

The State of the Nigerian Nation and the Way Forward: Ethnic Perspectives

Alexander Nnaemeka Agbaenyi

Department of Political Science,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria
an.agbaenyi@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Debate on restructuring the Nigerian Federation has lasted for decades without a consensus. Failure to secure agreement among major contenders has delayed this noble intent. This paper examined the debate to analyze major arguments and proffer a workable option for a headway. The study is, typologically, qualitative as well as descriptive and relied on documented evidence as a source of data. Claude Ake political economy of development in Africa served as a framework for explanation. Findings showed that the colonial concentration of powers at the central authority in Nigeria was reinvigorated by post-independence regimes. Northern oligarchy found favour in the system and gained collaborative allies in the South to consolidate its hold on Nigerian state power and resources. Thus, the monopoly of economic and political powers by the oligarchy created stringent living conditions for most Nigerians and they found identity and expression in ethnic associations as channels for demanding redress. Agitations that followed presented themselves in form of calls for restructuring Nigeria. Regimes' violent responses to agitations escalated rather than save the situation. Southern Nigeria and the Middle Belt region favoured restructuring while the North stood against it. Thus, the argument for and against restructuring became an unending tussle. Presently, Nigeria requires mutual understanding to make headway. Further disagreement may not go well for the country. Political education and dialogue are workable options to bridge the gap between the two contending forces.

Keywords: Ethnic Debate, Restructuring, Nigerian Federation, Ethnicity, Federalism

Introduction

Common ancestral origin, culture and indissoluble identity are broad categories in the core of Nigerian ethnic configuration with other micro characteristics taking subsumed positions in them. The structure has over the decades become a major channel of identity and expression of opinions on major national issues among Nigerian ethnic nationalities and population. Centrifugal actions of various Nigerian regimes have consolidated the phenomenon of ethnic organizations being platforms for citizens' agitation. This is because

of the lack of all-inclusive and accommodating politics by successive Nigerian regimes and the use of force as a responsive mechanism to repress agitations. People, therefore, find solace in ethnic organizations as means of interest aggregation and articulation and as a succor to persecution, marginalization or means of demands to the government.

What came as a surprise was the fact that all these decades, calls for restructuring have continued to fail to achieve success. The more the agitations, the farther the achievement of success. Clifford Constitution of 1922 was an outcome of such agitations, yet the elective principle introduced by the constitution did not empower legislators to decide for their constituents – as they were made up of an advisory body subjected to the whims and caprices of the Colonial Governor representing the Queen of England. This shortcoming presented itself in subsequent constitutions until independence. Richard Constitution of 1946, for instance, failed to empower representatives in the Regional Legislative Councils and Central Legislative House to decide for Nigerians. Rather, they were mere advisory bodies to the Governor (Olamide 2016). This resulted in further agitation and cosmetic constitutional amendments that followed, leading to the emergence of series of constitutions without addressing basic issues that generated recurrent tensions. From Clifford to Richard Constitution and from the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 to the Lythleton Constitution of 1954, the same scenario replicated itself (Olamide, 2016). At the core is the fact that the government's failure to address the causes of agitation over time made agitations unending. Demands were made for constitutional restructuring to give component units that makeup Nigeria authority to decide for themselves.

Though the Independence Constitution of 1960 handed the leadership of the country to indigenous elites, their leadership was marred by noticeable weaknesses. Ake (1996) revealed that though political independence affected some changes in the composition of political leaders, the Nigerian state system retained a similar character with the colonial state. The situation has perpetuated the agitation for a constitutional amendment to allow the people to decide their fate. With the departure of the colonial masters, the struggle for self-determination changed from Nigerians and colonial administration to Nigerians and Nigerian Government. The situation remained the same in the early post-independence era despite some scale of regional autonomy granted to the regional government.

