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TRENDS IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICS AND ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe and to some degree analyze trends in reorganizing Nigerian local government structure. The central focus will be on the relationship between the political and the executive structure in a broad sense.

Of recent, the debates on the management and the re-organization of local governments in Europe have centered more or less on the type of relationship that should exist between elective officials and administrative officers. The tendency in most countries that have recently undergone reforms and those that are envisaging one has been the reinforcement of the authority of elected officials over their employees because the latter is considered to be accumulating too much decisional power. A few examples will suffice. One of the reasons that motivated the City of Oslo to embrace the 'City cabinet system' was the need to improve political control over the administration¹. The same reason contributed to the Swedish reforms of the 1980s which led to the introduction of 'government by objective' and the introduction of a new structure of formal relationships between political and executive structure known as 'ordering and performing organizations'². In other countries like Britain where the committee system is practised and where administrative officers are known to be

more independent because councillors serve on part-time, recent developments have shown the desire of councillors to regain political control over their officers. More and more councillors express their intention to be more involved in the recruitment of their administrators. According to the report of the Widdicombe Committee, 80% of councillors thought they had to participate more in the recruitment of their senior officers.³ Not only this, the current practice of recruiting chief executives and chief officers on short term contracts⁴ could also be interpreted as a means by political elite to control their administrative counterpart.

The situation in Nigeria calls for a closer analysis and this for two reasons. First, the last two decades have seen the introduction of different reforms which have made local governments to assume new functions which were hitherto performed by federal and state governments in addition to their traditional ones. This development has automatically led to the growth of local bureaucracy, to the evolution of the rules that regulate the recruitment and the advancement of the career of local employees. Second, and most importantly it has brought about changes in the type of relationship that exists between the political and the executive structure. Though the officers have become less dependent on the political group for the regulation of their career, the latter has through the vari-

ous reforms carried out at that level assumed more control of political decisions.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, we present briefly the various reforms that have taken place since the democratisation process of the 1950s. Our main interest here is to see stage by stage how, during the past years, this relationship has evolved. In the second part, some fundamental questions relating to developments during the late eighties and early nineties are examined. In the concluding part, the impact of these changes on the relationship between political leaders and administrators are discussed.

TWO PHASES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT DEVELOPMENT

We have decided to discuss the development in local government since 1950 in two phases. The first phase, starting from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s, was characterised by regional/state reforms and was primarily directed at democratising local government administration and making them more performant through the reduction of their sizes, especially in the North and the merging of unviable ones in the South. In the Eastern and Western regions, efforts were oriented toward enlarging local participation through the reduction of the authority of traditional chiefs who were the pivot of the Native Administration system put in place by the colonial power and also improving the revenue base of these councils to increase their efficiency. Thus, the Eastern Region Local Government Laws of 1950 and 1955, the Western Region Laws of 1952 and 1957, and the Northern Region Native Authority Law of 1954 were promulgated. Though certain changes were noticed in both Eastern and Western Regions, nothing significant happened after the 1954 law in the

North⁵. While the level of participation and the impact which popular participation was designed to have in local administration was happening in Southern Nigeria, the reform in the Northern part was deliberately down turned by the traditional aristocracy in alliance with some members of the educated class who were co-opted, to conserve power instead of diffusing it.⁶

By 1966 when the military took over, the effects of the reforms of the 1950s had disappeared. There was excessive centralisation, financial instability and undemocratic decision making processes.⁷ As a result of these defects, and the division of the country into 12 states instead of the former 4 regions, reforms were carried out at state levels. But the general focus in the new six states of the Northern Region was (a) transferring some of the functions of the Native Authorities to the State government, (b) decentralisation and division of the large Native Authorities and (c) separation of political from administrative functions through the abolition of the Portfolio councillor system. By the time these new reforms were implemented, local government system in the North came to resemble what we had in the South before the military came to power.

The inability of local governments to contribute effectively to local development during the civilian administration led to frustrations in the southern part of the country. At the inception of the military, the general trend in the Western State and in the three new States of the former Eastern region was to try new structures and philosophies. Consequently, the Western state adopted the Sole Administrator/council manager system⁸ as against Development administration in the South Eastern, Rivers and Mid-Western States and Divisional Administration in East Central State. The essence of the systems adopted in

the Eastern States was to create a platform where the efforts of both the state and local government could be harnessed for post war mobilisation and reconstruction. Unfortunately, this could not be achieved as a result of lack of adequate education and commitment on the part of the local population.

