The Environment of Nigerian Public Administration in a Period of Uncertainty

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Nigerian public administration has been influenced by the critical factors within its environment such as political, economic, and social uncertainties in its structures and operations. The uncertainties that arise out of the Nigerian political environment are: the inability of creating institutions which can accommodate various orientations of the country's over 250 ethnic groups, the failure of the political class in pursuing national interest and the forces from the international community like the innovations in communications technology and the superpowers' struggle for geopolitical influence. In the economic environment, the main sources of uncertainties are the economy and the changes that accompany the modernization process. In the social environment, uncertainties arise from the existence of the traditional and modern world views within the same nation state. Strategies for solving these uncertainties depend on the efforts of the public servants, including the military, to act according to national interest, i.e., promote government programs, develop management capabilities, activate the informal rural and urban sectors, and improve the capabilities of administrative training institutions.

Introduction

Uncertainty and public administration are, properly conceived, contradictions in terms. Uncertainty has to do with the fortuitous while public administration, best defined as management in the public sector, emphasizes routinized processes and procedures. It is recognized, however, that any administrative system is in a causal relationship with its environment. The environment determines to a great extent the structure and functions of the administrative system. The latter is in turn capable of modifying its environment to its advantage. Indeed, the capability of a people to collectively manipulate their environment to their advantage has been used to define "development."[1] The institution for gaining such control is the administration. However, when the environment is uncertain, the capability of the

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administrative system to manipulate its environment is curtailed. Much seriously, these factors of uncertainty render the administrative system weak in implementing the nation's collective decisions.

This piece intends to discuss the major sources of uncertainties from the environment of Nigerian public administration, examine the implications of such uncertainties and suggest ways in which these uncertainties can be effectively tackled by public management in Nigeria.

Uncertainties in the Environment of Public Administration in Nigeria

Public administration scholars recognized early the need for an ecological approach to public administration. Indeed, Max Weber's typology of authority-administrative systems draws heavily upon the influence of the environment on the character of public administration and how the latter changes with its political environment. This largely casual reference to the role of the environment in defining the character of public administration was formalized in the works of the Howard Professor John Gaus in a series of formal lectures on the theme in 1945.[2] These were later published and applied to a greater domain by prolific public administration scholars, the most notable of whom is Fred Warren Riggs. According to Riggs, any truly scientific study of public administration must be comparative and to be truly comparative it must be "empirical, nomothetic, and ecological."[3] He has gone further to use this concept to explain the differential problems confronting bureaucracies in the Western and developing societies. The latter societies he refers to as prismatic societies, having a "sala" administrative system rather than a bureaucracy. By definition, "prismatic" societies are transitional and are characterized by rapid change, uncertainty, overlapping and ineffectively differentiated structures.[4]

Most of the basic texts of Nigerian government administration[5] inevitably start with a description of the basic parameters of the environment of public administration, following the advice of John Gaus[6]

> An ecological approach to public administration builds, then, quite literally from the ground up; from the elements of a place — soils, climate, location, for example — to the people who live there — their members and ages and knowledge, and the ways of physical and social technology, by which from the place and in relationship with one another, they get their living.

Gaus lists seven attributes that are critical to the environment of public administration. These are: people, place, physical technology, social technology, wishes and ideas, catastrophe, and personality. Specialized studies on Nigerian public administration have attempted to examine the impact of

politics especially on the administration and the most notable in the tradition is Professor Adedeji's, *Nigerian Administration and its Political Setting.*[7] Other authors have also tried to use environmental factors, singly or in composite, to explain performance of the Nigerian administrative machine.[8]

This paper focuses on the ways by which critical factors within the environment bring about uncertain conditions and how these influence the structure and operation of the public service in Nigeria. The identification of the critical factors in the environment which condition the performance of a country's public administration system was one of the major problems which confronted an ecological approach to the study of public administration. Three factors will be discussed in detail here: the political environment, the economic environment, and the social environment.

