

UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT BETWEEN BUREAUCRATS AND POLITICIANS IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This article focuses on the conflict between politics and administration by using Africa generally and Nigeria in particular as a case study. It therefore embodies the nature, causes and possible solutions to the face – off between politicians and bureaucrats on the continent. The aim here is to consider the feasibility of “working out a system which promotes mutual respect and cooperation between the political class and the bureaucracy” as advanced by Jewel, (2008). By relying on the use of extant literature and observation, the article contends that political - bureaucratic interaction can be very important in promoting development, as well as hindering it. The article argues that the bureaucratic structure in Africa is a colonial heritage which has regrettably failed to live up to expectations hence the persistent conflict with the political class. The article blames this conflict on a number of factors which include corruption, incompetence and undue influence from the politicians. The article submits that concerted efforts such as ensuring competence based employment within the civil service and the prosecution of civil servants for negligence have to be made in order to entrench mutual respect and cooperation between the political class and the bureaucrats.

Introduction

Having an efficient and effective public bureaucracy is an imperative for the success of democratic institutions. This is because effective public policies cannot be defined, articulated and implemented in the absence of bureaucratic systems that are transparent, competent and accountable. Efficient and competent public bureaucracies are a prerequisite for the effective administration of the rule of law, unbiased dispensation of justice, empowerment of the people, the equal treatment, and provision of equal opportunities to all citizens without regard to tribe, political or religious affiliation. It is in line with this that since the attainment of political independence over fifty years ago, the countries in Sub-Saharan African

have experienced an overwhelming increase in the number of public bureaucrats. This is because the newly independent African governments had moved rapidly to replace the departing colonial administrators with native - born bureaucrats.

It would be observed that in the first decade of African independence or even less, Africans embarked on a process of Africanization of the civil service in a bid to replace the colonial bureaucrats with native Africans (Adamolekun, & Kincaid, 1991). Perhaps due to the ethnic diversity of the African states, federal character or a system of quota was adopted in the recruitment process which paved way for the employment of incompetent hands – a situation that would turn out to mar the performance of the bureaucratic institution and exacerbate its conflict with the political class. (Gboyega, 1989) Thus, while democratic institutions were established, the social disconnect that emerged between the governing and governed led to the abandonment of these democratic experiments. As a result, widespread discontent and civil unrest began to manifest in various forms until successive military coups swept the continent leading to the ousting of democratically elected governments. The ascendancy of the military regimes at first caused hopes to rise, but reality soon set in as the new rulers began to purge the ranks of the government as competent and experienced civil servants whose loyalties they questioned were sacked.

Even the return to civil rule in these African countries has not been able to guarantee an efficient and effective bureaucracy Africa although this is not peculiar to Africa. . Bureaucrats seem to be almost universally perceived as obstructive as they may say ‘Yes, Minister’ but what they really mean is ‘No Minister’. A major challenge in this context is the conflict that exists between the bureaucrats and politicians. It can be observed that politicians have frequently come to experience disappointment in persuading the administrator to comply with their demands and their tendency to blame administrators personally for this. It is not unexpected that politicians will frequently take recourse to putting pressures on administrators for making them to comply with their demands. On the other hand, bureaucrats feel politicians are ignorant of the workings of civil service and tend to apply undue pressure without regard the due processes that have to be followed. The resultant effect of this misunderstanding is a lack of cooperation and the crawling pace of policy implementation.

This form of conflict is not peculiar to Africa. For instance, a character in the British political comedy series, *Yes Minister* had in the 1980s observed that “The opposition aren’t really the opposition. They are only the government in exile. The civil services are the opposition in residence” (Gboyega, 1989). However, relations between senior administrators and politicians are likely to be even more important in developing countries due to factors like federal character

which compromises competence and meritocracy. Where other variables are not defective, this rivalry is not that prominent such as in Singapore where the positive and close working relationship between political and bureaucratic leaders was central to the country's transformation. Indeed, a key factor in Singapore's development success was that the bureaucracy was given the autonomy to design, implement, and adapt economic policies. This was, in part, possible because of a largely meritocratic bureaucracy that recruited the country's best graduates. However, a combination of other institutional defects in Africa makes the rivalry between politicians and bureaucrats compelling.

