

DEMOCRACY, SECURITY, RESTRUCTURING AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

On the 1st day of October, 1960, Nigeria regained her independence from Britain amidst pomp and pageantry. Nigerians from all walks of life took to the streets, to public and personal houses and places to celebrate this momentous occasion and epoch making event. The excitement of Nigerians certainly knew no bounds especially when viewed within the context of the subjugation, humiliation and exploitation the people had passed through under the cleavages of colonialism. To Nigerians, a new dawn had emerged; a dawn where citizens would no longer suffer indignities of colonialism; a dawn when Nigerians would pilot the affairs of their own country and a dawn of economic prosperity. The nationalist who took over the mantle of leadership from the colonialists assured citizens that they would write - off the wrongs of colonialism and set the country on the path of economic prosperity.ⁱ

Unfortunately, as soon as independence was achieved, some of the booby traps and landmines set up by the colonialists started to explode. For instance, it has been explained by many scholars that they way and manner the Nigerian state was configured by the British colonialist “had not encouraged horizontal interactions, even though it had maximized vertical interaction between the various groups and the colonial administration.”ⁱⁱ The *awareness of parochialism*ⁱⁱⁱ which the colonial government implanted created suspicion and fear, which led to mistrust among the various ethnic groups, and also expanded the nation’s fault lines. It must be noted that most of these existing fault lines were suppressed by the colonial regime and only fully started manifesting upon their departure.

As should be expected, seven years after independence, the country was enmeshed in a fratricidal war that lasted three years (1967 to 1970), with devastating consequences for nationhood. Close to six decades of “nationhood”,

the Nigerian state is currently experiencing centrifugal strains from several groups and individuals negotiating for space within the Nigerian state. While some of these groups and individuals have become so loquacious and vicious in their contestation for spaces within the Nigerian state, others have become so vocal in their demand for the reconfiguration or restructuring of the so-called Nigerian “federal system state,” to give more strength, power and resources to the component units so as to drive development in the peripheries. Okpeh Okpeh was on point when he noted that:

Contemporary Nigeria is no doubt at cross roads. Never in the history of its existence as a nation has it been so helplessly entangled in the intricate web and contradictions of having to define the substance, nature and character of its sovereignty. The stringent manifestations of this crisis could be discerned from the prevalence of ethnic and religious wrangling, the clamour for resource control, fiscal federalism, and secularity definition. This development has posed the critical question as to whether Nigeria, as it is, has a future at all.....^{iv}

Historically, these agitations are not entirely new. The emerging clamour and contradictions in the Nigerian State is a consequence of the failure of the so called federal structure to promote a dynamic equilibrium between the centre and the component units. Importantly, the clamour by these groups is coming at a time when the component units have become severely emasculated economically, politically and structurally vis-à-vis the central government. The severity of this clamour should, therefore, be understood within the context of the economic depression which has exposed the weaknesses of the component units (states and local governments).

Thus, in just two decades of democratic governance, the country is confronted with a deep crisis of phenomenal proportions. Although we acknowledge the prevalence of conflicting records on the magnitude of the crisis, we however dare assert that the country and its people are confronting profound challenges, which if not properly handled, could mar future prospects. The crisis confronting the country has continued to manifest in many ways, some of which are briefly articulated as follows:

- Nigeria is the 7th largest oil producing country in the world, yet she has one of the lowest standards of living in global comparative terms.
- The country has one of the fastest growing populations in the world, yet there is no concrete strategy to convert this into advantage in the world and at a time when the demography is a veritable tool for achieving global greatness.
- Nigeria is very rich in resource endowment but this advantage is yet to impact on its material advancement. Poverty levels are quite high with the

country now adjudged the poverty capital of the world. Over 80% percent of the entire population of the country is still living under the bread line.

