

FEDERAL CHARACTER AS A RECIPE FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION: THE NIGERIAN PARADOX

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ABSTRACT

The problem of representational equity in Nigeria started with the problem of an unequal North-South duality, as if that was not problematic enough, the smaller southern component was split into two to create a deleterious Southern duality and an equally debilitating national trinity. The attempt to redress North-South regional imbalance resulted in the creation of states but it resulted in weakening the South against the North. This then became the justification for other methods albeit the Federal Character Principle for the promotion of a sense of belonging in the country by eliminating or at least minimizing domination resulting from imbalance in appointments. The purpose of the principle of federal character is laudable, unfortunately the application and operation of the principle tended to differentiate rather than integrate Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The assertion that Nigeria is a creation of British colonialism is no longer incontrovertible. Motivated by economic considerations, the colonialists had wanted to limit their exploitative tendencies to the coasts. However, a combination of factors which were largely internal threatened the realization of their economic motive, this encouraged the British to move into the hinterlands. That crucial decision with time thus annulled the sovereignty and independence of the hitherto disparate autonomous socio-political entities which had inhabited Nigeria. The conquest of the country by the British inevitably led to the establishment of a system of administration alien to the people. Two

types of administration direct and indirect were tried out. The consequence of this resort is that the various nationalities inhabiting Nigeria have not been welded into a nation in which all of them would have a stake (Ubah, in Saliu 1999). The immense concern of the British with exploitation and the ruthlessness that characterized its pursuit made them to be contented with keeping the nationalities as farther apart as possible, the so-called amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 notwithstanding (Usman, in Saliu 1999). Therefore it provided an unfortunate but conducive environment for mutual suspicion and distrust among the disparate groups in Nigeria.

On October 1st 1960, Nigeria attained clientele sovereignty with lopsided Federation. The Political tripod was dominated by the “majors” to the exclusion of the “minority groups”. This brought to limelight the knotty issue of domination which evoked morbid fears of marginalization (Leadership 2008).

Nigeria’s population is estimated at 140 millions (Bello 2006). The country has between 250 and 400 ethnic groups depending on the criteria used. A total of 374 ethnic groups were identified by Otite. These ethnic groups are broadly divided into ethnic “majorities” and ethnic “minorities” (Otite, 1990).

The numerically and politically majorities ethnic groups are the composite Hausa-Fulani of the North with Muslim majority, the Yorubas of the South-West and the Igbos of the South-East with christian majority. Against the backdrop of this ethno-religious composition, political issues in Nigeria are seen from their ethno-religious perspectives, thereby giving credence to ethnic and religious jingoists and war lords. Political offices and appointments are seen as battle fields among the various ethnic groups, where the battles must be fought with all the available weapons a group can muster (see Obi and Obiekeze, 2004; Suberu, and Diamond, 2004).

The problem of acrimonious existence among the diverse groups and interests in the federation of Nigeria leading to mutual distrust, suspicion and inter-communal conflicts

has become perennial and endemic in the nation's body Politic and has militated against the political stability of the country since independence. The fear of domination of one ethnic group or section of the country by another and the national question of who gets what and how the national cake should be shared constitute a major factor of this problem. As a result of mutual suspicion existing among the various social groups, whatever the issue at hand in Nigeria, the patterns of reaction to it will be determined by geo-political as well as religious considerations. This situation seriously hampers efforts at national unity as it applies to the building of a united Nigeria out of the disparate ethnic, geographic, social, economic and religious elements or groups in the country (Saliu, 1999; Agbodike, 1998; Gamberi, 1994; Kurfi 1998).

Among the measures put in place and constitutionally guaranteed as a recipe for national integration is the doctrine of federal character. The principle of federal character was formulated and put into use by successive governments in Nigeria to address and hopefully mitigate the problem of diversity so as to ensure a peaceful, stable and united Nigeria. As Ojo (1999) persuasively explained, Federal character principle as an integrative mechanism is defined as fair and effective representation of the various components of the Federation in the country's position of power, status and influence. He however observed that the principle of federal character touches on array of problems in the political process which includes ethnicity, the national question, minority problem, discrimination based on a indignity, resources allocation, power sharing employment and placement in institution, etcetera. It provides a formula for participation in the governance of the country in such a way that a single section of the country will not dominate another or a segment dominating the rest. The basic assumption, as noted by Ojo (1994:) is that, if every segment of the Federation participates in governance, there would be almost equality in the country in the scheme of things and expectedly, it will engender a sense of belonging and national integration.

