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PROFESSIONALIZATION OF NIGERIAN CIVIL SERVICE: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The tremendous growth in size and responsibilities of the Nigerian Civil Service, and the realities of socio-economic and political milieux within which it operates have made the institution embroiled in many serious problems (Govt of Nigeria, 1987:105-108). Today, an average Nigerian perceives the civil service negatively. It has been stigmatized with diverse vices. Examples include red tapeism, inflexibility, conservatism and ineffectiveness. The challenges posed for the civil service by its increased size, complexity, responsibilities in Nigerian economic boom/depression and the problems of the institution as outlined above have made it a subject of inquiries by successive governments, all in an attempt to tailor it towards governmental goals. Such inquiries during the post-independence period include the 1961 Morgan Commission (1971), Adebo Commission (1974), Udoji Commission and 1985 Dotun Phillips Study Group.

In recognition of the pivotal role of the Civil Service in national development, the Political Bureau inaugurated in 1986 by the present administration and charged with the responsibility of charting a new political order for Nigeria succeeded in rekindling debate on the problems of the Civil Service. One of the identified problems include the structural dysfunction of the institution characterized by an amalgam of generalists and professional personnel in the executive cadre (Govt of Nigeria, 1987). The consequence was an incessant conflict between the generalists and professionals resulting in poor coordination and control, sub-optimal use of scarce resources which tend to abort government policies and programmes (Government of Nigeria, 1987).

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incessant conflict between the generalists and professionals resulting in poor coordination and control, sub-optimal use of scarce resources which tend to abort government policies and programmes (Government of Nigeria, 1987).

This paper focuses on professionalization of the Nigeria Civil Service under the 1988 Civil Service Reforms. Professionalization of the civil service has been received with wide skepticism. Its avowed critics include scholars and administrators. Are there inherent problems in its implementation? What are the prospects of the exercise? The paper will address itself specifically to the questions raised in this section.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The concept "professionalization" derives from the concept "profession". A good starting point to understand the term profession is to quote the useful definition from the Encyclopedia of Education. It states profession as a field of economic activity requiring academic preparation above the high school level (Encyclopedia of Education, 1971). A crucial point to note from this definition is that the basic requirement for entry into any modern profession is a thorough specialized training above secondary education. Professionalism presupposes a specialized body of knowledge and skills acquired over a long period of education and training. It also requires adherence to a set of standards and values that delineate acceptable and/or desirable modes of behaviour (Fieldman, 1978:140-141). These values are instilled through professional training and reinforced afterwards through relationships with colleagues, continuing education programmes and most significantly membership in a professional organization (Fieldman, 1978). Similarly, it has a clear cut-occupational field as well as offering a life-time career to its members. From the above analysis, we can reasonably categorize law, medicine, agriculture, teaching, architecture, planning and management as professions.

The development and increasing strategic importance of the professions probably constitute the most important change that has occurred in the occupational system of

modern societies (Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, 1979:536). In an equal vein, the soaring technological, socio-economic political changes throughout the world are placing increasing demands on governments globally for the development and acquisition of a highly talented workforce to meet contemporaneous needs.

In the British conception, which has more or less become universal, the term civil service has a dual definition (Adamolekun 1983:151). In one sense, it refers to the body of permanent officials appointed to assist the political executive in formulating and implementing policies (Adamolekun 1983). In the second sense, it refers to the ministries and departments within which specific aspects of government work are carried out (Adamolekun 1983). The definition although British in origin is nonetheless relevant for our purpose. In a nutshell, the civil service whether in a socialist or liberal democratic state translates law into action and brings the national government into its daily contacts with the rank and file of any nation (Ogg 1987). It is a crucial government machinery for the realization of the purpose for which government exists.

THE NIGERIAN CIVIL SERVICE PRIOR TO 1988 CIVIL SERVICE REFORMS

In order to aid our understanding of the nature of the 1988 Nigerian Civil Service Reforms, a brief synopsis of the Nigerian Civil Service prior to the reforms is necessary.

