THE NIGERIAN STATE, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

The Nigerian state has been enmeshed in internal contradictions linked to its origin and the nature of the integration into the international capitalist system. It is also related to the character of the governing class and the collaboration between the foreign bourgeois class and the local bourgeois class. The Nigerian state is thus perceived as a mechanism to recreate and consolidate capitalist expansion in a peripheral state. The colonial state emerged to foster the economic and political interests of the core capitalist states, reproduce capitalist development in the advanced economies, and create social formation in the domestic economy that impinges on the nature of social classes, class relations and antagonism.

The subsequent post-colonial state expanded the basis of capitalist accumulation to include the local bourgeois class, and this was pursued through domination of statist structure, and institutions by the dominant fractions of the political class. The state thus became a contested terrain where fractions of the political class struggle to control political power, and appropriate resources, to foster private accumulation, peer and group interests. The Nigerian state assumed a repressive nature to sustain the dominance of the political class, its control on the expropriation and appropriation of public resources. The repressive character of the state is replicated through intimidation, harassment, politics of containment of critical opposition groups, divide and rule tactics, illegal detention of opposition leaders, cooptation strategy, arrest, detention and political assassination of critics.

The nature of the state, the behaviour of the political class, the privatization of the state domain, the pattern of social relations and social classes have had implications for the nature, character and form of civil society in Nigeria. The research objectives are to problematise the relationship between the Nigerian state and the civil society, and account for the growth of uncivil society organisations. It will also historicise the struggle for the public domain between the Nigerian state and the civil society, explain how the civil society organisations contributed to the articulation of the national question, their strategies and tactics , and the responses of the Nigerian state. These issues will provide the canvass to interrogate the role of the civil society in Nigeria in the conceptualisation and pursuit of the national question. The research observes the politicisation of the national question among the fractions of the political class as means to retaining or wrestle political power. It is thus the contestation of the political turf to determine who defines the superstructural and economic bases of the national political life.

The preceding analyses suggest the interface of the state and civil society. In other words, the thorough interpretation and analysis of the civil society should be predicated on the nature of the state. The character of the state, therefore, will more likely impinge on the pattern and evolution of the civil society. It is thus imperative to theorise on the state with a view to characterizing the Nigeria State. The next sub-heading will discuss the nature of the Nigerian state in relation to varying theoretical contexts that seeks to explain the nature of state crisis in Africa. The research task is to ascertain the relevance and suitability of these theories to situating the crisis of the Nigerian state.

The State Crisis in Africa and the Nature of the Nigerian State

The state in Africa has undergone severe crisis, but scholars differ on their perception. The crisis has occupied critical appraisals of the state through the coalition theory and the weak-capacity-state approach. The coalition theory is sub-categorised into the urban coalition theory and the comprador theory. These strands of the coalition theory perceive the state crisis as the outcome of the role of the state in appropriating national wealth for the benefit of fractions of the dominant class (*Beckman, 1988; Amin, 1991; Onimode, 1992*). The weak capacity state theory perceives the state as weak and vulnerable, lacking the capacity to mobilize popular commitment and predictable political norms, and inability to pursue clear cut policy agenda (*Sandbrook, 1985*). The neo-patrimonial, organizational and the monopolistic theories constitute strands of the weak capacity state theory (*Hyden, 1983; Sandbrook, 1985; Mars, 1987; Deutkiewicz and Williams, 1987; Bayart, 1993*). This research will rely on the comprador and neo-patrimonial theories to explain the nature of the state crisis in Africa.

The comprador theory provides insight into the origin of the African crisis (*Onimode, Ibid*). This theory contrasts the role of the state in the peripheral state in Africa and the core capitalist state. While the center has the capacity to replicate the dominance of capital and subordinate foreign capital to the logic of national accumulation, the peripheral sate lacks the capacity to control local accumulation. This is linked to the low level of capitalism, weak civil society and underdeveloped private   sector. The peripheral state dominates economic activities, but its functions are restricted to adjusting the local economy to suit the requisites of capital accumulation in the center (*Amin, ibid*).

To Sandbrook (1985), the state crisis in Africa is linked to the absence of a capitalist hegemonic class that has the capacity to enforce discipline and coherence of the state. The consequences are personal rule and the privatization of governance based on personal and communal ties. The state becomes the outlet to actualize personal and communal aspirations, and the distribution of patronage. Ake (*1994*) contends that the state in Africa has limited autonomy. This characterization is linked to the limited development of the productive forces, the restricted penetration of the economy and society. The state in Africa, therefore, is merely a coercive force that lacks the capacity to transform power into authority, and domination into hegemony. The location of economic resources in the state, and its capacity to dispense patronage leads to unmediated contradictions, intense struggle among the fractions of the dominant class, which shifts the focal point from economics to politics. The consequences are tenuous relationship between the ruling class and entrepreneurial class, the over concentration and fusion of power in the central authority, the notoriety of political contestation, the replication of the form and content of the colonial state in personal rule and dictatorship (*Ake, Ibid.*).

