

THE FEAR OF CLASS SUICIDE: OBSTACLE TO RESTRUCTURING NIGERIA SINCE 1960

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Abstract

The 1914 amalgamation brought the North and the South of what became Nigeria into an uneasy and unholy wedlock. Since then, there have been calls for the restructuring of the entity Nigeria. However, despite the incessant clamour for the restructuring of Nigeria, the political elites have continued to pay lip service to the course. While the colonial government severally tinkered with the country's constitutions, it cautiously avoided any political or economic arrangement that ran foul to the ideals of 1914. Post-colonial leaders have also toed the line of resistance to restructuring despite the increase in the calls for it and the popular belief that it is a viable option towards sustaining the unity of Nigeria. While some leaders diplomatically avoid it, others made sincere move to get it done by calling for national conference, but never implemented the resolutions of such conferences. There are still others who played political game with it by using it for political campaign, but eventually turned around to refuse it out rightly. Under the guise of maintaining the unity of the country, others have justified the status quo and deliberately blocked every move to get the country restructured. The restructuring of Nigeria form the ongoing, appear not to be in sight. The needed political will to take the bull by the horn is obviously currently lacking. Admittedly, there are several constraints to the restructuring of Nigeria. However, this paper argues that the major obstacle to restructuring is the fear of class suicide by the elites. It posits that elites are squarely afraid of the outcome of a restructured polity. The fear of losing enormous power to the states, the middle class and unknown forces, largely explains why the elites and those favoured by the status quo have remained opposed to restructuring. What is playing out is a form of class struggle for supremacy. The study is therefore located within the theoretical framework of Karl Marx's Class Struggle. The paper concludes that for restructuring to take place in Nigeria there must either be a compromise that will guarantee a place for the elites or a radical dethronement of that class.

Keywords: Class Suicide, Fear, Nigeria, Obstacle, Restructuring

Introduction

The administrative history of Nigeria first witnessed a falling trend in the number of major administrative units in place, before taking on a rising trend. Starting out with three major administrative units in 1900, the number was reduced to two six years later. By 1906, the Colony of Lagos, the Protectorates of Southern and Northern Nigeria, which made up the 1900 triple-based structure, were reduced to the Southern and Northern Protectorates. Eight years later, the two administrative units were 'merged' into one through the popular but controversial amalgamation of 1914.

The 1914 amalgamation brought the North and the South into a wedlock that has remained unhappy. The wedding took place without the consent and volition of the couples. The South never proposed to the North nor did the latter propose to the former. The colonial administrators who masterminded the wedding did not consider their volitions important. What was important

was that their wedding favoured the colonial administration and Britain by extension. “As soon as the amalgamation came into force, the British Government enacted the mineral ordinance 1914, investing the entire mineral, including coal, tin, oil and gas, etc, in Nigeria in the British Crown”¹

It was therefore primarily economic force and logic that informed the amalgamation and forced down the number of administrative units to one.² That force, being artificial, could not keep them as one in the real sense. What bound the two protectorates was not organic and coherent, and so was not strong enough to keep them under one administration. Consequently, they had to be administered as separate entities, under which other smaller units already created since 1900 would subsist.³ Wittingly or unwittingly Lugard, the head behind the amalgamation, further emphasized the existence of two major divides, and gave concreteness to the feeling of the existence of a gulf between them. This he did by setting up a boundary commission, shortly after the amalgamation, to draw and mark out boundaries between the North and the South.⁴ However, they were the **markers**, he was the **maker**. The way he concluded the boundaries left the appointed boundary markers unsatisfied, and the people discontented.⁵

The amalgamation therefore fell short of achieving the attrition of administrative units and the unity of Nigeria, even though it gave the impression of doing so at the face value. It has been credited with division rather than cohesion. It did not really shrink the number of administrative units to one, but super-imposed a superior unit over existing ones, a superior unit that was previously non-existent.