This paper is set out to examine critically the expediency of the federal character principle as an integrative mechanism with a view to pointing out whether or not it is

succeeding in integrating Nigeria or widening the dichotomy among Nigerians. The paper is divided into four sections. Section one introduces the subject-matter, section two deals with conceptual clarification and section three examines the paradox of the federal character principle as an integrative mechanism while section four concludes the discussion.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

National Integration

The term National Integration is now widely used to cover a large range of political phenomena. We will attempt to analyse these various uses and show how they are related.

National integration is firstly used to refer to specific problem of creating a sense of territorial nationality which eliminates subordinate parochial loyalties. In this sense, it is generally presumed that there exists an ethnically plural society in which each group is characterized by its own language or other self-conscious cultural qualities. This integration is used to refer to the tensions and discontinuities on the horizontal plane in the process of creating a homogeneous progressive reduction of cultural and regional territorial political community (Bamiseye, 2003).

Secondly, national integration is often used in the related sense to refer to the problem of establishing national central authority over subordinate political units. Chizea (1985) sees national integration in this perspective. According to him, “it is a process leading to political cohesion and sentiments of loyalty towards central political institutions”. National integration is thus conceived here as the subjective feelings which individuals belonging to different social groups of historically distinct political units have towards a new nation. Such a feeling is created through the objective control which the central authority has over the entire territory under its claimed jurisdiction.

The third use of the term integration links the government with the governed. Implied in this usage is the notion of elite-mass relationship characterized by marked differences in aspirations and values. Integration occurs through the progressive bridging of the elite-mass gap on the vertical plane in the course of developing an integrated political process and a participant political community. We need to emphasize that the mere existence of difference in goals and values between the governing elite and the governed mass is not what constitute disintegration so long as the governor's right to rule is accepted by the governed. It is not also the disappearance of differences among the elites and mass that indicates integration but a situation whereby a pattern of authority and consent is established (see Ogunojemite, 1979).

The fourth series of definition takes its root from the elite-mass definition. It refers in the main to a minimum value of consensus that is necessary for the maintenance of a political system. These values may centre on ends to which the system aspires or means of achieving the desired ends. It presupposes therefore a minimum acceptable procedure for conflict resolution. Here the concern is with the legal norms, with the legitimacy of constitutional framework and the procedure by which it should operate (Weiner, in Fagbemi 1987).

National integration, thus, covers a vast range of human relationships and attitudes ----the integration of diverse and discrete cultural loyalties and the development of a sense of nationality; the integration of the rulers and the ruled and the integration of the citizens into a common political process. As diverse as these definitions are, they have a common link in that they all point to the fact that integration is what holds a society and a political system together.

THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF FEDERAL CHARACTER

The military government that planned the handing over of government to the civilians (in 1979) was by ample declaration, dedicated to removing the blemishes which brought

about the decline and fall of the First Republic. Hence it initiated a prolonged consultative process which was hoped to produce the political atmosphere that will prevent the recurrence of the conditions inherent in the first republic. There was a vigorous determination to curb and control the potentials of ethnicity as a force for national disintegration. This resolve is actually translated into the text of the constitution that emerged from the consultative process. The key phrase lies in the concept of “the federal character of Nigeria” (Ogunojemite, in Olugbemi 1987:224). As defined by the constitution drafting committee (1976), the federal character principle is:

The distinctive desire of the people of Nigeria to promote national unity, foster national loyalty and give every citizen of Nigeria a sense of belonging to the nation (notwithstanding the diversities of the ethnic origin, which may exist and which it is their desire to nourish and harness to the enrichment of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.)

The 1979 constitution amends the 1976 definition by dropping the passage in brackets and substituted a reference to “a sense of belonging to the nation as expressed in section 14 (3) and (4) of this constitution” Section 14 (3) clearly spelt out the modus operandi of the Federal Character principles as follows:

The composition of the government of the Federation or any of its agencies be carried out in such manner as to reflect the Federal Character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and also to command loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or any of its agencies (The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979)

In pursuant to this provision, various other provisions were made in the constitution to a guarantee that the federal character principle is operative. This various provisions enjoins that the conduct of the affairs of central, state and local government bodies shall be carried out in such manner as to recognize the diversity of the people within its areas of authority and the need to promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all peoples of the federation.

