

Ethnicity and Prebendal Politics: Implications for Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

By

**Ihezie Okekwe &
Ebelechukwu Lawretta Okiche***

Abstract

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society comprising diverse ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups. Contact with the colonialists suddenly changed the peaceful co-existence of the groups and threw up ethnic loyalty and ethnocentrism. The fear of domination by some ethnic groups heightened the struggle for scarce resources and quest for control of power. The competition for power and resources which gullible politicians and public office holders believe are easily gotten from the state culminated in prebendalism. The paper examines the implications of the two variables of ethnicity and prebendal politics on democratic consolidation in Nigeria and recommends good governance as a way of addressing their negative effects. This study is hinged on the Tallcot Parsons' pattern variables as theoretical framework of analysis.

Keywords: prebendalism, ethnicity, democratic consolidation, pattern variables

Introduction

Nigeria, without doubt is a heterogeneous society made up of two hundred and fifty ethnic groups (Almond, G.A et al 2011). These ethnic groups have different languages, religion, cultural and other differences. These other differences manifest in form of dress, diet etc. In the light of these differences and diversity which the country is noted for, the effect these have for democracy and sustainable development generally is better imagined than discussed. Furthermore, the consequence of these also for politics in the country is quite grave. Thus work, arising from the foregoing looks at the impact of the cancer-worm of ethnicity and the

hydra-headed malaise of prebendal politics on democratic consolidation and or substance in Nigeria. The position this country finds itself in is not an enviable one. A country blessed with both human and material resources that stand tall amongst all the other countries in African cannot boast of a commensurate economic standing judging from its vast resources. Rather than rank amongst the most prosperous, its gross domestic product (GDP) is ranked amongst the lowest in the continent. No thanks to the plague of corruption (and prebendalism) that is the hallmark of Nigerian politics. In spite of being the most populous country in Africa, this asset (population) has not been converted to advantage like other countries in this category such as China, India, America, etc.

At this juncture, the poser is: what are the implications of these variables-Ethnicity and prebendal politics-to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria? By extension, this work attempts to provide answers to the following questions also, namely: What is ethnicity? How do we conceptualize prebendal politics? What is democratic consolidation? Is it right for a progressive society, especially when it is considered that ethnicity can generate healthy rivalry? These and more are some of the questions which this work would try to proffer answers to.

More importantly, this paper is very relevant in so far as the consolidation of democracy is concerned because it goes a long way in dissecting and laying bare the effects of ethnicity and prebendal politics in enhancing or hindering the sustenance of democracy. After over sixty-two years of independence, the citizens of the country still see themselves as strange bed fellows. They more easily identify themselves as Igbos, Yorubas, Hausa, Fulani or Ijaws rather than as Nigerians. According to Salawu (2011),

A consequence of this is that many of the citizens may never develop a proper concept of nation. This kind of ethnic group relation signifies negative dimensions and which may mean much for the Nigerian political system.

Aside from the above negativity, the country is the worst for it because the development and consolidation of democracy have definitely been stultified and retarded. Salawu .B (2011) goes further to paint a gloomy picture of the scenario as he further states:

Against this diverse background, many ethnic problems abound in Nigeria, which arise principally from the hostility that derives from competition between ethnically different peoples for wealth and power.

It is at this juncture that the Nigerian culture of struggle for power, that is acquisition of political power, rears its ugly head. As Claude Ake in Richard Joseph (1983) observed:

The crux of the problem is the over-politicization of social life... We are intoxicated with politics: the premium on political power is so high that we are prone to take the most extreme measures to win and to maintain political power.

Richard Joseph elsewhere (1987) expounds the analytical tool (which is usually associated with him) where he describes the political culture prevalent in Nigeria as one akin to patron-client relationship. This work analyses these variables with a view to underlining their implication for democratic consolidation.

This work is divided into several parts. Part one is the introduction, part two deals with the clarification of concepts, namely ethnicity, prebendal politics and democratic consolidation. Part three examines the implications of the variables for democratic consolidation while part four is the conclusion.

Clarification of Concepts

Ethnicity- A careful perusal of relevant literature has shown that ethnicity is amongst the most problematic variables to conceptualize (Joseph, R.A, 1987; Salawu, B., 1983). In fact, Richard Joseph successfully tied the two variables of ethnicity and prebendal politics when he observed:

In order to come to grips with the essentials of Nigerian politics, it is necessary to develop a clearer formulation of the dynamic interaction between these two social categories. Moreover, the most problematic aspect... will be the delineation of ethnicity, since the ways in which class interest are pursued will be shown to involve, to an important degree, the emphasizing of ethnicity symbols and boundaries with the struggle for wealth and power. (Richard, 1987).

