

Politics of Restructuring and Nation-Building in Nigeria, 1966-2019

PAUL O. OPONE

Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract. Agitation for the restructuring of Nigeria has become a topical issue in political discourse in recent times. Day by day, there seems to be a growing consensus in many quarters in Nigeria that the nation needs to be restructured following perceived structural imbalance in the Nigerian federation, which has greatly affected unity and national integration. Against this background, this paper examines such calls for restructuring for the Nigerian federation. The aim is to contribute to the national integration process in Nigeria by finding out whether restructuring will strengthen unity in diversity, or would lead to more diversity. To do this, the paper interacted with the available works on the subject and deployed the historical methods of description and analysis. The paper showed that while the military is credited for preserving Nigeria's unity, it none the less created a structural imbalance in the federation by emasculating too much power at the centre to the detriment of the federating units. Such a deliberate policy of the military has come to challenge unity in diversity in a democratic dispensation. The conclusion is drawn from the implications for the refusal by the current Nigerian government to commit to restructuring especially the danger it portends for the continued existence of Nigeria as a united country.

Keywords: Politics, Restructuring, Nation-building, Federalism, National Integration, Agitations, Unity in Diversity, Stability.

1. Introduction

Nigeria of today, which was described then by Late Chief Awolowo, as a mere geographical expression, is a product of British experiment in political cloning where different ethnic groups, which were nations in their rights, were made to coexist as one political unit

without prior negotiations. Nigeria was thereafter created in 1914 by the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates by Lord Frederick Lugard, which marked an important stage in the evolution of the Nigerian state. This act nonetheless brought together independent tribal groups and kingdoms with unique characteristics such as Languages, cultural beliefs, political and social structures, and forms of government and so on, under one colonial entity, Nigeria. As events later played out in the process of nation-building, many Nigerians have come to describe the 1914 amalgamation as an epicenter of Nigeria's socio-political problems (Olaniyan, 2003, pp.1 -.142).

This is why the journey of nation-building in Nigeria has been characterized by a series of challenges since independence. The minority groups have felt marginalized and rightly so by the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The feelings of dissatisfaction and marginalization have found expression in the persistent clamour to restructure the Nigerian federation shortly after independence. The clamour has, however, gained more current in this democratic dispensation given the tempo, frequency, and spread of the agitations by individuals, geo-cultural groups and geopolitical associations. No issue commands a greater, broader, and at the same time, controversy in Nigeria today than the clamour to restructure the Nigeria federation. This goes to show that many ethnic nationalities in Nigeria have grown heavily dissatisfied with the present political structure and arrangement, which by no means has made the process of nation-building a smooth one.

However, the political movements for restructuring have been politicized and have created a north-south political dichotomy. To this extent, the debate is largely divided between Southern protagonists who

largely lay for restructuring and the northern antagonist who are largely opposed to restructuring. The southern protagonists are canvassing the idea that each region should be allowed to control its resources and pay royalties to the central government. The south argues that restructuring is to make the Nigerian system work more effectively (Bello, 2017).

On the other hand, the northern antagonists to the argument on restructuring believe that the clamour for restructuring is surreptitiously aimed at dominating the rest of the country by the South (Vanguard, 2017, pp.49). The perception has been created in the north that restructuring is being aimed at compromising the historical and natural advantages embedded in the region. Generally, the north sees it as an attempt to divide the country in which the northern region shall be denied of getting the kind of shares they are getting from the federation account. Some neutrals have, however, raised concerns, and as such, questions have been asked. For example, will restructuring guarantee the security of lives and property of Nigerians under perpetual threat now, and steer political and economic development, which in the final analysis promote stability?

This paper, therefore, studies these issues as an aspect of the nation-building process in Nigeria. It begins from 1966 when the military intervened in Nigerian politics and ends in 2019 that saw the height agitations under a democratic setting. An attempt is made to show the level of responsiveness or otherwise on the part of the leadership to the people's agitation in the past and how restructuring is currently threatening Nigeria's existence as one political entity.