With the tactical formation of a central government, a state apparatus for the execution of colonial policies and maintenance of order was created.⁶ The former two protectorates now formed two sections under a central government. A triangular kind of structure therefore emanated, with a central government at its apex, and the two sections –North and South – forming the two sides. The people took their place at the base. Policy decisions taken in London regarding the country were communicated to the central government through the Colonial Office based in London. The central government then passed these to the people at the base through the administrators at the two sections and other smaller units under them. It could therefore be argued, that apart from balancing economic equations, the amalgamation was meant to establish the authority of a Central government over all of Nigeria, which had hitherto been absent. It was one stone that killed two birds.

The central government has since grown more dominant, suffocating the sub-political units. Although the North which seems to have gained more in the relationship has exhibited little or no interest for restructuring, the South has continued to clamour for the restructuring of the Nigeria union to allow for more equitable distribution of power and materials. This is because the South has been ill favoured by the over-centralized political arrangement in place which has made the lower units a mere periphery meant to serve the centre. That centre has also been under the firm control of the North with little or no room for the South.

The concept, restructuring, has been variously construed to meaning true federalism, fiscal federalism, devolution of power and resource control. Experts have defined restructuring as a transition from a lopsided federal political structure to a true federalism “characterised by political inclusiveness, people-oriented constitutional amendments, resource control, electoral process, political representation, sharing of offices, citizens’ rights, protection of lives and properties, and building of enduring political infrastructure.”⁷

Empirical study has shown that restructuring, especially one based on resource control will have positive impact on Nigeria's economy.⁸ It is this definition that best explains what we mean by restructuring in this paper. It is the equitable reconfiguring or redistribution of resources of the country among the constituent units based on their contributions and the reduction of the powers of the federal government. Thus, restructuring is also viewed as a constitution review strategy aimed at helping the central government shed some of its powers and responsibilities and granting implementation to constituent units. It is therefore also aimed at bringing the government as close as possible to the people at the grassroots.

This paper explains why restructuring has remained a will of the wisp in Nigeria despite the increasing call for it. It argues that the most fundamental reason for the non-realization of restructuring in Nigeria is the fear of class suicide. This position is explained within the framework of Karl Max's theory of Class Struggle, which is believed to be playing out in Nigeria's restructuring question. The rest of the paper is divided into four sections. The first section focuses on restructuring trajectory in Nigeria. The second section explains the Karl Marx theory of Class Struggle within the framework of this study. In the third section, attention is focused on explaining and showing how class suicide has been the main obstacle to restructuring. The fourth and final section is the conclusion.

Restructuring Trajectory in Nigeria

During the colonial era, the people constantly expressed desire for the restructuring of the political and economic arrangement of Nigeria put in place in 1914. This was sought through constitutional reviews. The colonial government made cosmetic changes but left the country largely dominated by a powerful centre. As Ikenga Ozigbo noted, the repeated tinkering with the Constitution in 1922, 1946, 1951, 1955 and 1960 did not aim at effecting genuine structures for a united, peaceful and progressive Nigeria.⁹ The only one close to the aspirations of Nigerians was the 1946 constitution which divided the country into regions and gave them more powers. Yet, the central government even then remained relatively more powerful than the regions.

After the 1962 census, a country-wide ethnic conflict shook Nigeria very vigorously leading to the formation of the Mid-Western Region in August 1963. This new region was carved from the then Western region so as to accommodate Nigerians who believed they were either marginalized or neglected. This move was aimed at bringing immediate reprieve, but at the same time it only postponed what would have been the lasting solution – true restructuring.

The 1967 Nigeria- Biafra war was indeed an outcome of the serious ethnic rivalry over claims and counter claims of domination and marginalization. Restructuring was sought through the barrels of the gun. Thus Nzeogu's unitary government which was perceived to be pro-Igbo was toppled by Gowon to ensure that the dominance of the North remained non-negotiable. Also, there was a strong agitation for a Sovereign National Conference in the Southern region following the annulment of the 1993 presidential election believed to have been won by M. K.O Abiola. The annulment was interpreted by the south to be a calculated move to stall the transfer of power to the south. After transition to democratic rule in 1999, yet another tension rose in the Niger Delta over claims that the region which produced the oil wealth of the nation was being marginalized in the distribution of resources.