But to fully grasp the concept of ethnicity, it is germane to define a related concept, namely, ethnic group. In line with Cohen (1974), Salawu B. et al (2011) saw ethnic group as an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other ethnic groups within the larger society because they share kinship,

religious and linguistics ties. According to Nnoli (1978, p.5), ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. He went further to posit that the most crucial variable in ethnic identity is language. In most cases, those who are themselves alike by virtue of their common ancestry, language and culture and who are so regarded by others belong to the same ethnic group.

Arising from the fore-going Nnoli (1978) said that what actually makes ethnicity insidious is the element of ethnic loyalty which carries with it the willingness to support, act or even die on behalf of the ethnic group – what Peil (1977) called ethnocentrism. It should be immediately noted from the above that ethnicity per se does not pose any serious danger or threat to societal development since it involves merely interaction among members of diverse groups. It is actually ethnic loyalty (or ethnicism) which both Salawum, B. (1983) and Peil (1977) agree involves a degree of obligation and it is often accompanied by a rejective attitude towards those regarded as outsiders, that is members of other ethnic groups. This is the crux of the matter; this is the bane of Nigerian politics and political life of Nigerians. This has plagued Nigerian politics for many decades. However, it must be conceded – and Nnoli (1978) and Salawu (1983) concurred – that the phenomenon of ethnicity was found among Nigerians before the coming of the colonialists, while the fact of ethnicism or ethnic loyalty is a product of competition for both economic and political resources. We shall shortly attempt an explanation of this scenario using a suitable theoretical framework. At this juncture let us pause and take another variable worth conceptualizing in this work.

Prebendal Politics: The concept of prebendal politics or prebendalism is usually associated with Richard A. Joseph (1987). He had aptly used the concept to describe vividly a very vital aspect of Nigeria's politics. He observed that everyone who understands and speaks perceptively about the struggle for economic and political power in Nigeria can be said to be talking about prebendal politics. He went further to state that the roots or origins of the concept can be traced to certain feudal states. He noted that the adjective, prebendal, refer to patterns of political behaviour which rest on the primordial belief that political offices should be competed for and then utilized for the personal benefit of office holders as well as of their reference or support group. The official public purpose of the office often becomes a secondary

concern however much that purpose might have been originally cited in its creation or during the periodic competition to fill it. (1987, p.8).

For the Catholic Encyclopedia, prebend was defined as the “right of member of chapter”. For Richard A.J (1996) the term, prebendalism was used to describe the sense of entitlement that many people in Nigeria feel they have to the revenues of the Nigerian state. Elected officials, government workers, and members of the ethnic and religious group to which they belong feel they have a right to a share of government revenues. He continued, according to the theory of prebendalism, that what mattered was what can be appropriated by office holders, who use what they grab to generate material benefit for themselves and their constituents and kin groups.

From the above, it is now very clear why for instance public office holders see the need to maximize economic benefit from the public purse. This equally explains why politicians and their cohorts steal public funds which of course they view as their own share of the national cake. People who are privileged to be appointed into public office are usually applauded by their kith and kin because they see such opportunities as their own turn.

At this point, we turn our search light to the third variable, democratic consolidation.

Democratic Consolidation: Democracy has been defined as a form of political system in which citizens change, through competitive elections, the occupants of the top political offices of a state. (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997B in Ogundaya 2011:3) Having defined democracy, we can now discuss democratic consolidation. Linz and Stephen, as cited in Babatope 2012, has this to say about democratic consolidation:

Behaviourally, democracy becomes the only game in town when no significant political opposition seriously attempt to overthrow the democratic regime or to promote domestic or international violence in order to secede from the state... Attitudinally, democracy becomes the only game in town when, even in the face of severe political and economic crisis, the overwhelming majority of the people believe that any further change must emerge from within the parameters of democratic procedures. Constitutionally, democracy becomes the only game in town when all the factors in the

polity become habituated to the fact that political conflict within the state will be resolved according to established norms...

It should be stressed that democratic consolidation is about regime maintenance and about regarding the key political institution as the only legitimate framework of political contestation and adherence to the democratic rules of the game (Ogundiya 2009 cited in Babatope 2012).

