

DEMOCRACY AND CHALLENGES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Democracy and challenges of local government administration examines how the last tier of government in Nigeria is constrained from effective discharge of its statutory responsibilities. The mal-performance/docility of this tier negates the principles of devolution of power as enshrined in the constitution, in addition to compromising democratic ideals. Through content analysis of secondary sourced data in tandem with focus group discussion, the paper reveals that undue political interference and financial strangulation of the local government vertically and horizontally is considered responsible for mal- performance of this tier of government and it concludes that unless the states and the federal government adhered to true devolution as reflected in the constitution and in line with democratic governance, people at the grass roots that constitute much of the population could be deprived from national sense of belonging due to continued emasculation of local government in this three tier federal arrangement.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a system of governance that underscores the plural nature of politics and hence gives recognition to the diversity of social forces particularly in federation. It systematically accommodates these forces by providing for a polycentric political order which not only recognizes these forces formally but enables them to interact with one another in diverse ways, in competition, collaboration or cooperation as well. Since democracy exists when relation between the governed and the government abides by the principle that the state is at the service of the citizenry and not the citizenry at the service of the state; and that the government exists for the people not

vice-versa could perhaps be the linchpin behind devolution of powers from the centre to the peripheries in a federal arrangement like Nigeria.

Nigeria's territorial size, diversity of socio-cultural and regional components as well as the desire to facilitate development at the grassroots led to the creation of Local governments as reflected in its constitutions. The importance of local government to any political arrangement cannot be overemphasized considering its instrumentality in creating sense of belonging, leadership training, safety and satisfaction among its populace. Successive regimes including the military considered the local government as the path to, and guarantor of, national integration, administration and development. As succinctly observed Lawal;

In Nigeria's socio-political context, with multiplicity of culture, diversity of languages and differentiated needs and means, the importance of such an organization in fostering the needed national consciousness, unity and relative uniformity as well as preservation of peculiar diversities cannot be over-emphasized. Central to the creation of local government, however, is its ability to facilitate an avenue through which government and the people intermix, relate and more quickly than any other means resolve or dissolve issues that may have heated the system. Local government has been perceived as a panacea for the diverse problems of the diverse people with diverse culture (Lawal, 2000:3).

This important tier of government however, is constrained from effective discharge of its statutory function in a democratic dispensation that ought to strengthen its role constitutionally. The challenges of Local government administration are both vertical and horizontal. Vertically the impediment ranges from undue interference of the higher levels of government (Central and States) and attendant reduction of this devolutionary organ, as mere delegative organ; horizontally inadequate political socialization and embezzlement of public resources among others challenge local government administration in Nigeria. It is along this line that this paper is poised to examine challenges of local government administration in Nigeria. The paper is divided into four sections: Section one would dwell on

concepts of democracy, federalism and decentralization; two on the justification for local government and its background in Nigeria, three background to local government administration in Nigeria and four on challenges of local government administration in Nigeria's democracy.

CONCEPTS OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy constitutes an approach to connecting rule-ruler-ruled relationship which dominates much political science postulations. It is not the only one nor is it necessarily the best, but it is the least problematic in constituting modern political systems. Robert Dahl (1979) defined it as a system of government which is defined by three important attributes: competition for public office by individuals and organized groups (political parties) at periodic intervals without the use of force; an inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies; and a level of civil liberties- freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of association-sufficient to guarantee the integrity of political competition and participation. Similarly, Huntington describes democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire power to decide by means of competitive struggle for people's vote" (Huntington, 1991). According to this conception democracy means liberty, egalitarianism, fraternity, effective citizenry control over policy, responsible and responsive government, honesty and openness in politics, informed and rational deliberation, equal participation and power and virtues. Therefore, the central dimension in democracy is stability.

It is the search for this stability that informed the pioneers of federalism to evolve a political arrangement that would carry along people with different socio- cultural, geo-political and economic background to live together through unity in diversity. According to K C Wheare (1959), a system can only be said to be federal if there is:

A division of powers between one general and several regional governments each of which, in its own sphere, is co-ordinate with the others; each government must act directly on the people; each must be limited to its sphere of action; and each must within that sphere, be independent of the other (Wheare 1959).

