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Nation-Building in Nigeria: The Military's Role and the Challenges Faced

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Abstract:

Nigerian independence has spanned through 57 years (from October 1, 1960). Of these 57 years the military have ruled for over 32 years. It was expected that the new state of Nigeria in due course would develop public institutions and out of their multiple ethnic communities and diverse cultural groups would emerge the spirit of the nation. Unfortunately, however, at independence, the British not only handed over leadership to a class of educated elite, but also handed over a regionalized, ethnic based administration. So, the emergence of a 3-region structure for Nigeria at independence had implications for nation building. A conscious policy or plan of making Nigeria a nation definitely includes putting in place a set of cultural values and practices for all those referred to as Nigerians. But the question is, did the military in its lengthy years of rule ever have the ambition or dream of building a nation? This paper contends that the military rule is a dictatorship rule which in itself produced all kind of challenges to nation building. These challenges include; the challenge of power- sharing; the challenge of unequal socio- economic development, intergroup tensions and conflicts among others. The paper concludes that nation building is a task for all and sundry; military as well as civilian administration.

Keywords: military, challenges, nation-building, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a heterogeneous country so ethnically diverse entity that it is acknowledged to have about 389 ethnic groups (Aluko, 2005). The Nigeria territory and its inhabitants and groups even though interrelated had different identities and it is doubtful if British colonization and the amalgamation of 1914 in particular succeeded in welding these groups together and gave them one destiny. So before independence in 1960 it is very difficult to ascribe the status of a nation to Nigeria.

The topic under discussion "The military and the challenges of nation building" raises some questions which are: what is a nation? What is nation building and what are the basic challenges of nation-building? Addressing these basic concepts will grant us a better understanding of the issue at hand. The military has been variously defined by different people. In the opinion of (Eshikena, 2012), the miltary regime is a government led by military leaders. (Eminue, 2006) sees military regime as governance dominated by military leaders. This is in line with (Joseph, 1991) who stated that military regime is when the military expand their barrack's boundaries to the governance boundaries. The military according to (Oyediran, 1996) is generally and popularly conceived as the totality of the armed forces found all over the world which include the army, navy, air force and to some extent the police.

(Fawole, 2003) refers to the military as the nation's entire coercive apparatus established for the defense of external attack and internal subversion and it includes the army, navy and air force. While the navy and the air-force came into existence after independence, the existence of the army dated far back into the colonial days. Its basics were the Nigerian regiment (Royal west African frontier force, (RWAFF) which perform both military and police function in the colonial days. It was ''created not to defend inhabitant against foreign attacks but to assist the foreigners conquer the country'' (Miners, 1971).

Generally, it is the army that intervened in politics and form government; it is the army that played a more prominent role in politics and governance. In fact, according to (Elaigwu, 2005), "the military is a political power contestant in the power equation in Nigeria". When the army took over power they try to include token of representation from the other services in order to give the appearance of unity of purpose of the entire armed forces (Fawole, 2003). In the context of this work therefore, the military refers to the army.

A nation is defined in several ways.

The Webster's new world: dictionary defines a nation as

i. "A stable, historically developed community of people with a territory, economic life, distinctive culture and language in common".

ii. It may refer to "the people of a territory united under a single government, country or state".

iii. A nation may refer to '' A people or tribe'' (David, 1970).

By the first definition, a nation can refer to the Ibo, Hausa, Yoruba, Fulani, Ijaw, Efik, Idoma, Tiv in Nigeria. The second definition defined a nation as "the people of a territory united under a single government, country or state", going by this definition Nigeria is taken as a nation and not the various nations within it and this becomes the operational definition in this paper.

