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20 Contemporary issues in Nigerian public administration: foundations of civil service reforms

F Onah

Introduction

The objectives of this chapter are to address the meaning, context, and problematic issues of currency in Nigerian public administration, and to look critically at the civil service reforms as a veritable means of improving Nigerian public administration, which is the same in content and scope of public administration as in other countries. What makes the difference is the environment or context in which it takes place. The actors also make much of the difference but it is common knowledge that the final disposition of the actors is a function of environmental influences. The peculiarity of Nigerian public administration is informed by the rather unusual political setting dominated by militarism, epileptic economic fortunes and misfor-tunes, the octopusness of ethnic consciousness, the less than adequate technical competence of career persons, and other environmental variables such as religion and population. What is more, Nigerian public admini-stration has been growing under a non-democratic culture. Indeed the military, which has dominated governance since Nigeria's independence, has had a more significant influence on it. Consequently, it is obvious that most of the tenets of bureaucracy have either been ignored, obliterated, or attenuated, because the key actors are regimented, as they have to obey "the last order".

This chapter will proceed by assembling a group of definitions of public administration and also justifying the reason for studying the discipline. The civil service reforms have been specially isolated as a contemporary issue in Nigerian public administration, which will also be addressed in this chapter. Finally some theoretical framework within which useful civil service reforms should take place are put in perspective.

What is public administration?

Most of us were born in public hospitals, graduated from public schools, and brushed our teeth with water from public water supply systems. We ride public transportation or drive on public roads in vehicles whose safety features are regulated by another public agency. Every organization, according to Adebayo (1982), in modern society consists of many different groups of people woven together in a complicated process to achieve the objectives of the organization.

This complicated process, which takes place in organizations, is called *administration*. It includes planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling. *Public administration* is therefore governmental administration and operates in the particular sphere of governments. It is the machinery for implementing government policy. Being a first of the whole universal practice of administration, it draws from the same stream of the universality of administration in devising the process to achieve its objectives (Adebayo 1982).

The central purpose of public administration, according to Akpan (1982), is the utilization of scarce resources for the sustenance and common well-being of members within a given polity. Incidentally, the scarce resources in Nigeria are no longer what Akpan perceived in 1982. Things have worsened and public agencies are collapsing, owing to lack of resources, and creating more social problems that were never conceived. The task before Nigerian public administration is therefore huge. Time has gone when just anybody of average intelligence could perform in the public sector. Public administration is no longer a conveyor belt, which mechanically executes the instructions passed on to it by policy makers. The responsibility of government for social and economic development has assumed great magnitude and demands exacting standards of efficiency, especially now that we are talking about sustainable development - a development that does not endanger the natural systems that support life on earth. The tasks of coordinative activities within and between public institutions and implementing government policies aimed at alleviating poverty, rejuvenating public enterprises, harnessing human resources and facilitating sustainable development are contemporary issues in Nigerian public administration, which can only be addressed through a look at the preparedness of the bureaucracy in the form of the civil service. It is for this reason that sufficient space is given to civil service reforms (CSR) in

this chapter. However, let us briefly examine what *bureaucracy* means, and why its study is necessary.

Why study bureaucracy?

"That stupid bureaucrat." "That dumb bureaucracy!" Who has not felt this way at one time or another? When we ar are sent from one office to the other without getting the information we want; when forms are returned to us because of some inconsequential omission; when rules are of such complexity that no two people understand them alike - these are the times when we think of bureaucracy. *Bureaucracy* is often used as an epithet connoting inefficiency and confusion in government or elsewhere, such as in the universities. But this is not its only meaning, and it is not the way the word will be used in this work.

If you alone had the job of collecting the dues in a small fraternity, you could proceed at your own discretion. However, if five persons had this job in a large club, they would find it necessary to organize their work, lest some members were asked for dues repeatedly and others never. If hundreds of persons had the assignment of collecting taxes from the citizens of a city or state, their work would have to be organized systematically to prevent chaos. The type of organization designed to accomplish large-scale administrative tasks by coordinating the work of many people systematically is called *bureaucracy*. The basic characterizing elements of bureaucracy are specialization, a hierarchy of authority, a system of rules, and impersonality. The concept of bureaucracy, according to Blau and Meyer (1990), applies to organizing principles that are intended to achieve control and coordination of work in larger organizations. Since control and coordination are required in most large organizations nowadays, bureaucracy is not confined to government but is found in business, voluntary organizations, and wherever administrative tasks are undertaken.

