

Federalism and the COVID-19 crisis: Nigerian Federalism



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The political geography of Nigeria has always been complicated, unsteady and uncertain. Novel issues emerge daily and these are often shaped by class, regional, party and other primordial interests. A largely mono-economy dependent on crude oil sales, with weak institutions that are bedeviled by corruption and inefficiencies, its largest achievement since 1999 has been the sustenance of liberal democratic practice. Though the return to liberal democratic rule in 1999 has opened the country's political space to mass political actions, the alignment and realignment of socio-political forces, and careful explorations of how the stretch the limits of the constitution, Nigerians know that there remains much work to be done to ensure and assure democratization, positive pluralism, accountability, the rule of law, and social justice.

Political discourses before and since redemocratisation have called for different forms of confederation, federalism, and political architecture, but have been unanimous on the acceptance of a federal political arrangement. The debate has focused on resource control and the structure and division of powers between the centre and the constituent units. Today, there is substantial agreement that the central government is far too powerful for the good of Nigeria's federal system. Yet, the extant structure, aside from revenue collection and resource control, has not prevented the states from providing good governance and investing available resources in the promotion of the common good.

The Federal Government has done well in its response to Covid-19, mounting a public education campaign, shutting the borders, closing all schools, limiting travel within the country, shutting the airports, setting up a COVID-19 Presidential Task Force (PTF), establishing a National Monitoring Committee, and activating and expanding its social development programmes to support

the "poorest of the poor", particularly through the Conditional Cash Transfer Initiative. The country's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) works with other stakeholders including the Presidency and the Ministry of Health, and gives daily briefings to the nation. The officers of the NCDC and PTF have visited many states to inspect isolation centres and hospitals, as well as review public awareness campaigns and initiatives. Though the country had only two centres for testing for infectious diseases prior to the pandemic, the Federal Government has provided funds to upgrade existing facilities, procure equipment and ambulances, establish more testing centres, and organise isolation centres. It has also encouraged the states to do the same, though responses have varied. The Nigerian Governor's Forum (NGF) recently announced plans for a two-week interstate lockdown. While this would certainly check some interstate transfer of the virus, it will mean little if not vigorously complimented with intrastate policies and programmes. There is evidence that some state governments are not taking the pandemic seriously.

The numbers of infections in the country have thus far been relatively low. Standing at 665 positive cases as of April 21st, there are well under 1,000 total confirmed infections in a country of 200 million people. The Federal Capital Territory (89) and Lagos (376) have the highest number of confirmed cases, with Kano (59), Osun (20), Oyo (16) and Edo (15) also seeing relatively substantial numbers of infections. Other States have relatively few cases. Lagos





has a high number of cases because of the size of its population, and because it serves as the commercial and transportation hub of the country. The Governor of the State, Babajide Sanwo-Olu has been surprisingly proactive and creative in his approach to managing the outbreak, and the intense campaign and investment in contact tracing, combined with a relatively effective house-to-house testing initiative, are yielding results. Lagos has also established Testing Centres in all its local government and Community Development Areas, with an accompanying public information campaign which encourages citizens to see them as help centres and not death centres. Overall, the level of testing in the country remains low at only 7,153 tests performed as at April 20th.

Nigeria must not, however, get carried away with the low numbers of infections. Testing has been very slow and community spread is only just beginning. The explosion of cases which will occur as a result of spread in the community is serious and urgent steps have yet to be adopted to mitigate the impact. All the cities have very crowded slums with no health facilities. Most communities still lack access to water and electricity. Levels of unemployment, ignorance and poverty are also high. With lockdown measures and/or border closures in force in most states, the poor are becoming desperate and ready to challenge control policies. Indeed several such challenges have already occurred in cities such as Lagos, Warri, and Abuja. With poor monitoring, and the existing disconnection between the people and their communities from the custodians of state power at all levels, the spread will move very quickly and dangerously. With the traditional neglect of the rural areas and inner cities, and closure of markets, offices and businesses, the palliatives distributed by governments have not resolved the problems of hunger and anxiety in society. There

have been accusations and counter accusations about the quality of the distributed materials as well as the extent of distribution. At the local government level, some chairmen have politicized the distribution by only favoring their political factions or political party members.

