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POWER IS NOT SERVED AS A LA CARTE: RETHINKING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Social contract is central to the provision of public goods and social welfare. Good governance among other things derives from strong institutions of government and citizen engagement in the political process. This study focuses on reshaping the relationship between the government and the governed in Nigeria. Using functionalism theory, the paper argues that political and economic success is not automatic in a democracy but proportional to the extent that the people can hold their leaders accountable. The study concludes that changing the prolonged ethno-religious narrative is critical to development and growth in Nigeria as the people are more united by their socio-political and economic problems than they are divided by their ethno-religious differences.

Keywords: *Social Contract, Government, Ethno-religious.*

INTRODUCTION

The agreement between the leaders and the governed is one of the underpinnings of modern democracy. This study focuses on the relations between the government and the governed in Nigeria. The social contract can be traced to the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment scholars like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau who popularized the notion of the rights of the citizens in relation to their rulers, thereby heralding the attempts to curb the excesses of those in power (Riley, Goldie and Wokler, 2008). This idea which is grounded on the symbiotic recognition of the responsibilities of the rulers to their citizens and vice versa, displaced monarchical absolutism in Europe during the period, paving ways for the constitutionalism and republicanism that subsequently followed.

The word 'rethink' means to consider or assess (something, especially a course of action) again, especially in order to change it (OALD 8th ed.). This implies having a deep reflection over an issue perhaps a problem with a view to proffering a solution. The world has witnessed several situations in which socio-economic conditions triggered a careful rethought of the concept of the social contract in many countries. For instance, in Latin America, political corruption, social inequalities were among the string of factors that triggered the call for political change as well as institutional reforms in Chile, Bolivia, Columbia, Brazil, and others in the late twentieth century (Weipert-Fewner and Wolf, 2019). Similarly, in North Africa and some parts of the Middle East, prolong political alienation, autocracy, corruption, and poverty brought about regime change as well as political reforms during the popular Arab Spring in 2009 (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

In Nigeria, there are genuine concerns for a rethink on the agreement between the government and the governed. For example, Karl Maier in his famous book, 'This House has Fallen,' observed that the democracy which Nigeria has enjoyed since its return to civilian rule, was not born out of the dictates of the Nigerian people rather it was configured according to the intentions of the 'Boys from the Barracks' (Maier 2000). This situation contrary to popular democracies in the US and western Europe made the people a derivative of political power rather than making political power a derivative of the people. Similarly, Isumonah and Agbaje (2001) were of the view that by the time the military handed over power to the civilians in 1999, they bequeathed a highly centralized system to the country such that true political power did not rest with the people rather it rests with whoever emerges the leader at the centre. This almighty leader according to them is to control the major instruments of social mobility such as education, socialization, and security. The reality is that the most important document that produced the democracy in Nigeria, i.e. the 1999 Constitution, is not a product of the intentions of the Nigerian people but from the whims and caprices of the military elite who birthed the 1999 civilian transition, as there was no constitutional conference nor a



constitutional drafting committee before the transition (Ogowewo, 2000). Consequently, the key components of civilian government namely the relationship between the federal and state governments, the salaries of public officials, the relationship among the three arms of government as well as their composition, and others were not decided by the Nigerian people. This situation has engendered cronyism, ethnic politics, corruption, weak institutions, a penchant for the looting of the public treasury, massive poverty, and underdevelopment.

ETHNICITY, RELIGION, AND IGNORANCE: A TRIPOD

Ethnicity

Danjibo (2013) is of the view that ethnicity is too fluid a concept to be encased in a single definition. To buttress this point, he cited the case of the Yorubas of southwestern Nigeria who see themselves at the macro level as an ethnic stock when contending with the Igbos of the south-east, and Hausa/Fulani of the north. However, at the micro-level, the same Yorubas see themselves as belonging to different ethnocultural identities such as Egba, Ijebu, Ife, Ijesha and others. Perhaps the three academic leanings of ethnicity attest to the perspective that ethnicity as a concept is neither 'here nor there'; but always in a state of flux. These three theories are primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism.

