The Roots of Political Instability in an Artificial “Nation-State”: The Case of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian “nation-state” is an artificial project of European 19th century colonial endeavor in Africa. As a cobbled variety of the state in Europe and North America, its pretence to the concept of state has not spared it from the contradictions of its awkward past. The immediate implication of this failure is the persistence of political instability. In this paper, I argue that as a “state”, its construction is not only flawed and absurd, it has remained unsuccessful as well. The primary reason for that lies in the respective refusal by both the British and the Caliphate undertakers of the Nigerian colonial state and its post-colonial successor to acknowledge the resilience of the distinct groups and identities that were forced into Nigeria. I also argue here for a new paradigm that locates political conflict and instability in Africa within the dialectic of state-civil society dissonance situated in a context-specific articulation of three concepts: construction, entrenchment, and transformation. I argue further that nation-states are stable or unstable to the extent that they are able to fulfil the tasks of construction, entrenchment, and transformation. That solution to Nigeria’s political instability lies in first by unraveling its present constitution, and secondly by the evolution of a new entity which accepts a new dialogue that proposes a challenge beyond formal construction of state apparatuses to an active relationship of entrenchment and transformation.

Premise

The much deserved shouts of hurrah which heralded the more relevant intellectual trend of “bringing the state back in” (Skocpol 1979) to the center of the study of contentious politics seems to have eclipsed one outstanding fact. Which is that the field has not completely recovered from the tenets of earlier traditions. This

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is so especially when Africa is the focus. Everywhere, stateness in Africa is still associated with the modern state as it emerged over the last five centuries in Europe (Sklar 1965; 1981). Each time when the subject is Africa (Young 1976; Badru 1998), little regard is cast on giving scrutiny to three crucial attributes of European and North American states which coincide with three stages of every state building exercise in Western Europe and elsewhere in North America to see if they are applicable to the contemporary entities in Africa which lay claim to the concept of “state” too. The political stability that we see in specific West European and North American states is indicative of the fact that not only were West European and North American states successfully constructed, equally, they were also successfully entrenched and transformed. Successful state building is therefore a function of the success in terms of these three attributes — construction, entrenchment, and transformation. In situations where all three attributes were accomplished successfully, the outcome is political stability. The same is untrue in the reverse scenario.

This paper rests on the theoretical position above, i.e. that the root cause of Nigeria’s political instability lies in the inability of the Nigerian colonial state and its post-colonial successor to entrench and transform themselves in any meaningful way. The three attributes of state building mentioned above cover a range of crucial issues rarely dealt with when scholars discourse the “Nigerian State”. The uniqueness of the issues they cover will only become clear with further exposition of their relevance in state building. Furthermore, if states are indeed “critical and direct agents of socio-economic change” (Migdal, Kohli and Shue 1994: 2) there is no getting around the need to address these three attributes here with respect to Nigeria. The afore-stated facts call for a careful definition of these three attributes of state building.

In this paper, state construction is taken to imply the establishment of a system of rule or political administration over a defined geographical territory which gives identity to the individuals and groups who inhabit it. Here, this definition applies to pre-modern, modern and even post-modern situations. In modern times, at least since Westphalia in the mid seventeenth century, entities which emerged through the course of the process defined above have been accorded international recognition as “nation-states” with a notion of sovereignty (Mansbach, Ferguson and Lampert 1976).

However, construction alone is only a necessary but is still an insufficient condition for a politically stable state. Once a state is constructed, it must be entrenched in order for it to acquire the necessary condition for the next logical step to successful state building and in consequence, political stability. That logical step is transformation. This is so because an un-entrenched state is largely disconnected from society. Sadly, some trends in contemporary scholarship popularize the illusion that this state of un-entrenchment or dis-connectedness in African post-colonial states as “strength”. The inter-link of civil society to the corporate state is