Thus federalism refers to a system of political arrangement that brings together various parts with distinct historical, cultural, religious and economic identities to be governed by one central authority exercising exclusive legislative jurisdiction while allowing for autonomous operations of various components (states) to govern within the areas of their jurisdiction. Within these components (states) there also exist subcomponents (local governments) which are the last tier or unit of government and are recognized by the constitution to autonomously operate within the spheres of its jurisdiction.

The operationalization of federal structure is fashioned within the context of decentralization of powers and according to Bello- Imam (1996:3) it refers to transfer of authority on geographical basis through Deconcentration which reflects a delegation of authority to field units of the same department or level of government and devolution a systematic granting of some measure of autonomy to states and local governments in a federal arrangement. In all, the Central, State and the Local Government exist in form of a concentric circle with the local government forming the inner layer, the state Middle layer and the Federal Government constituting the outer layer. The inner layer is the most potent and effective tier of government. It is the government at the grass root, much more proximate to the people than both the state and central government. It is the fulcrum for both national and state development policies a status which meander to encapsulate the significance of local government in most federal arrangements.

THE JUSTIFICATION FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Governments constitutes the tier of government bent on anticipated roles and functions it ought to perform as succinctly observed by Maddicks in the following remarks:

To achieve social change and general economic growth requires a spreading of efforts so that local communities and individuals can participate to bring under ideal conditions, energy, and enthusiasm and most important of all local initiative to the working out of local development activities....local authorities provide the opportunity for local people to participate in local decisions and local

schemes. Within the general national policies, and to act above all, as local centers of initiative and activity conducive to development (Maddicks, 1963:22).

The central point of Maddicks is the potential each community within the greater federation has; when collectively harnessed could propel overall socio-economic and political development. This and subsequent involvement of the people at grassroots to participate in the process of decision making would in the long run create a sense of belonging and national consciousness, as well the desire to compete in order to achieve the best. Therefore is in line with structural functionalist approach for national stability and development which conjoint the parts to a whole as observed by Esman that:

Local organizations are necessary, if not a sufficient condition for accelerated development which emphasizes improvement in productivity and welfare of the majority of the rural people (Sharpe, 1984:29).

Considering these importance of local government, it is pertinent for us to conceptualize the subject matter as it means different thing to different people. According to Bello-Imam:

Local Government is that unit of administration with defined territory and powers, as well as administrative authority with relative autonomy which could be elective or appointive which could be attained through devolution (Bello-Imam 2006).

This definition seems to capture our discussion as it is flanked by devolution forming the principal basis of local government. According to this conception; centralization inhibits the active participation of citizens in the running of their affairs and could by extension lead to despotism. Thus most countries according to Imam decentralize by devolution with a view to: Promoting economic development from below including provision of infrastructure, to promote political integration and nation building; to promote local freedom of action/autonomy; and to enhance grassroots democracy (Bello-Imam 1990).

BACKGROUND TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA.

Local government is a creation of British colonial rule in Nigeria. It has overtime experienced change in name, structure and composition. Between 1930s and 1940s, for instance, local government was known as chief-in-council and chief-and-council, where traditional rulers were given pride of place in the scheme of things. In the 1950s, election was introduced according to the British model in the western and eastern parts of the country with some measure of autonomy in personnel, financial and general administration (Nwabueze, 1982:20-21). It was on this premise that the rising tide of progress, growth and development experienced in the local governments in these areas was based.

During this period, heterogeneity was the hallmark of local government as there was no uniformity in the system and the level of development was also remarkably different. The introduction of 1976 reforms by military administration of General Obasanjo brought about uniformity in the administrative structure of the system. The reforms introduced a multi-purpose single-tier local government system (Ajayi, 2000:70) the reforms also introduced population criterion under which a local government could be created. Consequently, a population of within 150,000 to 800,000 was considered feasible for a local government. This was done to avoid the creation of non-viable local council and for easy accessibility. There was provision for elective positions having the chairmen as executive head of local government with supervisory councilors constituting the cabinet. This was complemented by the bureaucrats and professionals, (1976 Guidelines).