In all the reforms implemented in this first phase, efforts were directed toward creating a new relationship between politics and administration at that level. In most of these reforms, the administrative head was put above the Council. In the Eastern States, for example, it was the Development Officer who had the executive authority.⁹ Under the Council Manager system as operated in the Western State, the Council Manager

*"alone had control over the resources (human and material) essential to the successful implementation of the Council's programmes. He alone, and not the Councillors, could deal directly with other Council staff and some powers of discipline over junior staff was delegated to him by the Local Government Service Board . . . (He) was neither appointed nor dismissible by the Council . . ."*¹⁰

The distinctive characteristics of this phase could be summarized as follows. One, a reduction in the influence traditional chiefs had in the running of local government affairs. All the States (excepting Kano, North-Central, North-Western and North-Eastern who gave them some role) tried as much as possible to do away with the pre-eminence of traditional chiefs in their Councils. Despite these exceptions, it was glaring that the institution had suffered a setback. Two, one noticed an increase in the influence of local and state civil

servants in the decision making processes of the Councils. This could be explained by two factors. The first one is as a result of the ban placed on partisan politics after the coup. This led to the absence of elected councillors. Civil servants, appointed by military governors, became councillors, as was the case in the Mid-West and Eastern States. They were consequently made to exercise both political and administrative functions. The second factor is linked to the increased interference of the State in local government activities. State civil servants were appointed under different names like District Officer, Sole Administrator, Development Officer or Divisional Officer to preside over the affairs of local authorities. This presence, no doubt decreased the decisional autonomy of local governments.

The movement from the first to the second phase is outstanding in two ways. First of all there was a change in approach. All previous reforms before 1976 were conceived and implemented at regional and later state levels. The 1976 Local Government Reform was initiated and executed by the Federal Government. This made its effect to be nationwide.

Secondly, unlike the multiple-tier systems that characterised local government structures before then, the reform introduced a single-tier uniform system throughout the country.

Thirdly, the reform gave a formal recognition to Local Government as the third tier of government in the Nigerian federal architecture with clearly defined boundaries, established functions and stated sources of human and financial resources. The essential characteristics of these reforms in the various states of the federation are as stated by the Guidelines:

Political control of Local Government departments by Councils

should be exercised through a small number of Councillors (not normally exceeding four) each of whom will be chairman of a small committee concerned with the political direction of a group of departments or of a single department such as in the case of education. These chairmen will be political heads of the departments or groups of departments and will automatically be members of the Finance and General Purposes Committee which will in effect be the 'cabinet' of the Local Government Council. These committee chairmen as envisaged in this Reform will be responsible for policy issues and will not individually have executive functions. They will undertake political responsibilities for the day-to-day functioning of departments and will represent the Council in these departments and be its eyes and ears. They will give orders to executive heads of local government departments on policy issues only, but not on the internal management of the departments. Executive heads in this matter shall be responsible to the Secretary to the Local Government and will be accountable to the Finance and General Purposes Committee.¹¹

One important aspect of this reform is the determination of the federal government to separate political from administrative functions at the local level. However, the civilian government of the Second Republic reversed most of the achievements of this reform. As a result of certain institutional lapses, elections were not organised at the local level. Civilian governors thus appointed members of their political parties as councillors. The result was a total elimination of the barrier between politics and admin-

istration as laid down by the 1976 reform. Councillors participated not only in the day-to-day running of the council but also in their internal managements contrary to the spirit of the reform.¹² By December 1983 when that civilian administration was overthrown in military coup, a death blow had been given to Local Government. The new military regime appointed Sole Administrators to operate the Local Governments and set up a five man committee, the Dasuki Committee, to review the working of the system. The committee tried in its recommendations, most of which were rejected by the federal government, to strengthen the role of Local Government as the third tier of government. Other reforms that were directed at enhancing the autonomy of Local Government in the late 80s and early 90s include the abolition of the Ministry of Local Government by presidential fiat in October 1988, increased share of revenue allocation to 20% from 10%, and the introduction of the presidential system of administration which led to the politicization of the Office of the Secretary of the Local Government.

SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

Among the numerous questions connected to this development are those on intergovernmental relations, revenue allocation, staff and manpower development. But the one which we are going to discuss and which, in one way or the other, touches on the relationship between the political and executive structure is the issue of political control and accountability.