During the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan, a National Conference was inaugurated on March 17, 2014 over the renewed calls for restructuring. The report of the National Conference was not implemented and the government of Muhammad Buhari also ignored and refused to implement to report. Calls for the 'meeting of ethnic nationalities' aimed

at amending the Constitution and re-appraising the structure of the Nigeria state, persisted. A committee of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) government, chaired by Nasiru El-Rufai Committee was set up in August 2017 to articulate the party's position on true federalism recommended state policing, devolution of power among others. The fear of class suicide would not let the government implement the committee's report.

Under the administration of President Buhari, several calls for restructuring gained unprecedented momentum following perceived lopsided appointments skewed towards the North and neglect of the South. The calls also got heightened in the midst of numerous socio-political and economic challenges, disenchantment with the political class, economic downturn, rising insecurity, crimes and violence that all combined to place the country on its precipice.

The vanguards of these calls were largely people from the Southeastern region who felt neglected and marginalized by the then Buhari administration. While the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu called for the secession of the Biafra Igbo of Southeast from the Nigerian Union, others like the Ohaneze Indigbo and other groupings in the South called for the reduction of the powers of the federal government and devolution of power to the regions. The Southeastern region was eventually joined by the Southwest. Calls for secessions also eventually came for the cessation of the Yoruba nation. Sunday Igboho, a self-acclaimed activist, challenged the federal government when he declared a 'Yoruba nation' in an apparent reference to the 'desire' of the South-west to secede. The government did not only turn deaf ears to these calls but made moves to silence them. The apparent fear of class suicide by the ruling elites following the persistent demand for restructuring was palpable across the strata of Nigeria.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical underpinning of this study is the class struggle theory, otherwise known as Marxism, propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxism is a social, political and economic philosophy first formulated in the 1848 pamphlet, *The Communist Manifesto*. The manifesto opens with the declaration that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."¹⁰ According to this theory, there are two main classes of people in the world. These are the bourgeoisie, who controls the capital and means of production, and the proletariat who provide the labour. It is believed that around these two basic classes were found all other less important classes. Every society according to Marx, is divided among a number of social classes, whose members have more in common with one another than with members of other social classes.¹¹

Marx believes that there has been a struggle for most of history between these two classes, the haves and the have not. Marxists posit that this struggle defines economic relations in a capitalist economy. This tension or conflict known as class struggle, exist because different groups in the society have divergent and competing socio-economic interests. The control of resources by few rich or highly placed people (the bourgeoisie) to the detriment of the many under-privileged people, known as the capitalist system, is believed to be unsustainable. It is seen as an exploitative system by the workers. The two main classes at daggers-drawn in a capitalist system can be therefore branded as the exploiters and the exploited. Class struggle has therefore been seen as the perpetual tension, conflict or the antagonism between the owning and the non-owning class in a society.¹²

With time, as competition between the two classes intensifies, insatiable needs to make more profits compel the capitalists (exploiters) to expand their enterprises by intensifying exploitation of the proletariat. The workers would also want to resist further exploitation. The push of the exploitation rate at different directions creates a constant tension in a capitalist society.¹³

Marxists believe that the pyramidal capitalist system would be overthrown by the uniting of the workers at the base of the pyramid in a revolutionary action. The upturning of the capitalist system which would lead to socialism and eventually to communism is seen as the solution to the plight of the workers and the common people. This can only happen after class consciousness and solidarity is achieved among the group. That consciousness and solidarity has constantly brewed and formed among the proletariat in Nigeria.

The theory also shows the intense struggle between two forces. While one of the forces – the bourgeoisie want the structure to be maintained because it is favourable to the elites, the proletariat wants the structure upturned in their favour. Thusly, it depicts a society in a state of flux, as the interests of the people that make up the society run parallel to each other. The persistent calls for restructuring may be seen as an effort by those not well favoured by the extant structure to find relevance. This theory is applicable to the Nigerian situation today, where the ruling class, favoured by the status-quo has resisted any radical attempt at restructuring of the political structure in Nigeria, especially, those from the Southern part of the country seen as a threat to their existence.

