

The Civil Service, the Political Class and the National Question in Nigeria

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Introduction

Generally speaking the civil service provides the semblance of government. Hence the effectiveness of any government is determined, to a large extent, by the efficiency of the civil service. The civil service as the administrative and technical support for any political leadership is the instrument for both policy advice and implementation. James O'Connell argues that "political leadership without administrative and technical support is power in a vacuum; administration without political leadership is only tidiness in stagnation." It goes without saying that an effective, efficient and competent civil service is a *sine-qua-non* for a modern state.

In the Weberian sense, the civil service should be a junior partner or associate of the political class to prevent it from becoming master rather than servant. This thesis holds that when the civil service submits itself to political authority, it will insulate itself from the blame when government policies fail, yet it can also share credit for successful public policies. Thus, the role of the civil service becomes more control in state affairs in the sense that once a policy is decided by political leadership, it is the duty of the civil service to ensure that such a policy is "faithfully carried out as efficiently as possible, given the resources available and the circumstances prevailing."² This gives a symbiotic relationship between politics and administration. Against this background, this paper examines the relationship between the Nigerian civil service and the political class (civilian or military).

The major argument is that the search for a dedicated, resourceful and visionary leadership in Nigeria must also go hand

in hand with the development of an effective, efficient and competent civil service given the country's desire for a stable political system. Just as it has been emphasized in several expositions, if we agree that a major cause of Nigeria's political instability and economic crisis since independence is the lack of dedicated leadership, the paper hastens to add that there is also the other side of the coin, the lack of an effective and efficient civil service. This, what characterized Nigeria's poor leadership could also be equated with the negative interplay between the various policy making apparatus and the instrument of policy advice and implementation.

The thrust of this paper is to provide a discussion of the relationship between the political leadership and the civil service in historical perspectives and to raise some fundamental questions about our failures as a nation despite our limited success in our 37 years of political independence. How instrumental is the Nigerian civil service to the political and economic predicament of the country given the degree to which political leadership has impressed on it? What has been and what should be the role of the civil service, especially at this period of our political predicament?

The Evolution of Nigerian Civil Service

Although the pre-colonial institutions existing in Nigeria might have had some form of service to be equated with civil service, the present Nigerian civil service can be said to have evolved from the onset of colonial rule. It is a *deja vu* that colonial rule was the product of the insatiable appetite of the European economies for raw materials and markets for the processed industrial goods of Europe. Peter Ekeh (1978) says "Greed and lucre were the motive of colonizers."²¹

Thus, the motive of colonial rule was essentially to maintain law and order and to create a conducive environment for exploitation. The colonial government established a civil service with a limited objective of ensuring peaceful administration of the

colonized people. At that time the service was principally dominated by colonial officials as Nigerians were deliberately excluded in the service, especially the senior cadre. For example, by 1948 only 172 (representing 7%) of the 2,297 senior civil servants were Nigerians; the proportion hiked to only 19% at independence (Nicolson, 1966). The colonial civil servants were said to be men and women of high sense of mission, dedication, discipline and motivation who were prepared to make sacrifices. Their course was to achieve the goals of imperial policy and they did what they were expected to do with the highest sense of dedication, enterprise, initiative and even risk.* From the 1940s, however, the colonial administration started to admit Nigerians into selected senior positions in the service following some reforms of the local government (Native Authorities) as a means of mobilizing the native human and material resources for limited socio-economic and political development, especially for the first ever colonial development and welfare plan. This period coincided with the nationalists agitation for Nigerianisation of the senior civil service despite the imperialist propaganda that Africans were not ripe to be entrusted with senior positions and responsibilities (Nicolson, 1966).

From that time the civil service witnessed phenomenal growth in number and service institutions, training and competence levels. There was also a shift in the role of the service from the control of decision making process to advising on policy matters and implementation of policy decisions until independence was achieved in 1960. In a similar vein, the period coincided with the time the unity of the service as a colonial institution was broken into Federal and Regional Civil services in the wake of the adoption of the Macpherson Constitution. and the quest for the adoption of a "true Federation" in 1954. The federal and regional (and later the state) governments were to maintain sovereign civil services loyal and answerable to no other authority than the regional or state authorities. In this respect the regional; state civil

servants considered themselves equal in role notwithstanding the needs for national integration.

In spite of the brake-up, the civil service of that period continued to remain the primary source of advice and policy implementation. And in terms of structure and role the service remained the same under the civilian administration of the First Republic. However, the spectre of corruption among the politicians which accelerated from 1962 also found its way into the civil service and became a matter of concern when the military took over political leadership in 1966.

