government. According to Olaopa (2012):

He is the link between successive ministers, and the repository of principles and practices which endure while governments come and go. He serves with equal fidelity, regardless of the complexion of government. Indeed, all civil servants feel a temporary allegiance to the party in power and its programmes no matter their bias or personnel conviction.

In the same vein, Adebayo (2011) explains the role of the top civil servants thus:

Civil servants gather facts that may lead to change in policy. They, thus, help to define policy before the legislative stage is reached; they assist in drafting the law which is designed to carry out the desired programme. It is also their task to define and execute post-legislative policy, particularly where such policy involves the substance of the programme or possible legislative revisions or indeed where it involves the machinery for the enforcement of such legislation.

As a result of the rapid expansion and complexity of government activities and programmes in modern times, it becomes practically impossible for the few ministers and their political advisers, the legislators and the judges and magistrates who make up the three arms of government to be able to do all these. Ministers being laymen in administrative matters have to depend on the assistance and advice of the civil servants to formulate and implement their public policies. Since the civil servants work permanently in the same department or service, they acquire its special knowledge or skills and become specialists. It is they, who aid and assist the minister in preparing subjects for legislation and enable the minister to fulfil his electoral promises (Sharma *et al.*, 2012).

On the other hand, even if the ministers have the competence, they do not have enough time and energy to take care of all these activities within reasonable period of time. This is because they are professional politicians who are usually preoccupied with political meetings, campaigns, constituency affairs and other political activities. They are usually preoccupied with manipulation of political forces. They have to constantly respond to political pressures in their effort to remain in power, fend off the challenges of political rivals, reward political friends, form new alliances and consolidate existing ones (Nnoli, 2000). Moreover, the rapid increase in the role and size of government also brought the career officials into public lime-light. It proved impossible to remain 'anonymous' and 'politically neutral' where the ruling party insisted on civil servants defence of and open identification with the government's policies and programmes in the socio-economic fields. The various programmes of decentralisation in particular exposed career officials to the prying eyes of the public (Rasheed and Balogun, 1995).

THE FLUCTUATING FORTUNES OF CIVIL SERVANTS IN NIGERIA – A HISTORICAL SURVEY

The Nigerian civil service since its inception had been influenced by three major political dispensations. These are the colonial, military and civilian governments. A brief history of the fluctuating fortunes of the civil servants under these political regimes is undertaken below.

Colonial Era

The highest echelon of the civil service from time of conception was staffed with British officials and like many colonial bureaucracies, its goals were limited, the crucial one being the maintenance of law and order (Yerima, 2005). Personnel policies and practices were, therefore, determined solely by the colonial administration during the period. Politics was underdeveloped in the colonial state as the civil service actually acted politically but pretended to be apolitical.

This was because colonialism promoted the growth and development of the civil service at the expense of competitive politics, making it possible for the civil service to develop before competitive politics through which it could be controlled. The colonial administrative officers were at the very centre of the political life of the citizens of the country. As a result of the central position occupied by the British administrative officers, colonial rule was, therefore, essentially ruled by the civil service (Lapalombara, 1963). The civil service, therefore, performed all political functions.

First Republic 1960–1966

The form of administrative structure that existed during the colonial period was inherited by the country at independence in 1960. A study carried out by Harris (1978) concluded that in Nigeria's first Republic there was no clear-cut dividing line between the politicians and civil servants in their policy making role, as no rigid separation needed be made between policy and administration. The broadly defined role assumed by administrative officers in policy formulation and in the provision of political advice can be seen as a legacy of a colonial system of government that had been predominantly administrative in character (Adamolekun, 1986). Under the Whitehall model of administration, as adapted to Nigeria, the civil service was perceived essentially as the executive arm of government in power which was expected to ensure that approved policies were carefully, energetically and whole-heartedly carried out (Dudley, 1973). Therefore, in the first Republic, higher civil servants were central and, indeed, became dominant participants in the process of public-policy formulation leading to a source of extreme bureaucratic power. Some of the major factors responsible for this dominant position of top civil servants included political instability, the frequent failure of ministers to provide policy guidelines to their civil servants because they (ministers) lacked experience and were

educationally inadequate to cope with their job (Phillips, 2002). Other factor was the delegation of broad discretionary authority over policy and programme implementation.