Political Control and Accountability

The central objective of most reforms in Nigeria has been how to enforce political control and accountability. Two types of political control have been identi-

fied.¹³ They are executive and legislative controls. Robert Presthus, writing on executive control which is carried out by the political executives, said:

"Chief Executive have numerous agencies and instruments that help them check on the huge administrative machine for which they are constitutionally accountable. Personal staffs not only provide eyes and ears through which they can scrutinize bureaucratic activities, they can also be used to galvanise particular agencies into action in response to the demands of policy and politics".¹⁴

This is in line with the principle of representative democracy which advocates a separation between political and administrative functions. The political control of Nigerian local government is placed under an elected council who dictates the political direction of the Council. The Council is supposed to be the supreme policy making organ of the local government. Before the recent change, both the Chairman and Supervisory Councillors were elected directly. The Supervisory Councillors were political heads of their respective departments and as such acted as chairmen of relevant Committees in their respective Departments like education, works, health etc. The Secretary to the Local Government was a career civil servant recruited by the Local Government Service Commission. Among his responsibilities was being a signatory to local government cheques.

One conclusion that could be drawn from this set-up was the high level of involvement of administrators in the decision making process of these councils.¹⁵ It was how to bring this development under control that made the government to introduce a form of presidential system at the local government level.

Consequently, decree 23 of 1991 provided for a presidential arrangement comprising of the Local Government Council as the legislature of the local government council. It also authorizes the Chairman of Local Government as Chief Executive of his local government to appoint Supervisors who are to take charge of specific portfolios. A Supervisor, who no longer sits in Council, can attend council meetings if invited, to explain the conduct of affairs under his portfolio. The chairman, assisted by his Vice and the Supervisors constitute the Executive arm. The thrust of this decree as regards the relationship between the political and administrative structure concerns the politicization of the post of the Secretary to the Local Government Council. The Secretary to the Local Government hence becomes an appointee of the Chairman. He supersedes the former career Secretary who is now made the Head of Personnel. The Head of personnel (the former Secretary) reports, in a way, directly to the politically appointed Secretary and to the Chief Executive of the Local Government, who is the Chairman.

This mode of internal management, known as the separate executive, has its own advantages. These according to Stewart¹⁶ are, firstly, it "enhances the effectiveness of the authority by giving clear direction to the authority". Secondly, "it aids accountability by showing to the public where responsibility for the actions of the authority lies". Lastly, it "avoids the absorption of a general body of councillors in the detailed working of the authority, avoiding the time consuming and cumbersome nature of the committee system".

Based on these developments in Nigeria, the local government Chairman as the Chief Executive and the Chief Accounting Officer can not be exonerated from financial misappropriation or non

performance. He has the last word in all matters to do with money, planning, personnel and local administration, before the final decision is taken by the council as a whole. Under this arrangement, there is too much concentration of power in the political executive and this raises the issue of safeguards against the abuse of power. The administrative officers are relegated to the second position and their traditional role of investigating possible alternative solution to the problems that are given them by the political executive is jeopardised.

With the advent of the Abacha regime on November 17, 1993, the political structures at the three levels of government were swept away. At the local government level, the political executive was replaced by Caretaker Committee comprising of a Chairman and four Councillors, all of them appointed. As a follow up to this development, the former career secretary, who was made Head of Personnel Management under the reform of 1988, was now asked assume the functions of the Secretary to the Local Government. This is a return to the pre-1988 situation.

One significant remark that needs to be made as regards the relationship between the political and executive structure within the last three years concerns the difficulty of both to adjust to the current situation. The Chairmen of Caretaker Committees desire to operate like the elected Chairmen that preceded them. They want an almost total control over their personnel, the Secretary inclusive. As for the career Secretaries who were at a loss during the Babangida years, they see the current dispensation as another opportunity to assume their pre-1988 role. The situation has not been easy for the Secretaries and other senior staff of local governments. As one Secretary recently remarked and I quote:

*"We have had an entire management staff, Secretary to the Local Government, Area Officers moved on the say so of a Council Chairman. We have also had a Secretary to the Local Government removed and marked as unsuitable to hold such a position just on the say of another Chairman."*¹⁷

The Local Government Service Commission has not been able to defend local government officers as they expect. The commission has not given any fair hearing to most of these cases reported by even appointed Chairmen. This development further shows that there is an increasing move, in Nigerian local governments to place the administrative structure under political control.