With the coming of the military there was the suspension of all democratic institutions, ban on political party activities and party bureaucracies. Secondly, during the early period of military rule, politicians were kept away from government with Permanent Secretaries taking over the mandate of decision-making in addition to their primary role of advice and implementation. The period also witnessed the dilemma of the civil war- whether Nigeria was to remain united or not. With the East poised for secession, the military and the civil service had cause to defend the unity of the country throughout the period of the war. Although civilian commissioners were appointed in June, 1967, some of them felt their position anomalous, they looked forward to the earliest end of the civil war and an end to military rule.⁸ Since the role of the civil servants was to "patriotically serve the government-of-day to the best of their abilities,"⁹ the situation led to mutual distrust between the military and the politicians in government. As a result the military rulers found convenient ally in the civil service. The top civil servants continued to "maintain highly political positions which turned them 'political masters' rather than civil servants."

The Civil Service Reform during the First Republic and National Development

Generally, the political and administrative climate of Nigeria since independence was characterised by a variety -of power coalitions

between the civil service and the political leadership (civilian or military). In assessing the role of the civil service in the post-independence period, Professor Omo Omoruyi conceived of the service as part of the National Dominant Coalition (NDC). (Olugbemi 1979). This is a conception which denotes a configuration of whose interest is in hegemonic rule at a particular point in time. The civilian and military politicians are viewed in the NDC as other partners in the coalition:

...a coalition of equal partners, with a dominant and dominated partners at a given historical period. The position which a partner occupies in the coalition is determined essentially by the Balance of power struggle within the coalition. (Omoruyi, 1991:10)

Between 1960 and 1965 the civilian politicians as the inheritors of political powers from the colonialists were the centre power. The other partners in the coalitions (the military and civil services) were merely used to fulfil the specific interest of the civilian politicians. For example, while the civil service was used for implementation of policies of the politicians, the military was to stabilise their rule and to curb opposition.

In principle, the goal of this coalition was the same with the objective of independence, that is, the pursuit of unity and national development. But in reality the objective of independence was to some extent opposed to the dominant interest of the politicians themselves. They were more concerned with complimenting the political power they inherited with economic power. This led to the creation of various institutions and agencies through which primordial accumulation was ensured, the civil service became the "Conduit pipe through which public funds were diverted to private hands." (Omoruyi, 1991:11).

Within the trio coalition the civil service was the most junior partner between 1960 and 1965. It was junior to the military even though the military as a political institution, was yet to appear on the political scene. Due to the way the military was used by the civilian politicians to quell civil riots or displace rival political

factions (for examples, in the western regional crisis of 1962 and the Tiv riots of 1964), the military soon became politically relevant not only in the civilian politicians was depleted in favour of the military and by extension increased the power of the civil service.

The Civil Service Reform and the Military 1966-79

As noted above the military coups of January, 1966 shifted the centre of power to the Military and the civil service became the trusted allies of the military in the NDC. While the various explanations¹⁴ (Omoruyi, 1991:14) for this new alliance need not bother us here, it is instructive to note that the proscription of political institutions of state power created a power vacuum which was filled by the top civil servants. It was observed that the new coalition

process which initially began as incorporation by the military transformed into participation as of right as top Federal bureaucrats became members of the Federal Executive Council (FEC) along with their Commissioners¹⁵ (Olugbemi, 1979, 98). Basically the military had discredited the civilian politicians for failing to fulfil task of securing national unity, political stability and socio-economic development.

The military took over political power as a corrective regime to fulfil this task, thus the preponderance of the civil service in policy formulation and implementation was simply to fulfil the task. That was why the military saw the civil service as a worthy and capable ally. This capability seemed to have reflected in the ability of the civil service to provide the organisational and technical expertise for the post-war reconstruction programme and further sociopolitical development. The civil service thus gained ascendancy as a potent social force in the administration of the country. Its perception, interest and action became a determinant factor in shaping the strategies of administration under the military.

Following the emergence of super-Permanent Secretaries, too much attention was paid to the enhanced position of the top civil servants vis-a-vis their civilian commissioners. Although both the senior civil servants and their civilian commissioners were junior partners in the NDC under the military, the anger which greeted the inaction of the Gowon administration when it was displaced by the Murtala/Obasanjo government was meted on the civil servants through the 1975 purge. This was because the new military rulers saw the services as politically responsible for the drift and indecision of the latter years of the Gowon administration. Since the civil services was no longer considered neutral in the political decision -making process, the failure of their bosses was equally theirs, so the new military regime had to deflate the power of the top civil servants under Murtala/Obasanjo regime by barring the Permanent Secretaries from attending Executive Council meeting along with their commissioners.

