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Federal character principle as a pitfall for national development in Nigeria (A Historical perspective)

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ABSTRACT

This paper focussed on Federal character principle which was introduced into the Nigeria political and administrative system because of the multi-ethnic nature of the Nigeria Federation, so as to promote fair-ness among different ethnic nationalities in the equitable distribution of resources like employment, appointment, and election to any public position to promote national loyalty and encourage national development. A review of the contributions of federal character to national development in Nigeria since its inception in 1979 till date entails that the desired objective have not been achieved. It then becomes clear that federal character is now more of a curse than a blessing to Nigeria and Nigerians because; it has damage the principle of excellence, it discourages determination and zeal for national development, it undermines standard and professionalism, it encouraged liquidation of many industries, it invaded the integrity and standard of public bureaucracy and its purely an elites policy. Based on the above findings, some recommendations were made as prerequisite to national development in Nigeria.

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Introduction

The likes of Federal character principle are peculiar to all Federations as successful Federations find ways of accommodating the multiplicity of groups, hence, Nigeria imbibed this principle. The federal character principle no doubt was introduced in Nigeria to correct the imbalance in terms of employment and appointment to government ministries and agencies among different ethnic groups, regions, states and local governments. This is to ensure equity, fair-play and order among different ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria in the equitable distribution of resources, so as to promote national harmony and loyalty for economic development in the polity.

Federal character is a practice where every nationality is represented in all government owned institutions. This could be educational institutions like schools, it could be Armed Forces and other paramilitary agencies which include the Army, Navy, Air force, Police, Civil defence, and Road safety etc, it could also be other government agencies like Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), National Agency for Food and Drug Administration (NAFDAC), Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) etc.

Since the introduction of Federal character principle in Nigeria in 1979, the desired change has not been realized. It has since its inception encouraged mediocrity in position of authority, it has led to a situation in which inevitably, the public service became a dumping ground for incompetent and ill-motivated servants from different parts of the country. According to Okpata (2011:72), it has become bedrock of corruption, nepotism and inefficiency. This situation has marred our national development in Nigeria, since quality and standards has continued to remain below average and constantly depreciated. For instance, the Federal Ministry of Education reported on 24th of April 2012, "that more than 70 percent of teachers in Primary Schools in the North East and North West

Zones are unqualified and un-productive", since most of them can not make correct sentence or communicate effectively in English Language. Federal character principle no doubt is the major cause of this pathetic anomaly.

Not only that, in some states a grade level 09 or grade level 10 officer because of Federal character principle becomes a permanent secretary in either the Federal or State Civil Service (Joy and Egwu, 2006:104). Also, a lecturer one or senior lecturer can as well become a Vice Chancellor, Provost or rector of a higher institution of learning like university, college of education or Polytechnic just because of federal character. More so, an uneducated and unenlightened person may be elected or appointed to one government position or the other just to fill the quota of their people. The implication obviously become gross inefficiency and ineffectiveness, little or low productivity and economic underdevelopment becomes a continuum.

Origin of federal character principle in Nigeria

According to Afigbo (1989:1), Federal character is one of the inventions of the constitutional drafting committee (CDC) inaugurated by the Late General Murtala Mohammed on 18th October 1975. The phrase was coined based on the quest to promote national loyalty in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria. This is because, there had in the past been inter-ethnic rivalry to secure the domination of government by one ethnic group or combination of ethnic groups to the exclusion of others. It was therefore essential to have some provisions to ensure that the predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups is avoided in the composition of government or the appointment or election of persons to high offices in the state.

Based on the foregoing, Federal character emerged as one of the recommendations of the 1975 CDC. Following its recommendations, it first appeared in the 1979 Nigerian constitution. As an invention of the 1979 Nigerian constitution,

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Federal character has continued to appear in all the Nigerian constitutions including the 1999 constitution.

Federal character defined

According to the constitutional drafting committee (1975:2), federal character “refers to the distinctive desire of the peoples of Nigeria to promote national unity, foster national loyalty and give every citizen of Nigeria a sense of belonging to the nation notwithstanding the diversities of ethnic origin, culture, language or religion which may exist and which it is their desire to nourish, harness to the enrichment of the Federal Republic of Nigeria”. This means that the people of Nigeria because of their peculiar features want to use Federal character to ensure equity and fair-play to all ethnic nationalities within the country.

Ekeh (1989:21) opined that, Federal character purports to deal with the distribution of privileges and benefits among the primordial components of any state organization. This is to say that Federal character as a doctrine of the 1979 constitution sought to give a semblance of order to the modes of this distribution by preventing any ethnic group from having dominance and exclusive access to these opportunities and benefits inherent in the exercise of state powers and thus ensuring that every primordial grouping has equal access to the bounties of state. On the view of Okpata (2011:72), the application of Federal character principle (or its corollary; the quota system), in the public service of Nigeria is seen as the democratization of our public bureaucracy through the principle of representation as contained in the 1979 constitution of Nigeria.