2. Conceptual Clarification

Restructuring as a political terminology is fast gaining attention in modern literature in Nigeria. Some literature view restructuring from an economic perspective while others perceive it as politically, socially and psychologically oriented. Thus, there seems not to be a consensus on the meaning of restructuring. The word restructuring could be traced to the root word "to structure from which the prefix "re" was added to become restructure (Tamuno, 2012, pp.26 -27). In this sense, restructuring could mean to repair or adjustment of an existing structure. Wheare (1963, pp. 2- 13) feels that Political restructuring entails both the political reconfiguration of the country and the devolution of powers to the consistent units.

Restructuring has been conceived as "diverting the central government of certain powers and limiting its area of influence to such issues as fiscal policies, military/defense, foreign policy, migration, and national elections" (The Vanguard, August 18, 2017). Political restructuring can also take the form of the "quest for true federalism. As Adedeji and Ezeabasili (2018) observe, the clamour for restructuring is more stringent in countries with a federal form of government and a federal constitution but with a unitary practice, where the federal system is lopsided and perverted.

Mohammed and Sulaiman (2018) see restructuring as a political and administrative connotation, which implies agitation for more formation in the entire component of the existing federalism, as a result of the need to control the centre or representation in the political landscape of the country. They further add that restructuring involves the economic redistribution of resources among the component units of the federation based on true federalism.

In the view of Adesoji (2017), restructuring is not just merely a political mantra but has other undertone meanings and underpinnings. He contends that what Nigeria needs now is mental restructuring instead of political restructuring and also includes value re-orientation. The country is already torn apart by ethnic rivalries, communal clashes, marginalization of minority groups, nepotism, etc. This he described as the effect of prolonged brutality of the military, devaluation of human lives, psychological brutalization and leadership deceit. Among those who shared this view were former leaders who believe in a united Nigeria because no single region or state will ever be able to match the country's present profiles despite her battered and backward state. To solve the problems confronting the country, mental restructuring is advocated.

Abutudu (2010, pp. 23-40) has in his work attempted to establish the relationship between the dynamics of the national question and the demands for a restructuring of the Nigerian federation. He suggests that "the pattern of restructuring advocated has tended to follow closely the way the national question is framed". He accounts for three (3) broad perspectives that have dominated the discourse of the National Question in Nigeria. These are ethnic-relativist and class perspectives. The third perspective links the national question to agitations against dictatorship in the country and therefore as essentially a struggle for the expansion of democratic space.

Everything considered from our present state of knowledge, restructuring means the struggle for a rational federal system where power is distributed equally between the federating units (States or Regions) and the central or federal government. It also entails the clamour for an equitable federation, where every state and group is given equal political and economic opportunities, and also the freedom to explore and control their resources for their development.

3. Restructuring Under Military Rule, 1966 - 1998

The collapse of the First Republic as a result of the 1966 coup marked the end of the first phase of Nigeria's federalism. The military at the time was confronted with the challenge of what system of government would immediately restore peace on the land. Gen. Ironsi took the first step at restructuring by introducing a unitary system, which he thought would guarantee unity in Nigeria. However, his unification policy led to several agitations for a change in the existing political structure. When his successor, Gen. Gowon came to power in July 1966, Nigeria was in crisis mood created by a counter-coup that led to the death of Gen. Ironsi and other military officers of Eastern Nigeria extraction.

Ghana provided a buffer to restructure Nigeria to diffuse the impending political crisis from snowballing into a great conflagration. As a result, an accord was reached in Aburi, Ghana on how Nigeria should be restructured to ensure political stability. Unfortunately, the government failed to heed the Aburi Accord. This action or inaction of the government stoked the fire of agitation for freedom from the Nigerian federation by the Eastern Nigeria people by declaring the Sovereign State of Biafra.