There seems to be from the literature some elements of confusion as to when one can safely describe democracy as having been consolidated. O' Donnell (1996:37) considers democracy as consolidated when democratic governments endure in a given state. All said, democratic consolidation in transitional societies definitely cannot be what they mean in more stable and established democracies. To use the same yardstick in evaluating them is definitely unfair to societies (like Nigeria) that are working hard to achieve consolidation. For instance, Nigeria, in comparison with Ghana, has rarely been able to transit from one democratic rule to an opposition party democratic rule, whereas Ghana has achieved this feat several times.

A basic ingredient for democratic consolidation or sustenance is the legitimacy which democracy enjoys as a system of governance. Ogundiya (2011) notes that for democracy to be legitimized, it must make sense to the people and that the process of legitimizing democracy is often times referred to as consolidation. This is determined by a number of factors which include social factors like societal cohesion, homogeneity, integration and religious harmony existing in the society, all of which help in maintaining stable and enduring democracy.

Furthermore, there are political institutions deemed vital to the consolidation of democracy. These include: parliaments, the presidency, judiciary, political parties, interest associations and the role of the armed forces to mention but a few Ogundiya, (2011,pp 9-10)

It goes without saying that the prevalence of political institutions goes a long way in actualizing democratic consolidation since they provide viable channels of reconciling divergent interests. A vibrant and fearless judiciary and equally strong executive arm are good pluses for democratic consolidation. Impartial and independent electoral process and well institutionalized party

system are all indispensable to democratic consolidation.

Theoretical Framework of Analysis

Before delving into implications of these two variables, ethnicity and prebendism, for democratic consolidation, it is vital to proffer an explanation for the traits of ethnicity and even prebendal politics in the political behaviour of Nigerians. This negativity can be hinged on the theoretical framework of Talcott Parsons' pattern variables.

The theory argues that developed countries are characterized by the pattern variables of universalism, achievement orientation and functional specificity whereas underdeveloped ones are marked by the opposites, namely particularism, ascription and functional diffusion. So for the underdeveloped countries to develop, they must imbibe the pattern variables of the developed countries. It goes without saying that ethnicity manifests strongly the pattern variables of particularism, ascription and functional diffusion. In the next part of this paper, we will examine the implications of these variables for consolidating democracy in Nigeria?

Implications of Ethnicity and Prebendal Politics for Democratic Consolidation

This work thus far has been grappling with how ethnicity and prebendal politics have been affecting democratic consolidation through competition for wealth and power amongst various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Ethnicity and prebendalism have grossly hampered democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Both variables have continued to feed fat on the gullibility of Nigerian politicians and ordinary citizens.

Again the attitude of the Nigerian political elites, especially their pendant for not accepting election results, had also become a source of worry. This has given rise to a lot of political assassinations to settle score especially against those they perceive to have stolen their mandate.

Ake (1996) had earlier observed that the stakes are so high that politics in Nigeria is seen as a do or die struggle. The reason as Joseph (1987) observed above is because political office is usually seen as a big goldmine where the occupant of such high office hopes to make it. In most cases even if the occupant has a selfless disposition, the society goads him to convert public resources for his private use so that the crumbs will trick down to his kith and

kin. From the above, it is clear that the name of the game is “winner takes all”. The Igbo saying that he who climbs an Iroko tree shall do well to collect not only firewood and fodder but any other item because he would not know when such an opportunity would beckon again is very apt here.

At the risk of sounding lame or even begging the question, the seed of ethnicity or ethnic politics was shown during the colonial era (Salawu et al., 2011; Okekwe, 1999). The joining of Lagos colony and the protectorate of Southern Nigeria and the amalgamation of the North and South in 1914 provided the impetus for ethnicism. The colonialists were only interested in their economic benefits and not in fashioning out a novel administrative structure for the emerging country. With the panel beating of the country or what has been described as political restructuring in the literature, Salawu et al. (2011) have observed that... ‘the seed of mutual suspicion and fear of domination has germinated and was fast growing among the major ethnic groups in the Country...’ (31).

The above position was thrown up by the legacy bequeathed to Nigerians by the colonialists and the situation also ensured that the three regions became the base for the political parties that emerged. These were the Northern people congress for the Hausa/fulani North, the national Council of Nigeria and the Citizen (NCNC) for the Igbo East and the Action Group for the Yoruba West. Nigeria stood on a tripod with the resultant effect that party affiliation or coalition easily gave rise to instability. This is one of the inherent dangers posed by ethnicity with respect to consolidating democracy in Nigeria.

Prebendalism is the bane of politics in Nigeria. Commenting on this Nwafor Orizu (2012) noted that politicians consist of political office hunters and selfish contractors whose goals are personal enrichment. He further noted that it is for this reason that the ruling party is not effectively challenged by a responsible and effective opposition party. Again there is no ideology and therefore one can hardly distinguish one party from the other except of course by their names. Given this situation, how can democracy be consolidated?

