CHANGING PATTERNS OF SOCIAL REFORM PROGRAMMES IN THE NIGERIAN STATE AS A RESPONSE TO POOR POLITICAL CULTURE

John-Vianney Ibe M.Sc (Pol. Sc.), M.P.A.
Registry Department
Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi.

ABSTRACT
The roots of the present Nigerian culture of divisiveness, ethnicity, lack of patriotism/commitment to the Nigerian project, kleptocracy and corruption which have led to a poor image of the country both within and outside, have been traced to the structural flaws of colonialism and exacerbated by insensitive leadership and poor integrative efforts since the British founded Nigeria in 1914. Various administrations in the country have made conscious efforts towards changing and improving the people’s conception and attitude towards government, towards public property and towards the nation. But how have they fared in this crusade? By utilizing existing literature on the subject as primary source of information, this paper sets out to investigate the issues on ground namely, the resilience and implication of the citizens’ negative attitudes towards government policies and programmes as well as the variety of ways in which the various regimes have tried to respond to the situation through social reform programmes. It concludes with some useful suggestions and/or recommendations.


Introduction

Prior to colonialism, what later came to be called Nigeria was a group or rather groups of scattered states and empires with various cultural traits and geographical locations. For imperial and hegemonic interests, the British colonialists brought these various groups together under the aegis of colonial authority using strategies of trade monopoly, military conquests and divide and rule.

This bringing together was, therefore, a forced unity and the implications have been far-reaching and pervasive on the Nigerian political landscape since pre-colonial times. It has resulted in the difficulty of the colonial and subsequent leaders to weld the various units together as a nation. It has also resulted in ethnic politics, in North-South separation and in the concept of minorities.

As has been noted, the above cited defects of Nigerian colonial past resulted naturally in poor/negative political culture among the citizenry. Not surprisingly, therefore, successful administrations in Nigeria have evolved various strategies aimed at changing the people’s mindset and attitudes towards government and towards its policies. Thus, General Obasanjo, as

Generally considered, the central theme of all these efforts is the drive towards reconstructing and redefining Nigerian political culture with a view to evolving a more positive mindset and attitudinal disposition towards the state. In the words of former President Good luck Jonathan, the Rebranding Campaign was a ‘genuine way to reorient Nigerians toward believing in themselves again and to change the perception of the country both locally and internationally.

Theoretical framework

It is pertinent to capture here a theoretical platform which can serve as an analytical tool with which the phenomenon of poor political culture vis-à-vis government reform programmes, can be discussed.

The theory that seems most apt here is the systems theory of David Easton. The systems theory is otherwise referred to as input–output analysis. The approach sees the political system as a processor of policy inputs fed into the system. These inputs are then processed within the political system and later released into the environment as policy output. These policy outputs are recycled or fed back into the system as support and demands, and the process continues systematically (Oronsaye, 1997).

The political system comprises all the constitutional structures and political authorities who exercise powers as agents of the state at any given time. To be specific, the government in power, whether civilian or military, constitutes the core structure of the political system responsible for governance and the making of major decisions affecting the socio-economic and political lives of the people concerned.

It has been posited in the foregoing essay that the average Nigerian is ethnocentric. He does not believe in the Nigerian project or political system; he does not trust it; he does not love it and he sees public projects and property as ‘government thing’ which should not be preserved or taken seriously. He rather looks for an opportunity to corner it to himself or to his own community. The apex political leadership would view this phenomenon as inputs from the population and so devises social programmes in the form of outputs from the political system. The leaders believe that this process could go on repeatedly until a significant percentage of the populace would begin to regard the leaders and public property and activities as their own. That is ‘Systems Theory’ at work.
Implications of Nigerian political culture

Not surprisingly, the poor attitudinal disposition of majority of the citizenry toward the state as well as their ethnic consciousness, has trailed the country through colonialism to the present era. Osaghae (2002:19) and Meyer et al (1996:361) have summarized the elements of Nigerian politics since independence as resulting in political instability, low level of national cohesion and low level of system affect/ lack of patriotism (as well as the prevalence of corruption).