The Nigerian Civil Service came into being with the advent of British Colonial rule. In the early colonial period, in fact up to the late forties the Nigerian Civil Service was responsible for the maintenance of law and order. With independence, Nigeria like many new nations adopted development ideology. Successive Nigerian governments were poised to battle the problems and symptoms of economic, social and political backwardness. The increased financial resources available to the government through oil earnings also increased the tempo of government activities. These range from commerce, transportation, health, housing to communication.

Against this background, the civil service assumed a prominent role in national development. In spite of the enormous change in its size and in the scale and complexity of its area of concern the civil service still retains the basic structures and modalities, established many years ago by the colonial masters.

The political tune and aspirations of a new nation in which emphasis changed from law and order to development administration did not change the conservative structure in which the administrative officers dominate their professional counterparts. The generalists measured more in influence than their professional counterparts. Members of the administrative class were posted to head professional ministries (Balogun, 1983:151). This produced a situation in which the generalists wielded power in vital areas such as policy formulation, financial control as well as the interpretation and implementation of civil service rules (Balogun, 1983). Such a restrictive role frequently tried the patience of professional officers and brought them in to conflict with generalists upon whom devolved wide responsibilities (Balogun, 1983).

While the Nigerian Civil Service was hierarchical in nature, the focus of operations was on compliance with the regulations and adherence to procedures (Phillips, 1988). This tends to stifle innovations from subordinates as well as relegate the output or results of operations.

GENESIS OF THE 1988 CIVIL SERVICE REFORMS

The 1988 Civil Service Reforms as announced by the President of Nigeria, General Babangida in his 1988 Budget speech could be traced to the following factors.

As highlighted earlier, the transition in status of Nigeria as a colony to a sovereign nation ushered in radical changes which called for a changed governmental orientation towards satisfying the rising expectations of people in the social and economic spheres. It was in this context that the civil service acquired a developmental role. Regrettably, the civil service showed clear signs of inability to cope and respond effectively to its vital role of public policy

advancement, implementation and monitoring. For instance, annual budget goals have become rituals. Quite often, government programmes are badly conceived and results disappointing (thereby depressing citizens raised hopes) (Olojede, 1986). This phenomenon has in most times evoked public hatred and eroded government legitimacy.

It is a truism in management circles that there is a correlation between morale and productivity in organizations. In Nigeria, the morale of civil servants had declined considerably, posing great threat to productivity. Prior to 1975 the civil servants had enjoyed security of tenure. However, the massive purges of 1975 and 1984 inflicted an unprecedented sense of insecurity. In the 1975 exercise, not less than 11,000 public officers, (civil servants) inclusive were separated from the service (Kazaure, 1989). In 1984, the Buhari/Idiagbon administration further relieved 3,000 Federal civil servants of their posts (Kazaure, 1989). The massive separation of employees had a very negative effect on the civil service. In quest for physical and mental security, many civil servants began to engage in corrupt and subversive activities.

Another contributory factor to low morale was the adoption of personnel practices which placed undue emphasis on hierarchy, strict adherence to rules, randomized training and haphazard application of federal character. Balogun in the following extract reiterates the defects of the Nigerian Civil Service.

"Nigerian Civil Service is still characterized by inability to plan ahead; analyze the costs and benefits of decisions; anticipate developments in the environment and take necessary pre-emptive decisions; deploy, utilize and evaluate human and material resources; pioneer needed innovations; and motivate above average performance. Given such poor management climate, the Civil Service cannot satisfactorily fulfil the developmental role (Balogun, 1983)".

For the sake of completeness we must discuss the thorny issue of federal character in Nigerian public service particularly its effects on staff morale. Federal character simply refers to the fair and effective representation given to the various component units and communal groups in the nation's institutions, agencies and positions of power, status and influence (see Govt of Nigeria, 1987). The rationale for federal character is adequately reflected in Section 13(3) of the 1979 constitution.

"The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies (Govt of Nigeria, 1979)".

