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## POLITICAL CULTURE AND INSTABILITY IN NIGERIA

OKONKWO NNAMDI

&  
EFEURHOBO DAVIS

### ABSTRACT

*Culture is the way of life of a people. Political culture is that aspect of general culture which bears relevance to politics. A Nigerian political culture, therefore, will suppose the general way of political life of Nigerians. This will include the norms, values, and attitudes among others of the Nigerian citizenry. Intellectual debates have trailed the idea of a Nigerian political culture with most scholars arguing that what actually exists in Nigeria are political sub-cultures very common in multi-national 3<sup>rd</sup> world states still battling the problems of national integration. This paper takes a cursory look at the concepts of political culture and political instability. Its findings are that the more mature a nation's political culture, the more politically stable such nation is, while the lower a nation's political culture, the more politically unstable such a nation is. With the available data showing that this hypothesis is in tandem with the Nigerian situation, the paper concluded by offering some far reaching recommendations on ways out of persisting cases of political instability in Nigeria.*

### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a third world state, a derogatory often ascribed to a group of states that are politically unstable, economically unviable and social-culturally parochial. The problem of political instability in Nigeria is rooted partly in her not so popular constitutions, her weak institutions and her plural compositions but mostly in her sub-cultural variations which rather than develop into political culture, have created political sub-cultures.

Historically, we were told that before 1914, there was no entity known as Nigeria. What we had instead were several independent ethnic nationalities that were politically sovereign and economically self sustaining. For purely economic interest, the British colonial government through Lord Fredrick Lugard amalgamated the over 250 composite nationalities to form one country, Nigeria in 1914.

The colonial policy of indirect rule, condemned for application of different standards in administering different parts of one political entity Nigeria was also strongly fortified by the colonial policy of divide- and rule. These policies combined continually reminded indigenes of the various composite nationalities in the Nigerian union that the emergent state may not be predicated on equity, justice and fairness. What this feeling did was to confirm old fears of the various composite nationalities and reinforce ethnic political sub-cultures rather than grow national political culture in Nigeria. This could probably explain why in Nigeria as with other 3<sup>rd</sup> world states, the struggle for political power became more intense and brutal among the political leaders of the various ethnic groups and to be a major partaker, one must of necessity socialize in the political culture of violence (Onimode 1983).

A political culture, whether diverse or homogeneous is a product of many factors such as geography, historical development and experiences, diversity of a nation's population, patterns of traditional norms and practices as well varying levels of socio-economic development and socialization processes. (Babawale 1999:217). A nation's political culture is human centered. It involves the political style, values, norms, emotions, beliefs and symbolic attachment that are dominant among a population. When the level of morality driving these variables is high as in the USA, Canada or Britain, we have national and mature political culture which oftentimes harbour inbuilt mechanisms that checkmate political and socio-economic instability. Conversely, when the level of morality driving these variables is low as in Nigeria and other third world states, we have minimal political culture which most often manifests in the form of political sub-cultures. This could explain why Nigerian political culture does not harbour the requisite mechanisms to checkmate political and socio-economic instability. The entire state is thus, left at the mercy of primordialism

### CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS.

Some commanding and recurring concepts have been operationalized with the aim of laying a strong analytical foundation for the paper. Such concepts include political culture, political sub-culture, political instability and political socialization.

Ⓢ **Political Culture:** The definitions of political culture are many and varied (Babawale 1999:210). Scholars like Macridis (1960:40) and Pye (1962:122) conceive political culture as commonly shared goals and commonly accepted rules. For Almond and Verba (1963) political culture is specifically the pattern of individual political orientations, the attitudes towards the political system and its various parts and the role of the self in the political system. We speak of a political culture just as we speak of an economic culture or a religious culture. For Ikelegbe (2005:76) political culture is the attitudes, beliefs, values and affection that are consciously held in a society in relation to the political process. A nation's political culture is mature when the guiding norms and values are driven by high morality and also have national spread. It is low when the guiding norms are trivialized and driven by immorality. Although members of a political community never shared exactly the same orientation towards politics, yet, it is important for the stability of any system that the political culture is relatively homogeneous. Without some level of agreement on the basic nature of politics, the general role of government in the society, and legitimate goals of policy and participation, governmental policies which are popular with some sections of the citizenry are likely to be extremely unpopular with others and this may result into political strife and instability. For the political system to endure, therefore, requires a high level of consensus on political norms and attitudes.