- The country is one of the most unsafe places in the world, threatened by insurgency, terrorism, banditry and ethno-religious conflicts, which have ruptured her social fabric in ways that are implicating development at all levels.
- Although democratizing, Nigeria is reportedly one of the politically unstable countries in Africa. The governance crisis confronting the country has made nonsense of the idea of democracy.
- Infrastructure development is at a lowest level, and coupled with rampaging corruption; this has made the country one of the most difficult places in the world to do business.
- Structurally defective, the country is tenaciously held down by the incubus of leadership failure characterized by lack of political will, patriotism and a deep set visionlessness and cluelessness on the part of our political office holders.
- A richly multicultural polity that is unique in her diversity, but whose leaders and institutions lack the capacity to manage vertical and horizontal relations between her constituents.^v

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate and expose how the failure of our democratic system to emancipate the people, secure lives and property, and weave the various groups together is throwing up a number of contending issues revolving around restructuring and the national question. We shall demonstrate that in all sincerity, Nigeria's current democratic process is experiencing an unprecedented reversal, due largely to the inability of leaderships at all levels to provide the pillars of sustainable development. The multiplier implication is that several citizens have given up and as such resorted to various nefarious activities for survival. Why? Because of trust deficit in the leadership and governance process. Given the multiplicity of the security challenges confronting the nation, and the inability of the nation's component units -states and local governments - to confront them headlong, has further exposed the structural defects of the country. This has led for the vociferous calls for the restructuring of the nation. While we agree that there is need to rejig the country structurally, we will argue that democracy and restructuring can only make sense and meaning when Nigerians become more sincere, nationalistic and truly committed in building a nation-state.

Democracy, Security and Restructuring: Conceptual Foundations

Ordinarily, democracy as a concept does not need any kind of conceptualization. This is because the concept is one of the most defined by scholars, politicians, analysts and the media. Its usage is, therefore, commonplace

and its meaning is not imbued with the type of contradictions and complexities which are found in the conceptualization of other terms. One of the most popular and commonest definitions of democracy is the one offered by Abraham Lincoln, which defines it as “government of the people, by the people and for the people.” What is key in this definition is the centrality and fundamental role the people play in any democratic project. This definition supposes, to use the words of Abubakar Momoh, “that democracy is a form of government in which authoritative power and sovereignty rest with the people to the extent that the mechanisms, institutions and processes that exist are meant to be of benefit to the people”.^{vi} Democracy is people-centred, and that is why it is referred to as “citizens’ democracy.”^{vii} As the *New York Times* columnist, Anthony Lewis once opined, “The most important office in a democracy, is the office of the citizens.”^{viii}

What then is insecurity? Simply put, insecurity is the absence of security. What is the nexus between democracy and security or insecurity? Critical to our democracy, just like any other democracy is security. It is in recognition of this that section 14 (2) of the 1999 Constitution as amended declares that “The Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be a State based on the principles of democracy and social justice.” Apart from the fact that the same Constitution grants sovereignty to the people, it states in section 14 (2b) that, “the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government.” Regrettably, the Nigerian State has demonstrated incapacity to secure the country and protect lives and property as encapsulated in the fundamental objective and directive principles of state policy in the 1999 Constitution.

What then is restructuring? Used most commonly in the corporate management parlance, restructuring is that act of reorganizing the legal, ownership, operational, or other structures of a company for the purpose of making it profitable, or better organized for its present needs.^{ix} Since the Nigerian State is not a company, how then do we situate this definition to fit our present conversation? Restructuring for the purpose of this article simply refers to the process of redesigning, recalibrating or reorganizing of the structures of the Nigerian State to make it better organized, more result oriented and beneficial to its citizens. In retrospect, this conceptualization presupposes that the present structure of the Nigerian State is unworkable and, therefore, requires some form of restructuring.

The Dysfunctionality of the Nigerian State: How Did We Get Here?