In essence, it means the recruitment and promotion of Civil Servants shall be based on federal character among other factors. In the past, the principle has been haphazardly implemented or applied in a manner creating disaffection among employees. Some information obtained on selected public institutions revealed glaring malpractices in its application (see Govt of Nigeria, 1987). On the negative side of the scoreboard, this created daunt effects on civil servants. Civil Servants discriminated against not only became embittered but, worse still posed grave dangers to the realization of government objectives.

The immediate cause of the 1988 reforms is the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which was instituted in 1986. SAP as contained in the 1986 Budget is a policy reaction to the prevalent economic problems: rising debts, dwindling foreign earnings, inefficient public enterprises and unrestrained taste for foreign goods. The success of the Programme depends on the

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effective implementation which chiefly is the task of the civil service. Beginning a "new economic path" without

a corresponding structural shake up of the institutions would have amounted to sheer rhetorics or statement of intentions by government.

As outlined above, it is therefore inevitable for a purposeful or credible regime "committed" to the upliftment of the nation from the prevalent economic and social misery to take a decisive course of action in renovating the civil service. It is in the light of the above reasons that large scale reforms were embarked on to cure the civil service of its many ailments.

FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE 1988 CIVIL SERVICE REFORMS

In his 1988 Budget address to the nation, the President of Nigeria, General Babangida announced the following fundamental changes in the civil service structure:

- (a) The Ministry: The Minister will now both be the Chief Executive and Accounting Officer rather than the Permanent Secretary;
- (b) Tenure of Office: The Permanent Secretary's appointment is already political and its duration is at the pleasure of the President. Henceforth, holders of that position will retire with the Government which appoints them unless, of course, an incoming administration decides to reappoint them. It follows that any officer, who is offered the post of Permanent Secretary may have an option whether or not to accept it.
- (c) Professional Service: Each Ministry will now be professionalized. Every officer whether a specialist or generalist, will now make his career entirely in the Ministry or Department of his choice, and thereby acquire the necessary expertise and experience through relevant specialized training and uninterrupted involvement with the work of the Ministry or Department.

- (d) Federal Civil Service Commission: Under the new arrangement, each Ministry will undertake the appointment, discipline and promotion of its staff under general and uniform guidelines to be provided by the Federal Civil Service Commission.
- (e) Ministerial Structural Changes: The Ministries of Finance and National Planning have already being merged and will now be called the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. Details of its responsibilities and functions are being spelt out separately. The Central Bank of Nigeria will work directly with the Office of the President. Furthermore, a Permanent Planning Commission is hereby established to be called the "National Planning Commission and to undertake functions which are being administratively spelt out.
- (f) Budget Office: The Budget Department (Revenue, Recurrent and Capital Estimates) of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development is hereby transferred to the Presidency to afford the necessary fiscal supervision and control. In turn, the Productivity, Prices and Incomes Board which is now part of the Presidency is hereby transferred to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development to enable the Board function properly within the economic policies of Government.

PROFESSIONALIZED CIVIL SERVICE

One of the most striking innovations brought about by the new reform is the introduction of a professionalized civil service wherein each officer is expected to specialize in his area of deployment and make a career in one Ministry.

The challenges of a results oriented administration which requires specialized skills with greater value on

performance made the process of professionalization inevitable in the civil service. Successive Nigerian governments have assumed paternalistic postures since independence. The citizens look unto government for succour. This phenomenon contributed to the pervasive influence of government on the citizen's lives. Today, government activities revolve around public health, education, agriculture, community development, transport network, commerce, defence, communications, etc. These are specialized needs/services requiring specialists and not "jack of all trades" or "generalists" in various government departments.

As pointed out in previous sections, the failure of the conservative structure dominated by the generalists to perform effectively and relevantly in the administration of vital government policies and programmes culminated in professionalizing the civil service.

ELEMENTS

As stated in Implementation Guidelines on the Civil Service Reforms of 1988, the fundamental elements of a professionalized service include the following:

(1) At the commencement of the new dispensation, posting of officers from one Ministry to another will no longer be allowed.

