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Federalism and Civil Society in Africa: The Nigeria Experience.

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Introduction

Nigeria, like most of Africa, continues to wallow in the crisis of governance, itself occasioned by the generalized crisis of reproduction. Ethnic and cultural diversity have compounded and accentuated the crisis beyond the management capacity of the state, leading in some instances, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone, to state collapse (Zartman, 1995). The challenge of nation building in an environment of fragile state structures produced, in the case of Nigeria, the federal formula. Federalism as a power sharing formula thus became Nigeria's answer to Africa's most debilitating obstacle to progress: social, economic and political.

The country was, however, soon to succumb to the logic of unbridled ethnicisation of politics, culmination in a three year civil war (1967-70), the militarisation of society resulting from prolonged military rule and the near extinction of civil life and a brutal dictatorship that lasted a decade and a half. It is a paradox of political engineering that the people subjected to such brutal treatment would produce perhaps the most vibrant civil society on the continent. A major contribution of civil society in Nigeria is its tenacious defence of federalism as the most viable formula for sustaining the ideology of 'unity in diversity' – an ideology ironically developed by the military to justify its implosion into the political arena. A brief background to this development would put in context the role NGO's and other civil organizations play in the sustenance of Nigeria Federalism.

The Nigerian Experience

Nigeria as a political entity came into existence following the amalgamation of the Northern and southern protectorates in 1914 by Lord Lugard. The amalgamation formed the basis for the evolution of Nigeria's federation (Nnoli, O. 1978). In spite of diverse cultural, socio-economic, political and educational disparities between the various ethnic groups that existed in the two protectorates, the British colonialists nonetheless united the protectorates thus bringing over 300 nationalities under one central authority. In the negotiations for independence, the nationalists opted for federalism. Thus through the constitution of 1954 and the subsequent independence constitution the early nationalists

opted for the federal formula to contain the fissiparous tendencies in the amalgamated polity. But right from the onset federalism in Nigeria was confronted with problems inimical to its operation. Firstly, emergency powers were granted the federal government to suspend any regional government (I. Elaigwu, 1983). The fact that emergency powers were invoked in the suspension of the Western regional government created the basis for political suspicion, fear, anxiety and conflict. (L. Diamond, 1982). In addition the regions were partitioned artificially to the total neglect of linguistic, ethnic, cultural and economic considerations. In the process, the north had 79% of federal territory and 55% of its population. Hence from inception the component units were unequal not only in terms of resources but also different ethnic, religious and educational experiences, thus violating the sacred principle that no one unit in a federal polity should be large or strong enough to hold the rest to ransom.

This lopsided federalism, however, endured, until the military intervention in the political life of Nigeria on January 15th 1966 which fundamentally altered the country's federal trajectory by reversing the power equation in favour of the centre rather than the regions. Major-general J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi, the first military leader of Nigeria's long military rule attempted to institutionalize unitarism through decree 34 although this was violently rejected through riots and a military counter-coup in July 1966. With the ascendance of Gowon to power and the outbreak of civil war in 1967, federalism was seriously undermined. The creation of a twelve state- structure and subsequent financial dependence of these states on the federal government meant a total subordination of the states to the federal government. The concentration of the bulk of political and economic power and resources at the federal centre meant that attention was directed towards it and further intensified the struggle among ethnic nationalities for control of resources.

The 1976-79 transition programme of Generals Murtala Mohammed/Olusegun Obasanjo administration introduced the concept "federal Character" as a modality of power sharing for the in-coming civilian administration. Although federal character was enshrined in the constitution of the second republic, its practice further exposed the lop-sidedness of power configuration in the country. The military administrations of Buhari, Babangida and Abacha, which replaced the civilian administration of Shagari, further compounded the over centralized federal structure.

The annulment of the June 12 1993 Presidential elections, adjudged to be free and fair by national and international observers and won by the Social (Democratic Party) SDP's flagbearer Chief Moshood Abiola, was the immediate catalyst for the emergence of civil society organisations whose avowed mission was the termination of military rule. The arrest and detention of opposition forces calling for the recognition of the June 12 Presidential elections further, fueled the confrontation between civil society and the state, particularly in the South –west of Nigeria. Associations such as Campaign for Democracy (CD), Civil Liberties Organisations (CLO), Association of Democratic Lawyers of Nigeria (ADLN), Committee for the Defence of Human rights (CDHR), National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) sprang up to champion the course of democracy. In addition to the above some professional associations joined the struggle for the enthronement of democracy in Nigeria.

A typical example of the crucial role of civil society organizations in advancing the cause of federalism is the case of the Movement for National Reformation (MNR), whose

agenda became the platform for the gruesome confrontation between General Sani Abacha and the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO). Among its primary objectives are:

1. To work for a truly Federal Structure in Nigeria (as opposed to the present hegemonic and barely concealed unitary system), without which the unity of the country cannot be sustained.
2. To work for a full review of revenue allocation and the appreciation of the country's economic resources on an equitable basis to ensure fair and just inter-nationality relationship, meaningful development, and nation-building on an equitable basis.
3. To work for the evolution of a democratic, multi-party political system based on democratic, freely organised political parties and a popular parliamentary system of government.
4. To work for the zonalisation of the highest public offices and of control of the main policy-making domains in order to ensure to all communities and nationalities, large and small alike, meaningful participation in the governmental process of the country.
5. To work for the establishment of a secular democracy in which individuals and groups will be guaranteed full freedom to practise religions of their choice.
6. To work for a conference of all nationalities, professional bodies populist groups and patriotic movements to produce a new constitution for Nigeria.
7. To work for the new constitution to be submitted for approval to a general referendum throughout Nigeria.

It clarion call is for the restructuring of Nigeria such that "each ethnic group which so desires to form a state within a federation or join another group" could do so (Enemuo & Momoh 1999)

Conclusion

The early beginnings of federalism in Nigeria from independence were faulty. The inequality of the federating regions in terms of territory and population and the emergency powers granted the federal government was a sure recipe for crisis. Military intervention in the politics of Nigeria emasculated any pretensions to federalism because the military hierarchical command structure was foisted on the political structure thus concentrating and centralizing power rather than dispersing it. The emergence of Babangida and Abacha completed the process of the emergence of authoritarian rule which ushered the era of civil society organizations as champions of the struggle for democracy. Although civil society organizations were and still are confronted with a number of obstacles and weaknesses, they promise to be vanguards of democracy. Indeed their struggles led to the hand over of power to a democratically elected government on may 29th 1999. The past and the present of civil society organizations suggest an uphill task for any regime unbent on subordinating civil society to its whims and caprices an encouraging signal for democracy consolidation project in Nigeria.

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