The concept of nation-building has equally attracted several definitions. (Ehimika, 2003) sees it as the process of reduction of the diverse groups within a state to one. In the opinion of (Pye, 1962), nation-building refers to the process "whereby people transfer their commitment and loyalty from smaller tribes, villages or petty principalities to the larger central political system". Contrary to this (Elaigwu, 2005) is of the opinion that the process of nation-building does not involve the transfer of commitment and loyalties" from narrow or parochial levels of ethnic groups to a larger political unit such as Nigeria. Explaining further he said that being an Efik, Ibo, Idoma, Yoruba etc. is a matter of identity which cannot be transferred. That one cannot cease from being an Ibo, Hausa, Tiv, Idoma simply because one so declared. To him, nation building involves the widening (rather than transfer) of horizons of identity of parochial units to include larger units such as state. It is the progressive acceptance by members of the polity of the legitimacy and necessity for a central government and the identification (as a result of widening horizons of parochial loyalties) with the central government as a symbol of the nation. This he called horizontal dimensions of nation-building. It involves the acceptance of other members of the community as equal fellow member of a "corporate" nation to share the bitter or the sweet of the system (Elaigwu, 2005).

On the vertical dimension, (Elaigwu, 2005) sees nation building as the identification with several authorities of the state as the symbol of the political community. It is the understanding of not only having a state, but for the people to accept the authority of the state not merely by its coercing power but as a symbol of their political community.

Simply put therefore, nation building is the process of creating unity among heterogeneous groups, how the various groups are integrated into a nation, it is the process of making many, one.

The crux of this paper therefore is how far the military in their over 30 years of governance able to create unity out of the heterogeneous members of Nigerian polity.

2. Literature review

Nation Building In Nigeria: The Historical Experience

The challenges of nation-building are not particular to Nigeria, it is one of the challenges of political development that all nations go through. The problems of nation building in Nigeria are both historical and multidimensional (Ikime, 2006). As (Coleman, 1958) rightly stated, the "Present unity in Nigeria as well as its disunity is in fact a reflection of the form and character of the common government, the British superstructure and the changes it has undergone since 1900". The forces of the past have shaped the country and this will help us

understand the challenges of nation building. The British colonial administration had great consequences for nation building.

In 1900, what later became Nigeria today comprised three (3) colonial territories: the colony of Lagos, the Northern protectorates and the Southern protectorates. These were differently administered under British colonialism. In 1906, the colony of Lagos and the protectorates of southern Nigeria came under a single administration. The year 1914 saw the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates. By 1939, three (3) provinces were created; the Eastern, Western, Northern provinces. Each province had a commissioner responsible to the Governor in Lagos. The British's major objective by the arrangement was just to have a political fusion for administrative convenience. It was not intended to unify neither did they envisage that a "nation" would come out of this "geopolity".

The British did not encourage understanding among the different group in the colonial state. Not only were the provinces separately administered, the British officials also struggled to keep each province separate except for the unification of some essential department such as custom, police, and education. There was little or no effort made at integration. In fact through the old "divide-and–rule" strategy, the British encouraged inter-ethnic quarrels, competition and hostility. So given the multi-ethnic composition of Nigeria, the separate political development of the north and south was only suitable for colonial role and not for the development of a nation.

At independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited a three-region structure which had implications for nation-building. In each region there was one dominant ethnic group whose economic and political interest became the interest of the entire region. In the north, Hausa, Fulani elite interest became regarded as the economic and political interests of the entire region (Ikime 2006). The middle-belt people and other minority nationalities in the region had little or no opportunity for projecting, let alone advancing their socio-economic interest. The same thing applied in the Western and Eastern region where the Yoruba and the Ibo dominated their regions respectively.

Under this scenario, the various nationalities in the three regions could not yield their loyalty to the Nigerian state. Therefore, at independence, Nigeria was already bedeviled by problems arising from mutual suspicion and fear of domination among the various groups. So a serious contest was already established between the groups at the closing of colonial period.

2.1 Challenges to Nation-Building: The Role of The Military

As mentioned earlier on the challenges to nation-building in Nigeria are multidimensional, ranging from the challenge of socio-economic inequalities, the leadership challenge, the challenge from historical past to the challenge of power sharing and the fiscal challenge.

The military ran the political affairs of this country for about 3 decades. In these years of governance, how far the military was able to address these challenges so as to bring forth a nation or weld the political entities together and give it a sense of purpose. For a very significant part of its post-independence existence, Nigeria was under the military rule.