(2) Each officer, whether a specialist or generalist, will now make his career entirely in the Ministry or Department of his choice, and thereby, acquire the necessary expertise and experience, through relevant specialized training and uninterrupted involvement with the work of the Ministry or Department.

(3) At the commencement of the new dispensation all officers who become otherwise displaced shall get placement in accordance with their first three choices. Those who are unwilling to be retrained or refuse to accept redeployment shall withdraw from the Civil Service.

(4) Each Ministry shall undertake the appointment, discipline and promotion of its staff under the general and uniform guidelines provided by the Civil Service Commission.

(5) The principle of Federal character shall be faithfully adhered to at the point of entry, i.e. Grade Level 07-10 while, therefore, from Grade 11 and above, the mechanism or criterion for promotion shall be based on the universally accepted principle of experience, performance on the job, length of service, good conduct, relevant qualifications, training, performance at interviews and relevante examinations where appropriate.

(6) Each Ministry/Extra Ministerial Department shall be restructured vertically and horizontally to ensure overall management efficiency and effectiveness, high degree of specialization; job satisfaction, optimum span of control and clear lines of authority and responsibility.

(7) Each Department shall be sub-divided into Divisions to reflect broad professional areas within a Department. Each Division shall be subdivided into Branches or structured to reflect sub-professional areas. Each Branch shall be sub-divided into sections to reflect specialized activities within a sub-professional area. In all cases the span of control shall not exceed eight (8). The departments, divisions, branches and sections of a Ministry/Extra-Ministerial Department shall be headed as follows:

<u>Unit</u>	-	<u>Headship</u>
Department	-	Director, Grade Level 17
Divisions	-	Deputy Director, Grade Level 16
Branches	-	Assistant Director, Grade Level 15
Sections	-	Chief X, Grade Level 14 (Chief X refers to specialized function or profession).

(8) Thus, there would be in the personnel Department of a Ministry one Director of Personnel, and several Chief Personnel Officers.

(9) Each Officer shall bear a functional title reflecting his profession or specialization. In this regard, the use of titles such as Secretary for X, or Assistant Secretary (X) or Executive Officer (X), shall cease.

Civil Servants currently in the Clerical, Executive, Administrative and Professional cadres shall bear functional titles according to the following scheme (where X refers to specialized functions or profession).

<u>Grade Level</u>	<u>Functional Title</u>
17	Director of X
16	Deputy Director of X
15	Assistant Director of X
14	Chief X Officer
13	Assistant Chief X Officer
12	Principal X Officer
10	Senior X Officer
09	X Officer I
08	X Officer II
07	Senior X Assistant
06	X Assistant I
05	X Assistant II
04	X Assistant III

(10) Administrative Officers in general administration shall now specialize in one area of management such as Personnel, Planning, Budgeting, Finance, Research, Statistics, etc. which will enhance their deployability into other relevant departments of the ministries. Administrative Officers who are already performing professional duties shall remain in such specialized areas and shall henceforth bear a functional title (e.g. Planning Officers). Administrative Officers who are unable to select a specialization shall report to the Federal Civil Service Commission for appropriate counselling, retraining and redeployment.

(11) Every Civil Servant that satisfies the laid down criteria for advancement can rise to the topmost post in his Ministry/Extra Ministerial Department, namely that of Directors, G.L. 17. Also, any Civil Servant who has the relevant qualifications, training and experience may cross from one department to another within one Ministry/Extra Ministerial Department. In other words, vertical or horizontal mobility within a Ministry/Extra Ministerial Department shall be subject only to requisite qualifications, training, experience, good report and vacancy.

(12) The present annual performance scheme shall be replaced with one which emphasizes concrete and measurable performance with appropriate rewards and sanctions being based on performance rating.

(13) In consultation with the Director-General and the Directors of Departments in the Ministry, the Chief Executive of the Ministry shall set the targets which each Civil Servant in the Ministry shall aim at, even in routine matters. (see Phillips 1988a)

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

With the constraint imposed on the length of this paper, we cannot discuss all the problems of the exercise. We shall therefore examine problems that are central to the successful implementation of the exercise.