The Political Environment

. The political environment is very critical to the performance of the administrative system, so this must be of immense interest to us. The first uncertainty that arises from the Nigerian political environment is the inability, since the birth of the Nigerian nation in 1914, to evolve or create institutions which can accommodate the diverse interests of the country's over 250 ethnic groups, three of which make up two thirds of the federation. According to Michael Crowder, the modern nation of Nigeria actually comprised seven self-existent kingdoms before they were overpowered by British colonial masters. From two major regions, the country's regional institutions have been increased to three (1939), four (1963), twelve (1967), and nineteen (1979). Yet, the desire for more state-units persists and constitutes a major factor of uncertainty in the Nigerian political system, even though this problem is presently assuaged by a military government directive (suspending further state agitations) and the overpowering dominance of the federal government, vis-a-vis the state units.

This continual tinkering with the structure of the Nigerian federation has itself been destabilizing for the Nigerian public service. It has led to a rapid staff turnover, sudden increase in staff needs, and it has created an atmosphere of uncertainty. One other major effect of this regional or ethnic orientation is that it has denied Nigerian public administration of a national character and hence, also of evolving concrete notions of national interest. The Public Service Commission, established by the Federal Military Government, alluded to this problem in its report published in 1974. The preoccupation with the politics of zoning during the Second Republic and the debate on the reflection of federal character in top positions in the public service even in the absence of any clear policy guidelines long after the demise of the Second Republic demonstrates the persistence of the problem.

This excessive competition for power along ethnic lines can be held responsible for our inability to have a successful and acceptable population census since independence. This fact alone, the absence of a national, up-to-date census figure, creates a lot of uncertainty for public administration, especially in the planning and administration of major social services. The absence of an accurate census of the school-going population was one of the major causes of the failure of the Universal Primary Education Program of 1976.[9]

A more serious factor promoting uncertainty from the political environment, largely coming from the first consideration, is the failure of the political class. The civilian political class, which is entrusted with sovereign power, had demonstrated during both the first and second republics its inability to pursue national interests over and above sectional or selfish ones. The result has been a failure on the part of other strategic institutions to play their own roles as expected. The first institution that comes to mind is the judiciary as it is usually referred to as the bastion of democracy. Even though there are exceptions to the rule, the judiciary, during both the first and second republics, abandoned its role as ultimate arbiter within the social system and has instead allied with the executive to perpetuate evil. Some examples are cited below.

First, the Chief Justice of the Federation, knowing fully well that the courts had the final say on the most celebrated political case in the country, tried to resolve the same issue extra-legally.[10] This left few people in no doubt as to his judgments later in the case. Similarly, the first trial judge in the same case in a lower court, finished delivering judgment and went to be the guest of one of the major *dramatis personae* in the Nigerian do-or-die politics of that time.[11] All of these were ominous for the political system. The large-scale retirement of judges following the coup in the country was unprecedented and demonstrated that not even judges have been immuned from the corruption of the political system.

Of course, this cancer spread to all other social institutions — the civil service, private sector, the universities — but none was as devastating as the military. The military itself became highly politicized and indeed young men joined the military in order to "salvage" the country politically. A military man recounts:

> I came to the Army with a heart pointed towards finding a solution to Nigeria's political problems. Before I was actually commissioned, I had met and established a solid relationship with two young officers of the Army . . . whose hearts pointed in the same direction as mine.[12]

These were the *major domo* of the first military coup in Nigeria and the entrance of the military into the political arena (besides the unfortunate

effects of politicization on the military itself)[13] has been largely unsettling for the Nigerian public service. Personality feuds among senior military officers led to large-scale, nationwide civil wars, early morning putsches, and periodic change of political leadership arising from military coups. Military rule also brought about suspension of the rule of law and the evaporation of civil service traditions of *anonymity* especially during Gowon's regime of super-permanent secretaries and *security of tenure* especially with the mass purge of 1975 and purge/retrenchment of 1984. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the Nigerian political/administrative system will enjoy in the future the certainty of a settled political environment. This is because of the impatience of the military with its own members and with civilians at resolving thorny national problems once it has tasted power.

