

The role of the Church in the quest for political restructuring in Nigeria



Authors:

Ugochukwu O. Ezewudo^{1,2} 
Prince E. Peters^{1,2} 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

²Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Project Research Registration:

Project Leader: E. van Eck 
Project Number: 2400030

Description:

The authors are participating in the research project, 'Africa Platform for NT Scholars', directed by Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck, Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

Corresponding author:

Prince Peters,
prince.peters.195254@unn.edu.ng

Dates:

Received: 26 Nov. 2021
Accepted: 13 Mar. 2022
Published: 21 Dec. 2022

How to cite this article:

Ezewudo, U.O. & Peters, P.E., 2022, 'The role of the Church in the quest for political restructuring in Nigeria', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(1), a7254. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7254>

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The present political structure of Nigeria has proved unfavourable to Nigerians. This has led to catastrophic situations in Nigeria. This article evaluates the role of the Church in the fight to curb these catastrophes in the form of rising spates of insecurity, corruption, separatist agitation and marginalisation. These challenges have led to serious underdevelopment, poverty and unemployment, mostly in South-East Nigeria. Nigeria's inefficiency as a nation stems from a long history of poor leadership from the time of colonial rule until today, partly because of the unbalanced political structure in the country. The history of poor leadership has denied Nigerians the opportunity of achieving a new Nigeria like other countries of the world. The study uses a descriptive historical approach to investigate this challenging situation. As a result of the lack of true federalism demonstrated in the lack of a proper political structure in the country, the study advocated for restructuring the country's political structure to meet the immediate and long-term needs of all, especially in South-East Nigeria.

Contribution: Many Nigerian scholars have researched on the need to restructure Nigerian polity, but there is a paucity of literature on the role of the Church to achieve this, leading to a dire want of research materials in this regard. This research, therefore, contributes its quota to the search for the lingering problems of Nigeria as a nation.

Keywords: church; politics; restructuring; marginalisation; Nigeria.

Introduction

For the last 20 years or so, there has been agitation and a call by individuals, churches, non-governmental organisations, geo-cultural groups and geo-political associations for the restructuring of Nigeria (Bello 2017). This call has experienced a rising and falling surge, and currently, another rising owing to the fact that the structure and system of governance in Nigeria have continued to breed corrupt leaders and produce political leadership heavily tilted towards some geo-political zones instead of spreading throughout the six geo-political zones (see Emeh et al. 2020:109). This is corroborated in the words of Osaretin (2019):

[T]he politics of imbalance in the nation's political, social, economic, political and co-operate governance in the management, sharing and allocation of the nation's common wealth constitute to a very large rampant state of insecurity, rancor, fear, suspicion and feelings of agitation, exclusion and isolation within and among the various ethnic nationalities in Nigerian state. (p. 1)

The past and present heads of state and government within the last 20 years have given less concern to this burning issue which has even attracted the attention of the international community.¹ It was the action of former president Goodluck Jonathan in 2014, the inauguration of a National Conference that gave Nigeria a ray of hope. After his tenure, nothing seemed to happen on the matter. There are a few reasons why people rejected the idea of restructuring. Bello (2017) opines that such poor support to the call to restructuring was because of the ambiguity of the subject matter and what it is meant to achieve. Northern Nigeria had robustly resisted moves to restructure Nigeria in the past (Muhammad, Nazariah & Isah 2019:80) probably out of fear that political restructuring will be in favour of the south because the crude oil, which is Nigeria's most relied upon source of external revenue, is in the south. However, there are more agitations from southern Nigeria in support for restructuring, nevertheless with divergent views.