On its part, however, the military government under Gen Gowon took steps to create a twelve-state structure from the existing four regions on May 27, 1967, through Decree No 14, as a measure of restructuring the Nigeria federation. By this, the military partly broke down the regions into smaller units as states and weakened the powers of the regions, and partly addressed the agitations of the minority groups in the regions. This was thought to bring about stability in Nigeria especially that Gowon gave a pattern of equality between the northern and southern parts of the country by creating six states each for both parts. As part of a fiscal restructuring of the federation, the military under Gen Gowon set up the Chief Dina Committee that advised the Central Government to annex all revenues and grant states

allocation according to their needs (Ugochukwu-Uko, 2019). This was implemented in 1967 abandoning the revenue formula of 1963 that empowered each region to keep a certain percentage of their earnings and contribute a certain percentage to the Central Government as enshrined in the 1963 constitution.

After 1968, the military advocated what has come to be known as military federalism or nation-centered federalism (Osaghae, 2012, p.227). The military could no longer pretend to be governed by federal principles and also the political society was ready to adapt to the new style of federalism particularly after the civil war. The response of military federalism which was generally accepted by political society was to restructure the federal system along centrist lines to stem the tide centrifugal forces, which were responsible for the demise of the First Republic. As a result, the military emasculated power to the centre and rendered the federating states mere appendages.

The nation-building effort of the military continued unabated as agitation for the creation of states continued to increase. Gen. Murtala Mohammed created seven more bringing the total to nineteen states. After his death, his successor - Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo introduced the American presidential system of government to Nigeria and is still practicable till date. The massive political engineering efforts by the administrations of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and Sani Abacha were particularly notable in this regard. General Babangida instituted a political bureau, put in place a two-party system (Social Democratic Party and National Republican Convention) that were national in outlook to stem the tide of regional politics (Osaghae, 2012, p. 229). He also contributed to state creation and others.

General Abacha towed a similar line by creating an additional six states in 1996 making the number of states in Nigeria thirty-six (36) and seven hundred and seventy-four (774) local government areas in Nigeria. However, he had to respond to irrepressible agitations for restructuring of the federal system by applying palliatives to the Niger-Delta question and convening a constitutional conference that adopted zoning of political leadership, power rotation and increased the weight to the derivation principle, and so on (Osaghae, 2012, p. 30). But, his measures were not enough to quell the agitations for political restructuring and true federalism based on increased political and fiscal autonomy for the constituent units. It must be noted that these were the circumstances that paved the way for the Fourth Republic.

Thus while there is a strong view that federalism was eroded under the military as it took on the role of both the Executive and Legislature and gradually emasculated the Judiciary, there are those who celebrate the military for creating states and local governments, which considerably ameliorated minority and other domination problems. The truth remains that the military had contributed their fair share to political restructuring as they underwent massive socio-political engineering and adjustment. Although the means used in achieving this may not have been democratic or been generally altruistic, their effort towards restructuring remains relevant in Nigeria's political history.

4. Campaign for Restructuring during the Fourth Republic, 1999-2018

The Fourth Republic presented Nigeria with the opportunity to address many of the problems that have clogged its wheel of development. However, several years have gone by, yet the same socio-economic and political inconcinnities that gave rise to the agitation then still stare us in the face. Nigeria is laden with many socio-political and economic problems, to say the least. Economic stagnancy, political uncertainty as well as local conflict and threats of secession are some of them; all of which have reignited the debate for restructuring on how power and resources should be distributed.

The on-going restructuring debate contains recurrent themes and issues which border on the quest for true federalism. So far, the process of restructuring and re-engineering under the Fourth Republic has been slow and quiet. The various civilian regimes of the Fourth Republic have done very little when it comes to the issue of restructuring, little surprise why the call for restructuring has become more strident and vociferous in this political dispensation. Regardless of ethnicity, religion or socio-economic status, many citizens are calling on the Federal Government to commit to a comprehensive restructuring of Nigeria's governance architecture. This section takes a look at some of the issues that many Nigerians are demanding the government to address through restructuring.