The ethnic plurality of the new nation right from colonial rule provided the basis for frequent acrimony and contradictions in the socio-political and economic process. The plurality of the nation is blamed in the way and manner the colonial administration amalgamated these nationalities. For example, while the colonial

government tried to fuse the north and south together, it did not have the objective of building a unified country.^x For instance, from 1914 to 1960, very little effort was made to integrate the country – both the north and south were administered separately, and also fought very hard to maintain and sustain this separation. The British colonialist did not inculcate the spirit of nationalism and oneness which is a critical ingredient for nation building. Both provinces established and maintained their own separate institutions. Such separation tended to encourage ethnic consciousness and exclusiveness, thereby fanning the embers of ethnicism and sectionalism.^{xi}

The colonial government did very little to encourage oneness or the spirit of nationalism. For instance, the Richards Constitution which legally established three Regions – North, East and West, exposed the ethnic fault lines of the country. For example, ethnic based political parties would emerge. Besides, while it would appear as if the Richards Constitution was Federal in nature, in practice it was more unitary. As independence approached, nationalists pressed for more devolution of powers and this culminated in the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 and the Lyttelton Constitution of 1954, which granted the regions more power and autonomy.

Why were their demands for regional autonomy and the establishment of the federal system of government? First, this was basically because each region wanted to protect itself against possible invasion by other groups or regions in the competitive process. Secondly, each group/region wanted to take over the reins of power from the colonial government and control the distribution of allocatable resources and patronage.^{xii} As independence was achieved, two major issues had been driven under the carpet by the politicians to attain independence. These included:

1. The minority fears of domination which led to establishment of the Sir Willink Commission.
2. The fundamental imbalance in the federal structure which generated fear of political domination among the various groups in the country. For example, the Northern region accounted for 79% of the country's total area as compared to the Eastern region's 8.3% and the Western regions 8.5%. In addition, the North also had a demographic leverage over the Southern Region. The 1963 census figures indicated that the Northern Region accounted for 53.3%, while the Eastern Region and Western Regions accounted for 22.3% and 18.4% respectively. The Mid-Western Region had 4.6% and Lagos Federal Territory had 1.2%, of the total population of 55 million.^{xiii}

Despite these fears, there was some level of autonomy, self-determination and control from the various groups/regions (except the minorities who were sandwiched by the three dominant ethnic groups) leading to centrifugal pull. The regions were substantially autonomous and controlled, to a large extent, their resources, and only gave a percentage to the central government. For instance, while the Federal government controlled foreign policy issues, macro-economic issues, defense, customs, immigration and the Federal Police, the regions controlled their resources, micro-economic issues and regional police. This arrangement created room for a more healthy and robust competition among the regions.

The Situation during Military, 1966-1999

The military changed this arrangement completely. From a federal arrangement that gave the regions enormous powers, the Federal Military Government (FMG) whimsically changed the structure of the Nigerian state to a unitary system, which is highly centralized with a substantial part of state power residing in the central government. The centralization of power is akin to the nature of their (military) hierarchical command. Why the country appeared to be federal in name, in structure, it was completely unitary, with the president/military head of state in charge of the following:

- i. Creation of states and LGs in such a way and manner that suited the whims and caprices of the junta;
- ii. Rejigged the Revenue sharing formula in favour of the federal government;
- iii. Controlled virtually all the items in the constitution viz: police, mineral resources, the judiciary, primary and tertiary education, elections, etc.

The Situation in the Fourth Republic, 1999 to Date

Military midwifed transition ensured the sustenance of the arrangement that held sway during the last 29 years of their rule. For instance, they ensured that the 1979 and 1999 Constitutions which they handed over to Nigerians were federal on article but unitary in practice. For example, the federal allocation is substantially controlled by the Federal government at the detriment of the other component units (with FG 52.68%, with states and LGs having 26.72% and 20.60% respectively).

The FG also controls 68 items in the Exclusive Legislative List, while it again shares 30 other items on the Concurrent List with states.^{xiv} Some of the items which the Federal Government (FG) control include the Police, State and Local Government (LG) creation, minimum wage, federal roads, primary and tertiary education, mineral resources, pensions and gratuities, correctional services, the formation, annulment and dissolution of marriages, just to mention but a few. This has exerted enormous stress on the FG to the extent that it has been unable to

deliver. The present defective structure has malnourished states and LGs of resources and power to be able to carry out development strides. It has also underdeveloped the states and made them lazy, depending entirely on the FG for resources. This has made most state unviable, hence the call for restructuring.