Eteng (1998) who explains the implications of the non-autonomisation of the Nigerian State corroborates the preceding analyses. He posits that the political struggles have assumed a Hobbesian character, and the legitimacy of power and political processes becomes problematic. The contradictions and conflicts inherent in the socio-economic formation and social relations of production and exchange become difficult to resolve. The state, its manager and cohorts become involved in the prevailing peripheral capitalist production, exchange relations, and their inherent class contradictions and conflicts. The relative non-autonomisation of the Nigerian State exacerbates its inherent lack of

capacity for consensus – building and the mediation of conflictual relations among social classes.

The Nigerian state had been integrated into the global political economy through direct colonial conquest, the disarticulation of local national economies, the provision of social infrastructures to aid colonial exploitation, the emergence of a petty bourgeois class that served the administrative machinery of the colonial state. The Nigerian State thus became integrated in the international economic system as a neo-colonial, dependent formation. The hegemonic role of the multinational oil companies in the Nigerian economy and the dependence on oil rent also create a rentier mentality among the ruling class that contradicts wealth creation. The Nigerian state, therefore, lacks the capacity to concretely mediate the function struggles within the local exploiter class (*Obi, 2002*).

The neo-patrimonial theory of the state crisis in Africa provides a useful characterization of the Nigerian state. This state has been contested by fractions of the dominant class, who seek access to statist structures to build private economic domain or patronize the state managers for economic benefits. The bastardization of the Nigerian state is further characterized by the personalization of political power, institutionalization of corruption, and patronage policies where the ruling class distributed largesse to its clientele and cronies. The implications are authoritarian rule, personal rule, economic mis-governance and politics of belly, institutional collapse, frustration, apathy and anger of the populace, economic underdevelopment and pervasive poverty, and the pauperization of vulnerable social groups (*Bayart, Ibid.; Adejumobi, 1995; Momoh, 1995; Olukoshi, 2000*). The theoretical underpinnings of the civil society will be dealt with in the next sub-heading.

How Do we Conceptualize the Civil Society?:
The Nature and Patterns of Civil society Organizations in Nigeria.

There is a virile debate on the nature, pattern and direction of civil society among scholars (Diamond, 1994; Gyimah-Boadi, 1996; Fine, 1997; Kulipossa, 1998, Stelytler and G. Hollands et al, 1998). There is also growing literature of the civil society in Nigeria that captures the attempt to determine what constitutes the civil organizations, the implications of adjustment reforms and military rulership for the expansion of civil society groups. It also discusses the struggle to broaden the political space occasioned by the authoritarian and alienating nature of the governing class (Ekeh, 1992; Ajayi, 1993; Ihonvbere and Vaughan, 1995; Momoh, 1995; Olukoshi, 1997; Gboyega, 1997; Jega, 1997, Olukoshi, ibid).

The literature on civil society is dominated by the bourgeois conceptualization of predicated on market forces and a political system that is linked to class, economic stratification and the consolidation of the nation-state (Kulipossa, Ibid.; Momoh, 1998). The bourgeois perception has been popularized and recommended to develop societies as models of the civil engagement of the state. These are deliberate attempts to replicate the neo-colonial ideology, and historicize the nature of civil society organizations in the peripheral capitalist states. These are achieved through the prisms of capitalism and Western conception of democracy.

There is no consensus among scholars on how to define the civil society (McLean, 1996; Kulipossa, Ibid; Stelytler and Hollands, Ibid; Momoh, 2003). There are, however, certain attributes of the civil society organizations. These include the voluntarily constituted social relations, institutions and organizations that are not reducible to the

administrative grasp of the state. It is also a buffer against the negative effects of market economy, and self-consciously organized institution whose primary purpose is to articulate demand on, and influence government policies. It is an identifiable aspect of society that is autonomous of, but still relate with and prospecting to influence the state. Stelytler and Hollands (Ibid) rely on the corporatist and voluntary-pluralist models to explain the probable nature of the state and civil society relations. The corporatist model emphasizes the inclusion of the civil society into the decision-making process, and the capacity of the groups to impose sanctions with a view to exerting pressure on the state and its managers. The voluntarily-pluralist model assumes that the civil society relate to the state in a less regulated forms exhibits greater distance to statist institutions and aggregate opinion on varied issues in order to engage the state on its term.