THE PARADOX OF THE FEDERAL CHARACTER PRINCIPLE AS AN INTEGRATIVE MECHANISM

The implication of the provisions of the 1979 and 1999 constitutions for federal bureaucracy in Nigeria are interesting. Following these provisions, the composition of the federal public services for instance and the conduct of its affairs must reflect the federal character of Nigeria. And this can only be seen to have been done if it does not contain a predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups. In practice this means that in the appointment, promotion and postings of the federal public servants, every state, ethnic group, religions or any other sectional group should be represented. Thus, the criterion of membership of the federal bureaucracy is accordingly heavily skewed in favour of representation. Representation of states, ethnic or any other sectional groups especially religious groups in the composition of federal bureaucracy has, thus, superseded recruitment on the basis of knowledge and technical qualification as determined through a competitive examination. The situation is not different when it comes to promotion and postings. There are instances where capable, long serving and loyal federal civil servants have been denied promotion, precisely because the quota for their states in these posts has been filled. Under such situations, one's erstwhile subordinates usually become one's superiors overnight. Postings of federal civil servants have followed the federal character principle. Every state would like to see its citizens in all the organs or agencies of the federal bureaucracy. Sometimes, this representation is seen in absolute numbers not just between states in the federation but also between the North and South as collectivities. In fact, the issue of representation based on the federal character principle has unwittingly degenerated into verbal and sometimes acrimonious exchanges between the North and the South of the country (Okoli, 1990; Obi and Obiekeze, 2004). Paradoxically, the federal character principle has succeeded in institutionalizing North-South dichotomy rather than integrating it.

To those from the Northern parts of the country federal character is synonymous with quota system and means therefore a proportional absorption into federal institutions. To those from the southern parts of the country, it means an attempt by the "North" to infiltrate into areas which they hitherto regarded as "theirs" by right (Hotline, 1987, Suberu, 2001; Dagaci, 2009). The federal character principle carried an inherent tug-of-war between the claims of belonging to the nation and the claims of locally recognized

diversity. It is the insisting on equal representation and individual rights that will rock the boat of national integration. If we are to accept the intent of the concept that it carries an unambiguous and unchallengeable mandate for national integration, then the present provision has to be completely reexamined. (Okoli, 1990:5).

By 1986 the problems created by the constitutional provision of federal character had to be addressed by the political Bureau which was set up to examine the grounds for another constitution. The Bureau argued that: “The constitutional definition of Nigerian citizenship should, as a matter of urgency, be studied with a view to removing the difficulties and anomaly arising from the interpretation of the relevant section of the 1979 constitution (Report of the political Bureau 1986).

As Ayoade (1998) rightly argued, going by the constitutional definition of Nigerian citizenship, a dangerous dichotomy has developed between Nigerian citizenship and nativity of a state similar to the situation in the colonial period when Nigerians living outside their states of origin were regarded as native foreigners”. He noted that this category of Nigerians did not enjoy full citizenship rights in those states to which they migrated. Thus the operationalization of the federal character principle tended more to differentiate than to integrate.

That the principle of federal character tended to differentiate rather than integrate is not by accident, it is by design. This position is supported by Olugbemi (1987) and Suberu and Diamond (2004:27 when they implied that federal character as defined and pursued by the 1979 and the 1999 constitutions cannot succeed in integrating the people because it was an ideology of the minority ruling class aimed at protecting their interest. According to them, the doctrine holds a lot in stock for the economically dominant class to the exclusion of the masses from the political process in the country. Firstly, it helps to divert attention from the internal economy where the mass of the people wallops in abject material want. Second, it helps to legitimize the dominant and exploiting class position in the society. Thirdly, it helps to prevent mass mobilization for development

and by implication contributes in no small measure in maintaining an oppressive social order.

The various components of the petty bourgeoisies namely the top echelon of the armed forces, civil services, politicians and business people compete amongst themselves for the share of the state property and privileges (Heineken 1984). It is this intra-class factionalism within the economically dominant class over the state resources that the federal character as it is, attempts to give cover. In other words federal character by and large serves the economically dominant class that controls the state. This it does by giving explicit recognition to the essentially composite nature of the federation and provides ambiguous recipe for welding the federation into one (Olugbemi, 1987:84; Otite, 1990:112; Ojo, 2006:122).