4.1 Devolution of Power

There is a consensus that military federalism that is still operated in Nigeria has concentrated too much power at the centre, reflective of command structure and tradition of the barracks imposed on the country by the military via Decree No. 34 of 1966 and other decrees that came after it (Aguda, 2002, p. 34). This

has conveniently made the federating units mere appendages to the central government. As a result, the Nigeria President appears to be the most powerful in the world in terms of internal use of power. But there is a general feeling by progressive Nigerians of the need to restructure the centre by reducing its powers for the interest of the federating states. This implies diverting the central government of certain powers it wields and limiting its influence to such areas as fiscal policies, defense, foreign policy, immigration, and national election to bring the version of the Nigerian federal system as close as possible to what is obtainable elsewhere (Osaghae, 2012, p.22) This is one issue that has pitched the north against the south.

4.2 Regional Autonomy

Before the military intervention in Nigeria's politics in 1966, the federal arrangement ensured that the regions enjoyed autonomy as enshrined in the federal constitution of 1963. The idea is for every state to be able to control its resources and develop at its own pace as against the weak economic status of states where they depend on the federal government for a handout to carry out their functions or activity. Exponents of restructuring propose the amendment of the constitution to ensure that powers are decentralized and each state becomes autonomous with its constitution as the case with other federal systems, such as the United States and Canada. It is in light of this that many advocates of restructuring have suggested the return to the federal constitution of 1963 where the various regions were autonomous and self-sufficient.

4.3 Fiscal Federalism

Fiscal federalism amongst other things has remained a contentious issue in Nigerian federalism and restructuring debate. Fiscal federalism with particular reference to revenue allocation has been subject to profound and lengthy deliberations about adopting a suitable revenue sharing formula and of which consensus has not been reached (Mbanefoh and Egwaikhide, 1998, p. 213) Fiscal federalism refers to the financial relationship among existing tiers of government. This is an important part of a federal arrangement because it is the responsibility of the government at all levels to initiate policies that will lead to rapid economic development through adequate provisions of amenities. The system also ensures that the federating units are adequately catered for. The Nigerian situation nevertheless is different, because the process of how to allocate revenue to the different tiers especially through the

derivation principle has received protestations and attacks (Ekpo and Englama, 2008, p.221).

Nigeria's revenue allocation system is neither efficient nor equitable. There have been a lot of revenue allocations principles initiated by various Commissions since independence and have on many occasions failed majorly because the distributional patterns amongst the states did not reflect the needs of the states. So, the parameters for sharing revenue have become a source of concern and many even perceive it as a ploy to defraud one section of the country by others. Before the military intervention into politics in 1966, the derivative principle was adopted as a viable revenue allocation formula that benefited the various regions in the country. However, after 1966, Gowon's military regime dropped the fiscal autonomy enjoyed by the states, even though the Dina's Commission recommended that the rent and royalties from the onshore oil exploration be fully given to the states from where the extractions were made (Agbowo, 2003, p. 164). This benefited the non-oil producing majority states than the producing minority. The formula in succeeding years became worst and subjected to changes and alteration following the oil boom of the '70s and '80s. This has led to the resource control campaign by the political class from the Niger-Delta region with attendant implications to national integration of Nigeria following the emergence of many militant groups ventilating their disaffections through violent means.

4.4 Resource Control

Resource control occupies a centre place in the debate for restructuring and has been a matter of considerable national significance. Its advocates are from the Niger-Delta region made up of Nigeria's eight littoral States: Lagos, Delta, Edo, Rivers, Bayelsa, Ondo, Akwa Ibom, Cross River (Tamuno, 2014, p. 90). These are the States directly involved in a legal and quasi-political struggle with the federal government and other states in the federation over resource control. In the heart of the agitation lay the question over who should control Nigeria's huge revenues from oil, and that the legal framework built up by the military over the years, under which the federal government deliberately took control of the recourses should be dismantled in favour of the states. The campaign is for the states to control their resources and pay a percentage to the federal government.