It is probable to differentiate the types of civil society groups. These are the economic, cultural, informational and educational, interest groups, development organizations, issue-oriented movements and civic groups that canvasses political pluralism, political inclusion of the exploited classes in the governance process (*Kulipossa, Ibid*). There are conscious attempts to identify the sub-categories of civil associational groups in Nigeria (*Jega, Ibid; Ekeh, Ibid; Momoh, 2003*). These strands are broadly summarized into human rights, political, statist and deviant. The concept of uncivil society also emerged to characterise the self-organizations existing on the fringes of the state. The vigilantes and militias form the critical challenge to the monopoly of the physical force of the Nigerian state. These groups contest its legitimacy and demonstrate the propensity to pursue armed struggle (*Heinrich Boll Foundation, 2004*). This paper will, however, emphasize the roles of human rights and political civil society groups in the struggle to resolve the national question in Nigeria. It will also discuss the perceptions of,

and the tactics of the state to repress, intimidate, co-opt critics and impose statist agenda on the national question.

The Nigerian State, The Civil Society And The National Question In Nigeria

The departure point is the conceptualisation of the national question. This discourse is not peculiar, however, to the nation-state. It is raised in the context of power relations, the access to and influence on political structures and institutions, the identity crisis, the social relations to the productive activities and the attendant social class relations. It also engenders varying perceptions of how these should be dealt within the context of the historical specificity of a state. There is no consensus in the Nigerian state on the perception of its national question. There are two broad perceptions, however, of these contradictions and imbalances. These are the ethnic- and class-based. The differentiation is rooted in the perception of the state, the critical nature of the nationality question, the import of the ownership structure and the ideological context of the governance process.

These tendencies, however, agree that the dominant issues are predicated on identifiable questions. First, the national question debate centers on the national unity, local autonomy, self-determination, equitable distribution of revenue and other national resources, rewards, opportunities and power. Secondly, it is hinged on the enforcement of fundamental human rights, including rights to franchise and empowerment, social and economic rights to basic needs' satisfaction. Thirdly, it encapsulates the religious question that includes the core issues of secularity and theocracy, the relationship between the Nigerian state and religion, the attitude of the assumed secular state to the recurring ethno-religious crises, and a clear-cut national agenda to foster the cordial co-existence of the various communal groups in the country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious states (*Eteng, 1998*).

The national question in Nigeria is traced to the amalgamation of the disparate and isolated ethno-linguistic nationalities into Nigeria's colonial state (*Eteng, Ibid*). The lopsided nature of the federal system accentuated

the national question (*Eguru, 2003; Ihonvbere, 2003; Momoh, 2003*). The federalism debate in Nigeria is predicated on the politics of states creation and local government, the control and appropriation of national resources among the federating units, the access to and control of political power at the center, the unresolved indigeneship and settler question and the distribution of socio-economic infrastructure. The conflictual relations among the federating units that led to the Nigerian civil war were accentuated through the annulment of the June 12 Presidential Elections presumably won by Chief M. K. O. Abiola, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) Presidential Candidate. The crisis occasioned by the annulled June 12 elections reinvigorated the debate on the national question, promoted the growth of somewhat civil society organisations that campaigned for a *sovereign national conference* and the termination of military dictatorship.

The pro-statist Asiodu group began the advocacy for a national debate on the future of the Nigerian state. There were indications, however, that this group was promoted by the Babangida government against backdrop of skepticism of the civil society for the endless manipulated and crisis ridden political transition programme. This statist manipulation politics spurred the Nigerian progressive led by the radical lawyer, Mr. Alao Aka Bashorun to organize the state truncated national conference on the platform of the National Consultative Forum, NCF, in September, 1989. The state responded through the politics of cajole where a national conference was organized in Abuja in 1990, to assuage agitations and disgust occasioned by the subversion of the alternative non-state conference.