Military Government (1966)

This was the first military government which terminated the life of the first Republic. Although it did not last long (January to July, 1966), it made certain changes in the hierarchy of the civil service. The government relied heavily on its permanent secretaries and virtually all important decisions were taken by a narrow group. Because the military rulers did not know how to govern, the permanent secretaries became responsible for the management of their ministries.

Military Government (1966–1975)

Again, because the military lacked the required experience in administrative and governmental processes, the permanent secretaries possessed an unprecedented increase in power and, thus, remained at the helm of affairs following the absence of political bosses. They were their own political bosses and, thus, had things their own way. They usurped the powers of their ministers (military officers) by dominating the shaping and determination of government policies such as policy advising, initiating, formulating, advocating and defending as well as allocation of public resources became their permanent preoccupation. This period has been widely described by scholars and commentators as the golden age of the 'super-permanent secretaries'.

Military Government (1975–1979)

This military regime realised that permanent secretaries possessed enormous powers and, therefore, took far-reaching steps to address this. These permanent secretaries were, therefore, no longer allowed to attend the supreme military council and federal executive council meetings as against the case in the immediate past military regime. Furthermore, this regime carried out the 'mass purge' of the civil service in 1975 during which thousands of civil servants were either retired or dismissed from the civil service. This exercise was often described as unprecedented in the history of the service apparently to cut the power of the civil servants. This no doubt dampened the morale of the civil servants left in the service.

Second Republic (1979–1983)

With the return to civil rule in 1979, renewed efforts were made to establish political control over the civil service. This was because Articles 139 and 177 of the 1979 Constitution substantially undermined the formal standing of higher civil servants in both policy formulation and execution by authorising the appointment of special advisers to the President and the Governors from outside the civil service. This is in addition to the secretary to the government

who was expected to serve as the overall political adviser to the chief executive. This development, thus, added powerful and non-career competitors with whom permanent Secretaries and the head of service must vie when attempting to influence decision making (Eminue, 2005). Moreover, the Constitution introduced the politicisation of the civil service, thereby, establishing political control of the civil service. The Constitution allowed elected chief executives to appoint individuals from outside the career civil service as permanent secretaries to be known as directors-general who were to retire with their ministers. The President replaced incumbent permanent secretaries, head of extra-ministerial departments and the secretary to the government with fresh appointees of their own choice. In other words, under the system permanent secretaries were no longer permanent (Adamolekun, 1983).

There were significant variations in the role of career higher civil servants in the policy making process under military rule. For the first 18 months, higher civil servants actually governed in a diarchy with military politicians, and between 1970 and 1975 higher civil servants at the federal level in particular achieved something close to primacy in the policy process. For the remaining years of military rule (1967–1970 and 1975–1979), the role of civil servants in the policy making process was only marginally different from what it had been under parliamentary rule (Adamolekun, 1986). In the same vein, the then military deputy leader Major General Shehu Yar'adua declared that:

It is no longer a secret that civil servants have influenced major decisions in the last twelve years of military rule. They have enjoyed virtually unchallenged the exercise of power all these years. (New Nigerian, 5 August, 1978) The military regimes between 1983 and 1999 had a similar pattern depending heavily on the civil servants for the operations of government business.

However, during the civilian rule from 1999 to May 2015, the ministers gained primacy in the policy process.