Control and coordination are not, of course, ends in themselves. They are means towards the end of administrative efficiency, of completing successfully large and complicated tasks that no individual person could accomplish alone. The organizing principles of bureaucracy thus have the purpose of creating efficient organizations, not inefficient ones. But simply because bureaucracy is intended as an efficient form of organization does not mean that it always achieves efficiency. Critics of bureaucracy claim that its principles are inherently inefficient, and many citizens who are

irritated by unresponsive and sometimes inept government agencies tend to agree.

Interestingly, while the term *bureaucratic* is often used as a synonym for *inefficient*, at other times it is used to imply ruthless efficiency. The German sociologist, Max Weber, who is easily associated with the concept of bureaucracy, held bureaucracy to be so efficient that its power was "over-towering". Weber's American contemporaries, such as Woodrow Wilson, also worried considerably that the power of a large civil service organized according to bureaucratic principles would be inconsistent with democratic governance. Contemporary critics of both the political left and right also fear the power of bureaucracy. The left blames bureaucratic institutions for many of the evils of the world - the domination of weak nations by imperialist powers, the oppression of poor people, the uncertainties facing today's youth. The right blames bureaucracy for inflation, high taxes, and the sapping of individual initiative by excessive regulation. There is some truth in all these allegations, but there is also much exaggeration.

The criticisms of bureaucracy levelled by the political right and left can be understood as a result of its ethnical neutrality. *Bureaucratic administration* can be used as an instrument of economic domination, or it can be used to curb inequities that would arise if economic forces were permitted to operate without restraint. Bureaucratic administration is necessarily employed to administer health and social service programmes, whether governmental or private, whose purpose is to sustain the sick and needy. The challenge for democratic societies and those struggling to be democratic, like Nigeria, is to gain and maintain control over their bureaucracies so that they function for the benefit of the commonwealth rather than for that of bureaucrats themselves or of special interest.

Learning to understand bureaucracies is more important today than it ever was. It has moreover special significance in a democracy. In addition, the study of bureaucratic organizations makes particular contribution to the advancement of sociological knowledge. The activities of bureaucrats touch on our daily lives negatively or positively. The civil service is the main weapon of government when policy implementation is at issue. It is not only a typical public administration outfit but bureaucratically structured. This is probably why the changes that are currently

taking place in the service by way of reforms are given due attention here. To those changes we now turn.

Civil Service Reforms (CSR)

The civil service

The civil service is the major instrument used by government to implement its policies. It is composed of the ministries and departments of government and the bureaucrats and professionals who work in them. Its importance is such that even other bodies (such as the military, universities, and other parastatals) which are also used to implement specific aspects of government policies are themselves guided and controlled through the civil service . As the primary and private instrument of government, its nature, effectiveness, and response cannot escape the constant   attention of government (Phillips 1992).

Civil service reforms in Nigeria

The search for a more responsive and effective civil service in Nigeria has continued for quite sometime. Between 1954 and 1998 there has been at least eight major civil/public service Review Commissions: Gorsuch (1954), Mbanefo (1959), Morgan (1964), Elewood (1966), Adebo (1971), Udoji (1974), Philips' 1988 Reforms, and Ayida (1997). Out of the eight, four appear to have made major changes in the character and structure of the civil service. These are Gorsuch (1954), Udoji (1974), the 1988 Reforms, and Ayida (1997).

The question is, have the reforms ever made the civil service more effective? The answer is no. The situation is so because the politicians are corrupt and civil servants have been operating under abnormal situations most of the time - military government, emergency government, etc. Besides, the reforms are based on a theoretical framework. Thus throughout the nearly four decades of its post-independence life, the Nigerian civil service has had to contend with major institutional and structural problems, which, in no small measure, combined not only to drastically weaken its capacity to perform but also its credibility in the face of both government and the general public. The 1988 and 1997 reforms were instituted against this background. The rationale for the reforms becomes obvious from the myriad of problems which had bedevilled the

civil service and which had severely constrained its efficacy. Little wonder professionalization, financial control, and accountability as well as training are central to the last two reforms. The Ayida (1997) reform goes further to use downsizing as a strategy for improving the profile of the civil service.

Perspective on civil service reforms: theoretical foundations of CSR

Civil service reform (CSR) programmes are increasingly being adopted in several African countries. In many cases they are closely linked to structural adjustment efforts. The results have been made and the effectiveness of the aid provided in support of these programmes has sometimes been limited (Wescott 1996). This point of view is the case with Nigeria. Indeed the Ayida (1997) CSR was occasioned by the Structural Adjustment Programme. The focus of the reform was to realize some of the conditionalities of the IMF/World Bank Loan.

