

INTEREST GROUPS IN PUBLIC POLICY FORMULATION : THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

* *O. Lucky Ovwasa*

INTRODUCTION

The importance of public policy formulation in Nigeria can hardly be overestimated. More important is the growing tendency of Director Generals and Chief Executives of parastatals to go with the government that appointed them instead of providing continuity in times of crisis. And because Ministers are appointed by the Head of the Government and not elected, public functionaries more often than not derive their status and power from their abilities to get very close to the seat of 'Sovereign Power' and their influence and policy input also derive from their informal relationship with the Head of Government. As Ayida (1987:10) noted " major policy decisions are now taken at informal evening gatherings at state house than even in the so-called "Kitchen Cabinet".

It is against this background that we intend to analyse the impact of individuals and groups in the formulation of public policy in Nigeria since its independence.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The 'founding fathers' of the group approach to politics like Bentley (1967) and Kolb (1978) unanimously agree that the group is the single most powerful explanatory factor in the political process. To them, all politics is group

* *O. Lucky Ovwasa, Department of Political Science, University of Ilorin.*

conflict since they exert pressures on the government to push their interests to the forefront or to get their interests transformed to public policies. The group determines the course of social policy because it is the outcome of group pressure that is the sole determinant of the political process.

The group theory argues that to understand politics and the course of social life, the group and only the group should be used as the tool of analysis since the individual has meaning only to the extent of his participation in the group. Bentley (1967: 207) mirrored this clearly saying, "when the groups are adequately stated, everything is stated because the society is nothing other than the complex of the groups that compose it."

Based on this, groups or interest groups have been defined along the line of having common interests which they wish and actually protect or promote at the expense of other groups. To Kolb (1978: 165) an interest group implies "a collectivity of individuals who either formally organize or informally cooperate to protect or promote some common, similar, identical, or shared interest or goal." To him, the term 'pressure group' can be used because these groups appear to pressurise government. This is not to claim that the term 'pressure' adequately describes their political tactics and it is in fact, preferable to use the prefix 'interest' since the basis of their cooperation can only be found in the common interest and because their political roles are though frequent but intermittent in character.

However, Lapalombara (1974: 424) has included the term 'political' in his definition of interest group probably to play up the political activities of groups in their various political manoeuvrings and intrigues in pursuing their interests at the expense of others. According to him a political interest group is any "collection of two or more persons who in some manifest way demonstrate that they exist in part to influence public policy or the authoritative allocation of values."

The fact that interest groups are many in any society have resulted in the attempt by scholars to classify them along certain criteria. This is because typologies, in general, are very useful for the assessment and evaluation of

political institutions and processes, and including, of course, interest groups. As usual, no classificatory scheme is entirely satisfactory because of the overlapping types and characteristics of groups. Groups have, therefore, been classified by the nature of the interest or objective of specific groups, the organisational structure, how power is distributed within the group, membership orientation, religious, tribal, ethnic, racial, linguistic identities, or regional groups. They are associational non-associational, institutional and anomie groups (cf Lapalombara 1974:327 – 332).

Briefly, the associational groups are deliberately and formally organized on behalf of some interest or cluster of interests, and is more common in modern industrial societies. They have a formal organisational structure, formal procedures for acquiring membership, for selection of leaders and formulation of group policy. Some examples of associational groups in Nigeria are : The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), the Nigerian Association of Chambers and Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (NACCIMA) and the Manufacturer's Association of Nigeria (MAN). The Non-associational group is of course, the opposite of the Associational group. This is because, the Non-Associational groups have no formal organisational structure and are a common feature in agrarian and developing societies. They are only interest groups to the extent that their members at least have dim recognition of the interest they share with their fellow members. The association of illiterate farmers in the rural setting e.g. the Agbekoya uprising in the Western state of 1968 and petty traders association, are examples of Non-associational group.

Institutional groups consist of governmental bureaucracies, whose functions are supposed primarily to be decision-making, but have institutional interests of their own and frequently attempt to influence other branches for the protection and promotion of their own bureaucratic interests. Instances are the various ministries and department in government parastatals.

