

Federal Character Principle: Problems and Counseling Options for Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria

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Abstract—Nigeria remains a product of British political experiment of social cloning. There are about 250 ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Prior to 1914 amalgamation, each of the ethnic nationalities existed independently and distinctively. By 1954, British government introduced federalism. Yet it did not provide the desired unity. Giving the problems inherent with federalism, federal character principles were introduced along with national integration and nation building as a palliative measure. The extent to which the principles and policies have achieved its fundamental objectives demands scholarly excursion. Significance of this work lies in the understanding of why in spite there are still problems of unity. This paper identifies issues and proffer counseling for better options. Central issues identified among others include, ethnocentrism, mutual suspicion, elitism, and mediocrity. The paper adopted content analysis of scholarly inputs.

Keywords— Nigeria, federal character, nation building, principles and integration.

I. INTRODUCTION

NIGERIA is a country with certain peculiarities among which are ethnic diversity, religious and cultural differences. It is particularly problematic when an ethnic group feels superior over the other. This has contributed significantly to most of the problems in the country (Kukah,2003). Government has made several attempts through policy thrusts to promote peaceful co-existence yet this is far from reality. In pursuit of this, section 14 subsection 3 of the 1999 constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) states that: The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.

The inclusion of federal character has not made significant change in the character of an average Nigeria

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towards the other person from a different ethnic nationality. Even as the country celebrates her centenary in 2014 many pundits believe there was nothing to celebrate particularly when considered the level of marginalization on key positions and security issues. Nigeria's history of unity has been characterized by chequered issues. Shortly after independence in 1960 there were clear manifestations of the diversity among which are western Nigeria election of 1963, ethnic motivated coup d tat and counter coups which eventually culminated to the 1967 civil war between 2southeastern Nigeria dominated by the Igbo ethnic group and the other parts of the country. Given these developments some notable Nigerians described the country as a mere geographical expression (Awolowo, 1947).

In order to solve the problem of diversity and disunity, federal character principle was proposed by the 1976 Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) and enshrined into the 1979 and 1999 constitution respectively. The extent to which the provision/principle (federal character) and advocacy have achieved its aim remains imaginary. It is therefore very essential to seek for alternatives which this paper is fundamentally dedicated through counseling option.

Afigbo (1987) in Ezeibe (2013) identified some stages in the evolution of federal character. There was the period of informal federation 1900-1946; the period of formal federation, first phase, 1946-1966, and the period of formal federation second phase: 1967- present. He noted that the principle arose out of a compromise among the protagonists of the 1976 CDC. In another perspective, "Amalgamation" theories of the 1898-1914 type were not necessarily the first to hit the political horizon in the territories that later became Nigeria"(Tamuno, 2003:15). He noted that the principle nurtured ethnic and primordial nationalists. However were as Tamuno, was clear and consistent that federalism was very instrumental to many crises in Nigeria since 1954, Shivji (2009) aptly states that nationalism became cultural relativism at best or fundamentalism at worst. The 1979 and 1999 are products of the military juntas. It is argued that they do not reflect the independent wishes of Nigerian on the conditions for continuous existence in the union. In 2013 the president of Nigeria (Dr. Goodluck Jonathan) inaugurated a committee on national conference. This is seen as a bold step and very significant because

the president circumstantially was the first president from a minority. Expectations are high on what would be the recommendations of this committee. The question is, do Nigeria's elite and the masses possess the courage and will to uphold and apply those values and tenets that promote peace rather than crises, democracy rather than sentimentalism? The paper is therefore anchored on identifying problems in the application of federal character as well as counseling options for peaceful co-existence. The paper is partitioned into two sections: it presented problems with the application of federal character and counseling options for peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

II. PROBLEMS WITH FEDERAL CHARACTER IN NIGERIA

There are many problems facing the application of federal character in Nigeria some of which include elitism, ethnocentrism, and mediocrity:

Elitism: Afigbo (1987) aptly stated that federal character arose out of a compromise among the protagonists of 1976 CDC. To Agbodike (2003), federal character was channeled to serving the interest of the petty bourgeoisies. Impliedly it promotes elitism. In the view of Guaba, (2004, Agarwal, (2006) and Chaturvedi, (2006) elitism represents interest of the few minority. The advocates of the principle and policies are benefactors of the principle. They use the principle to expand their political and economic empire.