One of the most accepted realities of the CSR is that sustainable results are slow in coming. Wescott (1996) argues two stages in a framework that explains CSR. First, African governments will inevitably adopt the classical model of rational meritocracy, although not different rates, and often with major setbacks along the way. Second, the same underlying forces will also lead to economic and political liberalization, also at different speeds and with setbacks.

Rational meritocracy The first proposition of the inevitable triumph of the rational, meritocratic models may at first seem at odds with recent experience. The massive administrative reform efforts undertaken in the context of structural adjustment programmes over the past decade have brought the issue of civil service effectiveness to the forefront of the management development debate. The reason is that the rational, hierarchical, meritocratic model has failed in many African countries including Nigeria. Governments are not able to carry out the basic functions of formulating policies, delivering services and maintaining infrastructure (Esman 1988).

According to this model, complex tasks are divided hierarchically into simple ones, many of which can be carried out as a matter of routine. The assignment of complex versus routine tasks is then carried out based on

relative positions in meritocracy. There are traditional forms of social and formal organizations in Africa that have this character.

Yet efforts to promote this model in African governments have had preserve effects on incentives, encouraging 'rent-seeking', 'free-loading', and other unintended outcomes (Goldsmith 1992). The reason is that many African civil services, exemplified by Nigeria, have two competing goals: task performance/service delivery on the one hand, and political incorporation on the other. The former is subject to administrative reform, but is often a secondary goal. The latter is often the primary goal, ie the incorporation of a politically selected group as a means of political control, on terms which concede to most of them a right not to a say in government policies, but to a place, albeit a subordinate one, in the hierarchies of political control. Political incorporation through patronage is an effective controlling tool by the political elite, because jobs are scarce, and, as a result, there is pressure on civil servants at all levels to behave particularistically by extended family members, ethnic affiliates, schoolmates, and so forth (Blunt and Jones 1992).

The central features of such bureaucracies include solidarity, the relative insignificance of specialized experts' knowledge to bureaucratic roles, important rules neither transparent nor codified, a forgiving attitude to misdemeanour and poor performance of assigned roles, and idiosyncratic bureaucratic career. Reforms such as downsizing and rightsizing do not only threaten the careers of civil servants but the system of political control and stability. These reforms also threaten the well-being of the network of relatives supported by the job holder.;   This is important in Nigeria because of the absence of social security safety nets provided by the state. Leaders in such a setting may take advantage of downsizing programmes to get rid of political opponents and to refill the position with relatives and ethnic cohorts.

How can African governments achieve a meritocratic system? Some stress the need for a *top-down* politically-driven reform process. Thus Werlin (1992), citing examples of countries such as Korea, argues that reforming central bureaucracies is primarily a problem of political will and government's capacity to effectively use persuasive and manipulative (rather than coercive and corrupting) forms of power. Esman (1991 : 138-139), on the other hand, advocates a "bottom-up" approach to administrative reform as more effective than the comprehensive system - wide

management and reform strategies, which, he claims, disrupt familiar routines and threaten established centres of powers without demonstrating convincingly their efficacity.   He prescribes, instead, incremental, confidence-building measures, such as training, new technologies introduced with staff participation and focused at the level of individual programmes or organizations.

Whether through a top-down, bottom-up or some hybrid process, Fakuyama (1992) notes that rational meritocracy will increasingly be forced on governments.   According to him there is considerable historical evidence that states that do not adopt such a structure will be defeated militarily or overthrown by rivals that do.   Even though the federal character principle is instituted in the Federal Civil Service and other public bureaucracies, Nigeria will inevitably move towards a rationalized meritocratic system without deviating from the federal character principle.

Economic and democratic liberalism Wescott (1996), in his second theoretical framework, argues that meritocracy and markets are making a comeback in Africa, and that there is no going back. However, there is still one missing piece, which, according to him, is *liberal democracy*.

There is considerable evidence from around the world that liberal democracy usually goes along with economic development (Fakuyama 1995). Democracies are better able than other systems to adjudicate conflicts among the proliferating interest groups.   More importantly , democracies offer formal recognition of the dignity and worth of every human being. Democracy allows everyone the freedom to make money and climb out of poverty, but it doesn't promise the elimination of poverty. What it promises is to value each citizen at their own sense of self-worth, no matter their race, religion, or ethnic group. It promises that every adult citizen has the right to participate in the government that establishes these rights. People can vote, run for office, write newspaper editorials supporting candidates or positions, or serve in the civil service.

