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Politics Of Restructuring And Ethnic Question In Nigeria

UMUKORO, Jude

Department of Political Science
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

ABSTRACT
This paper examines the contentious politics of restructuring in Nigeria and its intersection with the ethnic question, analyzing the implications for national unity, political stability, and development. Nigeria's socio-political landscape is characterized by deep-seated ethnic divisions, which have influenced calls for restructuring of the federal system. Through a historical, theoretical, and empirical lens, this study interrogates the motivations, resistances, and outcomes associated with restructuring debates. Using qualitative data from secondary sources and theoretical frameworks grounded in federalism and ethnic pluralism, the paper reveals that restructuring is perceived by different ethnic groups as a means of achieving autonomy, equity, and justice. However, political elites often manipulate the discourse for personal gain, thereby stalling genuine reform. The paper concludes by recommending inclusive dialogue, political will, and constitutional reforms to address the ethnic question in a sustainable manner. The findings underscore that the success of restructuring depends on a well-defined national agenda that transcends ethnic cleavages and promotes a reimagined Nigerian state built on mutual respect and shared prosperity.
Keywords: restructuring, politics, ethnic groups, national unity

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, is a mosaic of over 250 ethnic groups and multiple religious communities. Since gaining independence in 1960, the country has grappled with the challenge of managing ethnic diversity in a federal structure that many perceive as flawed and skewed in favor of certain regions or groups (Osaghae, 1998). The political, economic, and social realities of Nigeria today are deeply influenced by this ethnic heterogeneity and the historical imbalance in resource distribution and power sharing. Calls for restructuring Nigeria's federal system have gained momentum, especially in the wake of recurrent agitations for secession, resource control, and political marginalization. Groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), and the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) have expressed dissatisfaction with the current federal arrangement, calling for varying degrees of autonomy or restructuring.

The concept of restructuring is multifaceted, encompassing political, economic, and administrative dimensions. While some view it as a panacea for Nigeria's myriad problems, others see it as a veiled attempt to disintegrate the country. At the core of these debates is the ethnic question, which concerns the perceived domination or marginalization of certain ethnic groups within the Nigerian polity (Suberu, 2001). This paper aims to dissect the politics surrounding restructuring in Nigeria, focusing on how ethnic identities and interests shape the discourse. It also seeks to explore the theoretical underpinnings of ethnic

pluralism and federalism as they relate to Nigeria's governance challenges. It argues that without addressing the ethnic question, any attempt at restructuring will be superficial and unsustainable.

Literature Review

Numerous scholars have addressed the restructuring debate in Nigeria. According to Elaigwu (2007), restructuring involves adjusting the structures of governance to reflect new realities and enhance national cohesion. The present structure, according to many scholars, is lopsided and centralizes power excessively at the federal level, thereby diminishing the autonomy of states and local governments. Akinyele (2015) argues that Nigeria's current federal arrangement is a legacy of colonialism and military rule, which centralized power at the expense of the federating units.

The literature also reflects varying interpretations of restructuring. For some, restructuring means returning to the regionalism of the First Republic, with stronger state autonomy. For others, it implies the creation of additional states to accommodate minority aspirations, resource control, or even outright secession (Ibrahim, 2003). This lack of consensus has contributed to the stagnation of restructuring efforts. Ibrahim (2003) observes that ethnic identity remains the most potent political force in Nigeria, often eclipsing national identity. The consequence is a federal system that struggles to deliver inclusive governance. Similarly, Ayoade (1998) posits that restructuring is often viewed through the prism of ethnic grievances, with different groups interpreting it in ways that reflect their historical and socio-political experiences.

The literature also highlights the resistance to restructuring by political elites who benefit from the status quo. According to Suberu (2001), efforts to restructure are often met with suspicion and opposition, especially from those in control of federal power. Nonetheless, the persistent call for restructuring underscores its importance in addressing ethnic imbalance and fostering national integration. Empirical studies have shown that regions endowed with natural resources, particularly oil, are at the forefront of the restructuring debate. The Niger Delta, for instance, has long complained about environmental degradation, poor infrastructure, and exploitation, despite being the source of the nation's oil wealth. This has led to militancy and agitation for resource control.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts two interrelated theoretical frameworks: federalism and ethnic pluralism. Federalism, as articulated by Wheare (1963), refers to a system of government in which power is divided between a central authority and constituent units. It aims to accommodate diversity within a unified state. In the Nigerian context, federalism was intended to manage the country's ethnic complexity by granting autonomy to regions.

However, the practice of federalism in Nigeria has been highly centralized, especially since the advent of military rule in 1966 (Suberu, 2001). The erosion of regional autonomy and fiscal federalism has exacerbated ethnic tensions, fueling demands for restructuring. Presently, state governments rely heavily on federal allocations, which undermines economic independence and deepens regional disparities.

Ethnic pluralism theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the coexistence of multiple ethnic groups within a polity. It argues that equitable representation and recognition of all groups are essential for political stability (Horowitz, 1985). In Nigeria, failure to adequately address ethnic pluralism has resulted in feelings of alienation and marginalization, particularly among minority groups. This dual framework explains why ethnic groups push for restructuring as a pathway to self-determination, resource control, and political autonomy. It also clarifies why central authorities resist such moves, fearing that they may weaken national cohesion or threaten territorial integrity. A key insight is that federal structures can only succeed when all groups feel represented and respected within the system.

CONCLUSION

The politics of restructuring in Nigeria is deeply intertwined with the ethnic question. While restructuring holds the promise of equity, justice, and improved governance, its politicization and ethnicization have hindered meaningful progress. Nigeria's federal system, though designed to manage diversity, has become

a source of division due to centralization and the marginalization of ethnic minorities. This paper has shown that the restructuring discourse is not merely a political gimmick but a legitimate quest for an inclusive and functional federal system. It reflects the deep-rooted dissatisfaction of various ethnic groups with the existing power structure, resource allocation, and political representation.

Without sincere efforts to address the structural and ethnic challenges, Nigeria may continue to face political instability and underdevelopment. The time has come for a new federal bargain that respects diversity, promotes inclusivity, and fosters a sense of belonging among all Nigerians.

RECOMMENDATION

1. **Constitutional Reforms**: There is an urgent need to amend the 1999 Constitution to reflect true federal principles, including devolution of powers, fiscal autonomy for states, and equitable revenue allocation. Such reforms must be guided by a national consensus and legal frameworks that ensure sustainability.
2. **Inclusive National Dialogue**: A national dialogue involving all ethnic nationalities should be convened to deliberate on the terms of coexistence and forge a new national consensus. This dialogue should be people-driven and not manipulated by political elites.
3. **Ethnic Representation**: Institutions should be restructured to ensure fair and proportional representation of all ethnic groups in governance. The principle of federal character should be reviewed and strengthened to reflect competence, equity, and inclusivity.
4. **Civic Education**: Government and civil society must invest in civic education to foster a sense of national identity over ethnic loyalty. Citizens must be educated on the values of unity, democracy, and mutual coexistence.
5. **Strengthening Federal Institutions**: Institutions such as the Federal Character Commission, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and the National Assembly should be strengthened to ensure compliance with federal principles and equity. Oversight mechanisms should be enforced to prevent the abuse of power and the marginalization of minorities.
6. **Promotion of Inter-Ethnic Collaboration**: Programs and policies should be developed to encourage inter-ethnic collaboration, economic integration, and inter-state cooperation. This will help reduce ethnic suspicion and promote unity.

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