The main issue that has fed the agitation for resource control is that the federal government had neglected

and marginalized the people of the Niger-Delta for so long. They argue that, while the bulk of Nigeria's oil wealth and in indeed, national revenue comes from the region, environmental degradation, poverty, and unemployment have characterized the region, which can no longer be accepted (Abbe and Wakili, 2018, p. 8) The agitation is further sustained by the unfair fiscal policies of the federal government, most especially the revenues allocation formula. Since the government has dragged its foot in restructuring the revenue formula to the satisfaction of the Niger-Delta States, the demand for resource control has manifested in legal litigations and aggressive militant response. The key issues of resource control remain unresolved and form the core demand of South-South for restructuring (Tamuno, 2014, p. 90).

5. Challenges to Restructuring under Buhari Administration

Nigeria faces new crises that threaten the cooperate existence of the nation. There is the proliferation of security threats ranging from the Boko Haram insurgency, the Niger-Delta militants, to the Fulani Herdsmen menace along with several ethnic separatists calling for secession amongst others. The country has never been more divided before than now. All these are indications that the Nigerian federal system is proving to be incapable of holding the polity together and as such, it is in dire need of restructuring. As obvious as this may be, the government is dragging its foot and remained unresponsive to the people's agitations for restructuring due to certain factors.

The first is a lack of consensus among the political class on what restructuring means and what constitutes the register of what are to be restructured? Most times people who push for restructuring have ideas different from others, which tend to confuse and complicate it. The campaign for restructuring has created uncertainty in this political dispensation and left the country divided. From a neutral point of view, some Nigerians have expressed fears as to whether there are real grievances that should be resolved through restructuring which will create the opportunity for national integration. Or is it the total abandonment of the existing political structure by re-federating and adjusting the political structure to achieve true federalism? The ambiguous nature of restructuring creates a problem for itself.

The debate for restructuring in this political dispensation has created a North-South dichotomy. Both sides are not willing to come to a consensus on the issues because of their regional interest and fear

of domination. The north, in particular, is resistant to the issue. A majority of the leaders from northern Nigeria remain in perpetual dread of what a restructured federation would offer to the region. An example is a recent attempt by Southern senators to promote restructuring through a call for the implementation of the 2014 Confab report. This was, however, knocked out on the floor of the Senate by the northern Senators who saw it as a threat to northern hegemony (Vanguard Newspaper, December 17, 2017. p. 8). The South, on the other hand, is more determined to change the status quo and their stance on restructuring remains unshaken.

6. Dream of a Restructured Nigeria

The perceived structural and functional imbalances coupled with the socio-political and economic crisis that remain inherent in Nigeria have diverted attention and focus towards restructuring of the federation as a possible way out. The debate has influenced the socio-political atmosphere and there are high expectations for the actualization of a restructured Nigeria. The dream of a restructured Nigeria would eventually translate to the practice of true federalism, which is perceived to have a positive impact on political and economic development. However some have suggested otherwise, that is, restructuring cannot solve the bulk of Nigeria's problems.

One perceived impact of restructuring is that it would lead to rapid and competitive development. Among other things, the major imperative for restructuring is the attainment of regional autonomy where states exist as viable autonomous and self-sufficient entities and units within the federation. A restructured Nigeria would create a political climate that would stimulate productivity and competitive economy, rather than a sharing economy that has been going on since 1967. Every state will be able to develop at its own pace by exploiting the human and natural resources available to it.