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation

We have thus looked at the implication of ethnicity and prebendal politics and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. From the analysis, we established that prior to the coming of the Europeans

Nigerians lived in peace with their neighbours in spite of the multifarious ethnic groups and linguistic differences. But with the coming of the white man the seed of ethnicity was sown with the heightening of ethnic loyalty and ethnocentrism

Again it was shown that the cancer worm of prebendal politics that saw every office as an avenue for amassing wealth ensured that the political landscape of Nigeria was engulfed with the burning fire of inordinate ambition and quest for material gains at the expense of service to the masses. The above scenario culminated in the poor and weak democratic consolidation in the country. Further to the above, the nature of the state inherited by the political elites is responsible for their crude and cruel political behavior. In this connection, it is important that our political actors should change their orientation from seeing the state and by extension political office as instrument through which they can accumulate wealth and exploit others. Politicians with this proclivity to stain their hands by helping themselves from the public purse should be prosecuted especially with the proposed political amendment that will remove the immunity clause that shields such office holders. This was turned down eventually.

The structural imbalance of the federation which breeds fear of domination and mistrust among the constituents groups should be addressed through the proposed creation of more states (especially from the South East) and recognition of the six zones in the constitution. Politics should equally be made less attractive by streamlining the benefits and salaries of political office holders, so politics will actually be seen as what it is service to the people and not an avenue to amass wealth and lord it over the people. This will abolish the winner takes all syndrome and make political office less attractive.

In addition, the federal character principle which is expected to address social justice, equality and equity issues should be strengthened and reviewed in such a way that merit is not compromised and mediocrity is not enthroned.

The place of good leadership which has been the bane of this country, according to Chinua Achebe, must be addressed. This should be done through good governance and strong political parties. According to Mark (2012):

In our contemporary constitutional arrangement, political parties are not only the engine of democracy, but also the key to consolidation and institutionalizing it. Unfortunately however, most of our political parties are weak. Even the big ones are not immune to strife. They are often times assailed by internal convulsions, lack of ideology, indiscipline and a deficit of internal democracy.

Finally the Centre for Democratic Studies (CDS) and National Orientation Agency (NOA) should be alive to their responsibility by intensifying their public enlightenment and education of the electorates not to see politics as do or die affair or an avenue for wealth accumulation. If this is properly done, communities will no longer goad and “push” their sons and daughters into betraying the trust reposed in them by the voters.

References

- Almond, G., Bingham, G., Dalton, R., and Strom, K. (eds) 2011). *Comparative Politics Today: A World View*. PEARSON Publishers.
- Babatope, O (2012). Party Conflicts And Democratic Consolidation In Nigeria: Bumpy Past, Shaky Future In *Journal of Research In Arts and Social Sciences* Vol No 1 June 2012
- Mark, A. (2012). *Democracy And Democratization In Nigeria : The Journey So Far*. A Lecture Presented at the 4th Convocation of ANSU, 23rd Nov 2012
- Nnoli, O. (1978). *Ethnic Politics In Nigeria* Enugu Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd
- NwaforOrizu, O. (2012). Political Party And Democratic Consolidation In Nigeria <http://www.ganji.com/article5000/NEWS5618.htm>
- Ogundiya, S. (2011). *Political Parties Institutionalized And Democratic Consolidation: Theoretical Nexus And Nigeria's Experience In the Fourth Republic* (ed) Political Parties And Democratic Consolidation In Nigeria. Ibadan, Codat Publisher
- Peil, M. (1977). *Consensus And Conflict In African Societies: An Introduction to Sociology*, Longman Ltd.

Richard, A. Joseph (1983). Class, State, Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics Vol 21, Issues 3 1983.

Richard A. Joseph (1987). Democracy and Prebendal Politics In Nigeria: The Rise And Fall of The Second Republic. Spectrum Book Ltd.

Richard, A. Joseph (1996). 'Nigeria Inside the Dismal tunnel' Current history

Salawu, B and Hassan A. (2011). Ethnic Politics And Its Implication for the Survival of Democracy In Nigeria. In Journal of Public Administration And Policy Research Vol3 (2), pp 28-33 February, 2011.

The Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathn/1237/a.htm>

***About the Authors:** Ihezio Okekwe (iheziokekwe4@gmail.com) is of the Department of Political Science, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Anambra State; Dr Ebelechukwu Lawretta Okiche (ebele.okiche@unn.edu.ng) is a Lecturer, Faculty of Law, University of Nigeria.