Restructuring Nigeria: What are the Contending Issues?

The resurgence of the debate for the restructuring of the Nigerian State is certainly not new. It commenced during military rule, particularly during the General Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abachas era. At some point, the clamour culminated to the publication of a book in 1998, to document the views and position of several academics on this subject.^{xv} The return of democracy in 1999 witnessed the resurgence of the restructuring debate. Another edited book would be in 2003, which also documented the various shades of opinion canvassed by some academics at that time.^{xvi} The recent clamour and agitations which reached its crescendo in the last six years (2015-2019), should be seen as a consequence of the failure of the so-called federal structure to promote a dynamic equilibrium between the centre and the component units, on the one hand; and within and between the units on the other. Importantly, the clamour by several groups is coming at a time when the component units have become severely emasculated economically, politically and structurally vis-à-vis the central government, thereby throwing up a number of challenges, including the security question.^{xvii}

The severity of the recent clamor for the recalibration of the Nigerian State should, therefore, be understood within the context of the contradictions in the Nigerian State, which has exposed the weaknesses of the component units (states and local governments) in recent times vis a vis the centre. The structural imbalance since 1966 has been a bane to its social, economic and political development of the country. These contradictions - which largely accounts for the nation building challenges confronting the country - are clear signals that the Nigerian State as presently constituted and structured can certainly not work without some form of recalibration.

The success or failure of any nation is intricately tied to the structure it adopts and the quality of characters (leaders and followers) available to operationalize the system. It is the structure that throws up institutions – political and economic institutions. Nigeria’s political and economic institutions are weak because of the defective structure it has adopted since independence. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson,^{xviii} have argued and also demonstrated that nations have failed because of the nature and character of the institutions they have developed over time. According to them:

The political institutions of a society are key determinants of the outcome of this game. They are the rules that govern incentives in politics. They determine how the government is chosen and which part of the government has the right to do what. Political institutions determine who has power in the society and to what ends that power can be used. If the distribution of power is narrow and unconstrained, the political institutions are absolutist, as exemplified by the absolutist monarchies reigning throughout the world during much of history.^{xix}

Political and economic institutions can be *inclusive* and encourage political and economic development, or they can be *extractive* and become impediments to political and economic development. Nations fail when they develop extractive political and economic institutions that impede and even block economic growth and political development. Most nations in Africa today have failed because - on purpose - they have deliberately developed extractive and weak structures and political institutions which are antithetical to development logic.

There is gain saying that there has never been a period in our political history, that the clamour for the restructuring of the Nigerian state has been so dramatic. From the North to South, East to West, there have been renewed calls for restructuring among groups and individuals with variegated prepositions. This debate appears to have heightened because a cross-section of Nigerians seem to be disillusioned, dampened and consequently unsatisfied with a system that has continued to perpetuate insecurity, corruption, poverty, penury, ignorance and disease.

While this debate rages on, it is important to quickly examine some of the contending perspectives and situate this debate within the vortex of Nigeria's national question:

1. To some, there is need to balkanize Nigeria. To this group of people, the country is unnecessarily too wide to adequately cater for the interest and well-being of the generality of the people. To them, the present skewed structure is responsible for the disempowerment of citizens (the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra [MASSOB] and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People [MOSOP] belong to this category).^{xx}
2. Some groups of people have canvassed for economic restructuring of Nigeria.^{xxi} Those who share this strand of argument contend that there is need to change the revenue sharing formula to be in favour of the component units.
3. There is yet another group that believes that there is need to restructure the polity entirely. To this group of people, the items on the Exclusive List should be substantially reduced and same given to states. To them, the FG

is too encumbered and loaded to manage all these items. Those who perform this position stress among others that FG's control, for instance, of the police is responsible for the security challenges bedeviling the country. To this group, the FG should be unbundled to enable states and LGs have more say in the affairs of governance.