Njoku (2007:76) asserted that; the application of the Federal character principle democratizes personnel management, development and promotion of staff in the public service. This leads to the appointment and training of mediocre in service as its practice obviously negates one of the important principles of Weberian ideal Bureaucracy. Here, Federal character is always considered in the employment, appointment, promotion, training and retraining of workers in any government establishment. Based on the foregoing, Federal character is a political arrangement introduced in the Nigeria public service, to give due recognition and fair-play to all ethnic nationalities, states and local governments (in the polity) in employment, appointment and promotion in all government establishments, with out due consideration and justice to merit, qualification and experience. This is to say that Federal character is a tool for ensuring fairness in public service over professionalism and goal attainment. And that is enemic and antagonistic to national development.

The concept of national development

A nation as a concept has inter-dependent parts, with complimentary roles that are vital for the survival of the entire nation. There are the human dimension which is primary, and the infra human dimension which is secondary. Though the later includes land, natural resources, roads, building, and machines etc, that are very vital for national development, they are not as important as the human dimension.

This means that national development does not end with the building of skyscrapers, roads, and acquisition of weapons of war, but with the improvement of the social, religious, political, economic, scientific and the technological well being of the nation (Ugwu, 2004:27). It involves the reduction of the gap between the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant, the skilled and the unskilled. It connotes the development of human

personality, which enhances development in other aspects of a nation. It is all about enhancement and realization of the creative potentials inherent in citizens of a nation, thereby enabling them to improve their material well being, through the use of resources available.

Maduabum (1999:3) conceptualizes national development as a process of increasing the skills and capabilities of individuals, thereby enabling them to tap the potentials of their environment, for improved standards of products, perfect means of production and better standard of living. From the fore-going, national development is a process whereby a nation-state utilizes (in an efficient and effective manner) human and material resources within its disposal so as to build a systematically organized, self-generating and technologically advanced society. The idea here is that merits, experience and best qualification are considered over federal character in terms of employment and appointment in to the public sector so as to enhance national development.

The pitfall of federal character to national development

In Nigeria, federal character has become more of a curse than a blessing. The total system collapse in Nigeria’s socio-economic and political environment can be attributed to the Federal character practice. The following entails how Federal character have marred our developmental efforts in Nigeria.

1.Damage to Principle of Excellence: Federal character has damaged the prospects of our economic and social development by relegation to the background the principle of excellence without which any modern nation is doomed to a position of inferiority and economic quagmire. Because of federal character, other countries like Brazil, India and China have all left Nigeria behind in economic, political and technological development. This is so as the principle of excellence is not encouraged in our polity because of sectional, regional, ethnic and state consideration (called Federal character) in all aspect of our national life.

2.No more Determination and Effort to Achieve National Development: Pre-occupation with the politics of Federal character has diverted interest away from the appreciation of Nigeria’s manifest destiny, so to say, leading to exclusive and exaggerated attention on orchestrated regional, state and inter-ethnic problems (Ekeh, 1989:34). Here, before the introduction of federal character in the Nigerian constitution of 1979, there was the expectation that Nigeria was destined to be the Japan of Africa. For a few months in the Murtatla Muhammed/Obasanjo regime, it appeared that there was such consciousness for national development. Subsequent events do indicate that Nigerians cannot sustain any such notions. What followed was retreat, with Federal character procuring Fresh opportunity for inter-ethnic manoeuvres. Here, with such low threshold ambitions as Federal character logically engenders, higher ambitions are not possible.

3.Weak National Leadership: Federal character have contributed to very weak National, Regional, State and Local Government leadership in Nigeria. This is because what matters here is where some one comes from (ie the percentage of people from his state, ethnic group or local government in position of authority that will increase or reduce his probability of getting the new job), and not what he can offer. Even political parties now adopt the principle as a means of gaining credibility. Peoples democratic party (PDP) had to resort to a zoning arrangement for their political positions in order to reflect a federal character, and win credibility among the ethnic groups in

Nigeria. The result is that they have produced inefficient and ineffective leaders, who would never have been able to compete with other potential pro-developmental leaders in the country.