RECOGNITION OF THE ROLE OF CIVIL SERVANTS IN GOVERNANCE BY PRESIDENT MUHAMMADU BUHARI

As noted earlier, different governments in Nigeria had given varying degrees of recognition to the involvement of civil servants in governance. Koehn (1983) describes this phenomenon thus:

In Nigeria, as elsewhere, the role of the career bureaucracy in public policy making has constituted a subject of conflicting interpretation, practice and prescription. Although higher public servants have always played a major part in shaping public policy, the extent of their involvement has ebbed and flowed in response to legal, structural and political changes at the

federal, state and local government levels. In recent years, the exercise of policy making and implementing roles by public administrators have evoked mounting criticism and top-level career servants in Nigeria have faced unusually serious challenges to their authority.

In most cases, civil servants were seen as mere servants of the government who merely run errands for the ministers. They are, therefore, often regarded as supporting staff to the ministers. This type of misconception led to the formulation of some popular statements such as civil servants should be 'on tap' and not 'on top'; 'civil servants should be seen but not to be heard'; 'civil servants are not ruling servants.' In other words, civil servants are expected to be 'anonymous' in the discharge of their duties. This type of approach to government completely negates the role and place of civil servant administrators and advisers, turning the civil service into a mere conveyor belt, a mechanical machine and indeed a waste of civil service resources (Adebayo, 2011).

However, contrary to this perception, the top civil servants came into public lime-light once again as major players in the conduct of government business by the civilian government of President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari. On assumption of office as the country's President on 29 May 2015, he made it clear that he was not in a hurry to appoint ministers to work with him. According to him, he needed more time to search for people of very high integrity who have no record of corruption charges against them for appointment as ministers. Apparently, the President was also comfortable with working with the top civil servants (permanent secretaries) in the absence of the ministers. In fact, he described the federal civil servants as the foot soldiers in Nigeria's march to a great destiny, adding that the hopes and aspirations of the whole society rest on their shoulders (The Punch, 8 September 2015). In his address to some newly appointed permanent secretaries, the President noted that the success or otherwise of the government would largely depend on their competence, ability and capacity to discharge their duties most effectively and efficiently (The Nigerian Tribune, 17 September 2015). He worked with permanent secretaries for about six months before he eventually appointed ministers.

While President Buhari was defending the delay in forming his ministerial cabinet, he explained that:

The civil servants and technocrats are more involved in the process of governance than the ministers, who are only there to "make a lot of noise". The civil servants provide continuity and that the technocrats are the people who do most of the work. They are there, they have to provide the continuity, dig into the records and then guide those of us who are just coming in. They have been there, some of them for fifteen years, some for twenty years. So, I think this question of ministers is political (Buhari, Nigerian Tribune, 17 September 2015).

n the same vein, Adebayo (2011) while describing the role of ministers in governance noted that:

The notion of ministerial appointment and responsibility was that of a ceremonial head in a department whose only duty was to wear expensive clothing to the office, sit back and wait for any files to come from the permanent secretary for his approval. When such files did not flow in, he began to suspect disloyalty or inefficiency on the part of his officials.

Therefore, in most cases, ministers usually regard themselves as masters while the permanent secretaries are regarded as their servants. Sometimes too, they assert their authority over the permanent secretaries. Various methods were applied by the politicians (ministers) in 'asserting their authority' over the public service. On some occasions, they (the politicians) bypassed rules and regulations and took decisions which were purely administrative or managerial (Rasheed and Balogun, 1995).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Nigerian civil service has been influenced by three major political settings since its inception. These are the colonial, civilian and military. This important machinery or heart of the government as well as the civil servants who man it have provided the much needed continuity to the various political transitions in the country. Apart from the critical role of ensuring the continuity of governmental administration, the civil servants have played a major role in governance by been instrumental in designing, formulating and implementing public policies and programmes over the years, before and after independence in the country. However, in spite of the centrality of the civil servants in governance, their recognition in this regard had fluctuated greatly vis-à-vis that of the minister from one regime to another. In most cases, the ministers seemed to have overshadowed the permanent secretaries in public affairs. This has been examined in this paper. When and if any government fails to recognise the important role of career civil servants in governance, the civil service will no longer be able to perform the tasks set for it by public administration. The immediate consequence of this attitude is that civil servants will lose incentive and initiative to the extent that they will also be frustrated. The tendency is for them not to see themselves as co-participants in the task of nation building (Adebayo, 2011).