4. There is yet another group that believes that the restructuring required in the country is a combination economic and political.
5. To others, the country does not need economic or political restructuring; what the country requires is moral restructuring. They argue that no matter what we do, if we don't restructure the minds of the people, the country cannot make progress. President Olusegun Obasanjo belongs to the category that shares this school of thought.^{xxii}
6. There are those who believe that there is no need for restructuring at all; that the so-called clamour for restructuring is being championed by politicians, particularly the opposition, who lost out especially in the 2015 elections (Governor Nasir-El Rufai of Kaduna State belongs to this group). According to them, these categories of politicians are only craving for relevance ahead of the 2019; wondering why they did not embark on restructuring when they were in power.
7. Closely linked to the above is the argument that the preset clamour for restructuring should be seen within the context of inter and intra-elite squabble for political space and power.
8. There is yet another group who feel that what is wrong with Nigeria is not the structure but the processes by which Nigerians carry out their responsibilities (President Buhari expressed this same position in his 2018 New Year day broadcast). According to him, what Nigeria needs to do is to rejig its processes but not its structure. This position is similar to those who think that what the country needs to do is to strengthen its institutions but not to restructure them.^{xxiii}
9. There is another group that is completely opposed to anything restructuring because they fear that it will lead to the complete disintegration or dismemberment of the country. This view is canvassed by those who believe in the cooperate existence of Nigeria.^{xxiv}

Conclusion

Arising from the several problematic analysed above, Nigeria is currently at cross roads. The crisis which Nigeria faces today is explainable within the context of its structural deformities and governance failures. Structurally, after close to six decades of "nationhood," the Nigerian state is currently in a dire stretch and already in the process of imploding if urgent steps are not taken. The nation's

democracy, to say the least, is not emancipatory. Twenty one years after, the nation's democracy is on a reverse gear. Elections have become battlefields, while governance outcomes have not be impactful. There is general distrust – distrust along ethnic, religious and sectional lines, and these fault-lines have continued to expand on a daily basis. The multiplier implication is worsening security challenges with the governments unable secure the lives and property of its citizens.

It is against this background that we strongly share the opinion of several Nigerians who are clamouring for the reconfiguration of the Nigerian state, due to several inadequacies, which have been a clog in wheel of progress for a long time now. Be that as it may, there is also a sense in which no matter how we restructure, if the nation's governance mechanism and processes are not refined, the country will not make any progress. By governance, we mean both the leadership and the followership - all working together to achieve the nation's roadmap towards progress.

As we (academics) gather here to examine the various challenges that we face –democracy, insecurity, restructuring and the national question, conferees must ponder on all the contending issues raised in this article, with a view to charting a sustainable course for the nation's progress and development. For instance, conferees must resolve on the nature of restructuring that suits us. Should it be economic, political, social, moral, religious or structural? I am particularly glad that the School of Arts and Social Sciences have joined the discourse to interrogate issues relating to the national question. In doing this, the School and the entire conferees are contributing significantly to national development. It is the duty of academics to provide the theoretical and structural foundations upon which the nation can stand solidly and this is exactly what you have set out to do. I hope that this conference will provide the road map to national rebirth and development.

Endnotes

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- iii. J.I. Elaigwu, *Gowon: Biography of a Soldier Statesman...*
- iv. See Okpeh, O. O., "The Sovereign National Conference: An Historical Appraisal of Contending Issues and Their Implications for

the Corporeality of the Nigerian Nation” in Okpeh, O. O. Jnr. (ed), *The Sovereign National Conference*, (Makurdi: Aboki Publishers), 2003, p. 13