As explicated in the paper, the 1988 Civil Service Reforms via professionalization seeks to avoid the wastefulness of ignorance, wrong guesses and impulsive imaginations/decisions. In short, it is a commendable effort to change the intransigent civil service. However, its practical application raises a number of problems.

According to the general guidelines on professionalization, each ministry/extra ministerial department shall be restructured vertically and horizontally to ensure overall management efficiency and effectiveness, high degree of specialization, optimum span of control and clear lines of authority and responsibility (Phillips 1988a). In addition, each department shall be headed by Directors who are

specialists. Also the Ministers shall now be Chief Executives and Accounting Officers of the Ministry rather than Permanent Secretaries (who were drawn from the administrative class). The position of Permanent Secretary has been replaced by Director-General whose appointment is now political. The Director-General is now to serve as the Deputy Minister with considerable functions delegated to them, and in the absence of the Minister, to act as the Minister (Phillips 1988a). In effect, Director-Generals are now to be part of the ruling class. They and the Ministers are now to be partners and no longer competitors (Phillips 1988a). The new arrangement is to ensure maximum effectiveness in the Civil Service and that the locus of responsibility is not separated from the locus of authority (Phillips 1988a). Until recently, the Ministers were held responsible by the President and the Public for the performance of the Ministry, but it was the Permanent Secretary who had authority to control the resources of men, money and materials available to the Ministry to perform its functions (Phillips 1988a). Similarly, the professional heads of departments had no formal direct access to the Ministers (Phillips 1988b). Official communication between the Ministers and professional heads were routed through Permanent Secretaries. The aforementioned structural defects created internal power struggles between Ministers/Permanent Secretaries on the one hand and Permanent Secretaries/Professionals on the other hand. As a result, incalculable damage was done to policy advancement and implementation.

Theoretically, the structural renovation appears logical and sound. But in practice nothing much has changed for the Nigerian Civil Service. In an interview with certain civil servants, it was revealed that the Ministers are unwilling to delegate responsibilities to Director-Generals (probably due to the old animosity that existed). From the foregoing, it appears that there is still a lack of understanding about new responsibilities by the main actors. The professionalization of policy and management can only be achieved if all the principal actors understand their roles in designated capacities. We suggest that the principal actors should be exposed to relevant refresher courses and seminars to enable them adapt and imbibe the changes. Contents of courses must

reflect the new changes in structures and responsibilities.

The central role of training for lateral transfers, development of employee skills and performance improvement is recognized in the guidelines. Training is the benchmark by which erstwhile administrative, clerical and executive cadres can become truly specialized. Specifically, the administrative officers should specialize in one area of management i.e. personnel, planning, budgeting, finance, research and statistics. Conversely, the guidelines is silent on its modalities. What are the training needs of personnel? What institutions would be responsible for training? What proportion of funds are to be allocated to training? The government clearly failed to address itself to these significant aspects. Closely related is the problem posed by the incumbents of the former executive class who have been integrated into management departments without requisite training. Harmonization of incumbents who are mostly non-graduates in the absence of predetermined training is likely to make unification difficult. There is a pressing need for government to allocate substantial funds to the training of Civil Servants. However, training should be based on identified needs of departments and it must be continuous to foster professionalism. Specific institutions should be mapped out to meet the training needs of different categories of civil servants.

Our educational institutions also have a role to play in ensuring the operationalization of professionalism in the civil service. Curricula of some of our conventional educational institutions must be reformed to orient these institutions to the specialized functions and needs of some of the ministries. An intersectoral professional dialogue between educational planners, manpower experts and heads of departments (within the Civil Service) is appropriate to relate curricula to the civil service needs.

The reform affected both the civil servants and the structures. As contained in management literature, manpower represents the most critical variable in the attainment of organizational goals. The reforms tend to

underestimate the support of the civil servants in the successful implementation of the reform. Reforms were adopted with little need to carry civil servants along. The result is an intense feeling of non-involvement by the human elements within the service. Deliberate and planned campaigns should be employed to educate the civil servants on the rationale and advantage of the exercise.