The latest recognition of the important role of civil servants by the present civilian government of President Muhammadu Buhari is, therefore, a welcome development. This is because it has brought the permanent secretaries into public lime-light once again. Indeed, they were totally in control of government business in the absence of minister from 29 May 2015 to 11 November 2015 when the new ministers came on board. This is no doubt a morale booster for the civil servants in particular and the civil service in general. However, while emphasising the central

role of civil servants in governance, the role of the ministers is also important in governance. This is because they provide the political direction for public policy formulation and implementation for the good of the citizenry. It is suggested here that the ministers should not display any form of master-servant relationship between them and the permanent secretaries whereby they see themselves as masters and the permanent secretaries the servants.

Similarly, the permanent secretaries should also not be allowed to gain undue ascendancy over the ministers in governance. Rather, the relationship between the two functionaries should be based on partnership, co-operation and mutual respect. They should have such an interdependent relationship that it is difficult to see one or the other by himself. The partnership should be alive and virile, rival ideas and opinions should be fairly considered (Adebayo, 2011). It is on the working relationship of these major two functionaries of government that the nature and scope of public administration depends for nation-building and national development.

REFERENCES

- Adamolekun L, 1983. Public administration: A Nigerian and comparative perspective. London: Longman.
- Adamolekun L, 1986. Politics and administration in Nigeria. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd.
- Adamolekun L, ed. 2005. *Public Administration in Africa: Main Issues and Selected Country Studies*. Spectrum Books Ltd., Ibadan.
- Adebayo A, 2011. Principles and practice of public administration in Nigeria. Spectrum Books Ltd Ibadan.
- Asogwa MNO, 2007. Bureaucracy, socio-economic reforms and political development in Nigeria. In: *Paper Presented on 26th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Political Science Association, Kano*.
- Bhagwan V, Bhushan V and Mohla V, 2012. Public administration. New Delhi: Chand and Chand Company PVT Ltd.
- Dudley BJ, 1973. Instability and political order, politics and crisis in Nigeria. Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press Ltd.
- Eminue OE, 2005. Public policy analysis and decision making. Lagos: Concept Publishers.
- Koehn P, 1983. The role of public administrators in public policy making: Practice and prospects in Nigeria. *Public Administration and Development*, Vol. 3, No 1.
- Lapalombara T, 1963. Bureaucracy and Development New Jersey. New Jersey: Princeton.
- New Nigeria Newspaper*, August 5, 1978.
- Nnoli O, 2000. Public administration. In: Mukandala R, ed. *African Public Administration. A Reader*. AAPS Books, Harare, Zimbabwe.
- Olagunju JL, 2006. The role of civil servants in nation building. In: Omotosho F, ed. *Contemporary Issues in Public Administration*. Bolabay Publications, Lagos.

The Fluctuating Fortunes of Civil Servants in Nigeria

- Olaopa T, 2012. Public administration and civil service reforms in Nigeria. Ibadan: University Press.
- Philips D, 1992. Essentials of the 1988 civil service reforms in Nigeria. In: Yahaya AD, Akinyele CI, eds. *New Trends in Personnel Management: A Book of Readings*. ASCON, Badagry.
- Rasheed S and Balogun J, 1995. Political pluralism and the management of the African public service: Learning from the past to reshape the future. *African Journal of Public Administration and Management*, Vol. IV, No. 1.
- Sharma MP, Sadana BL and Kaur H, 2012. Public administration in theory and practice. Allahabad: Kitab Mahal.
- The Nigerian Tribune*, September 17, 2015.
- The Punch*, September 8, 2015.
- Yerima J, 2005. Comparative public administration. In: Bello K, ed. *Essentials of Public Administration*. Flash Printers, Kano.