With military incursion into politics in 1966, agitation intensified and developed into a dual character where some Nigerians called for military intervention, while others took the opposing view. Ake (1996) observed that failure of development in Africa was unreal because development was never on agenda; so was the case in Nigeria where the struggle for power and resources by indigenous elites distracted them from fashioning effective development strategies and plans for developing post-independence Nigeria. The outcome is decay in infrastructure, education, security, governance, and the attendant poor conditions of life of the people. Calls to restructure the country to correct the abnormalities in the structure found their way in ethnic organizations as people saw them as the most vocal platforms for expressing their resentments. On the contrary, those who found the situation relatively favourable due largely to their control or involvement in government or as victims of ignorance stand against restructuring. Debate on restructuring, therefore, ensued and intensified between the two contending blocs, with ethnic associations serving as engines for vocalization. The debate on whether to restructure Nigeria to allow component nationalities the opportunity to develop themselves or continue with the present structure to work out means for good governance become the order of political expression in the country.

Methodology

This study is qualitative as well as descriptive in typology. It relied on published evidence for data collection. The paper explored ethnic associations as platforms for obtaining ethnic opinions on restructuring Nigerian Federation. It was built upon Claude Ake's political economy of development in Africa. The theory x-rays the interplay of politics and economic forces that determine conditions of life in Africa. It looks at the way elite production and distribution of wealth of the states interacted with their politics and determining realities of lives of their populations. The theory has the adequate explanatory capacity to unveil the root of the debate on restructuring of the Nigerian Federation by ethnic nationalities. Ake (1996) argued that colonial administration in Nigeria, arbitrarily, used state power to accumulate wealth without putting development into the agenda. At the departure of colonial administration, Nigerian indigenous elites struggled for state power to accumulate

private wealth at the expense of development. The situation resulted in adverse economic and political conditions of lives of many Nigerians and continuous agitations for restructuring the polity. Agitations further generated debate for and against restructuring among ethnic nationalities.

Ethnic Debate

Contestation of issues in society is a common phenomenon among various individuals and social groups. Each person or group contends in defense of what it considers its identified interest rightly or wrongly perceived. When this involves ethnic groups/associations as major contenders, the debate is referred to as ethnic debate. It is a situation in which national issues are argued along ethnic lines with each defending a position it considers favourable to it. The case of restructuring in Nigeria is the epitome of such type. Different social groups find ethnic associations as good platforms for identity and expression of ethnic positions on matters of their interests. The platforms are the most formidable means of expression due to high social attachment to the common ancestral origin and indissoluble identity as permanent features of ethnicity. Such identity lives with them. Badmus (2009) noted that ethnic identity is natural and not something an individual decides because it is an unchanging legacy of one's birth.

Restructuring

Debate on restructuring Nigeria has, in recent time, become most contentious among ethnic nationalities with Ohaneze, Afenifere, Arewa Consultative Forum, South-South Assembly and Middle Belt Forum featuring prominently. Abutudu (2010) observed that the national question has remained an intractable challenge to Nigeria's existence and revolves around the demand for restructuring the federation. Restructuring connotes rearrangement of the existing structure. The case in Nigeria borders mainly on power, fiscal and general economic structures which, if restructured, will have a recurrent effect on socio-cultural structures of the federation. Debate on restructuring presents itself in two dimensions: those in favour and those against the exercise. Those who support restructuring believe that faulty structure is the root of the developmental crisis and political tension in Nigeria. On the other hand, the antagonists of restructuring believe that

Nigeria's economic and political structures are not faulty, rather the problem is on bad governance, corruption, terrorism, and decay in national values (Sani 2018).

Nigerian Federation

The idea of a federation rests on sharing of power among federating political units and the federal authority in the national constitution from which each of the authorities derives power to legislate on certain matters in its geographical area. A measure of autonomy allows each unit to plan and run its life to the extent to which the autonomy exists. The idea is that with such autonomy, political units utilize their strengths/resources in providing the type of development they want for themselves and be able to fulfil their life desires based on their capacities. Self-effort is brought to bear on the development and general administration of the units. When this ideal situation is negated, the political system attracts some questions, especially when socio-economic and political conditions of lives of the people become stringent, unbearable, and unacceptable.