Ethnocentrism: "The new nation called Nigeria should be an estate of our great grandfather Othman Danfodio. We must ruthlessly prevent a change of power. We use the minorities in the North as willing tools and South as conquered territory and never allow them to rule over us and never allow them to have control over our future" (Shilgba, 2011:18). This was the view of one of the famous nationalist from northern oligarchy, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello in 1960. Further proof was instructively recorded in 1986 when a Sokoto Prince, Alhaji Shehu Malami and Alhaji Maitama Sule, one of the Nigeria's respected bureaucrats created a storm among southerners when they respectively informed their listeners of Hausas superiority. To their bewilderment (southerners), they were informed that they (Hausas/Fulanis) acquired their dark skin from inter-marriages with the local Africans and that they were endowed with leadership qualities (Kukah, 2003:98).

The evils of tribalism in Nigeria are many. Tribal appellations cause tribal idiosyncrasies, these lead ultimately to variety and superciliousness and disharmony. An Hausa man may think a Yoruba man is inferior, while the Yoruba man in turn commonizes the Igbo; and Igbo man concedes to himself that both the Hausa and Yoruba are just the people without gut (Ngozi, 2012:24).

The above quotations capture the reason and current situation in Nigeria due to ethnocentrism. An ethnic group is distinguished by language, culture, religion or both

(Nnoli, 1978). Ethnocentrism is a self judgment that one ethnic group is superior to others. Such assumption promotes antagonism evidenced in Nigeria. In response to many challenges orchestrated by ethnocentrism, Awolowo (1968) described Nigeria as divergently and almost irreconcilable entity. Drawing from the above quotations, principles of federal character is irreconcilable with the composition and attitude of most Nigerians.

Mediocrity: Federal character was introduced for purposes of ensuring ethnic balancing. In Nigeria, ethnic balancing is conceived, perfected and applied by elite for the promotion of their egocentric interest. Nigeria is divided along ethnic nationalities. The most outstanding is language and it impliedly forms the basis for consideration in federal appointments. Given the size and nationalities composition, the principle is faced with appointing the wrong person into a position in keeping the postulations of the principle. This has affected the performances of the public enterprises (Okata 2004:179, Abba 2003 and Sharma, Sadana & Herpreet 2011 and Utume 2003).

III. COUNSELING OPTIONS FOR ACHIEVEING PEACEFUL CO- EXISTENCE IN NIGERIA

Nigeria has recorded many socio-political and economic problems. Corruption among the ruling class is but a common thing. There is the need for change of attitude by the leaders to rise above ethnic interest and see the country as belonging to every Nigerian irrespective of the ethnic nationality. The leaders should spearhead the campaign for unity and be seen to preach and practice it. This will contribute significantly in promoting and sustaining the principle of federal character in Nigeria. The constitution should reflect the will of the masses rather than the few elites (Sanusi 2012) The mistake of including the principle has been made and may be easily deleted soon because of the interest it represents. Efforts should be to thinker smart options for survival as a nation such as true federalism, patriotism, honesty and fairness.

There is need to replace quasi or centripetal federation with true federation. Federation purports that everybody can be satisfied (or nobody permanently disadvantaged) by transparently combining natural and regional/territorial interests within a complex web of checks and balances between a general, or federal government on the one hand, and a multiplicity of regional government, on the other (McClean and Mcmillian, 2003:194). True federalism suggests that individual states within a country should have control over their own affairs, but are controlled by a central government for national decisions (Kobojunkie 2012).

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