The Civil Service Reforms from the Second Republic to 1999

The 1975 purge and the new deflation of power of the top civil servants was seen in some quarters to have reverted the civil service to its proper place and to its traditional role of offering policy advice and implementation of already agreed policies by the political office holders. This has prepared the way for the perception of the Second Republic politicians of what the proper role of the civil service should be. This was because the major actors in the Second Republic were the prominent politicians of the First Republic and the same crop of leaders who the senior civil servants relegated to secondary position during Gowon regime. The situation again reverted the civil servants to the most junior partner in the NDC "at a time when a vibrant and result - oriented civil service was needed to complement the Presidential system of government newly introduced by the 1979 constitution." (Omoruyi, 1991:2)

The most unfortunate consequence of the 1975 purge which the Second Republic suffered was that the purge demoralised and killed the initiative of the civil service. Secondly, it also generated a feeling of insecurity in the entire service. Thirdly, the constitutional provision (section 159 (2) (d) of the 1979 constitution) empowered discretionary appointment of anyone outside the service as Permanent Secretary of a ministry. Despite the re-expansion of the service, the exploitation of this executive prerogative was viewed by career civil servants as undeserving and unprecedented politicization of the civil service. This further exacerbated the feeling of insecurity introduced by the 1975 purge.

In the wake of the Buhari coup in 1983, there was a renewed retrenchment. The new military government saw the retrenchment as a clearing process and a way of reducing government expenditure on overstuffed and inefficient civil service. This further aggravated the fears of insecurity in the service with the morale of civil servants sinking to its lowest ebb. This was a time emphasis was being shifted to the issue of revamping the ailing economy where the civil service ought to have been more useful.

Perhaps that was why the Dotum Phillips Study Team was set up to review the civil services. Although the central focus of the team was to "examine the adequacy of the Federal Civil Service structure, composition and methods of operation to cope with the demands of government in the 1980s and beyond," (Omoruyi, 1991) attention was paid to how to enhance the morale of the service and make it efficient. The main emphasis in the report was how to revamp the economy as a basis the service and make it efficient. The team submitted its report to the Babangida government in August, 1985. The main emphasis in the report was how to revamp the economy as a basis for a stable political order. Unfortunately the implementation of the recommendation of the Study Team started in 1988 when the Structural Adjustment Programme introduced as an alternative to the IMF loan was being

implemented too. Secondly, the reforms were being implemented when the government had also introduced a political transition programme with various institutions in response to the political, cultural and economic needs of the country.

However, some aspects in the reforms which affected the relationship between the top civil servants and the political leadership merely represented the formalisation of the existing practices which began especially after the 1975 purge. Examples of the practices are the requirement that permanent secretaries (Director Generals) as political appointees should retire with the governments which appointed them and the total submission of the Director General to the Minister or Commissioner (despite the *de jure* politicization of the former) who now became the accounting officer of the ministry.

Indeed, the new reforms provide an empirical validation of the nature of the NDC and the balance of power struggle within the coalition. The military as the dominant factor and coalition was interested in pursuing policies and programmes which by their input, promote its identifiable class interest. The pursuit of the Structural Adjustment Programme and the botched political transition programme as specific types of socio-economic-cum political structures formalised such class interest and underscores the logic of the various changes which the IBB administration imposed on the Nigerian class interest in the pursuit of governmental programme, the task of the civil service reforms was to redefine a civil service which is committed and subservient to political leadership. As put by Professor Omoruyi, the reforms demands an unequivocal commitment of the civil service:

... to government policies and programmes under conditions in which control over the service is both desirable and expedient Commitment here would seem to imply a 'neutrality' suggesting, in effect, the abandoning of the time-honoured but obviously pretentious tradition of a politically neutral civil service often used as a core by the civil servants in denying responsibility of the lapses of the administration of which they are part¹⁹ (Omoruyi, 1991:20).