It is worth noting that the federal government recently announced another local government election to come up shortly. This election may usher in a new type of relationship between the executive and the political structures at the local level depending on the operating documents and decrees that will guide them.

CONCLUSION

There is a remarkable change in the relationship between the political and administrative structure in Nigerian local governments which has placed the political leaders above the administrative officers. Even though this trend has been on for some time now as demonstrated in the various reforms carried out by government, it is more noticeable in the military regime of General Babangida with the enactment of Decree 23 of 1991. The most remarkable aspect of these changes is the appointment of the Local Government Secretary by the Chairman. To say now that the Secretary is a political officer will not be an exaggeration. Though certain professional

knowledge and abilities are taken into consideration in his selection, it is clear that the major consideration is political. The best qualified candidate is not given the job. Since he is not covered by the local government scheme of service which regulates recruitment, promotion, discipline and termination of appointment, it means that he only retains his job at the pleasure of the Chairman who can decide to change him at will. He can therefore not be seen, as demonstrated in the

aborted Third Republic, to go against the wish of his boss, even when the actions taken by the former are contrary to the principles and practice of the local government service. Recent developments have not changed this situation. This is evidenced in the various punishments meted out to some officers by the Local Government Service Commissions of some States because they were reported by their Chairmen.

NOTES

* Most of the deductions in the last part of this article are generated from the operation of Local Government during the Babangida years.

1. See Harald Baldersheim, "Aldermen into Ministers" Oslo's Experiment with City Cabinet" in *Local Government Studies*, Vol. 18 No. 1, Spring 1992, pp. 18-30.
2. For more on this see, P. O. Norell, "Communal Administrators. The Swedish Case", in V. Hoffmann-Martinot, R Balme (eds.), **Local and Regional Bureaucracies in Western Europe**, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Bordeaux, CERVL, Les Cahiers du CERVL - series Actes de Colloques - no. 2, December 1991, pp. 149-179.
3. **The Widdicombe Committee**, "The Conduct of Local Authority Business" (June 1986). HMSO Cmnd, 9797, p. 148
4. *ibid*
5. See Wraith R., **Local Government in West Africa** (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964) p. 128 and Whitaker, **C. S. The Politics of Tradition: Continuity and Change in Northern Nigeria**. Zaria, Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1980, p.78
6. Gboyega A., **Political Values and Local Government in Nigeria**, Lagos, Malthouse Press, 1987, p. 74
7. Smith B.C., "The New System of Local Government in Nigeria - Background to Reform", **Local Government Studies**, March/April 1983, p.54
8. The Western State first adopted the Sole Administrator system before going to embrace the American Council Manager system in April 1973 as a result of general dissatisfaction in the state with the former system which led to the Western State riots of 1968. See Western State of Nigeria, **Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Disturbances which occurred in Certain Parts of the Western State of Nigeria in the month of December, 1968**, Ibadan, Government Printer, 1969.
9. Gboyega A., *op. cit.* p.119
10. *Ibid.* p.129
11. Federal Republic of Nigeria, **Guidelines for Local Government Reform**, Kaduna, Government Printer, 1976, paragraph 30.
12. See Otiri, E. Julius, **Anatomy of Decision-Making in Warri Local Government**

- Council**, Postgraduate Diploma in Local Government Studies Thesis, O.A.U., Ile-Ife, July 1988.
13. Awotokun, 'Kunle, "Control of Administration of Local Governments in Nigeria: Lessons from Ondo State 1979-1983" **The Nigerian Journal of Local Government Studies**, Vol. 3 No. 1 April, 1989, p.141
 14. As cited in *ibid.* p.141
 15. We have discussed this in "Decision Making in Nigerian Local Government: The Role of Appointed Officers", Forthcoming in **Inter-Disciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (I.J.H.S.)**, Bayero University, Kano.
 16. Stewart J., "The Internal Management of Local Authorities in Britain - The Challenge of Experience in Other Countries", **Local Government Studies**, Vol. 18 No. 1 Spring, 1992
 17. See "**Decentralisation and Accountability in Lagos State Local Government**" A Paper presented by Otunba Nurudeen A. Ojora-Adejiyan, Secretary to Badagry Local Government, at the **2nd Session of Local Government Service Forum**, Held at Ikeja Local Government Banquet Hall, on Thursday 30th November, 1995, p.11.