Recently, prominent northerners, even military generals, have supported the call for restructuring. For example, former Vice President Atiku Abubakar made a call towards restructuring (Ajayi 2016). Bello (2017) noted that the Speaker, House of Representatives of Nigeria, Dogara suggested a

1.The United States government through its army has shown enough concern in the instability presently rocking Nigeria's political structure, what Bouchat (2013:2) called 'political economy'.

constitutional amendment that would give rise to local government autonomy. In the same vein, retired military generals such as Babangida (Efeurhobo & Fredrick 2020:120), Alani Akinrinade and Tunde Ogheha have shown support towards restructuring (Onwumere 2019:7). Although there has been dissenting voices from the north towards restructuring, such opinions do not capture the entire opinion from the North. El-Rufai (2017) observed that despite the nation's endowment with natural resources which hitherto positioned it as Africa's leading economy and most populous nation, Nigerians are neither happy nor content with the current political structure, the present Constitution and virtually all the institutions of governance at the federal, state and local levels.

The Church in Nigeria is not alien to this development. Indeed, various studies have shown a good working relationship between the Church and politics. Both are inseparable (Kasomo & Naila 2012:17). The Church is not expected to shy away from political issues because politics ensures good governance and godly leadership (Dajur 2019:30–57). Politics always depends on religious commitments, and religious commitments are never politically indifferent but yield to political demands (Leeman 2021). The two variables have long been established as complementary to each other. Therefore, the role of the Church in Nigerian politics cannot be overemphasised. The Church has played major roles in positively affecting the culture, socio-economic, socio-political and educational life of the people. For example, 'the Church of Nigeria set up election monitoring groups to ensure fair outcomes of the 2003 and 2007 elections' (Nolte, Danjibo & Oladeji 2009:57). Economically:

[T]he Anglican Communion, Diocese on the Niger, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha, to mention but a few have projects that include building of affordable homes, guest houses, recreational facilities, clinics and hospitals and other commercial complexes. (Anozie 2013:281)

It has remained a strong force in influencing various countries' political processes and nation building. Therefore, the situation of manipulating church leaders by some powerful individuals or politicians who claim to be part of the Christian faith to pursue selfish interests remains one of the negative effects of the Church on the nation's polity. In addition, greed has crept into the religious terrain to the extent that some religious leaders now patronise political office holders to meet their lust for money and other material gains (Sahara Reporters 2010). Omosor (2019:40) explains how Rev. Fr. Mbaka embarrassed and sent out Peter Obi during Mbaka's church harvest thanksgiving because Peter Obi belonged to the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Rev. Mbaka was alleged to openly campaign for Hope Uzodimma of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and demanded that President Buhari sends money to his ministry to avoid failing the 2019 elections. In spite of the negative effect on the polity, the place of the Church cannot still be undermined. Considering the critical role the Church has played in Nigeria's politics, the call of the Church towards restructuring of the country has been emphasised (see Nche et al. 2020:9;

Ngele & Peters 2019:5) and this would also be reflected in this study. However, this article maintains that the Church cannot have a positive impact in the quest for political restructuring in Nigeria as long as it sits on the fence or is manipulated by the political class.

Conceptual clarification

The three concepts that will facilitate the objective understanding of the article are 'restructuring', 'politics' and 'church'. Both conceptual and operational definitions of these terms will be applied to drive the study's point home.

Restructuring

Restructuring has become one of the most popular languages used in the Nigerian political world today. Mohammed and Sulaiman (2018) operationally views the term as:

[A] political and administrative connotation, which implies agitation for more formation in the entire component of the existing federalism, as a results of the need to control the center or representation in the political landscape of the country. (p. 3)

Restructuring then assumes the call for restoration of federalism – the foundational constitution structure to which all Nigerians subscribed as encapsulated in the independence Constitution of 1960 (Aziken et al. 2017). It usually involves major changes for the organisation in its multiple departments and locations, including procedures and processes. Theoretically, restructuring leads to a more efficient and modernised entities. However, it may also lead to the redundancy of jobs and the layoff of personnel (Katarzyna 2016). The essence of restructuring is change (Slawomir 2012). Amboka (2012:2) contends that the restructuring of an organisation involves making strategic changes when the organisation faces environmental challenges. This applies to the study in the form of political need for change. This should reflect on creation of states/local government areas (LGA), resource control, regional autonomy and power devolution, etc. The most sensitive of which is resource control, especially oil wealth.