Anomie groups or outbreaks refer to a variety of similar kinds of actions entailing some degree of potential or actual violence which various kinds of groups use on occasion. They emerge spontaneously usually when a particular

issue of policy becomes overheated or when people demanding or opposing a particular policy experience severe setback. They are loosely led and may articulate contradictory demands. They do not generate permanent organisation, in fact; they really constitute more of a tactic used by all the interest groups. Instances of Anomic groups in Nigeria are the spontaneous riots that greeted the announcement of the cancellation of the June 12, 1993 presidential election by the then President, General Babangida and the various religious riots across the country, Student demonstrations and clashes with school authorities are also under the anomic group. Therefore, groups in our paper mean any formally or informally organized or unorganized association of professional bodies, ethnic groups, religious group, linguistic affiliation, clans, unemployed, unskilled workers, retirees that act to influence government public policies consciously or unconsciously in their interests at the expense of other groups.

In their bid to promote or defend their interests, interest groups adopt some strategies and tactics. The types of strategies adopted are highly dependent upon the composition and character of the group. For instance, a well-organised group of professional body is likely to adopt strategies and tactics, different from those adopted by a loosely organised group of unskilled workers.

Generally, however, the following strategies and tactics are known to be employed by interest groups to influence public policy formulation or to protect their corporate interests. One of such strategies is the sending of well-articulated position papers on a particular issue to the decision-makers. This strategy is commonly employed in Nigeria by such groups as the ASUU, NACCIMA, NMA and MAN. Other strategies adopted by interest groups include organising seminars, conferences, public rallies, distribution of pamphlets, sponsoring editorial and feature articles in newspapers. The "opening of" direct discussion with government officials and outright public demonstrations and strike are also tactics pursued "by interest groups".

PUBLIC POLICY FORMULATION IN NIGERIA

Public policy refers to the authoritative allocation of values in the society by the government of the day. It will include the decision to get off the

drawing boards, the actual implementation of the distribution of goods that society value at any given period. According to Kolb (1978: 285) public policy "constitute the expression of a political system's goals and the means with which it pursues them." The objectives of policies are the promotion of the professed values and goals of the society or government, and the content of policies are the political action programmes designed to pursue such values and goals. This is quite true of all societies and Nigeria cannot be an exception. The point of departure will be the determinants of public policies which are bound to vary from one state to the other. Our focus here is on the analysis of the determinants of public policy formulation in Nigeria, zeroing on various groups.

Before independence and up to 1966, the formulation of public policy in Nigeria has been characterised by competition for sectional advantage. This was defined, as it were, by the politics of the era. National issues on which consensus could be reached basing on their soundness and because of their viability in the national interest, suddenly became politicized once they were brought into the struggle for party and sectional advantage. Groups and sectional interests were the main factors in considering the formulation of public policies, rather than rationality based on national interest.

The control of men and resources rather than the concern for sound alternative policies were the dominant political phenomena of that era. As Dudley (1973:75) observes, "politics in Nigeria is not about alternative policies but about the control over men and resources." This we call the traditional conflicts between the national and group interests that have been general bottlenecks which have been impeding the formulation of public policy in Nigeria and also affecting the maintenance of national plan priorities. However, the major political obstacle to public policy formulation and the maintenance of National plan priorities in Nigeria has been and remains the vaulting ambition of the three major tribal groups in the country, namely Housa-Fulani's to the North, the Ibos to the East and the Yorubas to the West. Another group in Nigeria which constitutes powerful pressure group in the formulation of public policy are the various religious groups.

We shall now use two case studies, viz, the siting of an Iron and Steel Complex in the country and the issue of Nigeria's full membership of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), to illustrate the impact of groups in public policy formulation in Nigeria.

THE LOCATION OF AN IRON AND STEEL INDUSTRY

The former Federal Government that collapsed in January 1966 had plans to locate an Iron and Steel Complex in the most economically viable site in the country. And in tune with the politics of that period, three regional governments also included an Iron and Steel Complex in their respective development programmes. However, that regime ended in 1966 with the military incursion into politics and in the National Development Plan 1962-68 all the planned programmes of the regions were reproduced in the document as approved by the National Economic Council. It should be noted that the inclusion in the respective regional programmes was to ensure that the interests of the region concerned were taken into full account before the location was determined.

However, the location of the iron and steel complex became problematic when the National Economic Council eventually came to grips with detailed planning and investment decisions on the project. The politicians were naturally divided on regional lines, each region wanting the only industry to be located in their areas irrespective of its economic viability. Not surprising also, some of the administrators ceased to be faceless technocrats and their regions of origin either influenced their views or seemed to determine their expertise. The result of this regional interest outweighing national interest ended in the decision which Ayida (1967:26) aptly described as famous. To quote him :

"out of wrangling and embittered discussions emerged the famous decision of the National Economic Council to locate the one Iron and Steel Complex in two places in the Northern and Eastern regions presumably by splitting the project."