Interestingly and unfortunately, there remains much superstition, ignorance and misperception among the populace in relation to the disease and its transmission. This is amazing given the global campaign and increasing local efforts at promoting public education. Many people have quickly bought into all sorts of conspiracy theories and concluded that COVID-19 is a hoax, and the poor continue to agitate that the "Hunger Virus" is more dangerous than the Coronavirus! Some argue that COVID-19 does not kill Africans, that the local gin can eliminate it from the system, that the sun will melt the virus, and that local concoctions can cure the disease. Given the rather high profiles of the individuals who were some of the earliest to be diagnosed in the country - which included governors, politicians and businessmen - some have contended that the virus only "catches" the rich and powerful that travel globally and stay in big hotels, not poor people. Clearly, these views, while reflecting the extent of ignorance and hunger in the nation, also exposes the poor level of public education. It should also be acknowledged that prominent figures including artists, actors, and politicians are responding by promoting evidence-based public health advice.

The Nigerian Legislature has played an active role in the approach to tackling the outbreak. The issues of public response, expansion of health facilities, training for health care workers, compensation for frontline workers, and deepening of the emergency response

system were tabled and discussed before the National Assembly was compelled to shut down. The 109 Senators donated 50% of their salaries to the National COVID-19 Relief Fund for a month, while the 360-member House of Representatives donated 100% of the salaries for March and April. During the shutdown, the Speaker and principal officers have continued to interface with the Presidency and Ministers on palliatives for the most affected communities. The Speaker of the House of Representatives held a meeting with the Chinese Ambassador to Nigeria on the ill-treatment of Nigerians in China. He has also met with stakeholders with a view to providing free electricity service for two months to all Nigerians. In addition, all representatives have been encouraged to go to their constituencies and provide palliatives, sanitizers, public education, and other forms of support in response to COVID-19.

What has the response to the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria shown so far?

Nigerian political and social science discourse has always bemoaned the fragility, weakness and limited hegemony of the Nigerian state. This is largely due to its inability to dominate civil society. It relies more on political domination, especially through the legal monopoly of the structures of coercion. The state has failed in virtually every sector since political independence in 1960. The state and its custodians have not resolved a single challenge - from education, health and transportation, through security, agriculture and power, to social services, industrialization, and building public confidence. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed its weaknesses and incapacity to respond to the needs of the people. With no dependable and replicable data for planning, contact tracing and distribution of palliatives remains complicated. Suffering an underlying popularity deficit in terms of state-civil society relations, government efforts in responding to the pandemic have not yielded appreciable results.

The first observation is that Nigeria's response to COVID-19 clearly exposes the fault lines in the country's federal arrangement and practice. It also confirms the argument critics have advanced over the years that the centre is too powerful, too intrusive, too large and too costly to manage. The Legislative Exclusive List in the 1999 Constitution contains 68 items, while the Concurrent list contains 30 items. Of course, where there is a clash the Federal interest prevails. Secondly, the response has also exhibited the weaknesses of the 36 states, the Federal Capital Territory, and the 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs). Save for Lagos State, the country's business and former political capital, the other tiers of government were not prepared and found it difficult to coordinate responses and align them with national initiatives where necessary. Third the Local Government areas have remained silent, as if non-existent. With poor administrative structures, overstaffing, poor infrastructure, and excessive political control and intrusion by the

State Governments, they lack the ability to respond adequately, even if only on preventive grounds. Fourth, it took time for the media to feed into and participate in the response. This can be attributed to poor communication initially between government and media practitioners, and weak public education. Fifth, civil society has been slow in fully appreciating the impact and implications of COVID-19. Hampered by constant badgering from the state and sections of the Legislature, deficient in resources as external funding has dwindled, and lacking effective institutional capacity, it has been very slow in reaching out to and educating the populace.

The private sector, with time, has stepped up with donations of cash to support the fight against the disease. They have also recently announced a plan to distribute food items to the 774 Local Governments to support the poor. The Federal Government has announced that the cash donations received from the sector would not be distributed but deployed to post-COVID-19 restructuring and rehabilitation of the health sector. This appears not to be going down well with the public.

The long-standing calls for the establishment and development of Primary Health Care Centres (PHCs) in the 8,804 Wards of the country to bring healthcare closer to the people have been largely ignored or treated with levity. Now the lack of this kind of healthcare infrastructure has come home to roost and everything is top down. All ideas, financing, initiatives, supervision and policies are top down. Lagos is perhaps the only state to have remained upbeat and proactive in the federation.

Clearly, Nigeria's federation will no longer remain the same after the pandemic. From economic and social arrangements, institution building, and relations between and within constituent units and the centre, it is expected that the consequences of COVID-19 will engender a substantial shift in these dynamics. The federal government is realizing that it cannot do it all alone and that a strengthened state and local structure would consistently ease its own burdens.