Obstacles to restructuring: Fear of Class Suicide

One of the major obstacles to the persistent and unceasing calls for the restructuring of Nigeria in all ramifications is simply the “fear of class suicide”. This refers to the unbridled fear by the ruling elite and power holders, hangers-on on the corridors of power, the cheats and corrupt politicians, the political contractors that inflate contracts, of losing their position in a restructured Nigeria. In every change in structure in the world, there is usually emergence of new power holders and social classes and the Nigeria’s ruling elite are obviously scared of the consequences of such changes. The Amalgamation of 1914 hoisted an unholy union, an evil empire of colonial sorts. Events that followed had created the regional power struggle and inequality in Nigeria. Over the years, Nigeria has been laced with unhealthy ethnic based and sentimental power politics, unhealthy economic competition and underdevelopment, the elite fear induced Nigeria-Biafra war, ethno-political party affiliation, destructive religious intolerance and a lopsided military imposed constitution as a country, monetized crime and insecurity among numerous others. Those who benefit from the poor and lopsided structure of Nigeria, the regions that feel favoured by the extant structure and the ethnicised political system, would rather see Nigeria in ruins rather than see it restructured.

Nigeria has had the same set of politicians reshuffling and perpetuating themselves in power. Where necessary, they have had to cross-carpet to another political party irrespective of their ideologies only to achieve perpetuation in power. Election empires have been brow-beaten or bribed to manipulate election figures to declare their return to power. There is a palpable fear among the ruling aristocrats that if justice is allowed to prevail by allowing the will of the majority to triumph, it would backfire at them. It is this fear of committing class suicide – eliminating their relevance and ascendancy in the Nigerian society that opposes complete and total restructuring.

This fear has been manifested in many ways by various crops of leaders in different dispensations. First, it was manifested by the colonial officers when they handed power to leaders of Northern extraction. The British government wanted to remain relevant and powerful enough to keep calling the shots in Nigeria even after independence. It was counted suicidal to hand power over to the southern leaders who were seen as disloyal heads. Also, they kept Nigeria administratively un-restructured despite the obvious signals they got to the effect that the union of the North and South was not a happy and enduring one for the Nigerian people. Some of the signals included the census and election crises of the 1950s as well as the differences and disputes by the two major regions over the right time for granting Nigeria political independence. The British ignored these signals because of the fear of class suicide. A highly centralized government was considered easier for manipulation than a restructured Nigeria where power is devolved to federating units.

The immediate post-colonial leaders also manifested the fear of class suicide by remaining loyal to the ex-colonial power brokers. No radical attempt was made to alter the old arrangement because it was feared that any such attempt would jeopardise their relevance power brokers and possibly replaced with docile stooges. They chose to remain quiet about the existing arrangement than to lose their positions of power.

When the military juntas wrested power from the civilian post-colonial leaders, they too wanted the military class to remain in power. Aguiyi Ironsi, the military leader dealt another administrative blow by rebranding Nigeria as a unitary state, thereby strengthening and consolidating the over-centralized administrative structure. This helped the military elites rule with unchecked absoluteness. Rather than restructure an already over-centralized Nigeria, Ironsi went ahead to further centralize the system. Selfish interest among the military class however led to coups and counter coups and unwillingness to hand over power back to civilian leaders. For instance, Ibrahim Babangida annulled the perceived credible June 12 general election of 1993 partly to postpone military handover. Even after power was handed over to civilian leaders after much pressure, the military juntas, not willing to allow the preeminence of the military class to die, staged a comeback coup. It was again, the fear of class suicide that was at play in these perceived impervious and unpatriotic skirmishes, and political maneuverings and developments.

The civilian leaders that eventually took over power from the military juntas also manifested this fear of class suicide. In a country ravaged by corruption, the leaders saw the over-centralized structure as a good pot to eat from. All food was cooked in that pot from where the central leaders dished what they pleased to the downtrodden and weakened sub-units of government. The bulk of the food was not accounted for. To continue to enjoy these benefits of power in a very powerful centre, they amended the constitution, rigged elections and tried by all means to remain in power. President Olusegun Obasanjo's tenure was particularly interesting. After ruling for two tenures, he attempted to amend the constitution to allow him rule for the third term. The other aristocrats who felt it was their turn to 'eat' had opposed and truncated the third term bid and defeated it through legislative instrument and high-handed power and party politics.

