

## Problems and Prospects of Nigerian Bureaucracy

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**ABSTRACT** The paper examined and analysed the problems and prospects of the Nigerian bureaucracy since colonial days till the present time. It discovered that the public bureaucracy in Nigeria has been hounded by colonial legacy, the prolonged military rule, unstable political environment, economic crisis, social menace, constitutional lapses, unfavourable public policies such as the federal character, bureaucratic bottlenecks (such as red-tapism, rigidity, centralization, excessive bureaucratic layers), poor conditions of service etc. All of these factors have impeded the effective performance of the Nigerian bureaucracy in several ways. The association of bureaucracy with pejorative expression cannot be totally isolated from the factors enumerated above. The paper concluded that except these problems are addressed (some of which, suggestions are made in the paper), the prospect for its survival is dicey.

### INTRODUCTION

The term 'bureaucracy', in many parts of the world, is often associated with pejorative expression, and used to decry the inefficiency, rigidity and lapses that characterize public services. Some have attacked the term bureaucracy as "contrived, ambiguous, and troublesome". Those who view bureaucracy with this lens refer the bureaucrats as "simultaneously timid and ineffectual, and power-seeking and dangerous." (Waldo, 1982). Yet, an analyst has simply remarked: "few things have a worse reputation than bureaucracy. Say the word and everyone immediately thinks of red tape, stupid and rigid rules, waste, and coldly impersonal lazy clerks" (Woll and Zimmermann, 1989). Bureaucracy is so often used as a derogatory term, that one forgets that it "was coined by a distinguished sociologist to describe an institutional development that he regarded to be of great benefit to modern society" (Lynn, 1987:77). Weber saw bureaucracy as the type of administration, which is organized rationally, logically, impersonally and according to official rules as a means of carrying out imperative control over human resources. For Weber,

bureaucracy "was a necessary condition, or an organizational means, for maintaining the legal, economic, and technical rationality inherent in modern civilization." (Ostrom, 1989:26). Weber also emphasized the technical superiority of bureaucratic organizations over all other forms of organization - comparable to the technical superiority of a machine over non-mechanical modes of production. Some scholars have argued that bureaucracy facilitates rational planning of complex tasks and efficient production by large organization. (Lynn, 1987). In the opinion of Harold Laski, bureaucracy is a form of government in which officials effectively rule, with resulting 'officiousness' (Waldo, 1982).

Bureaucracy, which is one of the most frequently used words in modern writing about organization, according to Anthony Downs (1967), has three different meanings. It refers to a specific institution or class of institutions. In this sense, bureaucracy denotes the same concept as the term bureau. It can also mean specific method of allocating resources within a large organization. A synonym for this sense might be bureaucratic decision making. Thirdly, "it sometimes denotes 'bureauness' or 'the quality that distinguishes bureaus from other types of organization.'" Bureaucracy, in the context of this paper, refers essentially to the civil service and other government bureaux, established to help in the formulation and implementation of government's policies.

### ROLE OF THE BUREAUCRACY IN GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

The following statements would seem to capture the role and importance of the bureaucracy in modern governance.

... a neutral public bureaucracy, however ideal, is both a precondition and a vital by-product of healthy democratic system of governance<sup>1</sup>.

The success of a government rests as much as the way the public bureaucracy functions ...<sup>2</sup>.

An efficient and neutral public bureaucracy is a *sine-qua-non* to a healthy democratic system, and a healthy democratic system is critical to efficient public bureaucracy. Though, to some, bureaucratic institution and democratic institution are two antithetical poles, with different objectives. (Blau, 1972). The public bureaucracy has significant role to play in the administration of government - whether autocratic or democratic. However, the role of bureaucracy may vary significantly under each of the systems.

During the colonial administration in Nigeria (1900-1960), the role of the bureaucracy was essentially concerned with the maintenance of colonial law and order and collection of taxes and levies. The colonial bureaucracy was created in the first instance, to prosecute imperial policies. At Independence on October 1, 1960, things changed. The post independence era witnessed "the transformation and redefinition of the role of the civil service to that of nation building that is assisting the new government to plan and accelerate the pace of Nigeria's socio-economic development." (Nigeria, 1985:15).

