Politics, Conflict and Nigeria's Unending Crisis

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Abstract

Nigeria as a federal state has over the years being entangled in this web of political and social conflicts due to poor handling of the rich human and material resources that abounds within the nation state. The inability of the Nigerian state to address these issues has hampered socio-economic and political development. The country is entangled by the myriads of conflicts. Rather than bring the diverse groups together for meaningful development, Nigeria continue to divide along ethnic and religious lines with attendant consequences both in terms of human and material resources. Many have lost confidence in the politics of the state which is seen by many as promoting violence and other negative vices. This paper set out to examine the concept of politics and conflict with a view to unearthing their relationship. The paper uses the descriptive method of analysis. The findings are that politics co-exist with conflict and the unequal allocation of resources is central to conflict in a given political environment. The paper therefore recommend that individuals or groups be given an opportunity to accomplish the needs so as to enhance socio-economic wellbeing of the people and minimize conflict in Nigeria.

Introduction

Talking about politics elicit some form of reactions and counter-reactions why sometimes leads to conflict among the contending parties. The simple reason is that politics involves the sharing of the resources which often times are in limited supply.

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Due to the limited nature of these resources creates tension among the parties involved which if not properly addressed leads to conflict. This conflict is most found in an environment where there is so much in-equality and deprivations by those who control the power base – the political elite.

Nigeria as a federal state has over the years being entangled in this web of political and social conflicts due to poor handling of the rich human and material resources that abounds within the nation state. The inability of the Nigerian State to address these issues based on the principle of federalism has hampered the socio-economic and political development of the   nation state. Instead of bringing the diverse groups together for meaningful development, Nigerians have continued to be divided along ethnic and religious lines with attendant consequences both in terms of human and material losses. This paper therefore examines the relationship between politic, conflicts and Nigeria's unending socio-economic woes. To do this the paper is divided into four sections; Section one deals with the introduction; section two deals with conceptual clarifications, while section three deals with the link between politics and conflict and section four deals with conclusion and recommendations.

Conceptual Clarifications

The Concept of Politics

Like any other social science concepts the term politics defiles any one acceptable definition as there are myriads of scholars of politics and political science. However, the term "politics" comes from the word 'polis', the Greek word for city-state. In its simplest sense, the word "politics" and "political" relate to the state (Nwosu and Ofoegbu, 1986:11). The term, however, is not necessarily confined to the description of the state and its machineries such as the government. This therefore means that politics is present at various levels of man's social existence. It is also on the basis of the foregoing that Aristotle who is a Greek Philosopher per excellence, succinctly observed that man is a 'political animal'. By this he meant that, man on his own cannot live by himself alone. He cannot provide for all his basic needs working in isolation. He can only actualize himself by being a member of a group and working in cooperation with other people. Because his needs are varied and complex, he (man) endeavours to develop a network of social relationship with various individuals, clusters of individuals, groups and institutions at various levels of the society.

It is in recognition of the foregoing that we submit that politics arises out of these social relations of man: that is out of man's purposeful behaviour with other people to satisfy his needs and welfare. No wonder then, Lipson (1970:4) in his famous work titled, *The Great Issues of Politics*, made this point when he stated that: "politics is a sphere purposeful behavior through which we seek to live better than we do now." In essence, what this means is that, political acts involve deliberate choice by individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, villages, communities, towns, constituent states, and sovereign states about the alternative ends or needs of man in society. The idea of choice impliesthat we are never able to secure all that we need because the resources are limited. Besides, the more we are able to satiate some needs the less we will have the ability to accomplish other needs. Satisfaction of our needs or values may be accomplished at the expanse of other people's needs. The fact that some people are able to achieve certain needs and others are not able to do so, brings about conflict situations (Nwosu and Ofoegbu, 1986:12). Hence, individuals, interests groups, villages, communities, organisations, institutions and states can and infact do argue, quarrel, demonstrate, struggle, riot and fight in order to accomplish their needs or ends. It is because a situation of conflict usually exists while people struggle to satiate their needs, that politics is sometimes defined in terms of conflict (Lipson, 1970:4).