Ⓢ **Political Sub Culture:** Political culture may not be the same throughout the entire population. It is doubtful if any nation has a homogeneous political culture. There may exist different political sub-cultures alongside the dominant political culture. While in some nations, many beliefs are sufficiently widespread among the people that we can justifiably speak of a nation's political culture, and compare national culture with one another, in others such as Nigeria; there is no predominant political culture. The various Nigerian ethnic groups inherently constitute different political sub-cultural groups. They all exhibit cohesive political cultures of their own which are very different from each other and which resist amalgamation into a Nigerian whole (Babawale opcit:214).

Ⓢ **Political Instability:** Instability refers to the quality of a situation in which things are likely to change or fail suddenly (OALD 2000:621). This definition mostly explains political and economic instability. Basically, political instability is experienced when a group, be it a state, an organization or an association is engulfed in internal political differences arising from skirmishes and sometimes desperation to achieve certain interest in a competitive struggle. Political instability is a situation of chaos, disorder and unrest. It arises when people discard legitimate procedures and due process to achieve personal or collective goals. Political instability is an enduring problem in developing countries and this is explained by the fact that in such countries, there is no general consensus on a wide range of political and governmental issues. This is the meeting point of political culture, political sub-culture and political instability.

Ⓢ **Political Socialisation:** In its broadest sense, political socialization refers to the way society transmits its political culture from generation to generation. It is a process mediated through various agencies of society, by which an individual learns politically relevant attitudinal dispositions and behaviour patterns (Babawale opcit:218). These include attitude and behaviour related to political legitimacy, electoral behaviour, interest articulation, and decision making which affect the authoritative allocation of values in the system, feelings of personal competence to influence decisions affecting allocation of values, and attitudes towards authority. So many other scholars including Ikelegbe (2005:78), Greenstein (1968:551) and Almond (1960:7) have extensively conceptualized political socialization. In all, it is agreed that political socialization is a process whereby individuals in a society acquires, internalizes and makes use of certain political or politically related norms, values and attitudes to help develop and sustain the environment.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Political instability results from social conflict. Thus, the theoretical framework of this paper would of necessity be predicated on conflict theory.

However, there are clusters of theories that exist for social conflict including the structural-conflict, the frustration-aggression, the psycho-cultural and the relational theories among others (Faleti 2006: 41). Even though steel boundaries may not necessarily exist for these clusters, yet, the relational theory has been found a most helpful framework for discussing conflict and instability in a typical cleavage state such as Nigeria.

Relational theories attempt to provide explanations for conflicts between groups by exploring sociological, political, economic and historical relationships between such groups. The belief here is that cultural and value differences as well as group interests all influence relationships between individual and groups in different ways.

At the sociological level, differences between cultural values is a challenge to an individual or group identity formation processes and create the tendency to see others as intruders who have to be prevented from encroaching upon established cultural values (Faleti Ibid: 54).

Political economy identifies power and the advantages that it confers as a key source of tension between different interest groups within a political system. In a situation where multiple groups share a common resource that is fixed in nature (as in Nigeria) the chances that each will attempt to eliminate, neutralize or injure the others or monopolise such a resource is as high as the tendency to enter into a negative relationship (Maoz 1982).

Also, a number of conflicts grow out of a past history of conflict between groups that have led to the development of negative stereotypes, racial and ethnic intolerance. Such a history of negative exchanges between groups may make it difficult for efforts to integrate different ethnic and religious groups within the society to succeed because their past interactions make it difficult for them to trust one another. In Nigeria, for instance, it has been most difficult to get the Hausa, Igbo and the Yoruba to see themselves as partners in progress because they have a past history of conflict woven around control of resources including political power within their territories.