The First Republic that fell in 1966 ushered in the first military regime in Nigeria. During this period, the Civil Service rose to the challenge of the political crisis, which engulfed the nation. The top civil servants openly assumed political responsibilities. They were not only seen, but they were heard. They were in effect, responsible for policy formulation and implementation, while the military were preoccupied more with the prosecution of the civil war. The era also witnessed the emergence of higher civil servants, dubbed 'Supper Permanent Secretaries'. They became highly influential 'political technocrats', particularly between 1970 and 1975. It was an era of highly bureaucratic power. But the fall of General Yakubu Gowon military regime on July 29, 1975 marked the end of the 'golden age' of the civil servants in the act of governance.

The Second Republic commenced on October 1, 1979 after 13 years of military rule in Nigeria. The Second Republic had Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) as the executive president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The regime was terminated on December 31, 1983 via a coup d'etat. During this period, the civil service performed several roles. For example, Oyovbaire (1989) highlighted the following functions of the Head of

the Civil Service of the Federation (who is also a bureaucrat):

- Coordination of the activities of Federal Ministries and Extra-ministerial departments.
- Advising the Head of Government on the appointment and deployment of Permanent Secretaries.
- Formulation of policies on and allocation of office accommodation and staff quarters.
- Provision of staff for newly established and *ad hoc* bodies.
- Management of the careers of officers in the administrative cadre and all Senior Management Staff on GL 14 and above.
- All functions at present performed by the Federal Ministry of Establishments and the Public Service Department of the Cabinet Office.
- Liaison with Heads of State Civil Services.
- Providing leadership and direction to the service, maintaining high morale and *esprit-de-corps*
- Reviews of machinery of Government, restructuring and re-organization of Federal Ministries and Extra-Ministerial Departments
- Promotion of good relations between Ministries and Civil Servants.
- Relations with the following special bodies:
  - a. National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA)
  - b. Federal Civil Service Commission.

From the fore-going, we can summarize the role of the bureaucracy as coordination of federal ministries, advising the political officials, formulation and implementation of government's policies, gathering and supplying of data for policy makers, ensuring continuity of services and public relations services. All the roles highlighted above are so crucial to the smooth running of any administration to the extent that one may be tempted to conclude that bureaucracy is indispensable. Thus, the bureaucracy can make or mar any administration.

Furthermore, the public bureaucracy is entrusted with the public property. "The Public has entrusted the ministers with the government of the country, and the ministers in turn entrust the Civil Service with the property of the Public." (Baker, 1971). The public property may be either tangible or intangible. The tangible properties among others include cash, stationery, buildings, equipment, vehicle, furniture, stores etc. The civil servants are responsible not only for their safe custody and maintenance, but also for their proper and effective

utilization. Underscoring the importance of bureaucracy Downs (1967) states:

*It is ironic that bureaucracy is primarily a term of scorn. In reality, bureaus are among the most important institutions in every part of the world. Not only do they provide employment for a very significant fraction of the world's population, but they also make critical decisions that shape the economic, educational, political, social, moral, and even religious lives of nearly every one on earth...The ability of bureaus to outlive their real usefulness is part of the mythology of bureaucracy...*

The important roles of the civil service discussed above, notwithstanding, experience has shown in Nigeria that many of government's laudable policies have been marred by poor implementation strategies (i.e. bureaucratic procedures) adopted by the civil service, charged for the implementation. The civil service has a way of putting obstacles in the way of policies formulated by the political officials, especially those policies on which they hold divergent opinions. Various tactics are employed "to thwart implementation of policies about which they are sceptical - "ranging from procrastination, 'discovering' insurmountable obstacles or effecting unworkable solutions, etc. (Greenwood and Wilson, 1990; Okotoni, 1996). Finally, bureaucracy, being one of the longest standing institutions in Nigeria, will continue to be relevant to governance, its shortcomings notwithstanding.