The Nigerian Labour Congress, NLC, and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) have variously organized conferences on the alternative to the state implemented Structural Adjustment Programme,

(SAP). The economic reform measures have been implemented at huge social cost thus drawing public outrage and civil society's condemnation of its impoverishing impact. The Bretton Woods institutions with the least inclusion of the Nigerian Civil Society externally defined the SAP policy. This economic policy inflicted socio-psychological pains on the Nigerian People thus requiring a repressive state to contain the resulting agitations, protests, strikes, rallies and other forms of political actions. The alternative conferences were aborted by the state, which was insistent on imposing the statist economic policy. The repressive nature of the Nigeria State, however, further deepened the contradictions within the political economy and expedited the struggle to democratize the public space. The civil society had perceived the economic crises within the context of the broader national question. The professional groups particularly the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA) under the Babangida regime became vociferous in the struggle against military dictatorship and political corruption, deteriorating economic conditions and collapsing social infrastructure. The radical posturing of the professional organizations led to their banning and un-banning by the military as means of intimidating and coercing the civil society to accepting statist economic and political agenda.

The Movement for National Reformation MNR, constituted an integral aspect of the earliest civil society groups that canvassed for the resolution of the national question, and articulated specific agenda. The MNR relied on the defunct regional arrangement to canvass for the division of the country into eight federations with semi-autonomy. It also suggested a union government at the center, the regions as federating units, the residual powers vested in the nationalities and the rights of a nationality to determine where to belong among the federation units (*Momoh, 2003*).

The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, MOSOP, led by the novelist and environment rights activitist, Ken Saro Wiwa, demanded for the resolution of the national question captured as "ERECTISM". This is an acronym for "Ethnic Autonomy, Resource and Environmental Control". It proposed a confederacy of ethnic-based states as prescriptive frameworks to resolving the national question (*Eteng, Ibid*). The Civil Liberties Organisation, CLO, and the Campaign for Democracy have been very active in the struggle against military dictatorship, the brutal assault on the collective choice of the Nigerian people as represented by the June 12 Presidential Elections, the brutal assault on the rights of Nigerian People and opposition leaders through arrest, detention and political assassination.

The Campaign for Democracy, CD, led by the radical critic, Dr. Beko Ransome Kuti led the Nigerian Civil Society to protest the annulment of the June 12 Elections. It relied on effective collaborations with similar mass based organizations including the NLC, to mobilize and raise the political consciousness of the Nigerian people. These were achieved through sit-at-home, strikes, protests and rallies anchored on effective propaganda. The CD political actions raised the level of public outrage against the corrupt military governments, imbued in the civil society the culture of deviance against unpopular and repressive state policies, and provided the platform to propose and agitate for alternative economic and political programmes. It was envisaged that these alternative plans would moderate the high poverty level, foster political and economic pluralism, and promote a developmental process hinged on the populace.

The **National Political Reform Conference** under the Obasanjo civilian government has been deadlocked largely as a result of dispute on the

resource control. The delegates of the South-South geo-political zone had rejected the proposal of the majority report on resource control,
thus leading to series of reactions that stalemated the conference. The state-initiated conference at the onset had been flawed on accounts of the nomination process, the lack of the legal foundation, the restrictions on the likely agenda of the conference, and the seemingly manipulative role of the presidency.

These contradictions and the crisis occasioned by the logjam on the resource control question have renewed interest in the alternative conference proposed by the Pro-National Conference Organisations **PRONACO**. The PRONACO led by the nationalist, Chief Anthony Enahoro, and Professor Wole Soyinka serves as a mobilizing platform of progressive forces, workers organizations, human rights groups, the mass media and students' organizations and ethnic nationalities. It is committed to organizing a People's Conference with a view to discussing and negotiating the national question in Nigeria.

The PRONACO Conference as an alternative to the state sponsored conference raises pertinent issues. First, it is a challenge to the dominance of the state in defining the national agenda. Secondly, it raises question on the legitimacy of the state as against the popular sovereignty of the Nigerian people. Thirdly, it raises question on the enforceability of the conference conclusions and recommendations. Fourthly, there is a prospect that the state will resort to panic measures including the abortion of the conference as bases to perpetuate the status quo or it may impose the conclusions of the state-sponsored conference on the Nigerian people and avert the convergence of radicals and progressives with a view to sustaining the seeming legitimacy of the state. The Nigerian state will more likely resort to co-optation strategy to undermine the proposed conference or infiltration to destabilize the

process. It is obvious, however, that the national question is unresolved and will likely continue to impinge on the governance process in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

The state is a critical unit to discussing the civil society. The nature of the Nigerian state has had implications for the form and character of civil society. The civil society in Nigeria has grown, overtime as a result of the crises, and contradictions in the Nigerian state. The state had resorted to varying tactics to frustrate and subvert the emergence of vibrant civic organizations. These constitutes the backdrops for the analysis of the role of the civil society involvement points at deliberate and conscious attempts to redeem the public domain, change the context of politics, achieve far reaching political restructuring, promote issue and ideological based politics.

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