Nigerian federation has witnessed series of crises few of which include the 1966 military coup and those that succeeded it, 1962 Census Crisis, 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War, annulment of June 12, 1993, Presidential Election and the crises that followed it, judicial killings of the Ogoni social activists; military-militia face-off in the Niger Delta; Boko Haram terrorism; military attacks on Biafra agitators; herdsmen killing of community members; political instability; poverty; insecurity; corruption; electoral malpractices; kidnapping; human trafficking; ritual killings; unemployment; killing of Igbo people in the North and bad leadership. The state, as an independent political entity, started with three federating regions: East, West and Northern regions and federal authority in 1960 but subsequent creation of states resulted in the existence of this present thirty-six states and Federal Capital Territory. Efforts to make Nigeria a workable and peaceful society where citizens offer self-willed loyalty based on citizen-state bond has not yielded the expected success. Unfortunately, the situation on the ground presents socio-economic and political conditions that do not assure the citizens of a safe future. Thus, clamour for restructuring endured.

The federation is a colonial creation and a victim of colonial hangover. Ake (1996) observed that post-colonial state in Africa inherited colonial accumulation of wealth and abandoned development in the continent. Nigeria got its share in this unholy situation. Scholars of federalism argue that circumstances of birth or origin of a federal state are determinants of its success or failure. Hicks cited in Babalola (2013) argued that the historic origin of federations affects their establishment and their workings thereof. In the same line of thought, Stephen cited in Babalola (2013) argued that centrifugal and centripetal forces that establish a federal system are major elements that determine their working thereof. Historically, federalist adventures find explanations on socio-economic and geo-political factors that established them. In other words, the underlying intents that drive the formation of federalism are socio-economic, geo-political interests of the initiator of the federal idea. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo and Tafewa Belewa supported the creation of a federal system in Nigeria and declared as followed: "As for me and those who think like me politically, we are determined to make the revised constitution an avenue for holding the country together through a strong federal government." - Azikiwe; "I am pleased to see that we are all agreed that federal system is under the present condition the only sure basis on which Nigeria can remain united" - Tafewa Belewa; " only a federal system would suit Nigerian political conditions" - Obafemi Awolowo (Babalola, 2013:50).

Rickerian theory cited expansionist and military motives as reasons for the establishment of federalism. The theory was criticized by those who have a better understanding of the Nigerian federation. Eleazu, Awa and Ela cited in Babalola (2013) did not mince words while disagreeing with Riker. Reasons behind the formation of the Nigerian federation were (a) Britain was convinced diverse culture among different Nigerian nations could be managed by a federal system to avoid crisis and possible destabilization of structures and businesses. (b) Zik, Awolowo and Belewa believed that federalism was the system that could manage ethnic diversities and still hold the country together. (c) Fear of mutual domination (d) interest of the ethnic leaders to be in charge of the affairs of their regions.

Ethnic Sentiments and Politics in Nigeria

Ethnic rivalry was absent before the advent of colonialism and the amalgamation of pre-independence autonomous kingdoms and communities into Nigeria. Ayatse and Akuva (2013) found out that ethnic sentiment was intentionally introduced and consolidated by the British colonial administration to serve underlying economic and political interests. One of the British colonial Governors, Bourdillon, introduced the idea of federalism in 1939 and made moves to establish regional and federal structures but the Richard Constitution of 1946 started it (Tella, Doho and Bapeto, 2014). The system created the environment for region/ethnic sentiments in Nigerian politics when it recruited Nigerians from across the country into the federal civil and public services. In the services, Nigerians grouped themselves along ethnic/regional lines in fighting for identified interests. The struggle for interests was an outcome of marginalization, politics of exclusion and struggle to dominate others. Those dominated or marginalized groups united to fight back, while the dominant united to consolidate domination. The practise was commonplace in recruitments, appointments, promotions and other benefits. This practice gave rise to social groups, namely Egbe Omo Oduduwa, Janyan Muttanen Arewa and Igbo State Union. The groups later created Action Group (AG), Northern People's Congress (NPC) and National Council for Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) respectively (Ayatse and Akuva, 2013). Since then, politics in Nigeria has been played along the ethnic line. In party politics as well as in the struggle to restructure Nigeria, major ethnic associations demonstrated the stands on restructuring Nigerian Federation based on their interests.