Worried by this development, Kiragu, (1998) points out that Uganda's President, Yoweri Museveni highlighted this potentially troublesome relationship saying he intended to steer Uganda's development through the private sector. According to him, the public sector uses bureaucratic tendencies to frustrate development plans. It is important to point out that reform successes in other parts of the world have often involved small teams made up of political and bureaucratic leaders committed to reform, who developed networks across government and internationally. Close working relationships and shared pro-development values and goals in such core groups are important, and may be bolstered by informal ties. Other common features of effective interaction are bureaucrats who have more influence in designing policy than is usually the case, and strong political leadership that has a strategy to deal with opposition. Thus, considering the damage which the stand – off between politicians and bureaucrats causes to the development process there is the need to work out a system which promotes mutual respect and cooperation between the political class and the bureaucracy as submitted by Jewel. However, we need a better understanding of how politicians and bureaucrats engage with one another, and of the structural constraints and opportunities that affect this engagement which underscores the essence of this discourse.

Conceptual Clarification

The term bureaucracy refers to a set of regulations drawn by governments to control activity, usually in large organizations and governments. It is represented by a standardized procedure that dictates the execution of all processes within an institution, division of power, hierarchy and relationships. In everyday practice, the interpretation and execution of policy leads to informal influence. Bureaucracy is a concept in sociology and political science referring to the way in which the administrative execution of legal rules is socially organized (Moe,1997).

One of the structural concepts of the above definition shows that bureaucracy stems from the effort to govern organizations through closed systems.

In order to maintain order, such systems are described according to formal and rigid rules. Procedural correctness is held in very high regard within a bureaucracy. Perhaps the single most identifiable characteristic of a bureaucracy is the use of hierarchical procedures to simplify or replace autonomous decisions. Secondly, the classic rigidity and protectionism define bureaucracy such that firing poor performers is extremely difficult because of an arduous termination process hence the bureaucratic process is often likened with redundancy, arbitrariness and inefficiency (Akinwale, 2014). One common satirical definition of bureaucracy is the art of making the possible impossible. In this regard, labels such as "bureaucrat," "bureaucratic" and "bureaucracy" are often invectives or at least tinted with negative connotation. This is because bureaucrats do not come into office via democratic election or because bureaucracy is generally considered inefficient.

It is important to note that bureaucracy is not the same thing as governance or administration. Some administrative structures are not bureaucratic, and many bureaucracies do not specifically exist as part of administrative structures. The differences lie in the objectives for each system. An administration exists to direct organizational resources towards an objective goal, such as generating profits or administering a service. Bureaucracies exist to ensure that procedural correctness is followed, irrespective of changes in the government or party in power or outside circumstances or goals. However, bureaucrats can be considered as administrators more so as they are responsible for the administration of dictates of the political heads who are often alien to the bureaucratic process. Thus, it can be concluded here that bureaucracy refers to a specialized system and process of maintaining uniformity or authority within an organization. Bureaucratic processes are most common in large organizations or governments and administer formal rules of internal behavior are considered here as non – elected career workers. The mention of bureaucracy immediately brings to mind the civil service but bureaucratic structures also exist within non – civilian formations. While bureaucrats are career workers, politicians or the political class are people who are elected on the platform of political parties. The politicians may also be those selected by elected officials as executives who head the Ministries, Parastatals and Departments.

With regards to conflict, Lewis Coser(1956) considers the concept as a struggle over values and claims to scarce resources, power and status in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals. This shows that conflict can manifest in many forms, but its underlining cause lies in the incompatible desires that are nursed by the parties in conflict. Conflicts can also be considered as a state of disagreement or argument between people and groups. In this context, conflict is deemed to manifest in the form of opposing ideas, beliefs,

opinions, demands, interests etc. Within the ambiance of social conditions, theorists such as Evans and Newman cited in Adekanye, conceptualize conflict as:

... a social condition, which arises where two or more parties pursue goals which are incompatible. Normally, hostility is inevitable when two parties or groups perceive ideas, beliefs, opinions, demands, interests etc. in incompatible terms (Adekanye, 1987:39)

In the same perspective, conflict can also be seen as a nexus between a number of groups which possess differences in aims and objectives hence it is an inevitable aspect of human existence. This inevitability of conflict as an existential reality of human society is further captured by Best who argues that conflicts are inevitable reality of social existence, and they occur even in the best of human societies (Best, 2006). The foregoing indicates that conflict usually occurs primarily as a result of clash of interests in the relationship between parties, groups, or states either because they pursue opposing or incompatible goals, or because the laws, values and understanding that constitute the premise of that relationship are not clearly comprehended or have become unacceptable to some elements within it. It is within this context that this article considers the interaction between administrators and the political class as a form of conflict more so as the interaction is a clash of divergent interest, goals and expectations.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, this article is construed within the framework of the Politics - administration dichotomy theory. The theory dwells on the boundaries of public administration and hinges on the normative relationship between elected officials and administrators in a democratic society. The phrase politics-administration dichotomy itself does not appear to have a known inventor, even after exhaustive research, the combination of words that make up the phrase was first found in public administration literature from the 1940s with no clear originator (Arthur, 1968). Woodrow Wilson is credited with the politics - administration dichotomy via his theories on public administration in his 1887 essay, "The Study of Administration". Wilson came up with a theory that politics and administration are inherently different and should be approached as such. According to Wilson, "The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics.... Administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics. Administrative questions are not political questions. Although politics sets the tasks for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices.