The fear of class suicide by the ruling class survived up to the twenty first century. In 2001, during the tenure of President Jonathan Goodluck, when calls for restructuring and clamour for secession was rife, there was a town hall meeting where restructuring agreements were made. However, the presidency manifested lack of political will to implement decisions reached. The ruling class had vehemently opposed it that attempt at restructuring. Hence, it died a natural

death. The ruling class appeared relieved. Once again, the fear of class suicide was a major factor in the opposition of the restructuring policy of the National Conference.

Matters came to a head during 2023 general election. The party that was most vocal about restructuring and had practical plan for it (the Labour Party) was widely supported by the people especially the youth. The ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) had never ready to leave power. It also promised to restructure the country just to gain the support of the people. In the gubernatorial election which was keenly contested, the LP made a strong sentence that its time at the periphery was over. Seeing the feats accomplished by the LP in the gubernatorial and senatorial elections, the APC, for perceived fear it might lose power to the party employed all kinds of weapons to stop the victory of LP. People were beaten on the roads when it was learnt that they were going to vote for LP. This was especially true of Lagos State. The result of the election was eventually not electronically transmitted to the IREV as promised by INEC. INEC declared APC's Presidential candidate, Ahmed Bola Tinubu as winner despite the clamour by other political parties at the INEC national result collation centre for a winner to be declared only when seeming irregularities were being cleared. This was also despite the fact that international election observers noted the election was fraught with irregularities.

The European Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) to Nigeria, in its final report on the federal and state elections of 25th February and 18 March, stated that: "In the lead up to the 2023 general elections Nigerian citizens demonstrated a clear commitment to the democratic process. That said, the election exposed enduring systemic weaknesses and therefore signal a need for further legal and operational reforms to enhance transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability."¹⁴ The ruling class, by refusing to address the observed irregularities and allowing justice to prevail was squarely afraid of the consequences of a possible suicidal loss of power by the ruling class.

In the legal battle that followed the declaration of APC's candidate as winner, both the presidential election tribunal and the Supreme Court discountenanced and struck out the huge evidence advanced by the dis-satisfied parties largely on perceived technical grounds and had upheld the victory of the ruling party. By fearing to hand over power to any party that was passionate about restructuring, the ruling class manifested in all ramifications, the fear of class suicide. The ruling party has since its inauguration not mentioned restructuring the Nigeria. Obviously, the restructuring of Nigeria is not yet in sight. Who among the ruling elites is willing to commit class suicide for a restructured Nigeria?

Conclusion

It was the fear of class suicide that made the colonial government to be cautious of any political and economic arrangement that essentially ran foul to the structure put in place in 1914. The same fear is responsible for the refusal of post-colonial leaders to embark on any meaningful reordering of the status quo. If restructuring is ever to be achieved, the political elites cannot be dispensed with; they have a big role to play. They must loosen their hold on power, sheathe their swords and make sacrifices for the unity and progress of the country. Where the elites fail to do this and remain adamant, the only option would be for the masses, the 'marginalized' to take their destiny in their hands by uniting in another suicide mission to oust the elites and rescue Nigeria from carcass holding it down. This use of elements of force though not the best, but when peaceful restricting is impossible, forceful and violent restructuring may be inevitable. Apart from these two options, there is no other alternative to realizing a restructured Nigeria.

Endnotes

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² See Akinyele, “The Growth of Nationalism,” 286; A. A. Lawal, “The Economy and the State,” 186

³ Akinyele, “The Growth of Nationalism,” 287

⁴ In 1917, three years after the amalgamation, Lugard constituted a Boundary Commission, consisting of H.R. Palmer and Hargrove to look into how the boundary between North and South would be delineated. See Falola, ed., *Nigerian History, Politics and Affairs: The Collected Essays of Adiele Afigbo*, Trenton: African World Press, 2005, 233

⁵ Lugard did not follow the dispassionate recommendations of the Boundary Commission. He had his own plans, and went about delineating the boundaries the way he wanted. He not only called the bluff of the members of the boundary commission, he turned deaf ears to the claims of the people between which the boundaries were created. You can read up. Falola, ed., *Nigerian History, Politics and Affairs*, 232-233) for details of the differences.

⁶ Onyekpe, “Western Influence on Nigeria, 225

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