- v. For more details on this subject and other issues, read O.O. Okpeh, “The Sovereign National Conference: An Historical Appraisal of Contending Issues and Their Implications for the Corporeality of the Nigerian Nation” in O.O. Okpeh (ed), *The Sovereign National Conference* (Makurdi: Aboki Publishers), 2003, 1- 34
- vi. For more details on all these perspectives see A. Momoh, “The Thorny Match Towards Democracy: Some Introspection and Prognosis” in A. Momoh (ed), *Democracy and Socio-Economic Issues in Nigeria* (Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015),” 40
- vii. H. J. Gans, *Democracy and the News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1
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- xi. For more details read P. I. Ukase, “J.S. Tarka and Ethnic Minority Agitations and Struggles in Nigeria, 1960-1980: An Eulogy Revisited”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* (JHSN), 22, 89-92
- xii. For more details see P.I. Ukase, “Interrogating the Nexus between Minority Agitations and Democracy/Good Governance.....” and P.I. Ukase and A.I. Onoja, “From Opposition to Mainstream Politics: Central Nigeria in National Politics, 1960-2015” in S. Fwatshak (ed), *The Transformation of Central Nigeria: Essays in Honour of*

Toyin Falola (Austin, Texas: Pan African University Press, 2017), pp.43-58

- xiii. I.J. Elaigwu, J.I. Elaigwu, *Gowon: Biography of a Soldier Statesman...*
- xiv. See the 1999 Nigerian Constitution as Amended
- xv. P.I. Ukase, "Governance, Separatist Agitations and the Survival of the Nigerian State" Lead article **Delivered at a Conference on Governance, Separatist Agitations and the Survival of the Nigerian State Organised by the Department of Political Science and Diplomacy, Veritas University, Abuja** (The Catholic University of Nigeria), **on Monday, 5th March, 2018**
- xvi. For more on the views of these scholars, read O.O. Okpeh (ed), *The Sovereign National Conference* (Makurdi: Aboki Publishers), 2003
- xvii. For more details on these security challenges read P.I. Ukase, "Governance, Separatist Agitations and the Survival of the Nigerian State."
- xviii. For more elaborate details on this perspective see D. Acemoglu and J.A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (Great Britain: Profile Books Ltd), 2013
- xix. For more elaborate details on this perspective see D. Acemoglu and J.A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (Great Britain: Profile Books Ltd), 2013,"79-80
- xx. P.I. Ukase, "Governance, Separatist Agitations and the Survival of the Nigerian State" Lead article **Delivered at a Conference on Governance, Separatist Agitations and the Survival of the Nigerian State Organised by the Department of Political Science and Diplomacy, Veritas University, Abuja** (The Catholic University of Nigeria), **on Monday, 5th March, 2018**
- xxi. For instance, the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar, called on Nigeria ns to focus on devolution of the economy rather than restructuring the country. For more details see S. Ikemitang, "Nigeria: Political restructuring or Economic Restructuring?" cited in Punch cited in <http://punchng.com/nigeria-political-restructuring-or-economic-restructuring/> accessed on 26th February, 2018

- ^{xxii} . They argue that no matter what we do, if we don't restructure the minds, the country cannot make progress (President Obasanjo falls into this category).
- ^{xxiii} . See full text of President Muhammadu Buhari's 2018 New Year Broadcast cited in <https://punchng.com/full-text-muhammadu-buharis-2018-new-year-address/>, accessed on 23rd June, 2019
- ^{xxiv} . President Muhammed Buhari belongs to the school of thought. According to him, "in 2003 after I joined partisan politics, the late Chief Emeka Ojukwu came and stayed as my guest in my hometown Daura. Over two days we discussed in great depth till late into the night and analyzed the problems of Nigeria. We both came to the conclusion that the country must remain one and united." He stated further that "Nigeria's unity is settled and not negotiable. We shall not allow irresponsible elements to start trouble and when things get bad they run away and saddle others with the responsibility of bringing back order, if necessary with their blood." For more read Broadcast by President Muhammed Buhari of August 21st, 2017, cited in <https://punchng.com/full-text-of-president-buharis-speech/>, accessed on 23rd June, 2019.