

**POLITICS IN A MULTICULTURAL
SOCIETY: A SOCIOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

This paper examined the role of politics in a multicultural society and how it is a tool for resource allocation. It specifically highlighted two key social issues: equality and cultural identity prevalent in multicultural societies. The paper also explains that the differential benefit syndrome in a multicultural society like Nigeria often leads to conflicts among the different ethnic groups; and suggests that it becomes the responsibility of the political executives to decide on how the available resources will be allocated judiciously because they are the determinants of power stability and security.

Introduction

Politics is widely accepted as the means by which power is gained and exercised. It is further regarded as the pursuit of power, the stage in power formation where we have an opportunity to exercise our choice over who shall govern us. While multicultural society, on the other hand, is a society with several ethnic groups and culture. Multicultural societies exist in both developed and developing countries. The United States of America and the United Kingdom are examples of

multicultural societies.

The focus of this paper is on Nigeria as a multicultural society with diverse cultures and languages. And as a pluralistic society of more than 250 ethnic groups, it is the minority people that suffer mostly in the daily scheme of things. The fact that these ethnic groups were brought together to form the Nigerian state without their consent by the British in 1914 has remained a major problem in the quest for nation-building. It therefore behoves that the game of politics in building a multicultural society like Nigeria since independence has been a recurring phenomenon and appears to be very problematic and dangerous despite its attractiveness. According to Eboh & Ukpung (1993), the process and patterns of politics seem to be the very seed that can destroy its operations if not handled with care, more primarily, when the issues of "who gets what; when and how" comes in mind.

It is an unarguable fact that human (societal) wants are insatiable, while the resources to match them are limited in supply. It therefore becomes the responsibility of the political executives (class) to decide on how the available resources will be allocated judiciously. However, during the interplay, a group will benefit from government policy option while another will lose out. This differential benefit syndrome in a multicultural society often leads to conflicts of various forms among the different groups in the society. Resource allocation in Nigeria, according to Amanye (2006) has been a contentious issue under the constitution, particularly as it affects the local government system.

The above exposition is exactly what Nigeria as a multicultural society is experiencing. This trend is worrisome in view of the fact that Nigeria has come of age given its birth and emergence in 1960, especially as the giant of Africa. The paper examines the role of politics in a multicultural society and how it is a tool for resource allocation. It specifically highlights two key social issues: equality and cultural identity prevalent in multicultural societies.

Concept of Politics

Many people find politics remote and uninteresting; viewing it as the preserve, most often, of middle-aged men and women. However, Giddens (2006) sees politics as the means whereby power is used to affect the scope and content of governmental activities.

Mezieobi (1993) views politics as a pervasive human activity in which individuals and groups seek access to authority, power and control. Dahl (1998) conceives politics as any act that relates to the shaping and sharing of power. From necessary deductions, it is evident that politics in a multicultural society is multi-faceted and applicable in a wide range of activities, settings and social groups. In a similar vein, one may talk of politics in the family, churches, clubs, villages, town unions and associations. However, the definition of politics that depicts the actual political life in Nigeria is that of Eboh and Ukpong (1993) which explains that politics has to do with power; the power to make decisions, allocate resources, settle conflicts, and provide social amenities. Politics therefore, means striving to share power or influence the distribution of power either among states or groups of individuals in a state.

The Role of Politics

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced traumatic and major foundational crisis in terms of its politics. Today, our political system, like all others in Africa, has become a laughing stock in and outside Nigeria. Our political system has become a breeding ground for thuggery, gangsterism, cultism, corruption, kidnapping, killings and other forms of social vices.

The role of politics in a multicultural society like Nigeria include among others:

- making policies
- allocation of resources
- provision of social amenities
- security of territorial integrity
- arbitration and translation of justice
- how to get power

Making Policies

The main role of politics in both developed and developing countries is the power to make decisions that has direct bearing on the state of the nation towards national development. These policies could be economic, educational, social, religious and constitutional

development. Politics in recent times is thus seen as key to development. Supporting this view, Nwankwo (2012) states that politics and democracy have a direct bearing on the development of any society. It is in this wise, that democracy globally is accepted as the best form of government. This is because it gives the legislative and executive arms or government the privilege to make laws and acts that have direct bearing on the citizens.

