

Federal Character Principle and National Integration: A Critical Appraisal

Ahmed Babatunde Adeosun

Lecturer, College of Foundation Studies & Entrepreneurship Education, Kazaure, Nigeria

Abstract

Nigeria, Africa's most populous black nation and ethnically deeply divided state, is confronted with myriad of problems among which are the acrimonious existence among the different groups that make up the country, fear of domination of one group or section of the country by another and the distribution of "national cake" among the constituent units. These problems have resulted in mutual distrust and inter-community conflicts which have hampered efforts at national integration. Although successive governments after the civil war have tried to resolve these problems through policies such as state and local government creation, unity schools, revenue allocation, rotational power sharing and federal character principle, yet these problems persist. The paper argues that the federal character principle has proved inadequate for effective national integration because it discriminates against one group and favours another. The paper concludes that there is need for all and sundry to be consulted and be involved in its implementation.

Introduction

Like many Sub-Saharan African States, Nigeria is a multi-ethnic State. In the Northern part of the country, there are the Hausa, the Fulani, the Kanuri, Igberas, Igalas and many others. In the Southern part of the country are the Yoruba, the Edos, the Urhobos, the Ibos, the Ibibios, the Ijaws and other small ethnic groups. Each group not only inhabits a particular area but has its own language. Thus, when the colonialists came into the country, they saw that there was no common language, particularly between the major ethnic groups. Nigeria is also a multi-religious State with a substantial population being adherents of Islam, Christianity and host of indigenous religions.

In spite of these differences, the British government unified the various people under a common administration in 1914. This union has been described by a prominent Nigerian political scientist as a forced brotherhood and sisterhood [Ayoade, 1998:101]. Ever since, the country has been confronted with the challenges of accommodating diversity, fostering inclusiveness and promoting national unity among these diverse groups that make up the country.

One striking feature of Nigerian politics is the intense elites struggle for power among the different ethnic groups in the country. The struggle has been between the elites from the North and their southern counterpart. The reasons behind the tension are the fears in the North that the more educated South would dominate state institutions as well as the concerns in the southern part of the country that the more populated North would have an edge in the electoral contest. The zero-sum nature of political competition among the elites precipitated a bloody civil war between 1967 and 1970. According to Orji [2008: 125] the soul-searching that followed the civil war reflected in the quest for elite's consensus on how Nigeria should be governed to ensure political stability and fairness in the distribution of resources among the various ethnic groups that make up the country.

It is against this background that this paper examines the principle and practice of federal character in Nigeria vis-a-vis national integration. The paper is structured into four parts. The first part examines the evolution of the concept of federal character principle. It is closely followed by an assessment of the principle. Next is recommendation on how to make the federal character principle an instrument of national integration. The final segment is the conclusion.

II. Evolution of the concept of federal character principle

The idea of Federal Character Principle is not new. It was known by different nomenclatures such as zoning or quota system. Its informal origins date back to the pre-independence era of nationalist struggle for participation in the administration of colonial Nigeria and especially after Nigeria became a Federation in 1954.

Originally, during its informal application, it was concerned with legislative representation and equalization of inter-regional opportunities in education and appointments at the Federal level.

But in its present formalised and institutionalised form, as enshrined in the 1979, 1989 and 1999 Constitutions, virtually every sphere of federal, state and local governments operation is involved and consequently politicised (Agbodike, 1989:182).

However, it is instructive to note that the concept of federal character was first popularized under the Murtala/Obasanjo's regime (1975-1979). It became a constitutional matter in the Constitution Drafting Committee and the Constituent Assembly, the bodies which produced the 1979 Constitution. It finally found its way into the constitution as a directive principle of state policy (cf Osaghae, 1988:4-5). It is imperative at this point to define what the principle is. As defined by the 1979 Constitution, section 14(3), it means that:

The composition of the Government of the federation or any of its agencies, shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote 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 any of its agencies (cf Nnoli, 1996:234).