In 1991, a major landmark reform was introduced as the system had legislative arm. In addition, the Babangida administration increased the number of local government from 301 in 1976 to 453 in 1989 and 589 in 1991. According to the then chief of General staff, the reforms are:

Intended to enhance local government efficiency and effectiveness, improve autonomy, accord it guaranteed sources of revenue and thus strengthen its capacity for delivery of qualitative service to (the) people

particularly at the grassroots. In doing so, the present administration has taken bold, deliberate steps which some considers revolutionary to create a local government system, which is essentially unique to Nigeria (Fagbohun, 1996:3).

Complaints of marginalization further propelled the Abatcha regime to also increase the number to 774 local councils that we have today and the administrative structure also underwent some changes (Ajayi, 2000:71).

CHALLENGES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN DEMOCRATIC DISPENSATION

The concept of local government involves a philosophical commitment to democratic participation in the governing process at the grassroots level. This implies legal and administrative decentralization of authority, power and personnel by a higher level of government to a community with a will of its own, performing specific functions as within the wider national framework. A local government is a government at the grassroots level of administration “meant for meeting peculiar grassroots need of the people (Agagu, 1997:18). It is government by the popularly elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or place (Appadorai, 1975:287).

Nigeria accordingly, being a federal state has for long recognizes the importance of local government for effective administration of its diverse socio-cultural and historical compositions to be autonomously govern. This is facilitated through the constitutional provisions that guarantee the existence of local government as third tier of government in the wider federation. Thus the 1999 constitution state that;

the system of local government by democratically elected government councils is under this constitution guaranteed, and accordingly, the government of every state shall, subject to the section 8 of this constitution, ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such council (the 1999, constitution).

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria preserves the tripartite system of government, at the grassroots level, the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. The executive is vested on the chairman, vice chairman, supervisory councilors and the whole machinery of local government bureaucracy. The legislative functions are meant to be performed by the councilors who represent the wards that make up the local government area. The judiciary is streamlined with the federal and state and the local government that can avail itself of the judicial process available to it.

There must be periodic elections into the councils of these local governments as it is the case with federal and state institution. This becomes imperative as local governments are seen as training ground for higher level of political responsibilities in the federation (Kunle, 2005). This according to Nwabueze;

Presupposes that each government enjoys a separate existence and independence from the control of the other government. It is an autonomy which requires not just the legal and physical existence of an operations of government like legislative assembly, governor, courts, etc, but that each government must exist not as an appendage of another government, but autonomous entity in the sense of being able to exercise its own will in the conduct of its affairs free from directions of another government (Nwabueze 1982:11).

Freedom from direction especially from the state and the central government, would ensure determination of the people at the grassroots level toward embarking on issues that are sensitive to their sensibilities. This;

Individuals should be free and equal in the determination of the conditions of their own lives; that is, they should enjoy equal rights (and accordingly, equal obligations) in the specification of the framework which generate and limits the opportunities available to them so long as they do not display this framework to negate the rights of others (Held, 1982:2).

Looking at the existence, performance and relevance of local government, Laski (1982:411) opines that:

We cannot realize the full benefit of democratic government unless we begin by the admission that all problems are not central problems, and that the result of problems not central in their incidence requires decision at the place, and by the person, where and whom the incidence is most deeply felt.

These theoretical and constitutional postulations when adhered to, would no doubt lead to a desired state of well being and development in the federal republic of Nigeria. But local governments continued to shrink in relevance as it is controlled and teleguided first by the federal government in the first four years (1999-2003) of this democratic dispensation and then passed on to the states from 2003 to date. The Nigerian political class and in this process constrained the local governments in discharging its responsibility effectively.

Nigerian local governments according to most respondents fared better during the military regime than in this present dispensation. Democratic Nigeria has vertically and horizontally impeded the ability of local governments to properly function.