Eventually, restructuring will result in economic stability. It is presumed that the debate for restructuring became more heated following the economic recession in Nigeria. The concentration of power at the centre has made the federal government too financially powerful at the expense of the states. Matters of the economy are increasingly monopolized by the federal government, the result being that they (federal government) are too overburdened with economic responsibilities meant for the states. The federal structure is such that states would have to seek permission from the federal

government before undertaking some developmental projects that will naturally boost the economies of the states. Currently, for example, Cross River State has been seeking the approval of the federal government to develop its deep harbour and only got approval in September 2019 after exerting consistent pressure for so long. Again, many states can develop independent power and supply to their citizens to boost their local economies, but the federal structure demands them to channel it to the federal grid. This is why advocates of restructuring propose that the exclusive and concurrent lists be restructured to accommodate greater responsibilities of the states. It must also be pointed out that the federal government has failed to diversify the economy which has created economic stagnancy in the nation. The mono-cultural nature of the economy, that is, Nigeria's over-dependence on oil, has led to the abandonment and neglect of virtually every other sector of the economy.

Restructuring proposes that through regional autonomy, the federating units (states) would have to exploit, manage resources available to it more judiciously, and contribute a certain percentage to the centre. By this, it will not only minimize wastages but also create economic space for competition among the federating units. The states will be able to discover untapped resources as each will focus on its area of comparative advantage, leading to regional and national economic development. This will eradicate the current situation where many states are non-productive and only wait for federal allocation at the end of every month to function.

The imperative of restructuring goes far beyond economic benefits. One political motive for restructuring is that it would eradicate marginalization and ensure equitable representation of diverse groups and ensure stability. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic state with over 350 ethnic groups. The minority question has been a roadblock for nation-building and national integration. Various geo-cultural and ethno-regional groups have claimed marginalized. This is evident in the political agitations of the various groups such as the Ohaneze Ndi Igbo of the East, the Afenifere of the West, the Middle-Belt Forum, and others. Even within the core north, many groups also feel marginalized. The restructuring can address the problem and issues of equity and social justice in Nigeria.

7. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has shown that the clamour to restructure Nigeria's federal system has been one clamour too many because the governments over the

years have failed to sincerely commit to the idea. Of a truth, the Nigeria federal structure as it is currently constituted can no longer serve the purpose of encouraging unity in diversity. And the more the governments dragged its foot, the more many Nigerians came face to face with the ills and imperfections of the federal system which were not new by the turn of the fourth republic. The lopsided nature of the federal system has not only affected the political structure and democracy but also the economy and nation-building process. However, given the complexity of its multi-ethnic composition, the question is can restructuring provide the panacea and lasting solution to Nigeria's problems? True, the idea of restructuring possesses the prospect of being a solution as its aimed at correcting the perceived structural imbalances in Nigeria, but surely it cannot be the ultimate answer to all Nigeria's problems. It is an accepted fact that Nigerians cherish unity in diversity through a fairer meritocratic system, social justice, and structural balancing which restructuring is all about. But if it is not well handled, it could even lead to disintegration rather than aggregation because the idea is highly politicized to the extent that it has created a deep divide between the South and North.

Thus, for restructuring to work, the concept must be properly crystalized and comprehensible to every stratum and segment of the Nigerian society. It must go beyond political and economic issues like fiscal federalism, devolution of power, state creation, and so on. That is, it must not just be seen from a political agitation lens but must be perceived as a societal problem-solving mechanism including leadership. However, the whole tension surrounding the agitation for restructuring could be diffused by the government by revisiting the 2014 National Conference Report. Besides the fact that it will save the government the time and funds that would have been expended in organizing a conference, that report addressed issues of diverse importance including the economy in the way and manner that will move Nigeria forward. For example, the nationalities in the north can be factored in two additional geopolitical zones. That will allow for some equality and allow people to have some sense of belonging. By that, Nigeria would have deconstructed the Luggardian colonial political structure and make political progress. And if in the long run some of the problems persist, then there is nothing wrong with coming on a round table to discuss the future of Nigeria.

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