Pursuant of the above provision, section 135(3) states that in the appointment of Ministers, the president shall reflect the federal character of Nigeria" provided that in giving effects to the provision aforesaid, the president shall appoint at least one Minister from each state who shall be an indigene of such state(Nnoli,1996:234).

Moreover, Section 157 provides that appointment by the president into the offices of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, Head of Service of the Federation, Ambassadors, or the principal representatives abroad, Permanent Secretary or other Chief Executive in any Ministry or Department of the federal Government, or any office on the personal staff of the president shall have regard to the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity. Section 197(2) provides that the composition of the officer corps and other ranks of the Armed Forces of the Federation shall reflect the federal character of Nigeria. Various other provisions were made in the constitution to ensure that the federal character principle was operative in the political process (Nnoli, 1996:234).

These constitutional provisions were respectively repeated in the 1989 and 1999 Constitutions. How has the operation of this principle been in practice? Put differently, has the government

abided by these provisions by ensuring that no one group dominates the machinery of government? These and other issues are addressed in the next segments of this paper.

III. Appraisal of federal character principle

As laudable as the policy is, the wide gap between intent and actual practices is making it counterproductive. The appointment made under late president Umaru Musa Yar'Adua reignited the debate about the applicability of the federal character principle because the appointment tended to tilt in favour of a particular section of the country. It is important to note that available data has revealed that the Northern part of the country has dominated the other parts. Empirical data (see table I & II) from independence to date showed that the other parts of the country were under the sway of the Northerners.

TABLE 1: NIGERIA'S RULER FROM 1960-2011

S/NO	DATE	IDENTITIES	STATE	REGION
1	Oct 1, 1960- Jan 15 1966	Tafawa Balewa	Bauchi	North
2	Jan 15 1966-July 29 1966	J.T.U. Ironsi	Abia	East
3	July 29, 1966-july 29, 1975	Yakubu Gowon	Plateau	North
4	July 29, 1975-Feb 13, 1976	Murtala Mohammed	kano	North
5	Feb13, 1976-Oct 1, 1979	Olusegun Obasanjo	Ogun	West
6	Oct 1, 1979-Dec 31, 1983	Alh. Shehu Shagari	Sokoto	North
7	Dec 31, 1983-Aug 27, 1985	Muhammadu Buhari	Katsina	North
8	Aug 27, 1985- Aug26, 1993	Ibrahim Babangida	Niger	North
9	Aug 26, 1993- Nov.17, 1993	Ernest Shonekan	Ogun	West
10	Nov.17, 1993-June.8, 1998	Sani Abacha	Kano	North
11	June.8, 1998-May 29, 1999	Abdul salam Abubakar	Niger	North
12	May 29, 1999-May 29, 2007	Olusegun Obasanjo	Ogun	West
13	May 29, 2007-May 5, 2010	Umaru Musa Yar'Adua	Katsina	North.
14	May 5, 2010 to date	Goodluck Jonathan	Bayelsa	South

Source: Sunday Tribune, 7th August, 1994, Ibadan, pp-7-9 and updated by the author.

From the above table, we could see that the ruler ship of this country is dominated by the Northern section of the country. The appearance of some southerners as heads-of state was

accidental. For instance, the assassination of Murtala Muhammed on 13th February, 1976 led to the appointment of his erstwhile second-in-command, Olusegun Obasanjo. Also, Ernest Shonekan who also hails from the West was manipulated into office by the military to head a contraption called Interim National Government{ING} to placate the westerners who were annoyed over the annulment of the June 12th presidential election believed to have been won by the late business mogul, Chief M.K.O. Abiola (Adeosun, 2000:101). Thus, Shonekan administration lacked legitimacy and real power. The second coming of Obasanjo(1999-2007) has been attributed to the south-west threat of possible secession if not given the shot at the presidency, which informed the two presidential candidates (Olusegun Obasanjo and Olu Falae) from the same zone-south-west during the transition programme of General Abdulsalam Abubakar (Ojo, 2009:390). The death of Umaru Musa Yar'adua led to the emergence of Dr Goodluck Jonathan. Although the latter was later elected in April General Election of 2011, in what has been described as a pan –Nigerian mandate. The post-election crises that followed his announcement as the winner of the election further showed that the country was far from being united and make nonsense of the so-called Pan –Nigerian mandate.