The politics-administration dichotomy is an important concept in the field of public administration and shows no signs of going away because it deals with the policy-makers role as an administrator and the balancing act that is the relationship between politics and administration (Rosser, 2010). Wilson's politics -

administration dichotomy theory which was influenced by Richard Ely and Herbert Adams can potentially be substantial in sustaining a strong productive government. The theory exposes the complexity, difficulty level and ample multiplication of governmental functions which are a main component in the cause to implement the politics-administration dichotomy. The theory provides a solution that would counteract the majority of the incumbent voters. By employing the elite philosophical leaders to improve, shape, condition and sway public opinion, politics-administration dichotomy constitutes one of the first concepts of checks and balances, which is one of the most predominant systems of democratic accountability. Nevertheless "separating the will of the people from politics" could be extremely beneficial and institutionally separating administration from politics could prove valuable in sustaining government accountability (Wilson 1887). Politics-administration dichotomy also leads to political neutrality. The blurring of "politics" and "policy" has led to the advocations to dismiss "partisan politics" rather than "policy politics." The importance of neutrality in politics and policy are established within the politics-administration dichotomy.

The theory is not without criticism. For instance, it can be submitted that if politics includes all of what we know as policy making, then the dichotomy would bar administrators or bureaucrats from participation. The dichotomy of policy and administration was a conceptual distinction underlying a theory of democratic accountability. It was not intended to guide behavior, it was intended as a behavioral prescription directed against contemporary practices of machine politics (Montjoy, & Douglas, 1995). The strict definition is the model. It is not conceptually possible to have a one way dichotomy that keeps elected official out of administration but allows administrators to be active in policy. By Wilson making the statement, "Government should be run like a business," he thereby opened up many loop holes for the capitalist society to exploit the government for things they didn't actually have. This statement ends in a very dangerous uncharted territory for people now. Based on the fact government could be run like a business. The concept "everyone has a boss" with creating the business like mindset running our country it makes everyone have to answer to someone than the other, it creates a sense of working for your job when you are supposed to be working for the people whom you represent. Thus, instead of implementing policy to help the people, administrators and politicians are more concerned about who is funding/appointing than they are worried about the common man. In spite of these weaknesses, the ability of the theory to explain the dichotomy between politicians and administrators makes it relevant to this discourse.

Nature and Causes of Conflict between Bureaucrats and the Political Class

Conflict is an essential component of human interaction which manifests in different forms. During the interaction of politicians and administrators there are many avenues which lead towards contacts between politicians and administrators. To fulfill the demands and proposals, politicians contact administrators. When administrators fail to comply with politician's demands and proposals then there arise situations of conflict between both of them. In this connection, politicians pressurize administrators to attend their demands and make necessary efforts to meet them. To this end, the conflict between bureaucrats and the political class manifests in different forms. In the event of administrators' inability or failure to meet the demands of politicians, it is natural that politicians will react to it in certain ways depending on their personality structure, the extent of their commitment to institutional norm, and the nature of their appreciation of administrators' functions. Administrators can be retired, or transferred to areas of hardship as a response to the difficulty of the bureaucrats. Such areas include where they may face several problems, namely, health hazards, lack of educational facilities for the administrator's children's etc. Another reaction of politicians relates to the administrators' fear that the politicians, if they can do nothing else, can at least tarnish their reputation. In some instances, politicians can influence the alteration of the service records of the administrator. It needs to be pointed out that the administrator needs autonomy and discretion in much the same way as the politicians need control and intervention. Also the kind of reaction politicians will have also determine whether or not they will pursue the matter further and go to the extent of putting various kinds of pressure on administrators to get done what they want. The bureaucrats may react by thwarting efforts to towards the implementation of the policies of the political class.