One final factor of uncertainty from the political environment may now be considered. These are forces from the international community. We shall inevitably be selective here and consider just those ways in which the international political environment can or does affect the nation's public service. Firstly, as a result of great innovations in communications technology countries have been brought closer to each other due to accessibility of information on the political, economic, social and technological developments in other countries. These often become demands placed on the domestic administrative system. For instance, the philosophy and content of most of the reform innovations advocated by the Public Service Commission of 1974 are very similar to its British precursor: the Report of the Committee on the (British) Civil Service of 1966. Also, the populist programs of basic education and health services, launched rather hurriedly in 1976, were greatly influenced by developments in far away China and Tanzania which were popularized by such international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Health Organizations and the International Labor Office. Even the local government reform of 1976 was influenced by earlier developments in far away Brazil.[14] Since change is continuous on the international scene, a lack of restraint in adopting developments or reforms from this source is bound to be unsettling for the public service.

Another way in which the international environment affects the public service is through the struggle for geopolitical influence among the superpowers, a struggle which spares no nation, including the non-aligned ones. For instance, the fact that the European Economic Community (EEC) Countries, the United States, and the Soviet Union have each taken a major role in equipping and training our armed forces is bound to be a potential source of instability for the politico-administrative system. Finally, international politics influences foreign trade to a considerable degree. For instance, Nigeria's relations with the United States of America, the EEC countries (which received 82.4 percent and 86.4 percent of all our petroleum and

non-petroleum products respectively in 1979 and supplied 70 percent of
our total imports in 1979) or with the oil cartel, the Organization of Petro-
leum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is bound to influence the national econo-
my which in turn influences the administrative system. This is a source of
major uncertainty.

We will now turn to these economic factors that promote uncertainty
within the environment of Nigerian public administration.

The Economic Environment

The sources of uncertainty for Nigerian public administration in the
economic environment arise from the structure of the Nigerian economy and
the changes that accompany the modernization process. Three of these
which are particularly disruptive are discussed here: the role of oil, urbani-
zation, and technology.

Oil Industry. Even though the Nigerian economy is a largely agricul-
tural one, with agriculture employing about 70 percent of the labor force,
mining and quarrying as a group had risen from its contribution of only 1.1
percent in 1958-59 to 17.8 percent in 1973-74, with the petroleum industry
accounting for the lion's share.[15] Today, 90 percent of revenues accruing to
the federal government comes from the oil sector. This had had major
implications for the operations of the public sector. It has brought about
a rapid expansion of the public sector and this in itself is an element of
uncertainty. The public sector's share of the country's five-year develop-
ment plans has risen from 56 percent during the First Plan period (1962-68)
to 86 percent during the Fourth Plan period (1981-85). Public sector man-
power has also risen rapidly from some 200,000 in 1960 to 3.7 million in
1983, a figure which represents 65% of the total number of workers estimated
to be in the modern sector.

This rapid expansion also brought with it a growing involvement of
the central government in matters hitherto reserved for the states and even
local governments. And with military governance spanning over half of the
country's post-independence existence, and the fact that the federal govern-
ment took the lion's share of the oil proceeds, such centralizing trends could
hardly be challenged. Suffice to say that such a progressive centralization it-
self has been a source of uncertainty in a country whose federal administra-
tive apparatus has not been dispensed with even after sixteen years of mili-
tary rule.

Finally, the market for oil was an uncertain one. Its price fluctuated
from one day to the other with the result that a public administration
system depended so heavily on oil to fuel its programs has had to learn to

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respond to major crises both of an expansionary and contractionary routine. For instance, with the Arabs oil boycott of the early 1970s, Nigeria's oil revenues received a booster and the public service expanded accordingly. However, since 1977, the oil sector has faced periodic oil gluts and since 1980 a gradual reduction in oil prices has ensued, resulting in large-scale contraction which was characterized by privatization, reduction in employee benefits and retrenchment in the public sector.