The position above notwithstanding, it is important to address the question whether the bureaucracy in Nigeria will be able to rise to the challenges of civil democratic rule, having operated under undemocratic military oligarchy for over three decades. This question becomes relevant, realising the autocratic nature of the military with little or no regard for the rule of law and respect for procedural rules, coupled with high level of corruption, nepotism and partisanship which have characterized successive military regimes in Nigeria - as against the bureaucracy which is expected to emphasize rules, procedures, dialogue, consultations, anonymity, neutrality etc. There is no doubt that the Nigerian bureaucracy has virtually lost most of these bureaucratic principles. A gradual process is required to de-militarise the civil service and embark upon an aggressive acculturation to civil rule. An important area of the acculturation is the military language that has

become part and parcel of the civil. For example, expressions such as "with immediate effect", "report immediately", "must comply with", "without delay" should be gradually replaced in the civil service with more dignified, decorous and prudish vocabularies and dictions. In fact, the society at large in Nigeria must be given a new orientation of a civil society. Since the service did not get to where it is today over night, one should not expect it to get out of it in a jiffy. The most important thing is for the civil service to be willing to adjust to operate under a civil rule, apt to learn democratic principles, cooperate with the political officials and embrace democracy with all enthusiasm. However, the political leaders must reciprocate this gesture by creating a conducive atmosphere (void of rancour, prejudice, corruption, nepotism and rivalry) for the bureaucrats to operate. Without taking heed to the above, it may be like putting new wine in an old skin, which could bust. For the new wine to be secured and preserved, the old skin must be refurbished and placed in a safe environment.

#### **PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF THE PUBLIC BUREAUCRACY IN NIGERIA**

The public bureaucracy in Nigeria is beset with a number of problems that have hampered its effective role in governance in the country.

One of the major problems confronting the public bureaucracy in Nigeria is its politicisation. Several offices in the civil service were at one or the other politicised by the military. These include the offices of the Permanent Secretary and the Head of Service.<sup>3</sup> Although, there is nothing wrong with the bureaucracy performing political functions, but the fear is that unless such political functions are carefully controlled, they can further aggravate the already strained relationship between the political officers and the bureaucrats, with unpleasant consequences during a democratic regime. The political officers would regard such political roles performed by the bureaucrats as usurpation of powers and trespass.

Another problem is the high level of corruption associated with the public bureaucracy in Nigeria. A World Bank (1995) report stated that, "Nigeria's public sector lacks transparency and accountability." This is further confirmed by a recent publication of Transparency International, which rated Nigeria as the second most corrupt in the world. (*Nigerian Tribune* October 3, 2002). Mr

Ernest Shonekan, the Head of Interim National Government that succeeded General Ibrahim Babangida also made a serious statement on the level of corruption in Nigeria:

*We can no longer ignore the issue of corruption which is now believed to be quite endemic in our country ... People abroad now believe that it is virtually impossible to undertake any form of transaction successfully in Nigeria today without bribery ... Government is specially concerned with increasing cases of white collar corruption including advance fee fraud code-named '419', bank thefts, insider dealing, product counterfeiting etc. (The Guardian February 28, 1993, cited from Olowu, 1996a).*

In addition, a World Bank (1995b) publication has identified the cause of corruption among public officials:

It is no secret that inadequate salaries direct public officials into unprofessional forms of behaviour. When senior jobs produce opportunities to collect bribes, to evade income-inhibiting restrictions on private trade, to win government contracts for one's family or associates, or to misappropriate public funds, incentives are created to do one's job in ways that are inconsistent with the public interest."

The *Guardian* newspapers once reported the pathetic condition of the state of the country resulting from the high level of corruption in the country: "The Nigeria state has become a predatory institution through which people in places of trust and responsibility recklessly and remorselessly loot the nation's resources and extort tribute while the ordinary citizen shares ... what we see as an advanced state of social anomie, a near collapse of the Nigerian state as a social organism." (Editorial of *The Guardian* March 1, 1994).