Primordialism: this school of thought has it that ethnicity is given at birth and is largely unchangeable. Geertz (1963) believes that ethnicity stems from been born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, and following particular social patterns. To this view, ethnic identity is tied to culture. Constructivism believes that ethnicity is a product of human construction. Ranger (1991) in his history on the role of missionary and colonialism in the making of ethnic identities in east and central Africa, observed that it is the people who designed ethnicity as an identity badge. For Instrumentalism, ethnicity is an instrument which the elites manipulate for their selfish gains. Osaghae (1998) shows how ethnicity has continued to be used as an instrument of political mobilization in Nigeria. Also, Chazan (1999:108) is of the view that ethnicity is central to group formation and political organization by the elite.

Religion

Harrison (2006) in her work, 'The Pragmatics of Defining Religion in a Multicultural World,' pointed out the obvious among scholars of religion which is the fact that religion is one of the highly contentious subjects. Relatedly, Lampe (2014) made a corresponding submission on the same issue. However, Harrison (2006) believes that the family resemblance approach which is based on Wittgenstein's 'language game theory' is a more pragmatic attempt at conceptualizing religion, though the view is not entirely unproblematic. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, as cited in Harrison 2006, the word 'game' can be used to define certain concepts which do not have a single essential defining feature. He maintains that there is no common feature to all games rather similarities and relationships. If one considers any feature that some games possess, the person will find that some other game does not possess it. For instance, if one according to this view, agrees that all games are marked by competition, there is a card game called Solitaire which is not competitive. Religion is one of those concepts that does not possess a single defining characteristic - there is no one way to it. Although this definition accommodates the complex nature of religion as it encompasses all religion such as Judaism, Christianity Islam and others, Harrison has argued that if we regard as religion anything that has some common feature with standard examples of religion, then religion as a concept will have such a wide scope that it may be analytically useless. Moreover, she believes that there will seem to be a host of resemblance between 'religious' and 'circular' beliefs system.

Ignorance

According to Mueller (2018), ignorance is a useful element in social relations. Similarly, Gross (2012) believes that 'not-knowing' is critical to many types of everyday relations, and human-decision-making rotates around the orbits of knowledge and ignorance. Ignorance has been conceptualized as the twin of knowledge and not the opposite of it - a social fact and a productive force in its own right, and not simply a precursor or an impediment to knowledge (McGoey, 2012 and Mueller 2018). However, it is important to



stress that the type of ignorance discussed here is ignorance as a precursor or an impediment. From this standpoint, ignorance can be useful or destructive when it is mobilized for cultural, economic, institutional, or materially motivated ends.

In the case of Nigeria, a country with a diverse ethnic and religious population, ignorance serves the narrow interest of the political elite. The narrative of ethnicity and religion administered through ignorance aids the divisive purpose of the political elite enough to allow massive looting of public treasury, corruption, lack of basic infrastructure, and others in Nigeria. It is interesting to observe the irony that the same members of the political elite who manipulate and exploit the people through their ignorance by cementing ethno-religious narrative would all converge irrespective of their ethno-religious and political divide to felicitate one of them at a social function as was the case during the wedding of the daughter of former President Goodluck Jonathan. Sadly, there is also the case of the enlightened form of tribalism which prevails in the ivory towers and public spaces in Nigeria perpetuated by 'those who should know better,' whereby appointment and promotion are based on 'where you are from' and not on merit. A situation which made Achebe (1983) to observe that "nothing in Nigeria's political history captures her problem of national integration more graphically than the word tribe in her vocabulary".

However, Besley and Reynal-Querol (2012) have demonstrated in their study on conflict in Africa that narratives matter. Similarly, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) have highlighted the importance of social narratives in the success of popular democracies of the U.S. and western Europe. In this regard, it can be categorically stated that ethnicity, religion, and ignorance constitute the tripod of Nigeria's underdevelopment, corruption, misappropriation of funds, looting of the treasury and others, and that the docility and prolonged inability of the Nigerians to rethink the social contract spring from this triad. Nevertheless, it baffles common sense how long the ethno-religious narrative has been recycled despite its socio-political implications in contemporary Nigeria. It is important to note that before we were ever ethnic or religious, we were first humans. In fact, Ranger (1991) contends that ethnicity is a social construct. In other words, it can be acquired through socialization and not just by birth.