Initially, the military was not involved in domestic politics because of the effective operation and control that rested with the British until 1965 (Fawole, 2003). Their political neutrality was enforced by foreign control because the last British commanding officer, Major General Sir. Christopher Welby Everard left the country in 1965. This foreign control was a major factor that restrained the army from political intervention thus making the army politically neutral until the first coup in January 1, 1966.

Going back on the issue of the challenge of our past history, the historical legacies of colonial rule created some challenges for nation building. The British left a legacy of a political configuration that was highly regionalized in structure and orientation. This regional structure shaped the nature of politics to the extent that the regions were locked in serious combat, rivalries among the regions and parties for political control and supremacy at the federal (centre). The founding fathers tried to deal with the challenge by adopting federalism and advocating a policy of unity in diversity. Federalism was adopted as a "compromise" to deal with problems of nationals and sub-national self determination.

However, the imbalanced nature of Nigeria federal structure became one of the potent sources of fear among the group. It escalated mutual suspicion among the people. For instance, the federal structure in which the Northern region accounted for 79% of the total geographical area and 54% of the population made groups from the south to feel seriously disadvantaged. Population wise, the north had 29.8%, Eastern region 12.4%; Western region 10.3%, Midwestern region 2.5% and Lagos 0.7% (Elaigwu, 2005). With this, the fear that the north will continue to provide political leadership in the country created an intense sense of political deprivation in the south. On the other hand, the north was educationally disadvantaged so the North-South dichotomy deepened.

The military incursion into politics and governance in January 1966 brought into power as Ibo man as the Head of State, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi. His immediate response to the problem of disunity and regional animosities was to destroy federalism as a political principle. He did this by abolishing the 3 regions, eradicated the legislature arms of the government and subjugated the executives and the judiciary to its will. By its commanding structure and hierarchical nature, the military imposed a unitary superstructure on the polity, ruled by decrees at the national level and by edicts at the state. Thus, the military never minded that federalism was adopted for Nigeria as a convenient means of administering the fractions multi-ethnic conglomerate. In fact, as Abdulrahman declared, regionalism became a feature of the military too. The coup of 15/1/1966 and the counter coup of July 1966 was a clear indication of regional politics within the army which was not good for building a young state like Nigeria (Abdulrahman, 2014).

Rather than unite the country, the military did more damage to the fragile unity that was achieved before independence. Due to the military desire for centralism of power, successive military regimes balkanized Nigeria into fragile units. In 1967, Gowon broke the 4 regions into 12 states and from the successive military government till the time of Abacha in 1997 split Nigeria into the present 36 states. It is believed that the break-up of the 4 regions by Gowon reduced sentiments and agitations by minority ethnic groups in the various

regions. The move also weakened the Biafran secessionists by separating the ethnic minorities in the East from going along with the Igbo. These newly created states lacked capacity for survival, highly depended upon the central government for budgeting allocation and donations even to meet the basic functions of payment of worker's salaries (Fawole, 2003).

Repeated state creation has not resulted into more oneness or harmonious inter-ethnic relations nor has it led to a more united Federal Republic of Nigeria. In fact, (Ikime, 2006) declared "each time a new state is created, there is a new majority and a new minority and relations within the states became acrimonious than before, because the struggle for resources and development became most localized and intense. Since 1967, the demand for additional states has continued, the more states were created, the more the demands for more. So there were divisive dimension of the creation of states which has not helped nation-building.

The challenge of Socio-economic inequalities: This has been a serious challenge since independence. Citizenship says (Ehimika, 2003), is an instrument of nation-building. Buttressing this fact, (Gambari, 2008) declared that an important aspect of nation-building is the building of a common citizenship. This is done through the development of the economy and equal opportunities for all or through the development of social welfare safety; that mature nations try to establish a base-line of social and economic rights which all members of the national community must enjoy. Explaining this further, he said that in many western European countries, contemporary nation-building is about preventing social exclusion or the exclusion of significant segments of the population from enjoying basic social and economic right (Gambari, 2008).