4.Federal Character Undermines Standard and Professionalism: There is no doubt that the consequences of federal character have been destructive for the Nigerian political and economic system. In Nigeria today, our political and economic system are in shambles because professionals and experienced individuals are over-looked due to the fact that they are more in one part of the country than the other. The imbalance in the literacy rate between the South and North of Nigeria has made it impossible to have qualified people in sensitive government positions. In Nigeria today, the North would rather let an unqualified person to hold a high position in government instead of allowing qualified Southerner to play the role. For example, the minister of education reported on 24th of April 2012, that more than 70 percent of teachers in primary schools in the North East and North West Zones are unqualified and un-productive (while we have many qualified unemployed teachers in the South). This is because of the perceived need for a proper representation. Here, the unrestrained application of the federal character in the civil service and other public services, usually with out respect for minimum standard, has meant that professionalism is in danger in the public services of the federation. According to Ekeh (1989:34), as long as tenure and promotion are not safeguarded from the province of federal character, we are in danger of weakening and damaging the public service.

5.It Had Encouraged Liquidation of Many Industries: Strict adherence to the principle of federal character in government and private organizations had led to liquidation of many of such organizations because of mismanagement and inexperience caused by unqualified staff employed on ethnic, state, regional and local government basis. Ocho (2006:3) pointed out, as for industries, more industrial establishments died than were born between 1977 and 2004. the steel rolling mill, the refineries, the Nkalagu cement factory, the Nachi oil mill, the Enugu flour mill, the Umuahia ceramic factory, the vehicle assembly plants in Lagos, and other towns, the coal mines, the tin mines, the cotton ginneries in Kano and Kaduna, the rubber processing plants in Benin, and so many other established industries are all dead. Nigeria appears far less industrialized now than in the seventies just because of Federal character and other factors.

6.It Invaded the Integrity and Standard of Public Bureaucracy: The formulation of the principle of federal character potentially invaded the integrity and standard of public bureaucracy and such other governmental bodies that normally require safeguards from the ravages of politics. It did so by legislating, as it were, that they are subject to the federal character principles at every turn of recruitment, appointment, promotion, retention of service, and tenure. Under the aegis of federal character in Nigeria, many senior public and civil servants have been kicked around and removed and in many cases replaced with ill-qualified persons on the grounds of federal character apparently with out regard to the protection of standard and national interest. The result has not been the promotion of national loyalty, but alienation. Based on that, those who hail from states or ethnic groups which have suffered from federal character discrimination become resentful and alienated from the overall body politics while those who gain through federal character manoeuvres are grateful and

presumably loyal to the federal character units that favoured them rather than to the nation.

7.It's an Elites Policy that does not Encourage Competition Among the Masses: The doctrine of federal character allows the elites from disadvantaged area to exploit the political system with out contributing to the poor masses. Based on the logic of federal character, it pays to hail from an impoverished area in terms of personnel. This inherently discourages attempts at promoting educational development among the poor masses. Finally, it is the federal character that kept us (below average) where we are today in terms of national development and for that, professionalism and goal attainment ability should be considered above federal character.

Recommendations

For Nigeria to develop and achieved the height achieved by developed countries of the World by being one of the 20th strong and best economy in the world on or before 2020 (i.e vision 20 20 20), we must do without a consideration of multi-ethnic nature of our nation. This is to say that religion, sex, tribe, language, state and geo-political zone etc must not matter in any way. Here, we must not continued to pretend to be one, we must know, believe and work as one. Professionals and result oriented Nigerians should only be used to carry out national, state and local government assignments (and not to use unqualified people due to the federal character priciple).

Recruitment in all government establishments like armed forces, paramilitary agencies, schools, ministries and agencies should be done based purely on qualification, experience, capabilities, and professionalism. not only that, promotion, responsibility/position, training and re-training in such government establishments should purely base on merit, input or contribution to the service. This will help us to promote excellence and quality as it will encourage Nigerians to put in their best in all their live endeavours.

Also, the National Assemblies should make law to discard Federal Character Principle, and replace it with merit, professionalism, and experience as prerequisite for holding any public position, as this will encourage handwork and enhance national development in Nigeria.

finally, the federal government should only give national award to Nigerians who notwithstanding their status and professions, distinguished themselves positively in their endeavour and thereby contribute to national development. In doing that, market women, journalists. teachers, administrators, music/movie stars, military/paramilitary personnel, businessmen/traders, industrialists, human resource developers, bankers, doctors, lawyers etc who distinguished themselves positively should all be recognized and not only politicians as it has been the case. This, no doubt will promote national development in Nigeria.

Conclusion

An effective, efficient, experienced and qualified staff in any public organization will surely contribute positively for national development in Nigeria. This is because he will use the professional experiences and devotion in discharging his duty. On the other way round, an inexperienced, unqualified , ineffective and inefficient individual(s) employed or appointed based on federal character or any ethnic consideration is likely to mar the achievement of organizational goals in such public sector and for that, becomes a pitfall for our national development.

Since both empirical studies and historical findings have revealed that federal character principle since its inception in 1979 have done more harm than good for national development in the country, all hands should be on deck to replace it with merit and professionalism so as to encourage national development in our polity.

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