Ethnicity and ethnic sentiment are natural creations that emanated from the common historical origin and the indissoluble identity of a people of common ancestral birth. Sentiments are not entirely evil. Some are good while others are not. When sentiments support life, they are protective and good, but when they discriminate, they become hostile and exclusionist. Ayatse and Akuva (2013) held ethnic sentiments responsible for most of the inefficiencies and poor productive capacity in Nigeria. Ethnic sentiments, the paper argued, were used to replace merit and skills in such a way that chauvinistic behaviours adversely affected civil and public services in Nigeria. The paper submitted that ethnicity began with federalism. It is pertinent to bring to the fore the fact that different ethnic nationalities in Nigeria existed and had their ethnic identities and sentiments attached to

them before the advent of federalism. Sentiments are natural feelings| which human personality make-up shapes to good or bad. It lives with a man and manifests in negative and positive forms. Sentiments are best when they protect general interests. American sentiment, for instance, dwells in most Americans wherever they are and projects oneness and unity among them as citizens of the United State of America. It forms the basis for unalloyed loyalty to the state. Here in Nigeria, marginalization and politics of exclusion deflated what used to be a pillar of strength during the struggle for Nigerian independence. Such nationalistic sentiment was at the peak and gave independence fighters the strength for victory. Unfortunately, post-independence politics reduced it to ethnic status. Too bad! Ethnic associations demonstrated their positions on the debate about restructuring Nigeria.

Ethnic Debate on Restructuring Nigerian Federation

Ohaneze Ndigbo

Ohaneze is a socio-cultural umbrella of the Igbo people on which platform they express their opinions on national issues. Ujumadu (2018) reported that Ndigbo were united in speaking with one voice in what the Igbo intelligentsia termed “Famous Awka Declaration” held in Awka, Anambra State capital. It was a brainstorming exercise. Ohaneze demanded a new constitution for Nigeria through a constitutional conference backed by a law enacted by the National Assembly and approved by the people through a referendum. Nnia Nwodo in Ujumadu (2018) said that all the arms of Ohaneze accepted the recommendation by various committees that drafted the stand of Ndigbo on restructuring. He added that Nigeria needs a new constitution because the present constitution is dead. Ogbonna (2019) revealed that Igbo leaders retreated their commitment and determination to accomplish the restructuring of the Nigerian federation to guarantee equity and justice. For Ohaneze, restructuring will maximize the potentials of the regions (Agbaruku, 2018). The association, therefore, offered leadership in the “Awka Declaration” for restructuring of the Nigerian Federation (Obeta, 2018).

The position of Ohaneze was one of the outcomes of long-time marginalization and exclusion of the people of the South-East from the mainstream of socio-economic and

political centres of the institutions of governance and wealth of the Nigerian nation. The outcome of the 2019 General Election served as the epitome of the argument here. From the President to Vice President, and from Senate President and his Deputy to the Speaker of House of Representative and his Deputy there is nobody from the South East among them. The same situation applies in these present service chiefs; nobody from the South East was considered for any of the positions. One can agree that South-East was dominant in the People's Democratic Party during the 2019 General Election but it is important to note that after the election comes governance. A good leader should embrace his entire constituency after the election, irrespective of party affiliation. Support for a fellow brother in politics is a common phenomenon among ethnic groups. Such gesture was demonstrated across the board in all ethnic groups during the 2019 Presidential Election: South East and South-South supported Peter Obi; South West, Yemi Osinbajo; North East, Atiku Abubakar; and North West, Muhammadu Buhari. The Government of All People's Congress led by President Muhammadu Buhari should have ensured that different parts of the country are adequately represented in his government to foster unity and create a peaceful environment for discussing the Nigerian political challenges of our time.

The people of the Southeast lost their inclusiveness in the Nigerian political architecture during the Nigerian Civil War despite the "No Victor No Vanquished" policy of the Gowon Administration initiated after the war. Their clamour for restructuring is based on their belief that it will reintegrate them into Nigerian affairs and offer them an opportunity for self-determination and development.

Afenifere

Abiodun (2019) revealed that the socio-political organization of Yoruba people Afenifere vowed to continue agitation for restructuring of the Nigerian governing architecture because all groups will benefit from it. The group called governments in the South West to make policies that will promote Yoruba identity, orientation, values and economic property. Odumarkin (2019), Afenifere's spokesman, stated that the Yorubas would vote for restructuring over the prospect of the 2023 presidency because it is the only condition

on which the zone can develop. The Yorubas have been at the centre of Nigerian economic affairs. In politics, the region has been consistently active and recorded great losses, especially when we remember the circumstances of the death of Moshud Abiola, Bola Ige and Dele Diwa, among other prominent sons of the region killed in the course of Nigerian political intrigues. The region is rich in major economic activities that sustain the nation both in production, trade, and revenue generation.