From this political perspective, it spills into the processes of reorganising the legal and operational structure of the nation for the purpose of making the country more favourable and friendly for its populace. Restructuring Nigeria then would by implication mean returning Nigeria to the kind of federal arrangement envisioned by the founding fathers in the 1960s. The federal arrangement of the 1960s is as follows: various distinct parts of the country were federating units. Each state had the constitutional power to manage its unique problems and concerns, to develop its own resources for its people, to manage its own security and to make its own kind of contributions to the well-being of the whole country. The central government managed common matters like the defence of the country, international relations, currency, state relations and ensuring protection of fundamental human rights. If the country takes the impetus to restructure, the country will move forward both economically and socially. But if not well-planned and implemented, it can lead to more problems or even system collapse.

Church

The New Testament concept of the Church, its organisation and purpose are little understood outside the circle of biblical scholarship. The word 'church' comes from the Greek genitive noun *kuriakon*, which could be assumed to mean 'belonging to the Lord' (Berkhof 2003:557). The most widely used New Testament term for church is the Greek '*ekklesia*'. According to Smucker (1966:13), 'Ekklesia...is the translation of the Hebrew term for the whole community of Israel as the people of God, the word qahal'. It is popularly understood as the assembly or congregation called out from the world of darkness into God's family.² *Ekklesia* is a compound Greek term, derived from the verb *ekkaleo*. The prepositional prefix *ek* means 'out' and *kales* means 'to call', thus the compound word means 'called out'. The noun would then be a 'called-out group' or 'set apart group'. In secular Greek, *ekklesia* was 'a political assembly of citizens of ancient Greek states, especially the periodic meeting of the Athenian citizens for conducting public business and for considering affairs proposed by the council' (Caudle 2020:1). In the Gospels of Matthew, 'Church' was used to show that Jesus is the builder or foundation of the called ones (cf. Mt 16:18).

For a proper understanding of this article, two distinctive uses of the term 'Church' are noted, namely as an institution and then as an organism. The Church as an institution is defined by Reken (1999:198) as the 'formal organization that sets out to accomplish a specific purpose'. According to him, it is an agent which can do things, and can say things because it has its own voice. The Church as an institution has its own place, purposes, mission, plans, structure and leaderships. From an organisational point of view, Iwe (1979:88) understands the 'Church' as an organised people of God, a spiritual and moral force to be reckoned with. The Church is a unified 'body of believers, the communion of believers' (Reken 1999:198). It is the totality of individual believers in which each Christian acts as an instrument in God's hand to accomplish God's purpose.

Politics

The word politics is one of the difficult terms to define because there is no universal definition to it. It has wide range of meanings. Some people view it based on what happens in the political administration of any region or state (Hawkesworth & Kogan 2013; Udegbe 2017). Its definition varies from theory to theory of usage. It has been viewed as a dirty game, where elections and selection process are marred with violence, treachery, deception and all forms of wickedness (Udegbe 2017). It has been defined in various ways, as the study of conflict resolution (Crick 1962), the art of government, the conduct and management of public affairs, etc. (Modebadze 2010:39). According to Modebadze (2010), the two contradictory approaches to understanding politics are the narrow definition of politics and the broad definition of politics. Narrow definition of politics is what takes place within the government and state departments:

²Since neither the infinitive *ekkalein* nor the noun *ekkletos* occurs in the New Testament, and both are also very rare in the LXX (Schmidt 1985:355), this makes it problematic to accept this understanding.