The regime of federal character in Nigeria negates various definitions of national or territorial integration. Even the definitions by Ibrahim Tahir of national integration as the emergence of a situation in which every citizen is a perfect substitute for any other citizen for the purpose of selection and recruitment to perform socially determined roles subjects only to qualification of resident and technical competence is not appropriate. The caveat of residence neutralizes the integrative component. The insertion of non-task considerations and a modish concern for ethnic representation offsets presumed merit and job-skill related criteria. It is capable of resulting in a geometric diffusion of mediocrity (Okoli, 1990:8). This definition even contradicts that of Coleman (1958) and Rosberg (1971) who define territorial integration as “the progressive reduction of cultural and regional tensions and discontinuities in the process of creating a homogeneous territorial political community”. While this definition emphasizes the development of a homogeneous community, federal character is based on the recognition of ethnic differences. Neither does the operationalisation of federal character agrees with Ernest Haas’s definition of national integration as “a process whereby political actors in distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities

towards a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre existing nation-state”. Federal character encourages the valorization of the ethnic individuality rather than a dissolution of the ethnic personality (Oyediran 1986), Tahir, 1986, Ayodele 1998; Suberu and Diamond, 2004). The Principle of Federal character emphasizes the need for ethnic balancing as a necessity in the evolution of Nigerian citizenship and for ensuring less acrimonious relationships among the various peoples of Nigeria. It is argued that the principle “will make for a more equal federation to which more people will owe loyalty because, they see themselves represented meaningfully therein but unfortunately, the principle while stressing the imperative of ethnic balancing, invariably enthrones ethnicity and deemphasizes, the nation. In the process, too, it strengthens the parochial, particularist orientations and individual ethnic attachments of Nigerians. These tendencies form the basis of disaffection among various groups in the nation. In addition, the formula has not adequately addressed the problems of the minorities especially in states made up of different and unequal ethnic groups (Uroh, 2000: Saro-Wiwa 1987; Agbodike 1998).

The federal character principle has been manipulated by, and channeled to serve the overall interest of the petty bourgeois ruling class. It is the members of this class who formulated and operates the principle. Even the debate on the principle, as carried in the Nigerian press has been mainly an elite preoccupation. Under the guise of the federal character principle, the members of the bourgeois class get themselves entrenched in power and exercise control over the machinery of state. Through the application of this principle too, they strive to reconcile their class differences through the operation of acceptable formulae for the allocation, distribution and sharing of national resources and benefits among themselves. While they do this, they capitalize on, and fan the embers of the ethnic differences among the various Nigerian peoples to win the support of the masses in their areas. And in the course of this elite game, members of this class climb to positions, amass wealth and enrich themselves illegally. Thus, the federal character principle is merely an elite ploy, which would not materially improve the lot of the down-trodden in whose name it is raised (Awa 1972, Agbaje 1989, Gboyega, 1989).

Similarly, the operation of the federal character in Nigeria has given more powers to the politically superior groups thus creating a wider power disparity between the strong and the weak. The politically weak are subjected to double jeopardy, a situation that is patently antithetical to national integration. This situation is a natural consequence of the hegemonial ethnic political scheming. Secondly, it confirms the Austinian position, that the constitution cannot be enforced against the power that interprets it because constitutions are essentially morality, not law. But in a politicized plural society like Nigeria, morality is not a consensual value. If anything, in such environments morality is a strategic variable (Ayodade 1998: 67; Jega, 2007).

Thus, as long as the application of the federal character principle discriminates against one group and favours another no unity can result from such an exercise. The application is also falsifiable because distributive justice which it aims to achieve is of two types viz: Arithmetical equality and proportional equality. Simple arithmetical equality has been applied where the equality of all states is assumed. But states are not equal in two main senses. They are not equal in population and they are not equal in the size of the pool of eligible candidates for appointment. Be that as it may, there is no greater inequality than the equal treatment of unequals. Proportional equality would therefore be more just and less discriminatory than arithmetical equality (Ayoade, 1982; Akinwumi, 2005).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It has been observed that the principle of federal character is the Achilles heel of Nigerian politics. It is the most recent epiphany in Nigeria's troubled federal theology. It was aimed at redressing historical imbalance and integrate the country. The attempt was to balance the ethnic groups in order to create a virile and united nation. Unfortunately, the exercise has turned out to be a mere substitute for substance. Thus, if we are to accept the intent of the concept that it carries an unambiguous and unchallengeable national integration mandate, then the present definition cum application has to be re-examined. This is because it gives equal weight to two potentially opposite principles which has