The Concept of Conflict Explained

Here, we are using conflict in this paper in a generic sense to describe all forms of social relations "between sets of individuals or groups that involve incompatible difference of objectives" (Dahrendorf, 1959:134-136). Following from the views of Ralp Dahrendorf, it therefore means that conflict may assume the character of mere differences of opinion, disagreement, competition, protest or demonstration. On the other hand, Nwosu and Ofoegbu (1986:12) avers that:

Conflict may be more manifested. Consequently, violent demonstrations and civil wars are goodillustrations of manifest conflicts. Conflicts, whether latent or manifest, arise as a result of scarcity of resources. Individuals and groups enter into conflict relations as they compete to gain control of limited resources. Conflicts sterm more from unsatisfied wants. To be sure, it is not always that conflicts are dysfunctional to political systems. In some sets of circumstances, conflicts can help to give direction to social change.

Besides, conflict can generate new ideas and bring about new patterns of beneficial relationships among the various groups in the society.

J.D. Miller, whose views about politics stresses the issue of conflict. He sees political activity as that which is intended to bring about or resist change in the face of possible resistance. To conflict theorists, therefore, conflict is at the root of all politics. To this end, Miller concedes that "Politics is not necessarily always violent". Yet he stresses that "anything which is done without any disagreement at all, from start to finish, is not a political act" (Miller, 1962:14-16). While we do not share completely Miller's views, we recognize that conflict relationships are critical aspects of political relations. However, it is important to note that politics transcends conflict and that people can engage in political processes without entering into conflict relations. In a sense, what this entails is that politics involves comparative interactions between sets of individuals and groups.

The point has already been made that individuals,groups, organizations and institutions have many needs which juggle for their attention and action. These needs, according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, include the basic human needs such as food, water, clothing, shelter, safety; while other needs may be psychological and include identity prestige, esteem, affiliation and self-actualization, authority, power, status and influence (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969:17-18). It is inview of this very important role politics play in the life of individuals, groups and institution that Harold Laswell in his conceptualization opines that, "Politics is in consequence conceptualized as social relations that involves, who gets what, when and how." (Lasswell, 1958:202).

Nwosu and Ofoegbu, (1986:13) further submits that, in whatever way we classify the needs of society, the fact remains that the strong, the powerful and the well-organised are least able to pursue their needs. According to them, in some developed and in almost all underdeveloped societies, millions of people are condemned to life of perpetual poverty because they constantly lose the "battle" of sharing the societal products with the rich and powerful, after production efforts which may weigh disproportionately more on the poor than either on the rich or on a strategy of joint efforts. This view suggests that, situations of conflict exist wherever individuals and groups are unable to accomplish and groups are unable to accomplish most of their needs. The potency of the conflict depends on the needs and the nature of the society concerned.

Politics and Conflict and the Potency of Human Needs

Politics is one of the fundamental endeavours of human life. Politics occurs at various levels of society. However, the most basic level is, of course, the family (both the nuclear and the extended family). Given the nature of politics and its preoccupation in the socio-economic life of the people, it behooves us to argue that, our conception of society; our contact with authority systems; our initial internalization of community values and norms; and our awareness of needs which cannot be satisfactorily met at the family level, which therefore, require some social relationships with other families, all begin at the family level.

At the level of the local community, many more people are involved in social relations. The issues which concern them as individuals and family groups become more complex and cover more powerful and yet flexible authority systems that can inspire and lead the organization of sources of communal wealth; the development of systems of distribution;and processes of legitimizing these arrangements. At this level also, collective actions are required to develop rules and enforce them, and to fashion out acceptable patterns of the relationships with other communities (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969:18).