What is clearly observed in this framework is that sociological, economic as well as historical factors continually create conditions in cleavage societies whereby inter group suspicion and distrust is reinforced. The end product of all these are social tension, economic backwardness, low level of cultural Integration and political instability.

### EXPLAINING NIGERIA'S PERSISTING LOW POLITICAL CULTURE

Nigeria's political culture has widely been standardized as low or minimal and these nomenclatures that have been adopted in explaining the political culture of most subjective in parochial societies. As a multinational 3<sup>rd</sup> world state, Nigeria has continued to find it difficult to unite her diverse composite nationalities into one nationally consensus group. The over 250 ethnic nationalities remain significantly diversified in language, norms, values and belief systems, in history, geography and in virtually all activities and issues of culture. Nigeria's political culture has been categorized as low and this commands universal acceptability. Even so that, it has become more fashionable today to describe Nigeria as a political sub-culture. A society where deeply entrenched political subcultures have continued to weaken numerous efforts at attaining holistic, cohesive and homogeneous sets of national political culture.

In investigating political tension, instability and insecurity in cleavage societies as typified by Nigeria and other third world states, an analysis of political subcultures is exceptionally important. This statement is strengthened by (Grant 2003:44) when he asserts that cultural explanations can assist the understanding of how relations to political events and developments may vary in different societies, while the analysis of subcultures remains important in understanding tensions and cleavages within particular societies.

Another name for Grant's political tension is political instability and it remains a hallmark of the politics of third world states. What differentiates the third world states from their more advanced counterparts is actually not about the extent of pluralities or heterogeneities inherent in each, but the extent to which existing pluralities or diversities have been brought and bound together by a cohesive force of nationalism national identity. While the first and second world states have enjoyed nationalism both in their objective and subjective senses, the third world states lack nationalism especially in its subjective form (i.e. the spiritual and emotional sentiment of belonging together) (Heater 1964 :31)

For Nigeria, a state that was mechanically hounded together as one by an alien power, it has become most difficult a task trying to create a nation-state with a central set of political culture for the people. Even if the emerging nationalist class was able to close rank and fought against colonialism as a team, the moment it became obvious that the colonial government would soon grant independent to Nigeria, the ethnic and primordial character of the nationalists began to manifest. But before then, observe Orjiakor (1981:14) sir Arthur Richard, the colonial

Governor-general of Nigeria had used every opportunity he could find informing the emerging Nigerian elites that "you are not one people". Among the emergent nationalists, Akinyemi et al (1979:98) captured the outbursts of reservation and doubts over Nigeria's unity. For instance, it was revealed that as far back as 1957, Chief Obafemi Awolowo had declared that Nigeria is not a nation but a mere geographical expression and that Nigerian nationhood is only a British intention for it. On another front, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was obviously anxious about the position of his kinsmen in the emerging Nigerian state when he declared in 1949 that the domination of the Ibo over the rest of the tribes was a matter of time (Abiola 1972:256). Numerous other declarations in this regard which may not find space in this essay were made by the emergent Nigerian elite class.

Without doubt, the colonialists in collaboration with the emergent Nigerian elite class through deep primordial ethno-regional and religious attachment to their various values and attitudes sustained social cleavages and political subcultures in modern Nigerian state, a condition that is contradictory to contemporary trend. From this, flow other conditions such as despotic governance devoid of equity and fair treatment, resource and environmental agitation, weak institutions among others which have continued to reinforce the dominance of cleavage political sub-cultures over national political culture.

