

Review

Military regimes and nation building in Nigeria, 1966-1999

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Accepted 7 July, 2013

The problems of nation building in Nigeria, most of which are congenital, dating to the birth of the nation through the amalgamation exercise of 1914, became protracted since then till the supposedly nationalistic and apolitical military came to power in 1966. The military solutions were examined in this study in a descriptive analytical manner. The discussion revealed that the low level of national integration achieved under military dispensations was as a result of coercion and strict authoritarian guidance and control. Nationalistic affectations and parochial dispositions were more prevalent under the military. The end result was that they left the nation worse than they met it. They left a legacy of a highly militarized social polity that elevated violence, corruption, intolerance and selfish pursuits to lofty heights. And the situation has been worsening progressively since their departure from power in 1999. We now have many ethnic militia organizations and extremist religious groups unleashing terror on the nation and hapless people in their bid to redress real and imagined grievances. There is therefore an urgent need to demilitarize the polity, ensure justice, equity, fairplay and a truly federal democratic arrangement.

Key words: Integration, authoritarian, 'centrist' federalism, congruence, equity, militarize.

INTRODUCTION

The military took over the machineries of government in Nigeria in 1966 in order to check the drift towards anarchy and disintegration staring the nation in the face at this period. The political leaders of the first republic (1960-66) had demonstrated ineptitude, parochialism, injustice and corrupt tendencies in the handling of national affairs and these had bred serious alienation of the masses as well as general disillusionment such that the rulers had virtually lost legitimacy after five years in office. The manipulation of ethno-religious factors for political ascendancy had noticeably become serious centrifugal forces which threatened the corporate existence of the nation. Paden and Soja (1970) observed that:

Independence created a situation of competition for power largely between ethnic units, since other forms of group identity at the national level usually were not sufficiently developed to provide a wide basis of support.

This therefore, partially explains why the emergent ruling elite preferred to use ethno-religious factors as the springboard for national service (Falola et al, 1994). Predictably this development caused serious crises and instability which provided excuse for military intervention. The coming of the supposedly apolitical and nationalistic military was widely acclaimed as the solution to the problems of nation building brought into bold relief by the politicians of the First Republic. However this was not to

be as we will later discover in this study. For now, we need to clarify some terms like "nation building" and "national integration" which are central to the study. We will also expound more on the nature of the Nigerian nation which the military had to contend with from 1966 as well as the characteristics of the military organization which could conceivably prepare its personnel for the messianic role which it arrogated to itself.

But, first, let us clarify the identified terms. In simple terms, nation building refers to a conscious and deliberate attempt to forge a common and mutually agreeable identification with a nation by multiethnic and disparate communities. National integration has been defined by Paden and Soja (1970) as "a reduction in ethnic identity and stratification and the establishment of larger unity based upon associational ties". Both terms have similar connotations and so are often used interchangeably, but quite appropriately nation building is the 'end' while national integration represents the 'means' towards that end.

Five types of linkages have been identified in the theoretical literature on integration. These are: (a) cooperative interaction, (b) economic interdependence, (c) value congruence, (d) identity congruence: and (e) common authority (Paden and Soja, 1970). These will be discussed briefly in turn, ascertaining in the process the degree of the presence of each in the Nigerian polity.

a) **Cooperative Interaction:** This type of linkage is equity-based. The relationship does not lead to loss of identity. It is based on equal partners interacting for their mutual benefits. This is exemplified in trade relations the like of which was witnessed among pre-colonial Nigerian Communities.

b) **Economic Interdependence:** This type of linkage is based on a sort of division of labour or specialization among interacting neighbouring communities who of necessity must carry out some form of exchange for their survival. For instance, a group could specialize in the production of meat and other protein based goods while another specializes in agro-based products. In relation to Nigeria the economic relationship between the Northern and Southern territories fits this typology.

c) **Value Congruence:** In this category, shared values foster and sustain useful interaction in social and political life. The degree of presence of this type of linkage in Nigeria is very low as it is highly circumscribed by ethno-religious boundaries.

d) **Identity Congruence:** In this case, two or more groups can willingly identify with a larger and more embracing system, like a national state without necessarily losing their identities. The Nigeria that emerged through the amalgamation exercise in 1914 would appear to fit this typology. But it must be remembered that it was an enforced union carried out without consulting the people concerned.

e) **Common Authority:** In this type of linkage there is a generally recognized influential or assertive common

authority (like colonial authority or military regimes) that forcefully sustains a contrived union (Paden and Soja, 1970).