The implication of this type of wrangling among the major ethnic groups for Nigeria is that public policies are not formulated along rational or viable lines, but on the whims and caprices of groups. For example, as of that time, Nigerians were assured through the press that Iron and Steel project will be sited in the west as soon as iron ore and other raw materials were discovered in the region. The consequence was that there will be three iron and steel complexes in the country. Whereas, in reality, the Nigerian market was barely large enough to accommodate or sustain just one modest complex.

However, at the implementation stage, the iron and steel complexes were established in three regions outside the East. In fact, three were established in the North and the remaining two in the West. The major complex was installed at Ajaokuta in the North and the remaining two at Katsina and Jos respectively. The other two complexes sited in the West were distributed as follows, one at Aladja, in the former Bendel State, now Delta State, and the other at Oshogbo, in the former Western State, now the capital of Osun State.

The politics of this decision illustrates the dynamics of group influence over public policy decisions. The above scenerio can be explained on the basis of the nature of Nigerian politics. It would be recalled that during the first Republic when the decision to site the Iron and Steel Complex in the North and East respectively, was taken the coalition government of the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), which was mainly composed of the Hausa-Fulanis and the Igbos was in control at the centre. This provided the opportunity for groups from those ethnic regions to have favourable hearing from the government. But by the time of actual implementation the political pendulum has swung in favour of the former Western region. This was because, one of their illustrious sons and leaders, Chief Obafemi Awolowo became the Minister of Finance and Vice-Chairman Federal Executive Council under General Gowon.

Finally, the civil war had completely alienated the Igbos from the mainstream politics of the country. Consequently, this weakened their group influence in the decision-making process of the country.

THE ORGANISATION OF ISLAMIC CONFERENCE (OIC) NIGERIA'S FULL MEMBERSHIP

The regularisation of Nigeria's membership of the OIC in 1986 at the Fez (Morocco) conference of OIC members by the Babangida administration can be attributed to the views expressed and pressures exerted on the administration by the Muslim interest groups. Initially, when this decision was taken by the administration it was not made public because of the fear that public announcement of such decision can cause an avalanche of protests particularly from the Christian religious groups. But the secrecy about this crucial decision could not be kept for too long, before the bubble burst. This was when a Nigerian Newspaper, *The Guardian*, (1986), reproducing an Agency France Report (AFP), informed the nation of the move. What was expected did happen because the pandemonium which engulfed the country following the report was unprecedented.

Two dominant interest groups emerged on the heated debate that followed the report. The arguments advanced were of course, based on each group's religious interest. The Christians who were opposed to the move on the ground of fear that it was a subtle manoeuvre by the Muslim to islamize the country, called for a total withdrawal of Nigeria from the organization. On their part, the Muslims supported the move on their religious conviction that Nigeria being a full member will serve their spiritual purpose. Various strategies, already discussed in this paper were adopted by the two groups to force the government to accept their positions on the issue. For example, in a communique, the Nigeria Catholic Bishops Conference (a Christian group) argued forcefully that the disadvantages of Nigeria being a full member of the OIC far outweighed whatever benefits that might accrue from it. They cited Lebanon, Ireland, Sudan as examples of countries where government decision to favour one religious group at the expense of the other has led to untold hardship for their citizens, as a result of political instability and outright civil war. Through the *Daily Star* (1986:1), the body therefore posited that Nigeria should sever all links with the OIC in the interest of good government, orderliness and peaceful coexistence of the various religious groups in the

country. In a likely response to the then Chief of General Staff, Sommodere Ebitu Ukiwe (a Christian) that he knew nothing about Nigeria's decision to become a full member of the OIC.

The then head of the Anglican Mission in Nigeria, Archbishop Olufosoye called on the Federal Government to withdraw Nigeria from the OIC. He asserted that Nigeria's full membership of the organisation was surreptitiously carried out since it was neither discussed nor approved by the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC), the highest ruling body at that time, a body in which Ukiwe was second in command. (Daily Star 1986:1). Other Christian groups as the National Laity Council of Nigeria (NLCN), the Nigerian Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS), the Christian Students Movement of Nigeria (CSMN), the Synod of the Lagos Anglican Diocese and several other motley christian bodies came out vehemently to oppose Nigeria's full membership of the OIC. The former editor of Sunday Punch, captured graphically the position of the Christian groups when he wrote in an editorial titled "Don't touch that thing, it's too hot" because we were distant from salvation if we let our personal religious interest cloud our national development. Nigeria, should not have joined the OIC - since the idea was more division - causative than unifying - and it was not too late to withdraw her membership" Ayo Ositelu (1986:6). This actually summarized the venom in the Christian groups as they were seriously averse to the decision.