Urbanization. Another implication of dependence on oil has been the neglect of agriculture and rural areas in the development process. It was only in the recent past that renewed attention has been given to agricultural and rural development. Until the 1983 federal budget, successive development plans and budgets had committed less than 10 percent to the agricultural sectors. Usually, most of these funds are expended on the formal, large-scale agricultural enterprises owned by people who normally reside in the urban areas. Moreover, government operations at all levels are usually concentrated on the urban sector to the detriment of the rural areas. The result has been a massive urbanization of the population, even though it was known already from the 1952-53 census that the country was already "over-urbanized," with more than half the country's urban centers described as parasitic.[16] The propulsive urbanization (estimated at 26 percent of the total population in 1979) constituted a source of uncertainty and a variety of policy measures that were directed to tackling the problem. These range from farm settlement schemes, and other programs targeted at the rural sector, to low-cost housing, employment, educational and health services programs aimed at the urban centers. Most of these efforts proved abortive and continue to be a source of embarrassment to the public service.

Technology. Another major source of uncertainty from the economic environment is technology. Economic development is essentially technological in that it entails the ability of a people to manipulate the environment to their advantage over a long period of time. Unfortunately, Nigeria, like all other developing countries, is technology-dependent. This means that huge programs of economic and social development can be aborted by the absence, inappropriateness, or delay in the arrival or servicing of particular technologies, both of the hard and softwares. The experience with these foreign-based technologies over the years has been sadly disappointing, partly due to the naive belief in policy circles, especially in the 1970s, that the problem of Nigeria, with its ample oil money, was no longer that of funds but of spending it. This resulted in the importation of spurious technological gadgets, at great cost, which failed to function and had to be abandoned after a lot of money had been lost. The examples of the Aerosat Baloon project in the Federal Ministry of Communications, the Lagos State's 45 million naira incineration plants, and the one billion naira metroline projects are cases in point.

Two particular policy responses have fueled the amount of uncertainty created by the search for appropriate technology. The first is the excessive dependence and preference for foreign expertise in consulting and supplying technology. It is therefore not surprising that project costs were found to be much higher than obtained in other African countries, including those on the West African Coast. This was either due to collusion between public officials and the multinational agencies or the pervasive feeling in the international community that Nigeria had joined the rank of Oil-Sheikhs.

Coupled with this is the poor management of our own technological and research institutions. A paper assessing twenty years of agricultural research institutional management in Nigeria since independence had this to say in part:

> In the last twenty years since independence, Nigeria has demonstrated in the administration of science and technology her annual productivity of establishing institutions and administrative machinery that are regarded as necessary components of the regalia for national sovereignty and greatness. But in most cases, these institutions and administrative machinery have always fallen short of expectations in relation to the objectives for which they were established.[17]

It needs only to be pointed here that the uncertainties associated especially with the physical environment such as droughts, floodings, erosion, which often lead to losses in human lives and agricultural production can be alleviated if technology is applied in the right combination and circumstances. This in essence is the contribution of technology.

The Social Environment

Uncertainties in the social environment arise from the coexistence of two cultural world views within the same nation state: the traditional and the modern. The problems it creates for administration in developing countries have been well documented. These include: problems of communication, political mobilization, ethical confusion on the part of civil servants ("polynormativism" or "administrative normlessness"), formalism, overlapping structures, and role of clects.[18] In applying this to the Nigerian situation, one must observe that all these problems are present, but two in particular are of immense importance — the absence of an effective medium of communication and the lack of appropriate national symbols either in terms of institutions, personalities, or codes.

In the absence of a national language and basic literacy, the communications work of administration has been greatly compounded. Issues that ought not normally to engender strife or crisis rise easily to national crisis proportions. Such was the widespread incendiary that followed the query

given the Emir of Kano by the radical civilian government of that state in 1982. We can also mention the fanatical religious groups, whose nefarious activities has had to be quelled by the military at least on two occasions. This problem of communication has been aggravated by the poor transportation (rail, road, air) and communication (telephone, radio, television) networks. This perpetuates regional immobility and particularistic world views.