Having highlighted and discussed the types of linkage that could facilitate integration and establishing in the process the degree of their presence in the Nigerian polity, it will be demonstrated that assertive common authority, as symbolized by colonial rule and military oligarchy, was mostly responsible for the level of political integration that Nigeria attained at this period. This observation will be reinforced by examining the peculiar nature of the Nigerian nation and the military solutions to the identified problems of nation building. This will be done in a descriptive analytical manner, espousing historical trends and watersheds.

THE PECULIAR NATURE OF NIGERIA

Many peoples and communities of the emergent nations of the Third World were not parties to the defining of the territories and relationships which they were forced to sustain at independence. Deutsch (1974) put this succinctly in the following words:

(More) often they have inherited boundaries drawn for administrative or political convenience by foreign colonial rulers, as in the cases of India, Pakistan, Argentina, Nigeria and Ghana.

Specifically,

Nigeria ... is a union of ethnic nationalities that had lived on this land under established Kingdoms, Empires, Caliphates and Chieftdoms (Ojerinde, 2000).

It is instructive to note that although the Northern and Southern protectorates were unilaterally amalgamated in 1914 by the colonial master it was not until 1946 that they were brought into a single administrative component (Cookey, 1986) "and with only fourteen years of the enforced union they were given nationhood and total sovereignty" (Akorede, 1999). Ever since, successive governments (civilian and military) have been trying to translate the artificial unity into a lasting one (Olaniyan, 2003). The two dominant foreign religions (Islam and Christianity) have coalesced progressively with the geo-ethnic forces to become the bane of the nation. The situation has been the predominance of Islamic religion in the Northern half of the country while the Southern half is predominantly Christian. The discriminatory colonial educational policy which initially prevented the spread of western education to the Northern region compounded the matter (Ajayi and Omoyeni, 2012). And, with each half jealously guarding its religious 'enclave' the common attitude was intolerance. At independence, when political power devolved fully on the indigenes, the problem

became more manifest and in need of prompt attention if disintegration was to be averted. But the civilian administration of post-independence Nigeria further exacerbated the problem in its bid to perpetuate itself in office. The conscious employment of prebendal politics and ethnic jingoism had serious centrifugal impact on the polity as we have noted previously. Issues of national importance like census and elections soon became sources of discord and crises of serious dimensions. This was as a result of the ethno-religious colourations that usually attended the handling of such issues.

Five years after independence the situation had become so grave that something drastic had to be done, if the nation as conceived then, was to survive. This was the background to military incursion into Nigerian politics.

THE MILITARY OPTION

Until quite recently the assumption generally was that the military possesses some attributes which makes it a potential integrative force. This is not without some rational basis. A quite impressive body of literature on the military in the 1960s and 1970s portrayed the organisation as nationalistic and its personnel as puritanical, patriotic, detribalized and dedicated modernisers (Janowitz, 1964, 1977; Huntington, 1968; Johnson, 1962; Shils, 1962; Luttwak, 1969; Dorn, 1968). These assumed attributes were usually capitalized upon by Third World armies to launch themselves into politics. But as evident from recent works in the field these attributes were either exaggerated or over generalized when considering the situation in Africa (Adekanye, 1992; Falola and Ihonvbere, 1985; Falola et al., 1994; Amuwo, 1989; Kolawole, 1998; Ajayi, 1999, 2007).

In the specific case of Nigeria, the military proved to be "corrupt, permeated by secret societies and protection rackets" (Dent, 1978). And as will be revealed later it also proved to be an instrument of sub-nationalism especially in its handling of ethno-religious matters and allocation of national resources. But these negative traits were to manifest only later in the life of military regimes in Nigeria.

On the 15th of January 1966 when the military first seized political power in Nigeria it was warmly welcomed as a messiah that would right the wrongs of the past. But the solutions proffered by the Gen. Ironsi regime were to further compound the situation. That regime in its wisdom felt that regionalism was the bane of the nation and so it proceeded to abolish the regions and put in place a unitary government through Decree No. 34 of 24th May 1966. Decree No. 33 promulgated on the same day also abolished the political, ethnic and cultural associations that had served as the platform for the aggregation of popular opinions.