To deal with this endemic bureaucratic corruption, adequate incentives and motivation must be provided for public bureaucrats, which will not only attract talented people to the service, but also make them to perform effectively and honestly. Beyond this, Nigeria as a society should begin to change its value. In a decent society, money is not everything, but a society like Nigeria where money is considered to be everything, people can go to any length and use any means to acquire wealth, which nobody will care to query. Our orientation, value and priority must change. Integrity, honour and good name must be preferred above ill-gotten wealth that is when we can create a decent new society.

Other problems that are associated with the bureaucracy, world over are its rigidity, resistance to change, lack of innovation, impersonality, and "excessive aloofness, ritualistic attachment to routines and procedures". (Kramer, 1977). This is capsuled in what some refer to as red-tapism that hinders quick action and effective communication among public bureaucracies. The problem of rigidity and resistance to change by bureaucracy has contributed the failure of many civil service reforms in Nigeria right from colonial times till date.

### CONJECTURES AND CONCLUSIONS

Public bureaucracy in Nigeria has suffered a lot of setbacks due to its numerous problems. In the area of service delivery, many citizens have lost confidence in the bureaucratic institutions charged with the provision and delivery of public goods and services. The depressing state of public delivery services in Nigeria was x-rayed in a remarkable editorial opinion of *The Guardian* Newspaper titled "A State in Gradual Collapse" The paper *inter alia* stated "public utilities that have virtually collapsed, and educational system that has become epileptic, state hospitals which had 'first degenerated into consulting clinics' but had now become 'places to die' and the 'quality of services rendered by NEPA, NITEL, NIPOST etc being the subject of continuous lamentation by the citizens.'" (Olowu, 1996). The poor performance of public bureaucracy is sometimes blamed on its principle of impersonality, which often creates a gap between the bureaucrats and the citizens; a situation that has led several NGOs to become prominent actors in the delivery of goods and services to the citizens. However, some scholars believe that bureaucracy is quite useful and helpful. In the view of Arnold Tannenbaum (1968) "experience tends to show that the purely bureaucratic type of administrative organisation is ... capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency ..."

A fundamental question before us is "How can we make Nigeria bureaucracy functional?" Several steps must be taken which include the following.

First, the idea of representative bureaucracy tagged "federal character" in Nigeria, must be critically re-examined. According to the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, "the composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs carried out in such a manner as to

reflect the federal character of Nigeria ... thereby ensuring that there should be no predominance of persons from a few States or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that Government or in any of its agencies” (Section 14.3). In principle, the idea of federal character is good, but in practice, it has not helped the bureaucracy in Nigeria. For example, in some instances, the federal character has been carried too far to the detriment of the system. In the bid to have every state or ethnic group represented in appointment to the public bureaucracy, many unqualified candidates have been appointed to occupy important positions, where they can neither function or perform. To Professor Huque (1984),

The idea of a representative bureaucracy is redundant as the benefits it is supposed to produce are tentative, and cannot be ensured even under optimal conditions ... Ideally, a bureaucracy is expected to be neutral and ultimately efficient. But the inclusion of representatives of groups may result in a loss of efficiency as well as the generation of conflict among officials recruited on two different bases. Bureaucracy will no longer be effective as a cohesive force. The result will be more cleavages in already fragmented societies.

Above all, the federal character in Nigeria has not been fairly applied. In recent years, the public bureaucracy (both the civil and military) has been dominated by one section of the country. Several people and pressure groups have been calling on the federal government to redress the imbalance in order to move the nation forward. One of the ways to address it is to introduce merit as the primary basis for recruitment and appointment into the public bureaucracy. The use of discretion and other considerations should become secondary.

Secondly, it will be useful for a civil servant “to think of himself generally as a trustee. If he does so he will help to achieve the goal of good governance and public administration: “increasing the happiness and improving the welfare of the people.” Baker (1971) argues further that this will assist in “building up or maintaining for the Civil Service a reputation of being honourable and fair, a reputation which inevitably will lead to greater efficiency.” In his judgement with “such a reputation, the Service will be more acceptable to the people, and will command respect and confidence of the public who, as paymasters, quite correctly require their employees to be both civil and of service to them.” This, I think is one of the essence of a democratic government.