From a causal perspective, there are some bureaucrats that are partisan or have sympathy or links with particular political parties and if they find themselves under the leadership of a government under a rival political party, they resort to subversive activities which trigger the conflict with the political class. The low wages which civil servants receive also combines with poor incentives to trigger their resentment of politicians who earn fabulous amount within relatively short periods of time. Politicians may also be accused of being naïve regarding the workings of the civil service hence they sometimes apply undue pressure which troubles the civil servant. It will also be recalled that in Nigeria for instance, the colonial administration introduced good governance structure and partly succeeded in transforming native customs and institutions such as improvement in medical care, education, infrastructure and administrative reforms. The administration noted the unity of Nigeria despite the diverse nature of her peoples and also

recognized the strength of the merit principle in the practice of representative bureaucracy in Nigeria (Adamolekun, & Kincaid, 1991). The administration also recognized ethnic regionalism existing among the north, southwest and east and in the colonial administrative practice; the indirect rule policy laid the foundation for the acceptance of peoples of the three regions as one (Akinwale, 2014). Bureaucratic inequalities among the three regions were the basis for recruitment policies from colonial to post-colonial administrative periods. Regionalism was entrenched during colonial rule as economic structures such as the marketing boards were regionalized and regional parliaments were also introduced. Meritocracy was not abandoned during colonial era as the economic and political structures recognized the importance of merit in recruitment. The problem connected with colonial bureaucracy was that of difficulty to remove the ethnic structures.

By the 1950s, British colonial administration in Nigeria started to pave the way for localism of the Nigerian civil service which was achieved in 1960. The vacuum created in the administration of the Nigerian Federal Civil Service with the departure of colonial administrators meant that competent Nigerian administrators had to be placed in prominent positions in the Federal Civil Service. The quota system in Nigeria aimed at representation of states in federal institutions and dates back to management of the military by colonial administration when its lower echelons were occupied by ethnic minority groups from the North. In 1958, the North had 50% of entrants to the Nigerian army and 25% went to the East and West (Akinwale, 2014). The Nigerian civilian government of Balewa applied merit for recruitment of indigenous corps officers that took over from the British officers. The military quota was later put in abeyance but later appeared into the main stream of nation-building process under the 1979 Constitution when quota was based on state. He adds that quota system introduced into the educational system comprises academic merit, educationally less developed states, catchment area and discretion by operators of respective institutions. These components had graduated scores attached to them. Albeit, the quota policies have not achieved the expectations of opportunities spread across states of the Nigerian federation. Academic merit prescribed by the quota system was based on performance at mandatory or qualifying examinations. There were also scores for educationally less developed states and the catchment area of each institution was prescribed by the government and presented to the institutions. The quota system has both its merits and demerits in all sectors introduced. One merit of the quota system is the wide representation of states of the federation in federal establishments. Second, it has partly assisted to sustain the unity of the country and has also assisted to reduce gap in national development. The demerits include non-compliance with the quota

system in some states, falsification of states of origin and unavailability of candidates to fill their quota in respective states of the federation. Also, the system has not been able to harmonize merit and ecological approaches. These observations explain that decentralization is good in federal states like Nigeria and it has helped maintain the unity of the country but problems of harmonization with merit principles has introduced mediocrity and incompetence from the base of educational sector to the administrative sector hence, revealing that administrative policies have its flaws.

The colonial administration applied representation of indigenous bureaucrats and gave regard to the merit principle despite the ethnic structure of the country. Quotas and federal character were not applied during the colonial period. The distinctive aspect of the transition was the mixture of meritocratic and ecological approaches by bureaucrats in the post-colonial era. Despite the institutional framework to reforming ethnic considerations by post-colonial administration, the Nigerian civil service has reached giant strides but problems of application of federal character has impeded the level of world class civil service it would have reached. Professionalism in the civil service whose foundation was laid by colonial administration is now affected by sectionalism, ethnicity and regional considerations. It is clear that with federalism, there are still political issues of regionalism that are unresolved. Thus, the Nigerian federal civil service needs continuous reforms to ensure more power sharing away from the centre where economic and political powers are concentrated.

The earliest administrators had only secondary level education and the majority held junior and middle level administrative positions under the colonial administrations. Most, therefore, lacked the knowledge and the skills of the departing colonialists (Briggs, 2007). The process of hiring these native-born bureaucrats to replace the departing colonial administrators became widely and suitably referred to as Africanization. The rapid growth of the bureaucracy throughout Africa gave rise to an influential new class who, like their colonial predecessors, also aspired to a higher social and economic status. They, therefore, soon began to acquire corporate interests in positions they held, and moved rapidly to consolidate their hold on power in order to acquire and accumulate capital and wealth. In time, this self-interest caused a wide chasm to develop between the governing and the governed, which in the process, redefined the Weberian theory of bureaucracy from one in which the public was the beneficiary of public goods and services, to one that benefited only a small privileged class. The result is that even today, in most Africa countries, the government is perceived by the ruling elites as a vehicle to rob and terrorize the citizenry (Briggs, 2007).