No matter the good intentions behind the enactment of these decrees the timing was most inauspicious. At that

time the fear of Igbo domination was quite rife especially in the Northern part of the country. It will be recalled that the January 15, 1966 coup, in which prominent Northern politicians were killed, was led by a young crop of Igbo officers. Gen. Ironsi (an Igbo) who became the residuary legatee of the coup not only refrained from punishing the coup plotters, but also went ahead to surround himself with Igbo technocrats as advisers. He also initiated moves to unify the civil service – a development that would have put the Northerners in a position of serious disadvantage vis-à-vis their Southern (especially Igbo) counterparts who had more personnel in the service. With this kind of background the promulgation of Decrees 33 and 34 merely served to further inflame ethnic passions.

Despite the fact that the counter-coup of July 29, 1966 masterminded by officers of Northern extraction restored the political balance somewhat in favour of the North, Northern elements were still not mollified as they continued to decimate the ranks of the Igbo elements domiciled in the North. And when it appeared as if the Lt. Col (later, General) Yakubu Gowon – Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), was unable (or unwilling?) to stem the tide of the pogrom directed against the Igbo in the North, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Military Governor of the Eastern Region, directed the Igbo elements resident in the North to return home. This was precursory to the declaration of a sovereign Republic of Biafra by Ojukwu in May 1967. This development inexorably led to a civil war that lasted for thirty months.

The war was conceived as that of national unity by the Federal Military Government (FMG) and this posture enabled it to enlist the support and assistance of other ethnic groups in the successful prosecution of the war. The breakup of the existing four regions into twelve states on the eve of the war eroded the power base of Biafra and satisfied the yearnings of the minority elements to some extent. And the 'centrist federalism' of the military in which virtually all powers and resources were appropriated for the centre where the military's influence and authority were most profound and which was in tandem with the military's command structure ensured a strong grip on the polity. Thus the Nigeria that emerged from the civil war in 1970 was more united than previously but it was a unity that was based on authoritarian guidance and control.

We recognize the fact that there was the institutionalization of some cross-cultural devices that could assist in reinforcing the efforts at integration. These will include the National Sports Festival, National Festival of Arts and Culture and the National Youth Service Corps Scheme (NYSC). All these operated at the superficial level. Fundamentally no solid foundation for enduring unity had been built. Specifically, the festivals were seen as mere jamborees or avenues for corrupt enrichment by concerned state officials and so patriotism was lacking. Even the NYSC scheme which was initiated in 1973 and

lived up to expectation until the late 1980s eventually succumbed to corruption and maladministration. But more importantly the vexatious issue of graduate unemployment after the service year soon took the shine off the scheme. Thus, while it is true that ethnic antagonisms were minimized in the 1970s, they were not obliterated as illustrated by their resurgence in the 1990s.

We can also recall that the military came up with formulas like 'Quota system' and 'Federal character' in order to ensure some sort of balance in matters of admission or recruitment into public institutions and appointment into public offices. Ostensibly these were intended to remove the fear of marginalisation by giving every ethnic group a sense of belonging. In theory, these policies appeared well intentioned and patriotically motivated but in practice they were regularly manipulated to promote sub-national interests. The same thing applies to the handling of religious matters by military rulers. While constantly echoing the secular nature of the Nigerian nation many of the military rulers were giving covert and overt support to a particular religion. This is best illustrated by Nigeria's membership of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).

We can recall that in 1969 when the OIC was being put together an unofficial Nigerian delegation was in attendance and it was accorded an observer status. In 1971 the Gen. Yakubu Gowon regime recognized and identified with Nigeria's observer status in the OIC (West Africa, July 18, 1988). This position was sustained by subsequent military regimes until January 1986 when the Gen. Ibrahim Babangida (IBB) regime clandestinely changed it to full-fledged membership. This generated a lot of crises which threatened to pull the country apart on several occasions. Disaster was only averted through the deployment of the abundant coercive powers, which the military controls, to ensure some measure of stability.

The legacy of the OIC palaver and the sustenance of some state structures for servicing religion (e.g. the Pilgrims' Welfare Boards) has been the fostering of religious fundamentalists and extremists who have been taking the law into their hands in their defence of religious issues. This had bred intolerance and mutual antagonism between the 'Muslim North' and the 'Christian South'. The former had progressively become arrogant and intolerant while the latter, under the umbrella of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), have become radicalized, daring and censorious.

The fallout (which we are witnessing presently) has been the escalation of religious crises as a result of the stubborn insistence by some Muslim zealots to completely Islamise their strongholds in the North. While we recognize the right of every person to practice his or her religion and adhere to its tenets, this should be done without infringing on the rights of others. This is why Nigerian constitutions (1979, 1989 and 1999) have always prescribed a secular status for the nation. But the prevalent attitudes during the period of the military had

encouraged the religious zealots and political jobbers to only think in parochial terms.