only politicians, government officials and members of the political parties are involved in this brand of politics, whilst a broader conception of politics argues that politics is not only confined to a particular sphere, but also takes place in all aspects of human endeavours (p. 44), that is, in the home, religious institutions and in the society at large. Such a broad concept of politics assumes that politics is the interweaving of state, people and power. Hence, Usikaro (2011:31) wrote that 'politics is the power system of a place'. Ekwunife (1995) approaches the concept of politics from a religious view. To him, politics:

[I]s an expression of Christ's care for the masses. Christ who leads the sheep to green pastures, who is so devoted to their cause that he is prepared to die for them. (p. 40)

Ekwunife's perception contradicts people's belief that politics is a dirty game. The attachment of dirtiness to the game of politics in Nigeria has made it quite unattractive to the masses because of the associated corruption. This has led to the notion amongst Christians that politics is evil which people of questionable character have wholly embraced.

Nigeria and political structure

In 1914, Nigeria saw the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorate by the colonial masters. This is a nation with more than 200 ethnic groups (Mustapha 2005:4) and multiple ideologies. From 1960 to 1999, Nigeria has been experiencing different political restructuring. Under the leadership of Tafawa Belewa and Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe (1960–1965), they saw the creation of the Western Region. General Aguiyi Ironsi (January 1966–July 1966) abolished federating region; power became concentrated at the centre and also began a unitary system of government. Under General Yakubu Gowon (July 1966–August 1975), Nigeria was divided into 12 states. General Murtala Mohammed (July 1975–February 1976) started the process of relocating the federal capital from Lagos to Abuja, drafting a new Constitution and creating additional states. General Olusegun Obasanjo finalised and approved the change from a British parliamentary to an American presidential system of government, relocated the federal capital from Lagos to Abuja and shared central revenue amongst three tiers of government. Alhaji Shehu Shagari (October 1979–December 1983) established federal character principle in federal appointments. General Ibrahim Babangida (1985–1993) attempted to enforce a two-party system for Nigeria, whilst Sani Abacha (November 1993–June 1988) created six additional states and local governments. Between 1999 and 2018, there was no major political restructuring. However, an attempt was made by former president Goodluck Ebere Jonathan to restructure the country politically, leading to the inauguration of the National Conference Committee. The current administration seems to lack the capacity to implement the outcome of the National Conference Proceedings but aims at fighting political parties and not corruption.

After independence in 1960, the military regimes exacerbated problems of the Nigerian political structure. Recently, the

military heads of state that destructured Nigeria are now asking to undo some of the changes they made during their 29 years in power. Bello (2017) observed that:

[T]he incursion of armed forces into Nigerian political landscape is a bag of mixed blessings, some of the structures they created are difficult to dismantle and some of the changes they made are impossible to reverse. (n.p.)

On the other hand, the political leaders in the country today have failed to imbibe democratic principles which preach social justice, fairness and equity. The level of social injustice and marginalisation currently prevalent in Nigeria is reaching an alarming magnitude. Agitations for a restructured Nigeria have remained at the front burner of national conversation, amidst the cries of marginalisation amongst some of the estimated 250 ethnic groups in the country (Bakare 2017). The overwhelming increase of secessionist, militant and terrorist groups in Nigeria these days such as the Biafra agitators, Niger Delta Militants, Oduduwa Republic agitators, Boko Haram, Fulani herdsmen, etc. bears huge testimony to the inequality and neglect in some quarters. This demonstrates the unfavourable political state of Nigeria.

The need for political restructuring

A common reason, as a matter of urgency, to engage in political restructuring in Nigeria, is that every section of the country complains about marginalisation (Othman, Osman & Mohammed 2019:88). These agitations are motivated by the aim of finding geographical expressions for socio-cultural identities. These agitating groups (especially the Indigenous People of Biafra [IPOB] and Oduduwa) invoke their right to negotiate their existence with the Nigerian state as enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Nigeria is a signatory. As an art of mediation, restructuring could calm all agitations, and create room for Nigerians to advance, discuss and refine ideas for adjusting resource control. It will also encourage the jettisoning of ethnicity, encourage an equitable and fair distribution of national resources, bring all stakeholders to the table with sincere intentions of finding a lasting solution (Efeurhobo & Fredrick 2020:129–130) and check the unhealthy idea of born-to-rule mentality operational in the north (Efeurhobo & Fredrick 2020:119). These would expectedly make the nation more politically and economically stable by encouraging hard work and competition amongst the federating units, hence allowing each unit to develop at its own pace.