Africa and Nigerian bureaucrats can be described as artificial and comprising degreed and non-degreed bandits, who are out of touch with the people, operate through deception and abuse of power, and are perennially locked in combat with politicians and the people (Akinwale, 2014). The new administrative system that emerged out of post-independence Africa defined new governance rules that observed no rule of law, no accountability, and presided over chaotic governments and corrupt politicians who attracted the envy of politicians. The tragedy in which government institutions became virtual properties of the ruling class, precluded institutionalization of good governance and ensured that government bureaucracies ran predatory states, which subverted the agenda of social and economic development for the majority poor. A consequence of this system of governance is the emergence of corruption, embezzlement, capital flight, increased poverty, and tribalism, which continue to suck the continent deep into the vortex of internal conflicts, administrative failures and increasing violent political implosions. The absence of accountability in government has exacerbated the problems of good governance, while the lack of skilled, knowledgeable and dedicated public administrators has ensured that open and endemic corruption is bankrupting African countries and bureaucratic – political conflict creating a climate that continues to cause widespread social upheavals across the continent.

Promoting Mutual Respect and Cooperation between the Political Class and the Bureaucracy

Considering the fact that conflict between politics and administration is inimical to output and societal good as outlined above, there is the need for concerted efforts to be made to promote mutual respect and cooperation between the political class and the bureaucracy as advanced by Jewel. This can be achieved by removing or reducing the incentives for conflict. To this end, civil servants ought to be prevented and discouraged from being partisan in order to maintain neutrality on their part. This can be done by making the salaries of civil servants more attractive in order to prevent them from being jealous or interested in the earnings of political office holders. Increased earning by the bureaucrats can also promote output on their part and this can in turn the pressure mounted by politicians on them to deliver within record time. The application of appropriate sanctions on erring civil servants can also be introduced to deter civil servants from becoming partisan in order to gain favours and benefits from political camps which in turn influences their attitude towards other political camps. There is also the need to prosecute civil servants who neglect their responsibilities in manners that have criminal and negative implications for the development of the civil service and the larger society.

There is also the need to conduct orientation and re-orientation activities for both politicians and civil servants in order to make them more conversant with their roles so that conflict between them can be minimized. The roles of politicians have to be carefully redrawn in order to eliminate ambiguity. This means there should be a sharper division between politics and administration as such an integrated solution makes politicians vulnerable to influence and pressure from civil servants, that civil servants threaten to invade the political sphere and that a stricter separation of functions makes it easier to control the civil service. The slogan “let the managers manage” which means discretion for managers and boards and not too much daily interference from the political leaders. The implication of this slogan is that chief executives are better at managing and therefore should be given the discretion and opportunity to do so, thereby reducing the burden on the political leadership and, through a sharp division between politics and administration, increase political control.

It is more efficient to separate political and administrative functions than allowing them to remain integrated as it has traditionally been the case in most countries. The argument is that a division between of these functions makes it clearer that there are different functions with different actors. This means the politicians should be left to set the goals while the civil servants implement the policies. Meritocracy should be returned to the civil service in order to enhance the efficiency of the service which should reduce the friction that exists between the civil servants and politicians because the efficiency of the civil service would be improved. In repositioning the application of the federal character policy therefore, ethical standards of merit, cultural unity and choice-based selection must be put in place and harmonized in political and administrative settings.

Conclusion

Efforts have been made here to address the conflict between bureaucrats and the political class by using Africa generally and Nigeria particularly as a case study. The article has discussed the nature and causes of this conflict between these two groups and observes that the bureaucracy in Africa is a colonial inheritance which has been stripped of meritocracy and adorned with federal character. It has been demonstrated in this work that this lack of meritocracy has eroded the bureaucracy in Africa of efficiency but pressure from politicians and the deliberate intention of bureaucrats to thwart the efforts of politicians have also contributed to the conflict between bureaucrats and the political class. The predominant collective consequence of this is retarded development which stems from underperformance of the bureaucracy that has the sole responsibility of implementing government policies. The resolve here therefore is to work out a system which promotes mutual respect and cooperation between the political class

and the bureaucracy as advanced by Jewel. In order to achieve this, it is argued here that concerted efforts such as clearly redefining the role of the civil servant as it relates to policy implementation and that of the politician as it relates to formulation should be one of the steps forward. There is also the need to prosecute civil servants for negligence in order to entrench mutual respect and cooperation between the political class and the bureaucrats as part of efforts toward promoting the mutual cooperation advocated by Jewel.

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