been described as the concept of “irrespectivity” i.e. that no Nigerian shall have cause to feel aggrieved or excluded on the grounds of his/her place of origin, sex religion or ethnic grouping, and that of “irreducibility” i.e. ethnic equation in the main institution of the state. The federal character may well have got the principle right but has pushed too far its “irreducible” principle. An all out application of the principle of irreducibility has already shown signs of head-on-conflict with the co-principle of irrespectivity. Nigerians are now being discriminated against in the country on account of ethnicity. Examples abound in the Educational and Economic spheres. This cannot make for loyalty to the Nigerian State and therefore bring about the much sought integration (Ayoade 1998, Ogunojemite 1997:112, and Juadu, 2007).

The federal character as it is; is a doctrine of the emancipated educated elite in the civil services, armed forces and the business circles. It has little relevance to the integration problems of Nigeria. As practiced during the tumultuous period of the second republic (1979-1983) under Shagari’s leadership, Abacha’s military junta and even under the present ‘democratic dispensation’, the principle essentially focused on enhancing the dominance of the ruling class through patronage. The constitutional provision of federal character and zoning system within the political parties is for appointing trusted prebends, clients and hangers-on in strategic offices who in turn manipulated their powers by allocation of contracts, import licences, access to bank loans, fertilizers etc. Thus through the control of state power at the centre, the ruling class not only enhanced her leverage through patron-client alliances that cut across ethno-regional and religious cleavages, but also appropriated federal character principle to ensure its hegemony at all levels (Abubakar, 1998; Ogunojemite, 1987; Leadership, 2008).

Thus, Nigeria’s experiences under successive governments as shown above exposes the limitations of federal character principle as a mechanism for enhancing national integration and participatory democracy in plural societies. One of the fundamental weaknesses of federal character as practiced in Nigeria is that it tends to enthrone mediocrity in governance, at the expense of merit and professionalism. Also in the name

of representation and national unity, federal character allows ethno-regional patrons and their clients to exploit and mismanage state resources without contributing to any meaningful development. Furthermore, by focusing on regional and ethnic representation, federal character exacerbates differentiation instead of enhancing mutual trust, accommodation and national integration (Abubakar 1998; -Farrest 1993 Onimejisin 2005).

So far, we have argued that although federal character principle has been conceived as a policy mechanism for addressing the contradictions of Nigeria's national question arising from British colonial policies of divide and rule, as well as uneven development; the political class which inherited power since independence manipulates state power, ethno-regional, religious and sectarian cleavages for its selfish ends. The federal character as a means of achieving the desired aim of integration relies solely on the values of the ruling elite. Although it has been able to keep the territory together more so with the present structure, it is equally able to provide support for the central authority but in doing this it has only succeeded in widening the elite –mass gap because the value consensus that is necessary for national integration is lacking (Alabi, 2004).

Perhaps, as Ojo (1999) and Popoola (2002) argued, the most chronic of the banes of federal character principle in Nigeria is that it potentially invades the integrity and standards of public bureaucracy and such other governmental bodies that normally require safeguards from the ravages of politics. The result in this regard has not been the promotion of national loyalty but inertia and alienation as those who hail from states and communities which have suffered from federal character discrimination become resentful and also eventually alienated from the overall body politics. As Ojo (1999:5) and Okoli (1990:11) rightly submitted, competent people who are disqualified on the grounds of states of origin and such other spurious criteria cannot be willing materials on which to erect the unity of the nation. They must feel wanted in order to volunteer themselves for national sacrifice.

Be that as it may, our submission on the federal character principle as an integrative mechanism is that the principle, in practice has paradoxically exacerbated the division among Nigerians rather than uniting them. The principle in its operation cannot but do more harm than good to the fragile unity of Nigeria. Or what do we expect from a principle that robs Peter to pay Paul; certainly that principle cannot unite Peter with Paul.

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