

A REVIEW OF ORIGIN AND DYNAMICS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: The world over, different forms or patterns of local government have existed at different periods. Different types may even exist side by side at the same period in the same place. In this review, we looked at the various local government systems that have existed from the pre-colonial era to date.

Keywords: local government systems, different periods, pre-colonial era.

1. INTRODUCTION

Local government system in Nigeria dates back to the pre-colonial era. During this period, local government in Nigerian political system operated through the instrumentalities of traditional authorities. These traditional authorities were the Emirs, Obas, Age-grades and Village Councils. It was through these traditional political institutions that authoritative allocations of values were made for the society. These institutions were held sacred, and this legitimated their actions and decisions.

In the Emirate system of Northern Nigeria, the principal political ruler was the Emir. All the decisions and functions of the government were made and carried out in his office. Local government under this system was under the supervision of District and Village Heads, appointed by the Emir. Under this system, the Emir alone has the sole authority to appoint people into political position and ascribe their roles.

Among the Yorubas of the Western part of the country, the Obas were regarded as the fathers of the people and this gave sacredness, reverence and authority to their office. A kind of constitutional role surrounded the institution of the Obas. They were assisted by various categories of Chiefs, who played active part in the administration of those localities.

Finally, among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria, the traditional political system was based on the family lineage, village and towns units. Administration of the localities in this system was carried out at the village and family levels through decisions made by Oha-Eze and Diokpara.

This was the beginning of local government in Nigeria, though there was no formal name as local government then.

*''The existence of provincial systems, which operated in Borno and Oyo Empires as well as the emirate system of Sokoto caliphate exhibited rudimentary conception of local government... In these areas, there were smaller districts, villages and wards that were subject to the kingdom and emirate government. These smaller or sub-ordinate levels of government could be seen or described as local government''.*¹

What is important to note from the above statement is that, these smaller or subordinate levels of government could be seen as local governments.

2. NATIVE ADMINISTRATION

With the advent of British rule in Nigeria, some of the traditional political institutions, especially the Chieftaincy institutions, were involved in the system of local government known as "Indirect Rule". The main substance of the indirect rule system of the British colonialist was the Native Administration, otherwise known as Native Authority. This system was introduced by the British colonialists in the 1900s. This is the precursor of modern local government in Nigeria.

It is imperative to note that the existing traditional political institutions under which the Native Authority system and by implication Indirect Rule thrived was the Emirs, who were powerful and near absolute kings in the North; the Obas-Constitutional-Monarch in the West; and Warrant Chiefs in the East. These constituted the hub of the Native Authority. Though, there was no uniformity in the pattern of establishing the Native Authority, it varied from region to region and from one district to another. However, they were under the strict supervision of the British Officials particularly the District Officers (DOs).

It is important at this point to note that, while the system worked very well in the North, due to the Emirs, who were powerful and near absolute kings. The system did not succeed well in the West as was the case in the North, because the Obas did not enjoy such powers like their Emir counterparts of the North. The system was a complete failure in the East due to the acephalous socio-political nature of the people.

Okoli (2005:23) thus;

“No single person or body held absolute power in decision-making rather the decision-making powers were vested in a number of bodies which includes; Council of Elders, Village Council, Age-grade among other”².

Despite all these the system lasted up till 1966.

The widespread resentments and disenchantments against the Native Administration system, coupled with other socio-political factors, increased nationalist activities, emergence of political parties and resultant constitutional changes necessitated the transformation of Native Authority system of local administration. Furthermore, people were desirous to democratize the local government structures. This desire was more pervasive in the Southern part (East and West) than in the North.

3. MODERN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

The Eastern Regional Government was the first to embrace modern elements of local government system. The Regional House of Assembly in 1949 adopted a memorandum, which culminated and gave birth to the Eastern Nigeria local government Ordinance of 1950, which sought among others, to make local government administration more effective and democratic, as well as to garner the support of the local people in local governance.

The Western Nigeria Regional local government Ordinance of 1952 gave impetus to modern system of local government in the area. It introduced a system that had similarities with the pattern in Eastern Nigeria, although with slight difference.