- **Political culture of primordial Ethno-Religious Attachment:** Since the formation of the Nigerian state through amalgamation in 1914 and sovereignty in 1960, the over 250 composite nationalities brought together by the Nigerian project have continued to maintain very strong ethnic and religious consciousness through primordial sentiments and open display of xenophobia. As Babawale (1999:213) puts it, in such societies, people have little knowledge of the political system beyond what happens in their immediate local government. Since there is little expectation on the part of the members of the political community that significant changes in their lives can be made through politics, people prefer to remain loyal to their group political norms and values.
- **Despotic and tyrannical nature of formalized and officialised governance in most 3<sup>rd</sup> world states is yet another condition that creates and sustains low political culture in Nigeria.** Governance in most multi-national states whether they are democratic or authoritarian has not been conducted in most transparent manner. While political actors have constituted themselves as cult groups, governance is shrouded in secrecy. This problem is compounded by the fact of weak political institutions and their in-built principles such as (rule of law, separation of powers and due process) all of which have failed to guarantee individual and group rights, liberties and aspirations. The growing awareness that political leadership in Nigeria has not provided the enabling environment for inter group trust and confidence continues to sustain the culture of group allegiance and by extension, political sub-culture.
- **Political culture of inter-group suspicion resulting from marginalization, exploitation and exclusion:** To marginalize is to make a person or a group become or feel less important or less powerful. For Olawepo (2004), to marginalize means to cause to live on the margins of society by excluding from participation in many groups effort. Marginalization involves people being denied degree of power and it encompasses domination, maltreatment, intimidation, suppression, exploitation, deprivation and alienation as inflicted on an individual or group by

another individual or group (Mullaly 2007:252). Along with material deprivation, marginalized individuals and groups are also excluded from services, program, and policies (Young 2000:35). For Mullaly (op.cit) marginalization has the potential to result in severe material deprivation and in its most extreme form can exterminate groups. In Nigeria for instance, several enduring conflicts especially the persisting Niger-Delta crisis results from group feeling of marginalization of resources, political exclusion and environmental neglect. This has continued to erode the germination of a set of national political culture strong enough to entrench an orderly and stable political system.

- **Constitutional defects and general systemic disequilibrium:** The most authoritative statement about a constitution was made by Wheare (1966) when he conceived a condition as a collection of norms, or standards according to which a country is governed. For Wheare, a constitution contains statements intended to define the relations between rulers and the ruled, the basic institutional framework of government, the rights and duties of citizens, and many important procedures to be followed in connection with those matters. The constitution defines the conditions for the exercise of legitimate power, who shall exercise political power, how they shall exercise their powers (ibid). Constitutions are basically organic and evolutionary and hence able to create strong institutions. Since the Nigerian state is by fact of its mechanical and artificial nature a deviation from this standard, what we have instead become weak institutions that could not contain her drift into a state of disequilibrium. Given such scenario, a uniform set of positive norms and values that could have ushered in a strong national political culture could not germinate. Composite group political cultures continue to prevail over national political culture and its enormous capacities for political stability.

The four factors discussed above may not be mutually exclusive, but they have contributed significantly in creating and sustaining the conditions for national low political cultures or even cleavage political sub-cultures as the case may be. The result of all this is persistent cases of political tensions and political instability in Nigeria.

### **POLITICAL CULTURE AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN NIGERIA**

Political instability remains a global phenomenon even if it has manifested more in third world countries. It is a period of internal political crises, tension and disorder arising from human greed and unhealthy rivalry (among individuals and or groups within a society) and this will normally lead to desecration of the principles of rule of law, due process, probity and other legitimate procedures.

Finer (1962) concentrated his definition of a nation's political culture mainly on the legitimacy of the rulers and political institutions and procedures. He relates the level of a nation's political culture to the likelihood of its being subject to a military coup and also to the methods by which this would come about. According to Finer, (Ibid), the level of political culture is high when the political formula, that is, the belief or emotion by virtue of which the rulers claim the moral right to govern and be obeyed is generally accepted, or when the complex of civil procedure and organs which jointly constitute the political system are recognized as authoritative, that is duty worthy by a wide consensus, or when public involvement in, and attachment to these civil institutions are strong and wide spread. When all these four conditions are met, the level of political culture is said to be high, to the extent that they are not, it is correspondingly low. For societies with low political culture, Finer argues, the public is

relatively passive and weakly organized and here, the institutions and procedures of the regime are also in dispute.