Nwosu and Ofoegbu (1986:14) list the levels of politics higher than the local community to be the local government level, the constituent state level, and the nation-state level. At each of these levels, problems, needs and functions which can not be appropriately met at the lower levels of social organization of peoples into communities are tackled. These needs and problems may touch basic or psychological human needs. Four levels are suggested as:

a) they require higher order organization and function, b) they are more complex in being procured, distributed and paid for, c) they are likely to generate high order conflict if not organized and directed from higher levels; and d) they may touch subject (human needs) which lower levels of social organization clearly recognize are outside their resources and levels of competence (Nwosu and Ofoegbu, 1986:15).

The point to derive from the above is that, local issues give rise to "local" politics while national issues give rise to national politics. But local issues can develop into national issues and national politics can be diffused into local ones.

For instance, when the local politics crisis at the Rivers State started, no one expected that it will snowball into a national crisis. Today, the Rivers State political crisis has assumed national dimension with heavy casualties on both side. The same crisis led to the division in the once peaceful Nigerian Governors Forum (NGF). It is the same crisis that has led to the defection of Governor Rotimi Amaechi to the All Progressive Congress (APC). Several ofsuch instances abounds everywhere in Nigeria.

As we have established that politics occur at the various levels of society, it is necessary to add that the individuals and groups, who engage in politics are involved in an unending process of mediating conflicting needs, values and interests. They solve some problems and accommodate many others that may defy permanent solutions. It is because, much of political acts involve determining differences and allocating whatever there is to get, that a distinguished American Political Scientist, David Easton, conceived politics in terms of the "authoritative" allocation of values (Easton, 1965). The "authoritativeness" of the allocation varies from one level of the society to another. However, much of what is achieved at the end of the day, depends on the goodwill and support which the allocator enjoys.

"Allocation of values" is carried out in such organizations and institutions as trade unions, professional bodies, and agencies, boards, private companies and factories, universities, political parties and religious bodies. What this entails is that, it is not always that these organizations and institutions are in a position to enforce their allocations. Undoubtedly, some of them could conflict punishments which could cause untold hardships on the recalcitrant member, but none of these has any legitimate rights, without the backing of the state or its agencies, to employphysical force to enforce its decision. The only legitimate section in a society which has the monopoly of "coercive authority" to enforce its decision is the "political" section through its machineries such as the state and government. We shall later discuss this special attribute. It is because the "political" system enjoys this special privilege that its allocation of values or needs is not only considered an "authoritative" but also "binding".

In a sense, we can distinguish between the values and needs allocated by the "political" system and those allocated by individuals and by social economic and psychological system of society.

Those allocated by the political system, are referred to as "public politics" and those allocations done by individuals and organizations in the non-political systems, are referred to as "private politics" (Nwosu and Ofoegbu, 1986:16). While this characterization is important, any issue or problem arising from any level of the society becomes the subject matter of "public" politics, if it concerns the all-inclusive social system. For example, most of the decisions of the state are "authoritative" and "binding" on the entire social system because the political institutions of the social system can rely upon the system's reserviour of legitimacy and monopoly of the instruments of violence (or threat of the use of this instrument) to enforce their decisions (Nwosu and Ofoegbu, 1986:16).

Consequently, issues ands conflicts arising from the family, religious, economic and other social organizations, which are likely to disturb public peace, concern the all-inclusive level of social organization. On the other hand, many important issues and conflicts are dealt with as "private" politics within the level of the family, church, trade unions and other social organizations so far as these are within their competence and these bodies do not use coercive political authority to enforce their decisions. For instance, a church organization has legitimate right to legislate on whom to admit as its members, to make rules to govern patterns of social relations, and to make other decisions which in our terminology amount to the allocation of values orneeds. But the church organization has no power to make its decisions "authoritative" and "binding" in the sense that it cannot use force or the threat of force such as imprisonment and public execution, to enforce its decisions. Many "private" politics slip into "public" politics, and become subjects of authoritative mediation either by the direct initiation of the individuals or groups concerned or by the intervention of the state of its agencies.