Political Instability: The main indices of political instability include the high turnover of governments (regime structures, institution and personnel) occasioned by military coups, inconclusive and contested electoral outcomes, frequent changes in policy, political violence, and the crisis of legitimacy. Between 1960 and 1996, there were no less than ten officially known coups; out of these, two in 1966 and one each in 1975, 1983, 1985, and 1993 – were successful and involved the government being overthrown. Two were unsuccessful but bloody (1976, 1990), and two were nipped in the bud and the officers involved were jailed or executed (1986, 1995). These were in addition to rumours of unreported coup plots and executions of convicted officers.

It is noteworthy that within the same period, the country had three civilian Heads of State (Tafawa Balewa, Shehu Shagari, Ernest Shonekan) and seven Military Heads of State – an average of one head of state every three and half years (General Ironsi in 1966 and Ernest Shonekan, who headed the Interim National Government of 1993, held the position for six months and less). The situation in the states and local governments, whose numbers increased respectively, from three to thirty-six, and 301 to over 750 in the same period, was even more unstable.

The corollary of regime change at the federal, state, and local levels have been massive structural, institutional and policy changes. Government ministries, departments, agencies, parastatals, and other institutions were in an almost permanent state of restructuring with their executive heads constantly changed. For instance, the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) which supervises oil exploration and production in the country had eight chief executives between 1985 and 1996. Accordingly, this instability in tenure of officers resulted in policies being in flux, as each regime and chief executive saw new beginnings and discontinued with previous dispensations as part of the legitimization process.

Low level of national cohesion: Lack of harmony, cooperation, and unity has been identified as index of low level of national cohesion, and this has manifestly characterized social and political life in post-independence Nigeria. No effective formular has been found to bridge ethnic competition, class conflict, social diversity and the like into a higher or desirable productive synthesis. Politics in the country, especially contestation for state power and resources, has tended to be organized around regional, ethnic and religious interests. The centrifugal (disintegration) pulls emanating from this pattern of politics have made resolution of the ‘national question’ difficult. Fundamental issues of minority rights, resource distribution and
power-sharing remain volatile and even became greater in the late 1980s and 1990s. The result is that even in the fifth decade after independence, and after a civil war provoked by unresolvable issues of the national question, the country’s continued existence as one unit has not been assured and could not be taken for granted.

**Low level of system affect among public officials**

This term was first used by Huntington (1991:51) to refer to a low sense of belonging to and having a stake in the well-being of the political system. Specifically applied to Nigeria, and arising from the prevalence of ethnic politics, it means a lack of development of a sense of a Nigerian community. In this connection, it has often been posited that the nation’s economic problems were exacerbated by official corruption by Nigerians in the public service and by the functionaries of government.

Taking the case of utilization of oil revenue in Nigeria, one can see through some analysis of the situation that the nation has failed woefully in the area of management of its oil revenue because of low level of patriotism among public officials and government functionaries. At a time in the mid–1970s, the oil income of Nigeria boomed, rising at the rate of around 30 percent per year – from $400 million to nearly $25 billion per year by 1980 (Mayer, 1996:372). After that, oil production and oil revenue declined steadily throughout the 1980s. By 1989, oil revenue was only $4.22 billion. By the mid 1990s, Nigeria was using 44 percent of its foreign exchange earnings to service debts.

Aside the lack of patriotism or low level of system affect among public officers in Nigeria, there was a variant of the low level of system affect – this time coming from the subjects or the people. This is referring to the negative attitude to government and its operations which blossomed out in the post-colonial state with deep roots in the colonial past. Largely because the colonial state was imported from Europe, grew apart from the society and was made to serve the interest of the colonizer, the nationalists who led the anti-colonial movements mobilized support on the strength of an interest-begotten idea that the state was ‘alien’. This perception became ingrained in the popular consciousness, with the result that society at large refused to develop any serious stake or interest in the state’s well-being and sustenance, such as would have emphasized accountability, transparency, responsiveness and other aspects of a moral ethos. Rather, the state and government which animated it were approached as alien institution which belonged to the Oyibo (white man), and as such was not deserving of the citizen’s obligations or duties, could be plundered to feather private nests, and whose survival only the few who benefited from it were prepared to fight for (Osaghae 2002:21).