In Nigeria, the legislature and executive arms of government are direct representative of the people; chosen from the six geopolitical zones. Policies made by them are binding on all. According to Eboh and Ukpong (1993), the very decision to support a particular moral code, an ideology, a particular religion, sitting of an industry or project, economic principle demands a political decision.

Allocation of Resources

Politics, has been widely used as a means of controlling and allocating resources accruing from the regions/states and in sharing of resources. In Nigeria, the sharing of resources, be it from the crude petroleum (oil receipts) or other forms of minerals, money from federation account (revenue), are allocated through political process. However, the pattern of allocation of these resources in Nigeria as a multicultural society usually has some political undertone. Omoruyi (1977) stated that in the 1950s, the pattern of resource expropriation in Nigeria indicates that the dominant groups were placed at a vantage position. Politics, to a large extent, is used to determine appointments into key positions and in sitting of education institutions.

Provision of Social Amenities

As it generally known, political manifestoes, be it by individuals or government, are always indicating what the masses or electorate will be offered in return for their votes. Provision of social amenities to the people is significantly related to any political will or development of a country. It is an unarguable fact that the kind of politics practiced by any society determines to a large extent the level of its development. Provision of social amenities is the core reason for political participation by individuals and to bring development to the threshold of their constituency through constituency projects

like hospitals, roads, electricity, pipe-borne water and many others. By and large, it is regrettable to note that the political class rather diverts funds made available for the constituency projects into their pockets thereby abusing their oath of office and campaign promises. According to Ezegbe (2002), much of the wealth amassed by political leaders comes directly from the general wealth or commonwealth of the country. Politics of social exclusion is what is practiced in Nigeria; that is, the exclusion of significant segments of the population from enjoying basic social amenities.

Security of Territorial Integrity

Security in the context is *sine qua non* to development, bearing in mind that a safe and secured environment could assure development than the one without adequate security. Development is usually in terms of economic buoyancy, educational stability, religious tolerance and employment security. Security is a contested concept because of the various political usage in the 21st Century such as national security, and regional integration. Cambon (1930) cited in Dokubo (2010), conceives security to mean more than the maintenance of a people's homeland or even their territories beyond the seas. It means the maintenance of the world's respect for them, the maintenance of their economic interests, everything which goes to make up the grandeur, the life itself, of the nation.

Security of the nation lies in the ability of the political class to be unbiased with political issues that could be inimical to national development. The opinion of Adeyemi and Oyetade (2010) which states that the social and political security in Nigeria is unsatisfactory and characterised with maiming, shattered skulls, battery, sudden or untimely deaths, kidnappings, militancy, and ethno-religious crises agrees with it. This is also congruous with the opinion of Akinrinade (2008) which says that the kind of politics practiced in Nigeria has no "territorial integrity" as the political security is seen as the "trade mark" of encounters with the increasing army of criminals that can be found in the society. This is also explaining why people appear to be sleeping with one eye open for fear of being attacked. Some other problems are, lack of confidence among workers at places of work; distrust among close-door neighbours; inability to do business

together due to insecurity; increase in spite of bombings by Boko Haram; armed robbery and burglary; and kidnapping (Awuzie, 2012) to mention but few. It is thus noteworthy that all these culminate in heightened tension and general insecurity in the nation.

Security to a large extent is thus regarded as a sine qua-non for the growth, development, progress, peace and stability of any country globally. A country that is not secured in terms of lives and properties cannot enjoy peace and where peace is lacking; there cannot be progress and development politically, economically or educationally. In fact, security is the bedrock of human existence, especially where integrity is the focus.

Arbitration and Translation of Justice

The judiciary is in charge of arbitration and translation of justice in democratic dispensations. It is an important institution in any democracy. The judiciary not only arbitrates disputes between the various levels of government, between government and citizens and among the citizens but also among private sector agents. In recent times, the Supreme Court, the apex court in the country, has inspired much public confidence and respect because of the quality of its judgment, especially in some politically sensitive cases.

To Shettima (2012), the gradual maturity of the democratic process in Nigeria where politicians now prefer legal recourse rather to local rampage with their supporters and loyalists is directly linked to the growing public confidence in the courts. Election related disputes should be addressed in the courts. Election related violence should also be avoided. Nigerians should embrace our judiciary, which has provided reasoned judgments in several electoral cases.