The situation was not helped by the way and manner transition to civil rule programmes was handled by military regimes in Nigeria. The sit-tight disposition of some of the military juntas and the sub-national disposition of some others resulted in manipulated transfer of power or annulment of a popular election in one case (that is the June 12 1993 presidential election). This generated bitterness and loss of faith in the Nigerian nation by a cross-section of people in the southern part of the country especially. It is hardly surprising therefore that calls for a Sovereign National Conference to address the problems of the nation have been coming chiefly from southern elements. Definitely, people who have been marginalized politically would have something to say, while those whose territories have been generating the bulk of the revenue for the nation and are still relegated to the backwaters would also have an opportunity to air their grievances.

With the handover of power to the civilian administration of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo (retired General and former military Head of State) on the 29th of May 1999 and the envisaged opening up of the democratic space, hopes of redressing the prevalent grievances in the country through dialogue on the platform of a Sovereign National Conference were raised. But the Obasanjo administration was timorous on this matter perhaps in order not to step on some toes. The response to this nonchalant posture manifested in the form of ethnic jingoism. The more the government was shying away from convening a conference the more the ethno-cultural groups were retreating to their 'filial wombs' and waxing stronger in the defence of parochial or sub-national interests through the agency of ethnic militia organizations like Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Arewa People's Congress (APC), Bakasi Boys, Egbesu Boys, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). And lately a more dangerous dimension has been brought into the picture in the form of the terrorist activities of the Boko Haram movement – the 'Frankenstein baby' of the extremist maitatsine religious movement of the early 1980s.

Other vexatious issues are the mismanagement of the national economy and embezzlement of public funds. This unsavoury development had led to abandonment of social/welfare programmes, inadequate and poor infrastructure and mass unemployment thereby condemning many people to abject poverty while the small 'tribe' of the ruling elite (military and civilians) are stupendously rich. Preferential allocation of Oil blocks, sinecure appointments, spurious contract awards and outright looting of the government treasury are some of the avenues for corrupt enrichment by this class of people. For the avoidance of doubt, it should be noted that this class of people cut across ethnic, religious and regional divides. The common denominator is access to state

power. The state-centred neo-colonial economy has made the state the repository of huge financial resources which they have been cornering for private accumulation. This unpleasant development has made many people to lose interest in the Nigerian state as presently constituted. They now relate to the state as an alien institution put together not for their existential relevance but to service the exclusive interests of the ruling elite.

CONCLUSION

It has been established that but for the existence of a common authority with abundant coercive powers the geo-political entity (a Colonial creation) known as Nigeria would have disintegrated a few years after independence. No development illustrates this better than the fratricidal civil war fought in the country between 1967 and 1970. The successful prosecution of the civil war by the FMG has been discouraging overt centrifugal tendencies while the strengthening of its hold on political power ensured some sort of political integration. It is our belief that in a plural society like Nigeria, political integration of the various groups cannot be forcefully sustained for long. And this is why the nation has been perpetually under the strain and stress of diverse covert and overt centrifugal forces in recent times. Equity, justice, fairplay, respect for fundamental rights, and real federalism (political and fiscal) would constitute more enduring bases of national integration.

But these are attributes that were scarce under military regimes in Nigeria. Although the military evolved policies, like Quota System and Federal Character, ostensibly to facilitate political integration allegations of favouritism dogged their implementation. Thus, instead of being integrative forces as touted, they ended up causing disaffection between the favoured groups and the less privileged ones. The result was a fragile political entity that has been perpetually at the brink of disintegration. The hangover effect of prolonged military rule could be seen in violent conducts, intolerance and a highly militarized social polity where dastardly acts feature prominently and regularly. Rather than advance the cause of nation building in a fundamental manner the military only came up with the self-serving, expedient cosmetic and adventitious formulas that ended up being more fractious and divisive. The situation has been growing worse progressively since the military handed over power to civilians in 1999. The politicians have also been aping their military predecessors in terms of their authoritarian, selfish and parochial dispositions. There is therefore a crying need to demilitarize entirely the polity and enthrone genuine democracy in which the people's voice will count. Also there is the need to evolve a fair and just revenue

allocation system that would give due recognition to all interacting peoples, especially the groups which provide the bulk of the national revenue. It is our belief that a Sovereign National Conference will go a long way in facilitating this new orientation.

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