Vertically, the local government is constrained from effective discharge of its responsibilities by both the federal and state governments. For instance from 1999 to 2003 the federal government though had directly funded the local government; it however teleguided the last tier which according to most respondents believed had derailed the functions of the Local government. This could be ascertained within the context of federal government's directive urging these tiers of government to compliment the centre with policing service through the provision of patrol vehicle and other logistics to the Divisional Headquarters in their domain. The Association of Local Government Chairmen of Nigeria (ALGON) has been instrumentalized toward this end. The frequent convergence of the local government chairmen in Abuja for a meeting presided by the vice president informally made him, the head of all local government chairmen where direction of most polices emanates. These meetings open up an avenue for the presidency alongside the office of the secretary to the government of the federation to assume the role of Training and retraining of the local government Chairmen and

bureaucrats. These programmes were financed by the local government since the funds are directly deduced from the source of local government accounts.

Imposition of policy priorities, on the last tier of government and gross financial indiscipline continued to shrink the importance of local government to the people at grassroots. The failure was attributed partly due to reckless creation of additional local government by states that survives on the share of those funded by the central government. These developments were believed to be responsible for the outcome of presidential comity's report on the mal performance of the local governments that generated debate across the nation.

The performance of the local government was assessed by the presidency through the minister of intergovernmental relations professor Jerry Gana, who embarked on touring all the local councils with a view to ascertaining the project constructed commensurate to the grants allocated to the councils. The committee reported that, the direct funding only reinforces corruption and that most financial flows to the local governments went to individuals pockets (NTA network news 12 March 2003). This unfortunate revelation make the national assembly resolved that all 774 local government councils be scrapped so that it should be funded and operated in lines with whims and caprices of the state (Comet 2003, 4). In reaction to this, the National Union of local Government Employee (NULGE), cautions that, such amendment must be decided upon through national conference which would enable Nigerians to decide on the proposed amendments (Comet 2003 7). In similar gesture, the senate spoke person, Jonathan Zwingina said:

The decision (to scrap local government) was informed by the alarming rate at which state governors, were multiplying councils, allegedly to satisfy their political interest. If we eventually pass this constitution then all request for creation of local governments lying before the National Assembly will be killed such request now go back to senate (the Comet 2003:1)

While the political impasse on the fate of the local government lingers; the national assembly collectively agreed that, the third tier of government should be given second chance and be placed under direct supervision of the state governments.

Democracy And Challenges Of Local Government Administration In Nigeria

This means that while the federal government would continue to finance the local governments, the state governments which are closer to the last tier could have effectively monitor the activities of the local councils. Unfortunately, the wisdom of making the states supervise, was metamorphose to that of controlling making the beginning of decay of this important tier of government. The local governments are relegated to a mere parastatles or departments, directly controlled by the state governments, Politically through Ministry of Local Governments and Chieftaincy Affairs; and financially through State Local Governments Joint Accounts. These controls constitute fundamental challenges to local government administration in Nigeria.

Politically a glance on the chronology of local governments in this democratic dispensation would reveal that; the states impose candidates both at the chairmen and councilor levels which negate fundamental principles of local government. Imposing candidates meant absence of policy priorities peculiar to a given area; neither does it allow the people to choose and select policy peculiar to their area. This dilemma of the local governments is all over the federation as state governments introduced various manipulative ways of mortgaging the local councils. For instance, in Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, and Ekiti states, the tenure of elected local government officials was reduced to two years. While some states of the federation retained it to reflect three years. In the southwest, except for Lagos, a caretaker committee was introduced in 2003 immediately after the general elections. In similar vein, in June 2007, some state governments dissolved their local councils and appointed caretaker committee to steer the affairs of the council prior to the conduct of elections. Thus, the imposed candidates are only accountable to their masters that impose them and not to the people they claim to lead.