There was the popular perception which took root under colonial rule that ‘government’s business is no man’s business’. There was, thus nothing seriously wrong with stealing state funds, especially if they were used to benefit not only the individual but members of his community. Those who had the opportunity to be in government were expected to use the power and resources at their disposal to advance private and communal interests. It is noteworthy that such concept of the state and attitudes have in turn given birth to other problems which afflicted
and disabled the post colonial state. These problems (also known as the ‘soft state’ variables) include corruption, scant regard for constitutional rule or rule of law, the absence of a national society governed by common moral, cultural and behavioural norms and, indeed, political stability.

**Responses of the Nigerian state to negative political culture and associated constraints**

It has been posited that the poor attitudes of Nigerians towards the political system which had its roots in colonialism has, in turn, led to some socio-political deformities. As a corollary, attention has naturally turned to ways and means of tackling these deformities and correcting the negative political culture of Nigerians.

The current ‘Change Begins With Me’ campaign is just one of such efforts by the Nigerian state to change the image of the country both in the minds of the people and in the impressions of the country being sold to the outside world. It has to be said that the potency or efficacy of the Change Agenda pill must be judged by juxtaposing the crusade with the outcome of similar campaigns in the past.

It is important to emphasize that operators of the post-colonial state tried to change these perceptions and attitudes with little success. Among the notable efforts to this end, which were basically admonitory and mobilizatory, were the famous ‘Jaji Declaration by General Obasanjo in 1977; the ‘Ethical Revolution’ launched by the Shagari administration in the Second Republic, the ‘War Against Indiscipline’ (WAI) of General Buhari in 1984; Mass Mobilization for Economic Recovery, Self Reliance and Social Justice (MAMSER) launched in 1985/86 by General Ibrahim Babangida, and the War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC) under General Sanni Abacha in 1994. During General Obasanjo’s second coming as democratically elected president of Nigeria (1999 - 2007), a lot of conscious and determined efforts were made in the direction of stemming the tide of corruption and lack of patriotism which had become very debilitating to the survival of the Nigerian nation. Accordingly, the administration introduced a Reform Agenda which brought in some anti-graft commissions such as the dreaded Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC), and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). After President Obasanjo came President Jonathan’s Rebranding Crusade which was, so to speak, the baby of the then Minister of Information, late Prof. (Mrs.) Dora Akunyili.

It is, however, saddening that with all these efforts, including the current ‘Change Begins With Me’ project being propagated by the Minister of Information – Alhaji Lai Mohammed, it has not been possible for the successive governments put together to achieve a thirty percent reformation of the political attitudes and culture of the country’s 150 million people. Perhaps, more success would have been recorded if the elite majority were not stubbornly disposed towards the reforms. Recently, they have accused the EFCC of engaging in selective punishment of the culprits of official corruption. Another reason for the little success in stemming corruption and changing the political attitudes of the people is that the state operators themselves, who are supposed to be guided by the same codes, reap huge benefits of political legitimacy from them. Thus, attempts to entrench
a moral code for public service through agencies like the Code of Conduct Burea provided for in the 1979 constitution, have not helped. As a consequence, the state continues to exist in an amoral and disabling milieu which permits actions which would otherwise be reprehensible to society, hence the demands for accountability, probity, and transparency on the part of public officials by elements of the fledgling civil society have served to contract this amorality.

Furthermore, government has been found to be guilty of encouraging, though unwittingly, the counter-productive perception of the state in terms of allocative and distributive roles, rather than the productive roles of the citizens. Nnoli (1978:285) refers to this phenomenon as a product of the social relations of production in which production relations (which is wealth creation) should have superseded the relations of distribution. The latter sees the national wealth as a national cake from which all must get a share, irrespective of their inputs into the baking or production of the cake. Thus, the state is presented by the vast majority of the citizens as a benevolent ‘Father Christmas’ who distributes the national cake. This perception which was encouraged by the anti – colonial nationalists frustrates efforts directed towards developing the necessary social and political correlates of public finance. Most people not only believe that government is a reservoir of ‘free money’, but also fail to realize that a significant part of the country’s wealth comes from the taxes and levies they pay. Since the entry of oil as the main revenue earner, this notion of free money has become even more pronounced and problematic. This failure of most citizens to realize that government revenue and public funds are collectively owned and that all citizens have contributed or have to contribute to it by one way or the other, largely explains the virtual absence of demands for accountability in the political culture of public finance until the emergence of President Buhari’s administration.