In the West unlike the East, there was a deliberate attempt to accommodate the traditional rulers. Apart from this minor modification, the practice in the West remained essentially the same with the practice in the East.

In addition to the above, Lagos, the Federal Capital Territory, under the Lagos Act of 1963, has an all-purpose, multifunctional city council. This was outside the jurisdiction of the Western Regional Government. It was administered under the auspices of the Federal Government, and consisted of majority elected members, with few appointed members. The Oba of Lagos was appointed the president of the council, while the day-day running of the council was under the council chairman, who was elected annually by the council itself.

Modern local government did not start early in the North. The Native Authority systems remain the central basis of local government in the North, even when the Eastern and Western regions had abandoned it. This was due to the fact that, it was favourable to the prominent traditional rulers and the few educated elites, who were involved in the system.

However, the Native Authority Law of 1954 by the Northern Regional Assembly introduced very minor reforms, though still based on the Native Authority System, which still revolved around the traditional rulers. There was little or no democratization of the system.

It is evident that, this period actually marked the take-off of modern local government practice in Nigeria. Local governments witnessed an enhanced degree of mass participation and community development.

However, there were some major structural and functional problems, which include; size of the local government area, which is, some of the councils were either too large or small, and some lacked the requisite resources to provide essential services. Furthermore, the regional government and partisan politics filtrated the system; as such local government became smeared by political intrigues and maneuvering.

The termination of the first Republic by the Military in 1966 affected the pattern of local government system as well. Within this era, the regional structure was abolished, and in its place emerged a twelve state structure.

The reforms introduced into the local government system varied from one state to another. There was no uniformity. In the states of the North, the old system of Native Authority Council was abolished, and replaced with Local Authority Councils, and new ones created which invariably whittled down the influences of the traditional rulers. In the Southern States exists a different pattern of local government administration. While the States of the former Eastern and Mid-Western regions operated the Development Administration System, the Western States had the Council Manager System. Though all with their peculiarities.

The 1976 local government reforms was the first major nation-wide and comprehensive effort that was evolved by the Federal Government. Prior to this time, the reforms had been piecemeal and limited to either regions or individual states.

There are lots of changes that the 1976 reforms introduced in the system, thus;

“The reforms introduce fundamental changes in the local government system. Firstly, it introduced a uniform, single tier, local government system throughout the country. Also the reforms led to the recognition of the local government as a third tier of government, which has its own identity, power and source of revenue. Equally, it made provision for local government to share in federally collected revenue”³

This means that, the reforms introduced a formal structural differentiation between the local government and other levels of government, that is, in terms of personnel, financial management and functions.

Another very significant feature of the 1976 reforms is the constitutional recognition given to the councils, thus, empowering the federal government to legislate on local government issues, as well as its recognition as a distinct tier of government. In this regard, various constitutions at various times, made provisions for these, for instance, the 1979, 1989 as well as the 1999 constitutions made such provisions. All these constitutions have similar provision about the local government system, although with some modifications. But one distinct feature about the 1999 constitution is the provision which made the local government system a state responsibility.

Thus, section 7 Sub-section 1 provides that;

“The system of local government by democratically elected local government council is under this constitution guaranteed; and accordingly the government of every state shall, ...ensure their existence under a law, which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance, and functions of such councils”⁴

Based on this provision, nearly all state legislatures have made laws on local government administration, to regulate the operations of the councils.

4. CONCLUSION

Local governments system in Nigeria have passed through several stages of developments, from the pre-colonial local administration, the colonial native administration; otherwise known as native authority, and the post-colonial local government reforms up to the present 1999 local government system.

In the current dispensation, local governments are run by elected councils, with Executive Chairmen who are the Chief Executives and Chief Security Officers of the local government areas. There are also elected councilors and appointed supervisors.

However, there are speculations on further reform, as there is still controversy over whose constitutional duty it is to create new local government areas, as well as the regulation of the tenure of elected local government officers.

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