The point being made from the foregoing arguments is that, there are no fixed boundaries between "private" and "public" politics in several societies. As Lipson (1970:4) rightly points out, the conceptual boundary is that of systems' analysis: public politics must concern the all-inclusive social unit or organization. In some circumstances, he says, the boundary is culturally prescribed. But in countries which operate capitalist economies, there is a deliberate attempt to encourage more "private" than "public" politics; while in several socialist countries and economies, the trend is towards more "public" than "private" politics.

In most societies, however, the political system, given its predominant and supreme position vis-à-vis other organizations, exercises the right (in the interest of public peace) of making a private issue "public" according to its interpretation of what constitutes the general interest or good life of the society. Hence, whether we describe politics as needs, issues and matters which are local or national, private or public, it is a subject which engages the interest of the young and old, the organized and unorganized, and the male and female members of society.

Be that as it may, the mere mention of the term politics elicit debates, tension and conflicts. Nigeria's socio-economic and political woes are tied to the nature and character of the political experience since independence.

Power, Authority and the Influence of the Political Leadership

No single discussion of politics will be complete and meaningful without linking it with power, authority and influence which those in leadership brings it to bear in the performance of their duties. Therefore, power which is often sought by politicians not only for its own sake, but as a means of accomplishing societal objectives means the ability to do something. Its possession invariably involves capacity to make and enforce decisions; to mobilize, produce and allocate resources to mediate conflicts and coerce the intransigent; to reward the deserving and punish the offender. The substance of political power (Laswell, 1958:202) is always contingent on the available societal resources such as factors of production, physical infrastructure, and intangible resources such as executive capacity, information and coercion. According to Nwosu and Ofoegbu (1986:17), the possession of these resources confers a regime and its agents real and potential power to influence or control the behavior of other states, for the purposes of promoting its own vital interest. Power is not absolute. Its possession is relative and its capacity can be measured in terms of geographic location, resources, manpower, technological skills, diplomatic skill, military strength, degree of preparedness for common action, food and abundance of infrastructural facilities.

In relative terms, United States and USSR, or Britain and France can be matched. But it will be a mismatch to pair Nigeria and Gabon in a power continuum. It therefore means that a state can be very powerful, yet, in some circumstances it may seem powerless to act.

For instance, the United States had all the weapons to destroy Vietnam, but yet was constrained by other considerations not to use its 'total' power in its protracted war with Vietnam. Persistent internal opposition against the war, eventually compelled the United States to withdraw from the war.

On the other hand, it is germane to state here that, the possession of power does not automatically confer rights on the possessor. One can acquire power through brute force, and may, as a consequence lose legitimacy. The case of military interventions in Nigeria and the interim contraption of Earnest Shonekan in 1993 did not confer automatic legitimacy on these governments even though so many of them exercised brute force for quite a long time in office. It therefore means that, the concept of authority transcend that of power.

Authority refers to "power over people basedon the esteem or respect of those people" (Grazia, 1959:321). It is very important to note that authority is a communal matter. Its grant and withdrawal is done by individuals, groups, organizations, villages, government agencies and other such bodies. They grant it to whomever they hold in esteem, or have respect for. No wonder, then, when the former President Obasanjo wanted to elongate his tenure the people stoutly rejected the satanic agenda in 2007. The same way General Babangida and other military heads of state attempted to perpetuate themselves in power without earning the respect of the people, they were all forced to step aside as in the case of Babangida while natural cause stopped General Abacha's plan to transform into a civilian President against the wishes of the people.

The foregoing is an indication of the fact that, anything at any level of the society always presume a superior-subordinate relationship. Its exercise is consummated when there is interaction between the superior and the subordinate. The superior issues orders or gives directives, and the subordinate has the right to comply or refuse to do so. Exercise of authority is therefore complete when the subordinate complies.

Every polity or social structure has an authority structure which are often described as the executive, legislative, and judiciary which comprises of the courts and other adjudication agencies.