A final drawback that needs to be addressed with precision is the Federal character. While government aims at results oriented civil service on one hand, undue adherence to the Federal character at certain levels (Grade Level 07-10) on the other hand negates such radical objectives. This is more disturbing because these levels are large and are also critical entry points. Entrants at these points are mostly fresh graduates from universities, polytechnics and those on secondment. In contemporary times, the environmental changes (technology, social, economic and political) are placing great demands on governments worldwide to acquire highly talented workforce to meet societal needs. This can only be achieved through the recruitment of professionals with proven competence. The structural provisions for federal character at three main levels in the reform is diametrically opposed to the principle of merit, competence and proven skills which are essential ingredients of professionalism. It is true that the government must be politically responsive to the constituent units. The Nigerian public service ought not to be an exclusive preserve of an ethnic group or community. Equally, developed skills should not be sacrificed for mediocrity in the name of federal character, otherwise the reform would be an exercise in futility. In the spirit of the reform, we suggest that appointments based on federal character should be limited to Grade Level 07-08. This we consider fair. Strict application of the federal character at the point of entry from Grade Level 07-10 has the potential of weakening the corporate spirit of employees. Civil Servants whose employment are considered unmerited are likely to be resented and not to be cooperated with. This may in turn, lead to fragmentation of personnel, groups and loyalties within the civil service. Given

underestimate the support of the civil servants in the successful implementation of the reform. Reforms were adopted with little need to carry civil servants along. The result is an intense feeling of non-involvement by the human elements within the service. Deliberate and planned campaigns should be employed to educate the civil servants on the rationale and advantage of the exercise.

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The problems highlighted above are understandably expected in any human contrivance. They could be overcome through annual monitoring, review and evaluation to bring about required changes.

Whatever the problems in the exercise, the advantages are immense. Professionalizing the institution will increase its capacity to respond actively to societal needs. It is the professional skills that give government departments their problem-solving capacities; and their speciality often gives them foresight into the shape of things to come (Rouke, 1976). If professionals can assume "real" headship of departments they would be better placed to communicate and advice ministers directly on policy and programme objectives/implementation. This would be against the former practice where policy options or proposals were routed through generalist heads who served as 'gatemen' between ministers and professionals. This in most cases results in unnecessary delays, slowing the pace and flow of government business.

Contrary to anticipated fears of imminent destruction of the administrative class, the reform will eventually enhance the marketability of this cadre in the pre and post retirement periods as the case is in France. In France, it is a common trend for private enterprises to compete with each other to gain managerial talents of former civil servants (Ridley, 1979). This could be ascribed to the specialized and developed skills for which the French Civil Servants are noted, and which they have acquired over a period of time in specific fields. The Nigerian experience is opposite as most retired administrative officers enmeshed in the generalist civil service culture find it difficult to fit elsewhere. Most civil servants who were fortunate to hold top management positions after retirement were able to do so because of either initial professional qualifications or "questionable roles" while in service which were favourable to private enterprises which later employed them (Dudley 1985:117-119).

CONCLUSION

The paper has attempted to examine the professionalization of the Nigerian Civil Service, particularly its possible role in enhancing productivity in the public sector. Prior to the reform, the Nigerian Civil Service had acquired a negative image for itself. All too often, government programmes had been subverted through bureaucratic inertia. This phenomenon has contributed to the prevalent apathy towards public affairs.

The professionalization of the Nigerian Civil Service is not without its problems. These include inadequate information on vital aspects, financial commitment, contradictions between merit and representativeness and the failure to involve the people who are to be affected by the reforms. Nonetheless, if the aforementioned problems can be removed, professionalization would see civil servants in developing greater competence, awareness and initiative in the performance of their duties and ensuring greater productivity in the Civil Service. It is in this context that the fundamental structural change is conceived as a timely solution to the age long problem.

The success of the reform depends on a continuous monitoring and evaluation by government with a view to making necessary amendments to unforeseen problems. Civil Servants must also be actively involved not only to provide information on bottlenecks but also to secure their loyalty for the successful implementation of the reform.

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