How to Get Power

Power is the capacity to make people do what they would not have done under normal circumstance. Power is also the capacity to change other people's behaviour by the threat of some forms of sanction (Eboh & Ukpong (1993). Thus political power is usually considered to be acquired through election. Election, according to Anamgba (2006) is a process whereby the people select their leaders by voting. But it

is however regrettable that since independence in Nigeria, election into various positions have been characterised with malpractices at a high level. Olumide (2004) cited in Nwanolue (2006) observed that

Democratic elections conducted in Nigeria ever since independence have been intrinsically negated by electioneering bickering and hooliganism, with a concomitant adverse effect on the nation's socio-economic and political development. In fact, free and fair democratic elections in Nigeria are plausible desiderata, hanging on a limping utopia (p.234).

Equality

Nigeria is a society of multiple cultural identities or a multicultural society, and equality can best be promoted through policies that harness it to cultural identity. Both concepts are means and as well as ends: equality depends on and strengthens multiculturalism; multiculturalism depends on and strengthens equality. Equality is seen in this paper as equal access to allocation of resources. Amanye (2006) agrees that the spirit of favouritism and nepotism rather than equality had often been at play in revenue allocation in Nigeria. The minorities were not considered in the scheme of things.

It is a fact that equality has been a major constraint in the politics of multicultural societies be it in developed or underdeveloped countries. For equity or equality to abound in a multicultural society, a federal system is recommended. Federalism is a system of government in which power is constitutionally shared between the central government and the state/local governments. Amanye (2006) supported this view when he states that a federal system becomes necessary where there are differences in language, religion, customs, etc among the various groups in the country (as with the case of Nigeria or United States, the case of the State of California). This may explain why Okoko (2002) specifically warned that in multicultural societies like Nigeria, where equity is not enthroned, there is bound to be conflict, especially when the majority group seems to be in total control of everything and when the principle of equity as a basis for federal politics are not followed.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is an exhibition of certain basic cultural characteristics by which a person can be identified as a product of a given culture or a member of a given society (Eboh & Ukpong, 1993). Cultural identity has been one of the divisible tools that have affected Nigeria's political life since independence. Nigeria has 250 languages and three major cultural groups, viz: Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. These cultural groups to a very large extent influence the political process and resource allocation. Even the control of political leadership in Nigeria since independence has been manipulated by cultural identity. Egeonu (2006) however reports that a critical examination of political leadership suggests that there is an uneven spread among the current geographical zones, in that North-East zone has ruled Nigeria above 5years, North-Central - above 23years, North-West - above 6years, South-West - above 11years, South-East above 6months and South-South – about 2 years.

In most multicultural societies, cultural identity has been applied to solve economic issues like derivation to agricultural products. Omoruyi (1977) stated that in the 1950s, the pattern of resource expropriation indicates that the dominant groups are placed at a vantage position. According to Nwabueze (1983), the regional governments in the 1950s dominated and controlled by the three hegemonic ethnic groups, benefited from the principle of derivation. The Western Region controlled by the Yorubas produced cocoa from which it derived hundred percent of revenue. The North controlled by the Hausa/Fulani group produced groundnut and cotton from which it derived its 100% the revenue. The Eastern Region controlled and dominated by the Igbo produced palm resources from which a hundred percent of its revenue is derived.

With the ascending position of oil in the 1960s and early 1970s, it became imperative for the ruling groups to review the allocation formula. Amanye (2006) agrees that this issue became necessary in view of the fact that oil was found in minority areas and retaining the principle of derivation was no longer considered to be in the interest of the majority ethnic groups as it would lead to the minority states retaining a substantial proportion of revenue from oil and thus deny

the major ethnic groups which controlled the apparatus of state at the centre, a means of self esteem.

Conclusion

Politics in multicultural societies have been a do or die affair. People see it as an avenue of who gets what, when and how. Politics has to do with power; the power to make decisions, allocate resources, settle conflicts and provide social amenities to maintain development. Most political instabilities in multicultural societies arise out of disagreement about allocation of scarce resources among unlimited ends as well as power sharing or shift among the ethnic regions.

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