After 25 years of independence, regional and even tribal and clan loyalties and codes are still so much more important than national loyalties. All attempts made so far to build national symbols have failed either in the presidency, in the military, or in constitutionalism. National ethical codes prescribed by the constitution are observed more in the breach than in compliance. Major national figures perceive themselves and are perceived in return by their protege as clan or tribal lords.

The effect of all these on the public service has been unsettling. The civil service, both at the national, state, or local government levels, is torn by ethnic loyalties of diverse degrees. Just like the federal service which is torn by a struggle between the three major tribal groups and the minorities, the state and local governments are torn apart by a struggle for supremacy amongst their own different clans. A combination of these factors explain why it has been impossible to enforce most objective systems of personnel appraisal which were supposed to have been introduced into the public service in 1975.

The Reponse of Nigerian Administration to Environmental Uncertainty

The above summary of factors of uncertainty is certainly not exhaustive; we have merely discussed or mentioned the most important ones. These factors are also mutually reinforcing to one another.

The effect of this constellation of factors is to render the public administration system largely ineffective and corrupt. The backlash has been a critical attitude to the public service and some of the policy responses have been quite draconian although with little lasting effect.[19]

Generally, the response of the senior administrators to the political and social realities have been quite pragmatic. In response to the political environment, senior administrators have played a chamelion-like role responding to the whims and caprices of whoever wields temporary power irrespective of the considerations of national interest. This response itself has served to compound the problem.

As for the economic environmental uncertainties, growing evidence shows that the response has been to abandon any long-term plans for the economy in favor of a readiness to take a short-term view of events. The scorn with which Professor Diejomah's suggestion for longer term planning circles (25 years) is still fresh in the mind. There is also a growing evidence on corruption, post-retirement placement of senior government officials to suggest that an allegation of collusion between foreign and domestic compradors cannot be easily dismissed. .

Nevertheless, it would be evident that it is unfair to lay all the blame of poor performance on public administrators. They are part of the same social system which is subjected to the problems accompanying uncertainty.

A strategy for containing uncertainty in the future is bound to be of at least a two-stage process. In the short-run, efforts must be made by military rulers acting on national interest or by civil servants acting on enlightened self-interest to promote programs that support social communication — better roads, rails and air facilities, telephones, general literacy, rural development, and the adoption of a nationalistic outlook. They must also develop management capabilities, other than the one normally taught in management courses and institutions on how to deal with regular and rational behaviors but with the uncertain, the irregular, and the irrational.

In the long-run, there will be a need to develop countervailing centers of power outside the armed and civil bureaucracies — in business, agriculture, interest groups, and associations to deal both with the problems of development with which the government is presently handling almost single-handedly and to demand effective and publicly-spirited performance from the bureaucracy.[20] This is not a course most senior military or civil servants will love to counsel, or follow, but there seems to be no alternative to the circle of coups and counter-coups into which we are locked.

Side by side, will be a program of activating the informal sector both in the rural and urban sectors, focusing on the mobilization of local resources, especially in agriculture where some 70 percent of our people eke their living. This program must emanate from below unlike the misguided top-down development policies we have pursued until now.

Finally, administrative training institutions must try to develop capability in coping with the type of uncertainties discussed above, in order to make their training schemes more indigenous, relevant and productive.

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Endnotes

[1] See Fred W. Riggs, "Introductory Concepts," *African Administrative Studies,* Vol. 16 (1976), pp. 82-84.

[2] His 1946 lectures were published in John M. Gaus, *Reflections on Public Administration* (University of Alabama Press, 1947). See also his earlier writing on the issue, "American Society and Public Administration," in John M. Gaus, Leonard D. White, and Marshal E. Dimock, eds. *The Frontiers of Public Administration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936).

[3] Fred W. Riggs, "Trends in the Comparative Study of Public Administration," *International Review of Administrative Services,* Vol. 28, No. 1 (1962), pp. 9-15. See also Ferrel Heady, *Public Administration: A Comparative Perspective,* 2nd ed. (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1980). See also Ramesh K. Arora, *Comparative Public Administration: An Ecological Perspective* (New Delhi: Associated Press, 1972).

[4] Fred W. Riggs, *The Ecology of Public Administration* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1961).