It is also suggested that there is need to give a well-defined constitutional role for the civil service. Neither the 1979 nor the 1999 Constitutions spelt out the role of the civil service. The civil service must also be restored to its rightful place, and redefine the role that it should play in governance.

It is further suggested that the federal civil service commission must aspire to maintain certain conditions of employment in the civil services that may be summarized as follows:

- (a) The existence of adequate opportunities for a career, which will attract and retain in service the right kind of men and women;
- (b) A system of promotions through merit with due regard to seniority that enables persons who demonstrate the necessary ability, energy and devotion to rise to the highest positions in the service;
- (c) Reasonable security of tenure;
- (d) A pay structure that is broadly comparable to the pay structure of the central government and private employment and based on the principle of equal pay for comparable types of work;
- (e) A system of regulating employer-employee relations that is accepted by the staff as just and fair. (United Nations, 1964).

Furthermore, efforts should be made to resolve the conflict between the generalists and the specialists in the service. Similarly the conflict between the career officials and political officials must also be resolved. The counsel of Katako (1971) is particularly relevant here:

If confidence is to exist between the civil servants and the politicians, the former must appreciate the fact that politicians are normally under pressure from their constituents and their party to obtain results quickly, and are therefore inclined to insist on discarding rules and regulations which their nature tend to act as brakes on the speedy achievement of results. While rules and regulations are *sine-qua-non* for systematic and orderly government, they should be flexible.

There is an urgent need not only to create institutions critical to making public sector bureaucracies responsive, accountable and sensitive to the citizens’ needs, but also to establish mechanisms for sustaining them. According to Olowu (1996a) such institutions (which included the legislative, the judiciary, the public complaints commissions and code of conduct bureau) were created in the past but destroyed.

For an effective bureaucracy in Nigeria, the

present deployment system, whereby 40% of the federal civil servants are retained in the headquarters of the various ministries in Abuja must be redressed. The need for government to commit itself to reforming and revitalizing the civil services, rebuilding them around the ideals of professionalism, meritocracy, ethics and accountability, responsiveness and provision of quality services to citizens cannot be overemphasised.

In conclusion, what is the prospect for public bureaucracy in Nigeria? As Gortner (1981) has queried, "If bureaucracy is inefficient, and public bureaucracies are even more inefficient than private bureaucracies, then why not do away with them and set up different structure to carry out the public's services and needs?" Paraphrasing Winston Churchill, the answer must be that "Bureaucracy is the most efficient system for organizing people known to man except for all of the other systems." Gortner continued, "With all its faults, it is still the most efficient structure that has yet been discovered when attempting to coordinate the actions of large groups of people toward a specific goal. In fact, Peter Blau (1972) argues, "Antagonism toward bureaucracy usually results from the ruthless efficiency of bureaucracy, not its inefficiency." And that people antagonized bureaucracy because it is "efficient in carrying out its task as defined by the bureaucracy; when people rebel, they are upset by the bureaucracy's impersonal objectivity and efficiency, for it tends not to recognize human and individual characteristics."

In conclusion, the public bureaucracy in Nigeria has been hounded by colonial legacy, the prolonged military rule, unstable political environment, economic crisis, social menace, constitutional lapses, unfavourable public policies such as the federal character, bureaucratic bottlenecks (such as red-tapism, rigidity, centralization, excessive bureaucratic layers), poor conditions of service etc. All of these factors have in one way or the other impeded the effective performance of the public bureaucracy in the country. The association of bureaucracy with pejorative expression cannot be totally isolated from the factors enumerated above. Except these problems are addressed (some of which, suggestions have been made earlier in the paper), the prospect for its survival is dicey. "In the final analysis, the vitality of democracy depends on the capacity of government to deliver essential

services and to resolve the problems that confront society and the world. And this, in turn, depends very largely on the competence, integrity and motivation of professionals in government service (or in other words, the bureaucracy)" (Argyiades, 1996).

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