The Muslim groups on their part could not see anything wrong in Nigeria being a full member of the OIC. They argued forcefully too, that Nigeria has everything to gain from being a member. Based on their religious conviction, they posited that Nigeria would derive such benefits as soft loans from member states and solid support of OIC members on issues of national importance. And because of these benefits, the Muslim groups urged Nigerians to accept the OIC full membership. In an article in defence of Nigeria's full membership of the OIC, the only two Nigerian journalists (Muslims) who had the privilege of being present in Fez when Nigeria was admitted as full member of the organization argued that "joining the OIC does not make Nigeria an Islamic state as it did not make other member states like Cameroon, Benin Republic, Sierra-Leone,

Gabon, Uganda and a host of other Islamic state" (Liad Tella and Femi Abbas (1986:5).

The tension generated over the issue by these interest groups forced the Government to intervene, by appointing a twenty-member Committee of four ministers, eight Christians and Muslims respectively to study the implications of Nigeria's full membership of the organisation. As Nwosu: (1989:14) rightly pointed out :

It was to a great extent due to the acrimonious debate over the admission of Nigeria as a full member of the OIC which mostly were argued from religious perspective that President Babangida decided to intervene,

The impact of interest groups (this time religious) on the determination of public policy in Nigeria, was also acknowledged by the then President Babangida when he stated at the inauguration of the committee that :

In a secular world, the only place for religion is in the area of interpersonal rather than public relations. It follows from this assertion that while a country like Nigeria with multiplicity of religions cannot have one state religion, the need for ethical and spiritual upliftment of our citizens makes it imperative for government to encourage religious life whose neglect has caused and will continue to generate social problems including indiscipline, dishonesty, unbridled greed and materialism and all kinds of anti-social behaviour (Babangida 1986:7)

To illustrate further the impact of religious groups in the policy process, the President established a National Council for Religious Affairs.

CONCLUSION

What our analysis crystalized is the revealing fact that in Nigeria, the group approach can be used to a very large extent in understanding public policy formulation rather than concentrate on the formal institutions of government

which ostensibly are supposed to be more revealing. The impact of groups on the Nigerian body politic is rather overwhelming in the process of governmental decision making and implementation. This is not to argue that sectional interests are necessarily incompatible with national public policy formulation especially in a pluralist society like Nigeria; but in a situation where they try to undermine the interest of the nation, they can lead to irrational policy formulation.

It will be refreshingly interesting to note, however, that under the military administration as under the presidential system of the second Republic, ministers were appointed by the head of Government, and not elected. The implication of this, is that public functionaries will influence public policy in accordance with their levels of personal relationships with the head of Government and not on the basis of bureaucratic norms.

It is obvious, from the foregoing discussions that the impact of groups and individuals on the formulation of public policy in Nigeria is great and the geo-politics of the nation makes it very difficult to undermine the power or potency of group interests in the country.

Reference

Ayida, A.A. 1987, *Reflections on Nigeria Development*: Malthouse Heineman, Lagos.

Babangida, I. 1986, *New Nigerian* (Kaduna) 13 February.

Bentley, A.F. 1967, *The Process of Government* in Peter H.Odegor (ed) Harvard University Press, Cambridge. DailyStar 1986 (Enugu) 24 February.

Dudley, B.J. 1973, *Instability and Political Order: Politics and Crisis in Nigeria*: Ibadan University Press, Ibadan.

Kolb E.J. 1978, *A Framework for Political Analysis* Prentice-Hall, New Jersey.

Lapalombara, J. 1974 *Politics Within Nations* Prentice-Hall, New Jersey.

Nwosu, N. 1989 "Democratization, Pressure Groups and Nigeria's Foreign Policy: Two Cases" in J. Bayo Adekanye (ed.) *Institutions and Process of Democratization in Nigeria* NPSA, Ibadan.

Ositelu, A. 1984, *Sunday Punch*, (Lagos) 24 January.

Tella, L. and Abbas, F. 1986 *National Concord*, (Lagos)

The Guardian, 1986 (Lagos) 6 January.