[5] See, for instance, L. F. Blitz, ed., *The Politics and Administration of Nigerian Government* (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1965); N. U. Ukpan, *Public Administration: A Nigerian and Comparative Perspective* (London: Longman, 1982); M. J. Balogun, *Public Administration in Nigeria: A Developmental Approach* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983); and L. Adamolekun, *Public Administration: A Nigerian and Comparative Perspective* (London: Longman, 1982).

[6] John M. Gaus, *Reflections on Public Administration,* op. cit. reproduced in Richard J. Stillman, *Public Administration, Concepts and Cases,* 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 77.

[7] A. Adedeji, ed., *Nigerian Administration in its Political Setting* (London: Hutchinson Educational Ltd., 1968). See also Humphrey N. Nwosu, *Political Authority and the Nigerian Civil Service* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1977).

[8] See, for instance, Dele Olowu, "Development Administration in Africa: A Critical Appraisal of Administrative Reforms in Nigeria," *African Administrative Studies,* No. 23 (1983), pp. 89-104. For a well-rounded view of the Nigerian environment, see Anthony Kirk-Greene and Douglas Rimmer, *Nigeria Since 1970: A Political and Economic Outline* (London: Hodder and Stronghton, 1981); Financial Times Survey, *Nigeria, Twenty Years of Independence* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1980); and Harold D. Nelson, ed., *Nigeria: A Country Study,* 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government, 1981).

[9] G. O. Olusanya, "Universal Primary Education in Nigeria: A Case Study in Policy-Making and Execution," in African Association for Public Administration and Management, ed. *Policy-Making in Africa* (Addis Ababa, 1982), pp. 58-68.

[10] Obaferni Awolowo, *Adventures in Power Book 1: My March Through Prison* (Lagos: McMillan Nigeria Publishers, 1985), pp. 204-213.

[11] *Op cit.,* pp. 215-217.

[12] Adewale Ademoyega, *Why We Struck, The Story of the First Nigerian Coup* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1981), p. 26.

[13] There is a very interesting article on this issue by Col. Jemibowon in L. Adamolekun, ed. *Nigerian Public Administration, 1960-80: Perspectives and Prospects* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1982). Major-General Oluleye, a one-time federal Minister of Finance in the Murtala/Obasanjo Administration, from 1975 to 1979, is also in agreement with this position that military rule is not the answer to the problems of political leadership. See James J. Oluleye, *Military Leadership in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press Ltd., 1985), p. 16.

[14] Dele Olowu, "Local Government Innovation in Nigeria and Brazil: A Comparative Discussion of Innovational Transfers and Intergovernmental Relations," *Public Administration and Development,* Vol. 2, No. 4 (October/December 1982), pp. 345-358.

[15] See F. A. Olakolu, ed., *The Structure of the Nigerian Economy* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979). For most of the data on the economy, figures on the size of the public service were found in National Manpower Board, *Nigeria's Manpower Requirements: Implications for Education and Training* (Lagos, 1983).

[16] A. L. Mabogunje, *Urbanization in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 316.

[17] Bede N. Okigbo, "The Future of Nigerian Public Administration in a Changing Scientific and Technological World," in L. Adamolekun, ed. *Nigerian Public Administration 1960-80, op. cit.*

[18] Fred W. Riggs, *Administration in Developing Countries: The Theory of Prismatic Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964).

[19] Dele Olowu, "The Nature of Bureaucratic Corruption in Nigeria," *International Review of Administrative Sciences,* Vol. 49, No. 3 (1983), pp. 343-352; Dele Olowu, "Bureaucratic Corruption and Public Accountability in Nigeria: An Assessment of Recent Developments," *International Review of Administrative Sciences,* Vol. 51, No. 1 (1985), pp. 7-12.

[20] For a highly thought-provoking piece on the overpoliticalization of social life in present-day African states, see Claude Ake, "Why is Africa Not Developing? " *West Africa* (London, June 17, 1985). See also Goran Hyden, *No Shortcuts to Progress: African Development and Management Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), especially Chapter 5.

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