In this present political situation, the region finds itself playing second fiddle in the political arrangement of the northern oligarchy. With Yemi Osinbajo as Vice President and Femi Gbajabiamila as the Speaker of House of Representatives, the region is active in the second position in the conspiracy that kept the Southeast and South-South aside in political power-sharing of the Nigerian Federation. However, there are several Yorubas who believe that their living conditions will be better with the restructuring of the federation. They find their mouthpiece in the Afenifere socio-cultural association of the Yoruba nation. They believe that with early western civilization, Yoruba people are supposed to have gone beyond this present level of life in Nigeria but they are dragged back by the present structure of the federation which undermines self-determination and development of the people.

Pan Niger Delta Forum (PANDEF)

PANDEF insisted that until Nigeria is restructured, the required unity for building a strong Nigeria remains elusive (Okafor, Akpan-Nsoh and Ande, 2019). Nkanga in Odey (2019) revealed that the Niger Delta region clamours for restructuring because it considers it the only way the region can reclaim its stolen wealth. Nkanga argued further that no matter the argument for and against restructuring, Nigeria must be restructured. Leaders of the South-South gathered at Yenagwa, the Bayelsa State capital, to emphasize their support for restructuring Nigerian Federation. The theme of the event was “Fellow Nigerians, let’s restructure now; tomorrow may be too late. A restructured Nigeria will guarantee unity, fairness, peace and progress for all irrespective of religion, creed, region and state.” (Oyadongha (2018). The event was an avenue to take stock of the South-South’s sojourn in Nigeria and construct a roadmap to reposition the region for development. PANDEF, at the event, accepted that, though palliative measures were adopted at different times, each of

them was unable to achieve any meaningful development for the Niger Delta people and sometimes left the region worse. Niger Delta region is the seat of Nigerian oil wealth. Unfortunately, the environment and people are not as rich as people from oil states. They are kept far from the centre of allocation of the wealth of their motherland through exclusionist politics of the Nigerian state system. The region is highly polluted with discharges from oil companies' activities operating in the area.

Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF)

The Forum is a major mouthpiece for the people of Northern Nigeria. It is vehement in the defense of the interest of the North. Arewa Consultative Forum stands on the premise that though marginalization abounds in Nigeria, it extends beyond politics and material allocation of wealth to education, commerce, industry, science and technology, and the Northern region is lacking in many of these spheres of life. The Forum came to the limelight in the year 2000 as a rallying point and mouthpiece of the people of the north. It features prominently on national political matters and has a pronounced opinion on the lingering debate on restructuring Nigerian Federation. The Secretary-General of the Forum, Anthony Sani, made it clear that Arewa Consultative Forum does not support the restructuring of the Nigerian Federation at this point because the Forum does not believe anything is wrong with the structure of the Nigerian Government. According to him, the problem with Nigeria is decay in national ideals and core values for humanity. The Forum, he argued, does not understand restructuring being clamoured for because of difference in views of the proponents of restructuring. The Secretary-General sees federalism as a compromise between confederation and unitary systems practised in Nigeria (Isenyo, 2018). However, the authors do not agree with the Secretary-General that Nigeria had a confederal system in the past. It is equally important to remind ourselves that people who are favoured by a system do not call for a change. Northern Nigeria has dominated state power since independence. Even when a Southerner was a President, like during Obasanjo's administration, the North dominated so many government positions. Their grip on political power in Nigeria is a major challenge to political equity and fairness. It is usually characterized by Northern domination and marginalization of some sections of the country.

It is admissible that the North is lacking in so many fields of life, but such a situation is not created by any force outside the North. Many Northerners have ruled the country and spent money that can develop West Africa if well utilized, yet bad life conditions dwell with the majority of the Northern population. This is also even although Northerners filled so many positions in Nigerian civil and public services, the forces and government.