Conclusion and recommendations

It has been posited in the foregoing analysis that the political culture of ethnicity, tribalism cum statism, political instability, absence of commitment to the Nigerian project, poor political culture of public finance and accountability, politics of violence and political apathy among some members of the citizenry are all attributable to the fact that the peoples that constitute Nigeria were not homogenous in any way but were forced to ‘unite’ by colonial conquest for British hegemonic and imperial interests. They were later ‘disintegrated’ through colonial administrative policies of divide and rule, north/south separation, regionalization, and federalism. If that is the diagnosis of the problem bedevilling Nigerian political culture, what are the pills that should or can be prescribed for the treatment of the ailment? Naturally, the suggestions or recommendations should flow from the analysis of the problem and should be such that would not produce ephemeral results or serve as mere palliatives.

In his study of the ethnic phenomenon in Nigeria, Nnoli (1978:110) remarked that in addition to the historical colonial circumstance that encouraged ethnicity, tribalism and the like, the country’s leaders do not help the situation by their attitude towards governance and public administration. He notes, with disappointment, that Nigerians are made to celebrate the things
that separate them rather than the ones that unite them as is evident in the former National Anthem of Nigeria and in the design of forms to be filled by Nigerians for various purposes. The stress or demand for one’s state of origin, tribe, religion, are unnecessary for a country that wishes to stay together and work together.

In his words:

…Nigerians have merely followed in the footsteps of their erstwhile colonial masters without fully appreciating the latter’s motives, or have appropriated the colonial heritage for their own personal and class interests. It is pertinent to note that Tanzania consists of at least 150 cultural linguistic units but no one hears Tanzania talking of their heterogeneity, diversity, or federal character. Tanzania is a unitary state, so are Cote D’voir, Mozambique, Zambia and many other African states which consist of a multiplicity of cultural linguistic groups.

Similarly, it is the opinion of this paper that in order to dislodge the phenomenon of tribalism and deal a blow to the attendant negative political culture, there should be a public policy mandating every Nigerian family to make or regard wherever they are residing as their home with equal rights and privileges with the original natives of the area. The idea is that in the long run, there would have been substantial mixing up and diffusion of cultures to such a level of unnoticeable differences.

It is also suggested that any programme for the creation or promotion of national unity should be judged by its effectiveness in eliminating or at least ameliorating the impact of factors such as colonial type socio-economic scarcity and inequality, intraclass competition for the division of national wealth rather than its production or creation, the internalization of ethnic sentiments, the use of the ethnic base for political competition, and the use of state governmental apparatus for ethnic competition. The other factors are political, social and economic policy differences which run along communal lines, differences in the traditional ways of life, and the emergence of a section of the population which benefits from the allocation of resources along ethnic lines. All these deserve to be erased from the polity in favour of national unity.

In order to achieve a drastic reduction of colonial-type scarcity and inequality, there is need to evolve a revolutionary development programme which, among other things, satisfies the demands of each citizen for a minimum of biologically and socially reasonable standards of nutrition, drinking water, free education, free health service, employment, housing, clothing, care of the old, and a revolutionary onslaught on the structure of private ownership in the country.

In line with the aforementioned socialist approaches to the ethnic phenomenon by Nnoli, there is need to consider the social distance between the leaders and the followers because it is this factor that is at the root of the present political culture of apathy towards government and its
activities which has its roots in colonialism. The leadership must change their adoption of the Elite mode or model of policy making which assumes that public policy must flow from the elite downwards to the masses rather than vice versa because they perceive the masses as apathetic and willing to accept passively any situation that comes their way. The same reason explains why there is low level of patriotism amongst public officials which results in the negative political culture of public finance and accountability. To stem this tide, there should be re-orientation on the part of the leadership in favour of bridging the gap between leaders and followers, between politicians and voters (the electorate). The leader ought to be seen by the followers as one of their own and hence identify with his aspirations and goals. For instance, it is no gainsaying that the leader-followers closeness model is playing out in the present day Anambra State of Nigeria under the populist leadership of Mr. Willie Obiano. The Governor is spearheading a progressive and revolutionary regime of cultivating and strengthening of alliance between the state and the rural and urban poor majority.

To sum up, we need urgently the implementation of the above mentioned strategies for improved political culture in Nigeria, for political stability and for resounding success in the current ‘Change Begins With Me’ campaign.

References