The responsibilities of the Church towards political restructuring in Nigeria

Participation of the Church in the process of socio-political restructuring for the realisation of justice is a mission that should not be overlooked. Christians are to take positive actions to destroy all forms of oppression and injustice wherever they are found (Hastings 1976:91). The restructuring role of the Church should be such that will enhance influence

on the socio-political order without affecting spiritual and evangelistic mission (Uchegbue 2013:142). This will involve confronting and challenging every unfair, oppressive and exploitative structure with Christian values and principles. The Church along with direct spiritual vocation should be committed to the process of justice, human freedom, social development and a well-organised system of governance by fulfilling the following responsibilities: rejection of marginalisation, creation of awareness, Christians' active participation in electing political representatives, encouraging dialogue and peace building, and upholding the scriptural principles (Uchegbue 2013:149). The leadership of Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) and Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should work together as one united body to achieve this political restructuring.

Marginalisation is an exclusion from religious, political, economic and social well-being of the people. Mowat (2015:454) asserts that 'Marginalisation is a global problem that impacts negatively upon societies across the world'. People who are marginalised have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them. They may become stigmatised and are often at the receiving end of negative public attitudes. The Church as an instrument entrusted with ethical principle enshrined in the gospel has unconditional responsibility in confronting and challenging the systems of corruption, exploitation and injustice which deprive the masses their right of living. It is obvious that Church leaders, because of the corrupt leaders, become unable to challenge the corrupt nature and attitude of these leaders towards good governance. The Church should always remember her calling to impact positively and transform the society with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he mentioned the fruit of the Spirit which is love, joy, kindness, self-control, goodness, etc. These are virtues which object to marginalisation. The Church is called to give prophetic witness through a life of selflessness dedicated to defend the marginalised by preaching justice peace and integrity of creation (Ishaya 2017:10). The Church as an agent of liberation from injustice and inequality should stand on her calling in liberating the nation from selfish individuals without seeking for personal gains. For Karl Marx, religion is the opium of the masses (1994:57), but the Church is the voice of the masses calling for the adoption of principles enshrined in the scripture which will lead to a lasting solution over marginalisation in Nigeria.

Recommendation

In view of the issues raised in this article, the researchers put forward the following recommendations that the government should partner with the Church towards:

1. Ensuring equal access and equal opportunity for all. The place of minorities in the Nigeria political structure should be considered. Every Nigerian, irrespective of background and social status, must be given a sense of belonging, must contribute to the nation and must have a share of national wealth.

2. Correcting of structural imbalance, thereby giving room for equalisation of all inequalities. This ensures distribution and representation of all tribes.
3. Ensuring that the place of meritocracy in selecting leaders and directors be given strong attention.
4. Encouraging unity in diversity.

Conclusion

Nigeria, as a multi-ethnic and multicultural society, needs true federalism. For the past 17 years, Nigeria has experienced uninterrupted civil rule and this is praiseworthy. However, the idea of non-implementation of true federalism has attracted the attention of many Nigerians. The problems of lack of free and fair election, negation of fundamental human rights, unaccountability of government and disregard to constitutionalism and rule of law need to be tackled in order to give way for political restructuring. The participation of the Church as the voice of the voiceless, and a sacred institution with an indispensable social mandate and relevance should not be overlooked. The Church remains a powerful agent for socio-political change and liberation from marginalisation tendencies. Therefore, for Nigeria to achieve political restructuring, the Church must be involved.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed equally to this work.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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