The imperative of the reforms which centre on accountability and responsibility of the political leadership and demanding the subservient commitment of the civil service, thus allows the ruling class to submit "itself to the temptation of dipping its hand directly into the coffers of government fund." This explains the open looting of government fund and property, and the acceleration and even 'legalization' of corrupt practices following the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme and the pretentious political transition programme of the Babangida administration between 1985 and 1993. The institution of the Code of Conduct Bureau as an instrument for monitoring the action and behaviours of public officers to ensure that they conform to the highest standard of morality and accountability did not help matters. Thus, the reconstituted Code of Conduct Bureau during IBB's transition period remained like the one entrenched in the 1979 constitutions as low standard of morality resulting in open looting of government treasury following connivance of the factions of the NDC. Despite the junior partnership of the civil service in the NDC, it still remains the conduit pipe through which public funds were diverted into private hands. However, with the promulgation of the Failed Bank Decree and the establishment of the Failed Bank Tribunals by the military regime of General Sani Abacha in 1996, the civil servants have entered a state of fear or 'wait and see' despite their low morale exacerbated by very low pay and harsh economic conditions.

The NDC and the National Question

The major difference between the colonial civil service and the one it preceded is that the former had some objective and philosophical values which gave the administration coherence, consistency and organic unity. Such objectives and philosophical values made the colonial civil service:

An efficient instrument patterned on the British model and therefore more suited for British type of environment of class society which has also well differentiated political organs. At

independence in 1960 a new set of operators took over the machinery, but unlike their British predecessors, they had no cultural root in the modern systems. They inherited these essentially British instruments but had perforce none of the socio-cultural values and orientation of the British which could facilitate the operation of the system satisfactorily. Political stability ... will need this matrix of ideas, objectives, and a philosophy, within which the bureaucracy can interact and serve these objectives. This is absent from the post-colonial era²¹

Secondly, the indigenous politicians were neither spiritually oriented nor committed to the system they inherited because it had no organic root in their societies. While dissenting the British conception of the role of the civil service, they were saddled with the problem of socio-political and cultural pluralism in Nigeria. The three (later four) centres of power which emerged in 1954 crystalysed into warring political camps and instead of one there were four civil services. Within the regions and at the federal level, there existed focal points of demand, which had links with village, ethnic and even religious loyalties. As independence was approaching, the regions consolidated their civil service distinct from the federal bureaucracy. These reflected all the cleavages, tensions and loyalties that manifested themselves into regional politics.²²

Other vertical cleavages also manifested in the growing gap between the elite and the mass of the people, both in status and the standard of living. The civil servants now stepped into the shoes of colonialists and adopted most of the trappings of the office of their predecessors. Due to the absence of a strong political class, the more organised institution of administration, the military, remained the only basis of continuity of the country as a nation. During the crisis period, the military had to displace the civilian political class and enter into alliance with the civil service as a cementing link and shock observers.

The issue of ethnic plurality had been identified as a major obstacle to national unity and political instability. The problem of multiplicity of ethnic groups became manifested during and after the civil war. But the point is that, during the prosecution of the Nigerian Civil War and the post war reconstruction and rehabilitation programme, it was the collective efforts of the multiple ethnic groups that brought about the 'oneness' of Nigeria. In this connection it becomes clear that multiplicity of ethnic groups cannot be an obstacle to national unity. Theoretically, however, when some ethnic groups became large enough and attained enough political power to feel able to rule out compromise, national unity will be at risk. This is because national unity cannot be attained through the transfer of ethnic identity but through the acceptance of other members of the society to share common history, resources, value and other aspects of the state and buttressed by a sense of belonging to a political community. This postulation centre on achieving compromise and consensus in the entire polity.

The implication for the civil service is that the Nigerian civil service must evolve a machinery for achieving consensus and compromise. It was the diabolical problem of cultural plurality that led to the creation of the Midwestern Region in 1963. This was because at independence the regions were strong enough to endanger the centre from 1967, 36 more states have been created, more are still being demanded.²⁴ This structural transformation the Federation to smaller units has to some extent, reduced the danger of breaking the centre no matter the political crisis we are experiencing. But recent political development in the country has proved that our major problem as a nation is lack of achieving consensus and compromise as the clause on rotational political offices enshrined in the 1995 draft constitution tries to address and the civil service has a role play in this respect. Unfortunately; however, the political role of the civil service as the main channel of political struggle through which different interests

will be regulated and aggregated has been constantly eroded as result of its shifting position in the NDC and the fears of insecurity generated by political interference.