PEOPLE AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

The term 'good governance' is associated with public sector reforms that originated from the World Bank in the 1990s (Keping, 2017). Although good governance is a contentious concept in that it has been variously defined as observed by Keping, yet there is a consensus on the fact that the concept derives its relevance from the context of misgovernance. According to the World Bank, governance means how power is exercised in the management of a country's social and economic resources. But good governance is epitomized by predictable, open enlightened policymaking, a bureaucracy imbued with professional ethos acting in furtherance of the public good, the rule of law, transparent processes and a strong civil society participating in public affairs. Poor governance, on the other hand, is characterized by arbitrary policy-making, unaccountable bureaucracies, on enforced or unjust legal systems, the abuse of executive power, a civil society unengaged in public life and widespread corruption (World Bank report, 1989).

This World Bank perspective is comprehensive; however, it can be inferred that its practicability is impossible without the cooperation of the people. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) have argued that under a social contract that the government becomes the ultimate guarantor of public services and social welfare such as education, health services, security and others while the citizens support the government with the needed taxes to ensure their provision. According to them, the extent to which a country succeeds is proportional to the degree to which its citizens are willing to hold their leaders accountable. From the foregoing, it is clear that good governance is not an accident nor some altruistic actions of some politicians rather, a deliberate choice of the citizens who are ever willing to hold their leaders accountable at every point in time. However, this is not the case in Nigeria where an average citizen is a 'local government' on his own: providing his electricity, water, security and other social amenities by owning a generator, constructing a borehole and the likes, while the political class earn monumental salaries and allowances such that the legislators recently they ordered some 400 units of 2020 model of Toyota Camry from the US as their official cars at the exorbitant rate of



25,000 USD per one in total disregard for the Nigerian made Innoson brand (Johnson, 2020). The implication of this scenario, is poor education, weak infrastructure, unemployment, inadequate security, and others.

FUNCTIONALISM THEORY

Functionalism theory also known as structural functionalism as advanced by Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton, believes that society is made up of interrelated parts that must work together for the stability of the whole. These parts of the society refer to the disparate political, economic, and social institutions designed to perform a specific function for the betterment of the society (Mooney, Knox and Schacht, 2007).

However, this theory which studies the cooperative relationship of the institutions of society argues that a change in one of these institutions would invariably result in changes in others. For example, as a result of changes in technologies, colleges are now offering more technical programmes and many adults are returning to school to learn of this new set of skills required at the workplace. Thus, the theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of human society focusing on how each part influences the other and vice versa. Mooney et al highlight how the theorists used the terms, 'functional' and 'dysfunctional' to explain the effects of social elements on the society. While elements that are regarded as functional contributes to societal stability, dysfunctional elements do the opposite. Some elements can be both functional and dysfunctional at the same time. For example, crime is a dysfunctional element in that it leads to physical violence, loss of property, and fear. But it is also functional in that it can bring about awareness of shared moral bonds thereby increasing social cohesion.

This theory can be used to explain the dysfunctional nature of government in Nigeria in the light of its duty to the people such as to warrant a rethink of the social contract.

CONCLUSION

There is a consensus among scholars that modern democracy thrives on the commitment to the social contract between the leaders and their citizens. However, Nigeria's socio-economic problems such as unemployment, insecurity, poverty, poor funding of education, shortage of basic infrastructure, and others in the face of abundant natural resources show that there is hardly any commitment on the part of the leaders to the pact. Most of the political issues such as lack of peaceful transfer of political power, electoral violence, cronyism, looting of the public treasury, high cost of governance owing to bloated salaries of political office holders, bribery, corruption, nepotism, and others uncover a profound need for Nigerians to reshape the relationship with their leaders to strive towards development and growth. Despite the call to rethink the social contract, it is important to observe that the ethno-religious narrative as perpetuated by the political class constitutes a serious impediment to changing the status-quo-since the status-quo in Nigeria presently serve the interest of the political class and their cronies. Finally, there is a need for the Nigeria people to realize that poverty (which we are already the country with the highest number of poor people), unemployment, bad roads, epileptic power supply, poor healthcare system, hunger, and others do not discriminate among the ethnic or religious groups. Therefore, until Nigerians realize that they are more united by their problems than they are divided by their ethnic or religious groups this call might keep going unheeded.



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