The same way, there is the bureaucracy which comprises of civil servants, statutory bodies/boards, political parties, electoral commission, and so on. Through these authority, roles are acquired and exercised. In many developed politics, the authority structures are more integrated and 'rooted' with the wider society. But in several less developed states, the society is marked by more dispersed and divided authority structure. The consequence of this is that incumbents of authority roles at the national level do not enjoy much legitimacy-reservoir of good will which enables them accelerate the pace of economic and social development.

The beginning of the current dispensation in Nigeria up to the current regime of President Goodluck Jonathan has suffered legitimacy crisis due to flawed electoral processes. As earlier said, it is important to note that power and the exercise of authority is a communal matter. Its grant and withdrawal is done by individuals, groups, organizations, villages, government agencies and other such bodies. Therefore, nobody no matter his/her personal ambition must be located within the group efforts if such a person is to attain power and enjoy legitimacy of the people.

Also related to power and authority is what we describe as influence. Influence is a relation between two or more actors, in which one actor induces other actors to behave in a desired pattern. The exercise of influence is not limited only to those who possess power resources or who are incumbents of authority structures. In fact, in several political communities in Africa and especially in Nigeria, the exercise of influence is not limited only to those who occupy formal authority structures.Others who exercise considerable influence on majority of the people both rural and urban are the political elites, traditional rulers, etc. The influence which they exercise derives from their social status, customs, and other ascriptive sources such as heredity. Invariably, what this entails is that most African leaders, including Nigerian leaders, who seek elective offices, depend on men of influence in the rural areas to mobilize support and loyalty on their behalf.

In the main, the point being made here is that, political elites in Africa and Nigeria in particular, seek power, authority and influence not only for their sake, but to survive and be able to induce economic and social changes. In Nigeria, due to failure of leadership at all levels of governance, the desire to peddle influences and exert it on those who control power has become ferocious as people consider it as a basis to remain relevant both outside and inside government since legitimate social security systems are non-existent.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that politics involves conflict resolution in society. It will, however, be wrong to limit politics to only social processes of conflict because issues in politics often stern from area of agreement, common interests, shared desires, shared wishes, and common expectations. What we should know is that the root of politics transcend conflict. It also includes cooperation and common interests.

Pennock and Smith (1967:8) were on sound grounds when they argued that "not all politics consists of settling disputes among conflicting groups or determining that one value shall be given priority over another." Through politics and government, values are created and allocated; common needs are met; and conflicts that face these processes and those that arise in their becoming realities, are tackled and sometimes solved. Lipset (1969:21,89) stressed an important point when he said that "a stable democracy requires the manifestations of conflict or cleavage … but without consensus… there can be no democracy."This now brings us to the views of Nwosu and Ofoegbu (1986:19-20) that: Politics is most inclusive of human behavior in society; that concerns the productive forces of society and the resultant social structures of these productive processes; that affects the creation, as well as the authoritative and binding allocation of public values in society; that organizes among the public values that are created and allocated such values as social justice, authority,structures, laws, order, welfare, development, freedom, and, that focuses essentially, but not necessarily, upon the polis (its organization, processes, authority system and environment), and upon the conflicts inherent in production relation with the polis.

It therefore behooves us to conclude that where there is conflict there is politics and in the same way politics can be used to solve emerging conflict situations through equitable and fair allocation of resources and values to the people. For it is only when that is done that conflict will be minimized and the values of democracy will be achieved.

Nigeria needs to pursue a credible and sound electoral process that will produce candidates that will win elections and at the end of it all earn the legitimacy of the people. A situation where elections are fraudulently won creates legitimacy crisis and loss of confidence in the political leadership.

It also increases the level of mutual suspicion leading to violent conflicts. Given that politics is one of the fundamental endeavours of human life, conflicts can be minimized when individuals or groups are given the opportunity to accomplish both individual and group needs. In that way, socio-economic and political development can be achieved.

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