The table below summarily points at the chronology of local government administration in this democratic dispensation;

1999-2002 - Elected councils on political party basis (return to civilian era);

- 2002-2003 - Selected councils by state governors called transition committees;
- 2003-2004 - No uniform system initially; some states use directors of personnel management of the local Government others used the state government party supporters to form new transition committee.
- 2004 – 2007 - Elected councils some three and others two years with strong influence of the party that controls the state
- 2007-2010 - This period marks the worst strangulation of the local governments as Chairmen and Councilors were imposed without any regard to democratic values (Imam 2000 and field survey 2010).

The state government controls all the elective posts because even the caretakers were given to permanent secretaries and party loyalist especially in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states to ensure the success/manipulations of the state government.

The State Local Government's Joint Account (SLGJA) also serves as a constraining factor on the ability of the local governments to deliver dividends of democracy. Through SLGJA, the chairmen of the council are expected to make a proposal on projects, which must be approved by the state government. However if the proposed project is not endorse by the state government no matter its importance and relevance to the community it would be phased out. Furthermore, the projects implemented, especially in Borno and Adamawa are uniform and hence negate the principles of autonomous existence. For instance the construction of twenty (20) housing units and boarding primary schools in Borno or those of Agriculture Skill Acquisition Centers in Adamawa states might not necessarily be the demand of all the council. While some council might need schools others might also need Hospitals, bridges, or water supply not Housing or skill acquisition centers. This SLGJA to many respondents is considered a conduit of

diverting public funds as most states embark on state projects that are funded by SLGJA while the state share of the statutory allocation remain unaccounted for.

Horizontally, the local governments are constrained from discharging its responsibility as a result of political indiscipline and immaturity which result on random imposition of candidates, both at the executive and legislative arenas. Such impositions of candidates amount to reductionism, tantamount to departmentalizing autonomous entity in the wider federation. Apart from destroying chances of leadership training, the act breeds political thuggery, hopelessness and sense of despair which is inimical to democratic governance.

The impose candidates typical of stooges never ask their masters on fate of their people and the council, they are used to divert monthly allocations to the local councils. The local government executives especially the bureaucrats could hardly be on their seats for fear of been intimidated by political thugs. They avoid being there since there's nothing to be done except in rear cases where they might be asked to update records and to mischievously sign on contract documents when it is done. The bureaucrats are more humiliated than the elective officials as their professional carrier were put in jeopardy by giving wrong information to cover the chairmen thereby living them with two options: either to disagree to fraudulent directives by council executive which is punishable by transfer, demotion or outright dismissals by the ministry for local government; or to comply with the directives to risk the dangers of being arrested by the Economic and Financial crimes commissions (EFCC) and Independent and Corrupt Practice Commission (ICPC) as experienced in Damboa and Monguno Local government areas of Borno states.

These circumstances cannot midwife service delivery particularly in respect to the role and functions of the local government. While rural people complain over lack of pesticides for their farms, diesels for their borehole, drugs for their clinics and teachers for their schools; the political class in their continued ambivalence reinforce a sense of hopelessness in the government. This as succinctly observed by Adedeji that:

..marginalized, alienated and excluded to the extent that the vulnerable and impoverished, the uprooted and the ravaged, women, children and youth, the disabled and the aged, the rural and urban poor, are all treated as invisible informal sectors. For there to be genuine third tier of government system that is democratic and development oriented, there must be direct popular participation of the people (Adedeji, 2000:2)

This lack of direct popular participation and constitutional loopholes manipulated by the political elites constitute challenges to Local Government Administration in Nigeria.

In conclusion, local government in this democratic dispensation is faced with numerous challenges that make it lost in relevance. Being a tier of government which is supposed to be autonomous within the spirit of federalism and principle of devolution; this tier in this dispensation is reduced to be an exclusive charity club in the hands of the states since finance and policy are emanating from the states. Such scenario negates aspiration for socio-economic and political development of Nigeria. therefore reversing the trend remains the only option, unless and until local governments were made to be practical, effective and efficient in discharging their statutory responsibilities; efforts aimed at curbing rural urban migration, attaining national food security and even combating crime would largely remain in limbo.

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