In Nigeria, many citizens are denied basic rights such as right to education, housing and health. Not only that, variations equally existed in the level of enjoyment of these rights across the country. So different Nigerians live different lives in different parts of the country. High level of socio-economic inequalities has several implications for nation building:

i. Citizens are not motivated to support the state or society because they do not feel that the state is concerned about their welfare.
ii. Marginalized, hungry, poverty stricken citizens can hardly be expected to play their role in the development of the state.
iii. Socio-economic inequalities fuels fear and suspicion which keeps the people divided.

One major justification for the post military intervention in governance is the mismanagement of the country's resources by the civilian government which in turn has led to poor socio-economic development of the citizenry (Eminue, 2006). Has the military regime in its prolonged years (over 3 decades) of governance faired better? The military tried to engineer socio-economic policies and programmes to improve the economy and its effect on the life of the citizens. Some of these programmes includes: The Better Life programme for Rural women, The Family Support Programme 1993, National Directorate of Employment NDE 1986, The Nomadic and Adult Education Programme 1986, The Directorate of Foods,

Roads and Rural Infrastructure DFRRI 1986; The Local Government Reform 1976 to mention just a few (Eshikena, 2012).

It is a credit to the military regime for establishing those programmes but the poor state of the economy, hunger, poverty, disease and insecurity is an indication that the policies and programmes have not really transformed the economy talk less of having meaningful impact on the lives of the citizens. The military regime more than the civilian had enormous revenues accruing to it from rapidly increasing crude oil, yet there is high level of poverty, inflation, and unemployment. With all these programmes how easily accessible is education, health facilities to the man in Lagos, Ilorin compared to the man in Isanlu and Ogbia. As (Ake, 1981) rightly observed, the socio-economic improvement of a nation is often the yard stick for measuring the performance of any government. The absence of available and promotion of equitable distribution of socio-economic facilities produced poverty stricken and unskilled citizen whose loyalty and support the military could not command for nation-building.

From the creation of four regions in 1963 to now 36 states, the fear of injustice, unfairness, lack of confidence in one another by the Nigerian groups and suspicion and fear of domination by one group or the other has persisted culminating in the challenge of power sharing. This challenge of power relation scattered the first republic and unfortunately the incursion of the military worsened the issue. Beginning with the January 15, 1966 coup that brought General Aguiyi Ironsi to power, the 8 Majors that carried out coup were all Igbo except one captain. Ironsi's closest advisers were Igbos, he dismissed Airforce Cadet of Northern origin on "educational grounds" even though they had completed 2 years service. He promoted twenty-one officers to the rank of Major to Lt. Colonels out of which 18 were Igbo speaking (Agbowu, 2000).

By the counter coup of July 1966, the Northern agenda became the agenda of successive military regime. Based on the 1963 census, the agenda was such that anything shared between the South and the North must be in the ratio of North 54% and the South 46%. Thirty-six (36) states were created, 20 states in the north, 17 in the south with ratio 54.1% to 45.9%. Similarly, in the creation of local governments, there are 419 in the north and 355 in the south, a ratio of 54.1% to 45.9% (Agbowu, 2000). The Nigerian federation is such that ethno-regional interpretations of actions of political leaders are usual norms. It is taken that these are done for the north to continuously have an edge over the south in relation to the representation in the House of Assembly.

To cap it all, the fact that for most of the over 30 years in which the military governed all the Heads of states came from the north except Ironsi's seven months and the seven months of Obasanjo's interlude. This has reinforced the fear of some sections dominating the bureaucracy while another cabinet. This pattern of uneven distribution, monopoly and marginalization of power and political exclusion did not and has not augured well for nation-building. The military introduced the concept of Federal Character and Quota System and the creation of 6 geo-political zones provides some answers to this issue. However, both the

Federal Character and the Quota System generated problems and have helped to compound the National question (Ikime, 2006).

The pursuit of the principle of Federal Character was/is at the expense of merit, it did not make for an inclusive system on which nation-building can anchor.

Another problem that has bedeviled the nation-building process in Nigeria is the leadership challenge. Leadership is a critical factor in nation-building, however "the trouble with Nigeria is the failure of leadership" (Achebe, 2008). (Gambari, 2008) declared that nations just don't happen by historical accident; they are built by exemplary men and women with vision and resolve.