Numerous theories exist in support of the claim that the higher the level of political culture of any society, the higher the level of consensus on a wide range of political issues and the lesser the chances of political instability in that society. The converse is, however, the case for the lower the level of political culture. In multi-ethnic and fragmented Nigerian society, the over 250 composite nationalities have each demonstrated very strong inclinations towards preferred political values which they cherished. Also, the several organizations and associations therein operate in tandem with some standing political sub-cultures.

Since cherished ethnic, organizational and associational values may not be broadly accepted by the diverse and cleavage groups within the Nigerian state, it becomes extremely difficult to evolve and harness a uniform set of national political culture. What is implied here is that certain political values which the Ijaw of South-South Nigeria considers as centripetal may not enjoy similar consideration by their neighbouring Itsekiri ethnic nationality. The same may be true of the Ife and Modakeke clans of Osun state, the Tiv and Jukun ethnic groups of the lower Benue basin, the Christians and Moslems of Nigeria, the Nigerian Army and the Nigerian politicians, the Birom and Hausa-Fulani ethnic nationalities in the Jos plateau among so many other instances.

Political culture, more than any other variable determines the extent of political stability or political instability of any country. As earlier observed, the mature or developed political culture of the United States of America, Britain or Canada has sustained political stability while the low or minimal political culture of Nigeria, Burundi or Afghanistan has sustained political instability. In retrospect, therefore, some political culture that induced actions and events that created conditions for political instability in Nigeria are enumerated.

- Military intervention in Nigeria's politics and frequent disorganization of Nigeria's democratic Processes: The very significant ones were experienced in 1966, 1983 and 1993.
- Pogroms in the army resulting from incessant cases of intra military coup d'etat. While some of these coup plots were successful, significant numbers failed and hundreds of military officers and their civilian collaborators have paid dearly with their lives.
- For Oyediran (1979), attempted ethno-regional secession of the Igbo dominated Eastern region from the federation which was forcefully resisted by other federating units was a major factor of political instability in Nigeria. This culminated into a thirty (30) months civil war in which hundreds of thousands Easterners especially of the Igbo extraction lost their lives.
- Challenge to the legitimacy of the procedure for the transferring power and who constitutes sovereign authority observed (Babawale op.cit) could be a major factor in explaining political instability in countries with minimal political culture. This is evidenced by persisting controversies that have trailed the Nigerian electoral process since independence. The outcome is that no election has been unanimously accepted as free and fair just as no elected government has been accepted as legitimate. The first republic politics of thuggery and arson, the second republic bandwagon politics, the moribund third republic politics of self-succession and the current zero-sum politics of the fourth republic have all led to loss of faith in the political process.



- The June 12, 1993 political crisis which resulted from the annulment in July 1993 the presidential election adjudged the freest and fairest in the political history of Nigeria, this annulment pitched the Nigerian military junta against the Nigerian civil society and especially the pro-democracy activists. Political eruptions and violent clashes which resulted into mass deaths earned the federal military government condemnations and sanctions from the international community. With legitimacy of government at its lowest ebb during this period, political instability engulfed the Nigerian state.

- Ethnic conflicts and ethnic massacre: According to Smooha (1975:69) conflicts can hardly be discussed outside the concept of pluralism. Both pluralism and conflict are related in complex ways. A plural society which Nigeria typifies is characterized by co-existing but distinct cultural diversities and compulsory social institutions which determine and guide the individual and group behaviour of the incorporated peoples (Otiye 2004:2). In Nigeria like other plural societies, there are group intercultural encounters in the process of fostering specific interests and aspiration in view of the limited common resources, and this divergent interests and values may restrict concessions and co-operation among members of different nationalities. This clearly explains the series of inter ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts which regularly disrupt the political and socio-economic stability of Nigeria.

- Weak political institutions and highly corrupt governmental officials operating state agencies have also instigated political instability in Nigeria. Institutions of government especially the judiciary remains weak and cannot adequately adjudicate and interpret constitutional laws. This is also supported by corrupt officials, who compromise laid down rules and due process. This results in bottle up anger among the masses, waiting to explode at the slightest provocation.