Besides, the domination of number one seat, the composition of some selected ministries [see table II] from independence to date also revealed the domination of the ministries by the Northerners. As rightly observed by Olopoenia {1998:48-49} that:

The greatest manifestation of this tendency is the implicit policy of reserving the political and top bureaucratic management positions in certain key ministries at the federal for people from certain parts of the country.

The key ministries where the Northerners hold sway are regarded as being important to the continued safeguard of Northern interest in the scheme of things.

TABLE II: COMPSITION OF SOME SELECTED

MINISTRIES FROM 1960-2011					
S/NO	MINISTRIES REGIME	DEFENCE	INTERIOR	FEDERAL CAPITAL TERRITORY	MINES&POWER
		MINISTER/REGION	MINISTER/REGION	MINISTER/REGION	MINISTER/REGION
1	Balewa 1960-1966	Mohammadu Ribadu/North Inua Wada/North	Usman Sani Ali/North Shehu Shagari/North		Mallam Maitama Sule/North
2	Gowon 1966-1975	Yakubu Gowon/North	Kam Salem/North		Dr. Russel Dikko/North
3	M. Mohammed 1975-1976	I.D. Bisalla/North	U.A. Shinkafi/North		Mr.Effionm . O. Ekong/South
4	O. Obasanjo 1976-1979	O.Obasanjo/South	U.A. Shinkafi/North Mr.M.O. Yusuf/North	A.Adeogun/ South	Alh. Shehu kangiwa/North
5	Shagari 1979-1983	Iya Abubakar/North Akanbi Oniyangi/ North	Dr W. Dosunmu/South Iya Abubakar/North Maitama Sule/North Baba Ali/North	Jatau . Kadiya/North I. Danmusa/North H. Dantoro/North	Ibrahim M. Hassan/North
6	Buhari 1983-1985	M. Buhari/North Domkat Bali/North	M. Magoro/North	M. Vatsa/North	Alh. Rilwan Lukman/North
7	Babangida 1985-1993	Domkat Bali/North Sani Abacha/ North	Labert Gwam/North John Shagaya/North Domkat Bali/North A.B. Mammam/North Dr Tunji Olagunju/North A.Okene/North	M.Vatsa/North H. Abdullahi/North G.Nasko/North	AVM Nura Imam/North
8	Shonekan 1993-1993	S. Abacha/North	S. Yusuf/North	G. Nasko/North	Aih. Hassan Adamu/North
9	Abacha 1993-1998	S. Abacha/North	Alex Ibru/South B. Dalhatu/North B, Kingigbe/North	J.T. Useni/North	Bashir Dalhatu/North
10	Abubakar 1998-1999	Abubakar Abdulsalam/ North	M.Yakubu/North	M. Kontogora/North	
11	Obasanjo 1999-2007	T.Y. Danjuma/North	S. Afolabi/South	B. Sheri/North	Lesely Obiorah/South

		R. Kwankoso/North	M. Shata/North	M. Abba Gana/North	
		T. Aguinyi Ironsi/South	O. Adeniji/South	N. El- Rufai/North	
12	Yar'Adua 2007- 2010	Y. Ahmed/North	G.Abbe/South	A. Modibbo/North	Sarafa.T. Ishola/South
		S, Ibrahim/North	S.Ibrahim/North	A. Aliero/North	
		G.Abbe/ South-			
13	Jonathan 2010 to date	A. kayode/South	E. Iheanacho/South	B. Mohammed/North	Mohammed. M.Sada/North
		B.H. Mohammed/North	Abba.Moro/North		