Nation-building requires leadership that is committed to the rule of law. Leadership that has a demonstrable sense of fair-play, leadership with ability and integrity, leadership who has vision for Nigeria, who wants to accomplish greatness for Nigeria and not just for themselves and their immediate families. Nation building equally requires leadership who by words and deeds are achievers and not deceivers.

Unfortunately, however, the standard of leadership in Nigeria over the years, the military inclusive, are leaders who do not understand the socio-economic and political problems of the country not to talk of finding lasting solutions to them. They have been leaders who abuse public office for private gain, leaders who were interested in silencing their opponents, who see themselves as champions of only one section of the population. Leaders who resolved to build a nation indeed must imbibe and promote the values of justice, fairness, equity, tolerance and accommodation of all. These ingredients were not found in the leaders. So nation-building has remained elusive.

Fiscal allocation has been a serious challenge to nation-building. In pre-military era, population was never a factor in avenue allocation but what each section of the country contributed to the national purse. So Northern Nigeria received 12.6% of Nigeria's oil revenue, the South received 67.4% and the Federal Government at the centre 20% (Agbowu, 2000). From this, it is seen that what the North enjoyed was approximately 13% of Nigeria's oil revenue.

However, when the military took over in 1966, the oil revenue allocated to the regions was scrapped. All the oil revenue were pooled to the centre and shared by proportional representation in the country, North 54%, East 22%, West 18% and Midwest 6% (Agbowu, 2000). Successive military regime due to its undue centralization of power used state apparatus and instituted obnoxious policies to centralize the economics in the hand of the federal government. The following are policies that created enabling environment for resources distortion and laid the foundation for conflict (particularly in the Niger Delta) include: the Offshore Oil Revenue Decree of 1971; Territorial Waters Act, CAP 428 laws of the Federation, 1990 as amended by Act No. 1 of 1988; The Exclusive Economic Zone Act CAP 116 Laws of 1990 as amended by Act 42 of 1998; and the Land Use Act CAP 202 laws of the Federation and Exploration Licences CAP 350 laws of the Federation of 1978 (Ibuomo

and Ekundayo, 2017). The military systematically removed the oil revenue going to the Niger Delta for the Centre.

The population sharing formation went on for approximately 20 years when the Niger Delta came to understand that the process of fiscal equalization had seen the transfer of funds to other states that are less-well to do and robbing the rich states of their funds. The Niger Delta became militant because of neglect of their area. States could not carry out most of their basic functions without dependence on federally-derived funds. After a bitter fight in the House of Representatives, the Northerners who had majority in the houses conceded 13% only to the oil producing area. The neglect and degradation in the Niger Delta resulting from using unwholesome parameters to siphon their resources for the other parts of the country has created travails and insecurities in the area which according to Olali and Ekundayo had become the political instability of Nigeria (Olali and Ekundayo, 2010). The atmosphere of insecurity and instability has not been conducive for nation building.

3. Conclusion

The formation of Nigeria state was an arbitrary sandwich of people into a territorial wait which formed a geographical entity or a geo-geographical expression. Too many people in this state there was no identification with the state as a symbol of a people and a political community. If our colonial and historical experiences did not have the objectives of a unified state or nation-building, it is seen from this discussion that building a nation is a conscious and deliberate effort of committed men and women.

The military can be credited with putting in place several institutions for socio-economic development (through largely unimpactful), the military role is a dictatorship role that produced all kinds of inequalities and this had made their role in nation building questionable. The military never had the dream or the ambition of building a nation. This is why by the time the military left the stage for the civilian in 1999, “the glue that once held the nation together even in artificial unity had weakened considerably. It was merely held together in artificial unity more by coercive than by consent of the people” (Fawole, 2003). However, one cannot blame the woes of nation-building all on the military but perhaps they stand out in this crucial issue because of their decades of governance. The task of nation building is a complex and dynamic one and more has to be done by all and sundry to weld the various groups in this country into a real nation.

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