Finally, there appears to be both a structural and philosophical weakness on the part of the various political leadership in Nigeria and the civil service. That is why, unlike their counterparts in the developed world, they have always been relegated to the second and third party position in the NBC by the military. This point needs further elaboration. For example it was the lack of a strong coalition of the political class, the civil and the mass of the people which could have provided a basis for the regulation and aggregation of divergent political interests in the country that gave way for military take-over. This deficiency did not only give way for the over involvement of the military in the political affairs of the country, but also allowed the military the task of designing and searching for roles for both the political class and the civil service as often emphasized in the military governments' transition programmes. This is ironical.

The political class is not only structurally weak but also philosophically or ideologically weak. This weakness has lingered on in the country's administration for over 25 years until the Babangida coup of 1985. The execution of Babangida's Structural Adjustment Programmes, and the botched Political Transition Programme was a pointer that his administration was operating from a specific class interest and philosophical stand. This ideological and class interest, it seems to this author, is to break up the existing state power in Nigeria and open up the Nigerian economy and society for extensive capitalist penetration. The two programmes were also to open up vistas of links between foreign and domestic bourgeoisie and consolidate both the economic and political power of the latter. The only difference between Babangida and Sani Abacha's regimes is that the latter tended to shift emphasis to financial probity and accountability.

Although early politicians have appreciated the need to complement the political power they inherited with economic power, they were structurally and ideologically weak on the onset. The civil service suffered the same fate. And as someone argued, it is unlikely that an internally incohesive group like the Nigerian civil service, operating within an equally poorly integrated political community can contribute to national unity. The import of this argument is that:

The structural and ideological weakness of the Nigerian civil service vitiated its capacity to contribute positively to the attainment of national unity and stability. Whenever it was associated with an integration effort, its actions were dictated more by veiled sectional interests than considerations for the common good.

The implication of this structural and ideological weakness *on the part* of the civil service and the political class is that with the emergence of a strange and ideologically based military government they are being played with as pawns *in political chess game*.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that there is a symbolic relationship between politics and administration. The treatise also reveals that what characterized Nigeria's poor leadership can also be equated with the lack of an effective civil service and the negative interplay between the service itself and various political office operators in the country.

The civil service which was bequeathed to Nigeria at independence properly suited the colonial situation. But at independence a National Dominant Coalition (NDC) was formed with the civil service relegated to the most junior position in the coalition as the political class preferred and used the coercive power of the military to defend its political ends. Coupled with their structural and ideological weakness, the military exploited the

situation and deflated the power of the political class in favour of the civil service.

The years that followed witnessed shifting positions in the alliance as governments kept changing and on the whole there was "a bureaucratic conspiracy against the country's true interest." This situation does not only call for the emergence of a dedicated, resourceful and visionary political leadership to address the national question, it also calls for an effective and efficient civil service which must function as an instrument for regulating and aggregating divergent political interests. A major prerequisite for national unity, political stability and economic development in Nigeria is the development of effective mechanism for obtaining consensus and compromise, both the state and federal civil services must be specifically and deliberately converted to the main channels through which various interests can be regulated and aggregated. The current transition programme in Nigeria must also address this problem vis-a-vis the much emphasized issue of power sharing.

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3. See Dunmoye, R. A. (1994), "Political Leadership, Regime Turnover and the Survival of Democracy in Nigeria," a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Nigerian Political Science Association, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, February 28 – March 2, 1994
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6. See also Akpan, *Public Administration in Nigeria*, op. Cit, p. 165
7. Ibid. p. 169
8. See Asidu, Op Cit., p. 82
9. Ibid, p. 83
10. The idea of National Dominant Coalition (NDC) might have taken root from Stephen Olugbemidescription of military - civil service coalition in his paper: "The Civil Service: An Outsiders View" in Oyelerye Oyediran (ed), *Nigerian Government and Politics Under Military Rule* 179, Op. Cit Omoruyi further developed and conceptualized the concept of NDC in the paper he delivered at the 'Civil Service Forum' in Benin City, on March 15, 1991. The paper titled: "The Reformed Civil Service in the Transition Period and Beyond".
11. Omoruyi, Ibid., pp. 10 -11.
12. Ibid, p. 11.
13. See Omoruyi, Ibid., p. 13.
14. For the various explanations or reasons advanced for the alliance between the military and (Service. See Stephen Olugbemi's "The Civil Service: ,V. Outsiders View",in Oye (ed), Op. Cit, pp. 99 -100, and Omoruyi, Ibid, p. 14.
15. See Olugbemi, Ibid, p. 98
16. Omoruyi, op. Cit. P. 20.
17. Ibid, p. 29.
20. The Statement was made by a one-time Permanent Secretary Under the Gowon administration Requoted from Omoruyi, Ibid., p. 31.
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