There is no necessary link between democracy and market economic development. If anything, democracy is a drug on economic efficiency. Policy decisions are often made in democracies on the basis of popular appeals, and yet the people are often poorly informed as to the economic consequences of these policies. However, economic development creates conditions that make democracy more likely for two reasons. First, education and technologically expanding media teach people that they are

human beings with dignity, and that they ought to have that dignity recognized. Second, education breaks down old class barriers by favouring equality of opportunity. This leads to greater mobility, which in turn promotes the spread of democratic ideas. The civil service is most likely to grow and be more efficacious under such conditions.

Strategies for implementing CSR

Civil service reform is a process of moving towards meritocracy in the context of economic liberalization. It is SAP-driven and its process is rather long, needing a multidisciplinary undertaking. Generally, two broad strategies are adopted in implementing civil service reforms, namely *institutional development* and *capacity building*.

Institutional development Civil service reform may include a wide array of institutional development interventions, some of which are improvements in personnel management systems and procedures, and downsizing programmes.

Improvement of personnel management systems involves a couple of activities. In Nigeria this has entailed staff training and development, promotion of staff based on performance, selection of staff with high literacy levels and cognate skills. Civil service reforms also give rise to enhanced salary and other benefits in order to retain high profile staff. But the problem is, how far have the increases in wages been competitive enough to keep professionals in the service? There is no doubt that in Nigeria and many other African countries the weakness of their currencies, inflation, combined with rapid rises in public employment and stagnant or declining revenues have led to compensation well below the minimum needed for the basic necessities of living in an urban centre.

Downsizing is one of the most controversial civil service reform components. Downsizing programmes, which include the reduction in size and cost of the civil service to an affordable and sustainable level, can contribute to macro-economic stabilization and assist government to restore budgetary stability (Wescott 1997). The 1997 civil service reform in Nigeria included a downsizing component, which is referred to as *rationalization* and *retrenchment* of staff. It affected not only the civil service but staff of government parastatals and other extra-ministerial agencies. In general, downsizing and rightsizing programmes should take place at

ministerial reviews, because these will identify redundant posts and
personnel to be laid off. Paying off of workers in public agencies has
always been associated with problems ranging from fierce acrimony,
antagonism, and misinterpretation or misapplication of the guidelines. At
times, this is so in order to get rid of targeted individuals and individuals
perceived as disloyal. This defeats the object of downsizing as the money
spent on litigations and compensations is far more than the expected gains.
Besides, no sooner than any downsizing exercise is taken than politicians
fill up the gap again with sons, daughters, and friends of loyalists by way
of extension of unnecessary patronage. The long-run gain of fiscal savings
is therefore doubtful.

Capacity building for improved service delivery   In addition to fiscal sta-
bilization, improving service delivery is an ultimate goal of civil service
reforms. There are two types of services needing improvement: services
provided by one government agency or another, and services provided by
government to citizens. Both types can be provided directly by the govern-
ment or subcontracted through an NGO or private company under govern-
ment supervision. *Capacity building* involves scaling up the outfits
qualitatively and quantitatively so that government can be seen as rendering
effective service.

The first type of service, government-to-government, is important
because it is often vital to ensure that rural health clinics have adequate
supplies and can pay their staff. Without supplies and regular pay checks,
service delivery will suffer.

Thus, according to Hilderbrand (1994), capacity building for improved
service delivery often features in African civil service reforms. It is closely
linked with institutional development. Capacity is the ability to perform the
appropriate tasks. It is not just an organization's human resources skill
profile or overall efficiency, it is part of an active process. Capacity relates
to what is required for a particular organization to achieve its purposes
effectively, efficiently, and sustainably.

Capacity building interventions are those focused on the performance
of specific tasks, while *institutional development interventions* are more
road-based. Yet capacity building is more dependent on, and necessary
or institutional development. It is dependent because neither individual
or organizational performance can improve without appropriate

service will be freer to carry out its functions with less constra recognition of the dignity and worth of every human being will b There will be freedom and human performance will be at its b

Civil service reforms are implemented minding two institutional development and capacity building for improv delivery. But whichever strategy is being adopted, there is an fact that workers are suffering as none is receiving a decent wa who are comfortable are those who are corrupt. They are stil likely to be affected in any retrenchment exercise incidental to c reforms.

Civil service reforms is beneficial if it is done for the improving the capacity of the service. It could improve servic which is a central aim of public administration. If it is an e removing `enemies', then the associated long-run gains woul pains for everybody, including the government.

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