Ⓢ The political culture of militancy in agitation for resource control and environmental protection: Even though this culture is not new in Nigeria, it has come to assume a frightening dimension among the Ijaw and other ethnic nationalities in the south south geopolitical region of Nigeria who have continually threatened to secede should the Nigerian state fail to accede to its demands of a controlling share of the proceeds from crude oil and gas sales.

All the political actions and conditions stated above represent strong variables in the explanation of Nigeria's political instability.

## CONCLUSION

In all known societies, political culture and political stability are said to share intricate relationship. This is because the more mature the political culture of a country, the more the likelihood that such a country will be politically stable while the reverse is the case for a country with minimal political culture. Nigeria as a third world country is still struggling to shade off conditions (both internal and external) that have frustrated the emergence of mature political culture. To that extent, political culture of primordial attachment, self-aggrandizement, greed for acquisition and holding on to political power, corruption and disdain for state institutions among others have continued to remain the hallmark of her social order and it is known that these are conditions for political instability.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A major interest of this paper is to proffer way out to the challenges of minimal political culture and political instability which have embarrassed Nigeria since its formation. This has become more expedient in an era when globalization and democratization have taken the centre stage of intra and inter state relations

Political instability is retrogressive and any state marked out as politically unstable does not record any meaningful socio-economic lift. Moreover, such state is treated as having neither culture nor civilization and could be viewed as a pariah state. There is even the tendency at times, to assume that politically unstable states are terrorist states. Bulk of the conditions leading to political instability originated from the political culture of Nigeria. To address this issue, therefore, it will be more beneficial to rely on logical discussion rather than mechanical enumeration of relevant variables.

As we already know, sub-cultural variations may hinder the emergence of a national political culture (Babawale Op.cit: 217). The Nigerian state is already weighed down by problems arising from sub-cultural variations. To overcome the problems arising from this, there is need for cultural transformation. This involves changes in the values and attitudes of the people and emergence of shared orientations. A political culture is not static but will respond to new ideas generated from within the political system, imported or imposed from outside. If this process goes the positive direction in Nigeria as it most often does elsewhere, recurring cases of political instability and social tensions would have come under effective state control.

Also, political stability is underlined by the relative success or failure of the assimilation of new attitude into the existing value structure. This change is made possible through political socialization-those developmental processes through which persons acquire political orientations and patterns of behaviour. Political socialisation serves as a means of effectively transmitting the political culture of a nation from generation to generation. It helps in creating new attitudes and values about the political system. The process may encourage either loyalty or disloyalty to the nation. Currently, the process remains adrift in Nigeria. If strong and adequate policies are put in place to arrest this drift, a process that may encourage loyalty to the nation may be realized. This in turn may increase trust and support for the political system and drastically whittle down the likelihood of political instability in Nigeria.

Democracy in its current form with its central focus on "good governance" if sincerely operated, wields the capacity of demeaning extremities in the political sub-cultures and creating a holistic national political culture in Nigeria. This, however, can only be realized if Nigeria's democratic perspective is transformed to practically align with democratic principles of equity, fairness, probity, transparency, rule of law and due process among others. By so doing, those aberrations within the Nigerian state which have sustained cleavages would give way for an emergent national political culture. This certainly will reduce inter and intra group tensions and drastically curtail the occurrence of political instability in Nigeria.

Finally, among the facilitators of change in the political culture of a nation are the processes of industrialisation, urbanization, mass media, mass political mobilization, massive investment in education, the democratization processes as well as the creation of symbolic elements such as national heroes and political leadership, lingua franca, national flags, national anthems, national public events and popular national constitutions. All these can foster the spirit of emotional attachment, loyalty and support to the system thereby engendering national unity and political stability.

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**OKONKWO NNAMDI**

Dept. of Political Science  
College of Education, Agbor  
&

**EFEURHOBODAVIS**

Dept. of Political Science  
College of Education, Agbor