Middle Belt Forum (MBF)

Middle Belt or North Central region had been part of the North in governance, politics, and opinions on national issues until recent political developments in the region made the people of the area victims of the attack and government negligence. In what the Middle Belt Forum called “Restructuring Nigeria and Re-awakening the position of the Middle Belt,” the forum, in its gathering at Makurdi, Benue State called for restructuring of the Nigerian Federation (Uja, 2018). In their solidarity with Southern Nigeria in favour of restructuring, a team of South and Middle Belt believers of restructuring were barred from flying from Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport to Makurdi by the airport authority for a meeting to discuss restructuring (Toromade, 2018). The people of the Middle Belt have suddenly realized that it is only during the presidential election that the North regards them as Northerners or at best they are given government positions to retain them as second class Northerners. When Nigerian political chips are down, Hausa/Fulanis do not accept them as real Northerners because most of them are Christians. Until the recent, massacre of the Middle Beltans, they have always thought their membership of the Northern region could guarantee their safety. When Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen killed them in numbers without government protection, they realized where they belonged. Federal Government is doing everything possible to establish Herdsmen Settlements in the region against their wish. This is a sign that Fulani-led Federal Government does not care whether they accept herdsmen (their killers) or not. Middle Belt’s calls for restructuring is premised on the need to have control over their region. With restructuring, the region can decide for itself the direction it wants to take in the security and development of the region.

Issues and Possibilities

The issue on the burner is the fact that the north rejected restructuring because it feeds on this present structure at the expense of other ethnic groups, particularly due to its stronghold on state power. This notwithstanding, other parts of the country may not allow the present situation to continue for too long. If the situation continues, conflict is likely to be the outcome and such conflict may jeopardize the unity and corporate existence of the country. On the other hand, the North may design again another cosmetic and deceptive formula to fake restructuring without making any fundamental change to the structure. This depends on the interplay of forces for and against the noble exercise. Deception may not likely work again, rather what seems to be possible is either a partial restructuring or a conflict that may lead to a forceful restructuring with any outcome as a possibility. The North may want war rather than relinquish its hold on Nigeria state power, and the South is tired of tolerating Northern dominance any further.

However, another salient issue is whether the South has the courage for action or just to continue the campaign for restructuring without the impetus for effective action. Other geopolitical units of the country seem to be afraid of the North and betrayal from co-propagators of restructuring. South-East and South-South still suffer South West's betrayal during the Nigerian Civil War. South West was alleged to have agreed to secede along with Biafra but they changed their mind and joined the Nigerian force against Biafra. There is an ongoing unity in the opinion expressed by Ohaneze, Afenifere, Pan Niger Delta Forum and Middle Belt Forum but the question remains who will take the first action towards a forceful restructuring if Arewa Consultative Forum remains adamant on its position.

Conclusion

The debate on restructuring the Nigerian Federation has reached a straining point of contestation. It requires urgent and constructive attention to secure a safe headway. Each contender needs to be accommodative of opposing views for a peaceful resolution to be

achieved. Present domination of Nigeria by Northern oligarchy and the resultant bad conditions of life in the country is not likely to continue if peace and unity of the country remain the desire of the oligarchy. However, the North may not accept the position of the South and the Middle Belt on the matter in the forms in which they presented them. They may look for a centrist position that allows a measure of autonomy to the federating units without making the central authority weak. This is because propagators of restructuring lack the united force required to threaten the North to submission. A centrist position may likely be sought for the case to be resolved for now but indeed, Nigeria needs to be, properly restructured for the component political units to compete and develop themselves.

On the other hand, if the North blatantly reject restructuring, the Nigerian structure is likely to change with conflict as the means of implementation. This present situation of things in the country will cause more damage than good if not changed. Nothing seems to be working as expected and solutions are not achieving effective results. The regional character of the component political units that started the independence of Nigeria is still a relevant option for proper restructuring, peace and continuous existence of the country as a single political entity. The majority of ethnic nationalities in Nigeria are fed up with the present condition of things that has dragged for a long time without a better change. Security threats caused by Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen's attacks have worsened the situation with the alleged Islamization agenda of the Buhari administration making the news around. The political stage is tense and sincere dialogue is a workable option for reaching an agreement and implementing a peaceful restructuring of the federation.

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