



YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Nigeria: Facing the challenges of globalization in a federal system

BY EYENE OKPANACHI

Eyene Okpanachi was selected as a participant in the Forum of Federations' Youth Summer Session on Federalism 2002. Each participant was asked to submit an article in response to the question, "What are the challenges posed by globalization to your federal country?"

How does one organize a government to satisfy citizens' needs for peace, order and prosperity? Those three goals were championed by U.S. Chief Justice Oliver Ellsworth in 1802, by British aristocrats half a century later and by Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo in a speech delivered last June. But without democracy, these goals are sure to ring hollow.

Today, the reality of globalization – a new competitive environment, the internationalization of capital, trade liberalization and the information revolution – has made this question more relevant than ever. In a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, globalization could accentuate ethnic nationalism and weaken state authority. Such consequences could, in turn, increase the potential for ethnic and religious confrontation and violence. How can these problems be effectively managed? What system of political organization is best suited for harnessing the forces of diversity to achieve sustainable development in a rapidly changing world?

Federalism offers a solution as it provides a dynamic balance between the centripetal and centrifugal forces in society. Indeed, at the heart of federalism is what Daniel J. Elazar called "the linkage of individuals, groups and polities in lasting but limited union in such a way as to provide for the energetic pursuit of common ends while maintaining the respective integrities of all parties." Yet federalism is not always a "ready-to-wear" solution: it may also contain within it the seeds of its own destruction. Nigeria's experience dramatically demonstrates this.

Federalism under pressure

In the 1954 constitution, a federal solution established a framework to hold together the diverse nationalities that had been arbitrarily incorporated into a unitary colonial state by the British Empire.

Since independence, however, deep ethnic and religious cleavages, a "rentier" culture, military rule and attendant over-centralization of power have limited the effectiveness of federalism. Federalism did not provide a means to cope with the rise of ethnic militias such as the Egbesu Boys, the Odua People's Congress, Arewa Youths and the Bakassi Boys. Nigeria's federal structure could not resolve the struggles over resource control, indigenous rights and citizenship, nor did it prevent violations of states' rights by the central government.

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Given all these problems, should Nigeria simply jettison the federal idea? No, federalism retains its utility for Nigeria's multi-ethnic society, and increasingly so in a globalizing era. The crucial question is how Nigeria can revitalize its system so that it manages its own tensions while effectively grappling with the problems and the possibilities of globalization.

The challenges are stark: conditions for economic development in Nigeria are limited by the persistence of ethnic and religious conflicts, by poor political leadership and endemic corruption, and by uncertain weather conditions. Nigeria's most talented individuals shun the public sector or, assisted by the increasing flow of goods and persons across borders, are lured abroad by the promise of greater income and security.

As globalization progresses, the interplay of demographics, disease and weak governance – if left unchecked – could lead to the further marginalization of Africa. Nigeria would not likely be an exception among African countries. Peace and good governance are hard to come by under the best of circumstances. Since independence, ethnic and communal tensions have intensified, periodically escalating into open conflict, spreading across borders and spawning secessionist movements that threaten to unravel Nigeria's federal structure.

Globalization is not only changing the very nature of the global economy: it is also transforming the traditional balance of power within states. In Nigeria, liberalization and democracy have given states greater influence over foreign policy, a field that hitherto was the sole preserve of the federal government. Indeed, these states are now attracting foreign capital, investment and loans.

Dealing with globalization

How can Nigeria's system of intergovernmental relations cope with the present reality? How can sub-national governments respond to the challenges of globalization without undermining national security? How can Nigeria reap the benefits of intergovernmental cooperation in a globalizing age without sacrificing the benefits of competitive federalism?

Although no consensus yet exists on federal reforms in Nigeria, the current situation requires action, not reaction.

Pro-active reforms could include:

- the decentralization and safeguarding of the non-centralizable powers of states and localities;
- the introduction of residency rights for all Nigerians living in any state of the federation;
- the resuscitation of the National Council on Intergovernmental Relations; and
- the implementation of principles of good governance.

Until Nigeria becomes a genuine democracy, none of the above is likely to succeed. Developing a framework that integrates federalism and democratic governance is an imperative of Nigerian politics that has yet to be realized. Globalization has provided an opportunity for a policy re-evaluation in this direction. Nigeria now has a chance to take up this challenge. ☺