Source: Compiled by the author

The Northerners also complained of Southern domination of strategic sector of the economy most especially the bureaucracy. It should be pointed out that the southern domination of this sector was not a deliberate policy to marginalize the north. But rather the educational gulf between the two sections accounted for the south domination of the bureaucracy. The South had early exposure to western education. The educational disparities between the North and South date back to colonial era for instance, in 1947, only 251 Northerners were in secondary schools, the figure represents just 2% of the total secondary schools enrolment in Nigeria. In 1965, secondary school enrolment in the North increased to 15,276 compared to 180,907 pupils enrolled in secondary schools in the South {Coleman, 1958:134, Mustapha, 2004:12}. The imbalance in terms of education between the North and South continued after independence. For example, in the 1969/70 academic session, only 19% of the students in the Nigerian universities were from the Northern States, the Western States alone accounted for 48% of the students {cf Orji, 2008:131}. In the 1974/75 academic session, the Northern states had 24% enrolment in the Nigerian Universities while the Southern states had 74 % { cf Orji, 2008:131}. In the 2000/2001 session, the North had only 20% of the candidates admitted into Nigerian universities {Mustapha, 2004:12}.

The Southern head start in western education had a effect on the ethno-regional formation of human capital. The South was ahead of the North in the production of skilled manpower that took over the public service after independence. For example, in the mid-1960s, the North had only 7%, 4% and 3% of the engineers, doctors and accountants in Nigeria respectively {cf Orji, 2008:131}. Similarly, in a research conducted by Adamu {cf Mustapha, 2007:4}, the Northern

zones with 53% of the population had only 10% of engineers, 15% of the professors, 10 % of the architects, 25% of the lawyers, 8% of bank executives and less than 2% of insurance practitioners. This translated to Southern predominance in both public and private spheres.

The data in table 3 below show that the Southern states have 62.2% of the officials in the federal civil service while 37.7% are from the North. The figure for the core north is even smaller – only 19.1% of the federal civil service. The two dominant ethnic groups from the South namely the Yoruba and Igbo accounted for 25.2% and 16.2 respectively. This analysis shows the correlation between South's advantage in education, human capital formation and staffing of federal institutions.

TABLE III: COMPOSITION OF FEDERAL CIVIL SERVICE BY ZONES AND REGIONS AS OF 2000 [CONSOLIDATED STATISTICS]

REGIONS	NO.OF STAFF	% OF TOTAL STAFF
North	35,977	19.1
Middle Belt	34,989	18.6
Northern Region	70,966	37.7
Yoruba	47,349	25.2
Igbo	30,490	16.2
Niger Delta	39,153	20.8
Southern region	116,982	62.2
Total	187,958	99.9

Source: Adapted from Federal Character Commission 2000:2

It is imperative at this juncture to examine the pit-falls of this principle. It suffers from what Ayoade {1998:13} referred to as “a faulty philosophical premise”. It is a policy supposedly to have been designed for the benefit of less privileged in the society. But it is serving the interest of the ruling class, thus resulting in the further disempowerment of the under privileged in the society.

Another defect of this policy is the unofficial policy of elimination by substitution, which makes it counterproductive. For fairness sake, why should somebody be retrenched or removed unnecessarily from public service in the name of federal character because its operators wanted to put a kinsman in such a position?

In his insightful assessment of the policy, Ayoade (1998:116) noted that as long as the application of the principle discriminated against one group and favours another, no unity can result from such an exercise.

The policy has also been criticized on the ground that the distributive justice which it aims to achieve is of two types; namely arithmetical and proportional equality. Simple arithmetical equality assumes the equality of all state. But states are not equal. They differ in size, population and size of the pool of eligible candidate for appointment. In the words of Ayoade (1989:116), “there is no greater inequality than the equal treatment of unequal”. Proportional equality would therefore be fairer and less discriminatory than arithmetical equality. But more appropriately, the appointment must reflect the size of eligible candidate per state so that excellence is rewarded. Competent people who are disqualified based on state of origin and such other spurious criteria cannot be a willing material on which to erect the unity of the country. They must feel wanted in order to volunteer themselves for national sacrifice (Ayoade, 1998:116).

According to Afigbo (1989: 33), the principle suffers from overgeneralization. It was generalized to areas where inter ethnic group conflict and attachment did not exist. Adesoji and Alao (2009 :149) argued that the principle promotes mediocrity at the expense of merit particular with the abuse that characterize it application in civil service appointment, promotion, admission in to school and so on, then it could be seen as a solution that has become problematic. In the same vein, Oyovbaire (1983:19) argues that the principle encourages mediocrity in position of power. Gboyega (1989:183) observed that federal character principle is merely an elite ploy which would not materially improve the lot of the down- trodden in whose name it is raised.

Despite the shortcomings of this policy, its proponents have argued that it is neither immoral nor unjust. Rather it should be seen as a variant of distributive justice. Ohonbamu and Kirk –

Greene (cf, Agbodike, 1998:185) contended that if the merit criterion is the only one used, most jobs would naturally go to the most educationally advanced of the Nigerian ethnic groups. Thus, to ensure that others do not feel deprived; the principle of federal character should be used to give them a sense of belonging.

Another proponent of this principle, Alhaji Bargudu Shettima, erstwhile chairman of the Federal Public Service Commission contended that the principle can enhance the efficiency of the service. Gboyega (1989:182) believes this can be realized through fair representation which would command public confidence and greater cooperation, mutual trust and mutual respect among the public servants themselves.

IV. Recommendation

The National Assembly should as a matter of urgency amend the constitution and remove all references to indigeneity from the constitution. Specifically, the requirement in section 147(3) of the constitution that the president appoints at least one minister from each state who is an indigene should be changed so that residency, not indigene status, is the determining factor. It is also important to emphasize the fact that merit should not be completely sacrificed on the altar of the federal character [Obasanjo, cited by Gboyega, 1989:113). The appointment of persons to various positions should be made from the best available in any part of the country. Besides, recruitment to posts which require specialist training such as medical practitioners, architects, engineers and pilots should be essentially based on merit (Adamolekun, 1986:185). To do otherwise would expose the people to great peril.

Furthermore, the application of the principle has been described as bourgeois oriented and does very little to relieve the plight of the down trodden of this country (Agbodike, 1998:137).

For example, the indigenisation and privatisation policies put the wealth of this country in the hands of a few Nigerian at the expense of majority of the people. The masses need to be given equal opportunities for employment, equitable share in the distribution of resources and benefits of the state in terms of provision of social amenities such as education, access to good roads, portable water, housing; etc, which will bring about improvement in their standard of living. To this end, the political system, should arrest the exploitation of the less privileged in the society

and redress their feeling of insecurity. It is only when this welfare issue is address that the great majority of the people can “develop a sense of national identify..... transcending parochial loyalties of ... ethnicity, religion, language and region” (cf Agbodike, 1998:137)

Finally, the Federal Character principle should be applied with less stringency but with fairness among ethnic groups, states and local government that are homogenous, to avoid creating division where none may have existed.

V. Conclusion

The federal character principle is the Achilles heel of Nigerian politics (Ayoade, 1998:117). It was introduced to redress historical imbalance and integrate the country. It is a known fact that the principle has gone a long way to reduce various factors of mutual mistrust and rivalries among the different ethnic groups that make up the geographical entity called Nigeria. But the implementation of this policy has hurt some section of the country. There is need for all sections of the country to be consulted and be involved in the implementation of this policy.

It is therefore necessary to implement the federal character principle in the manner suggested in this article in order to achieve the desired result of the principle.

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