

UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICS OF ZONING SYSTEM IN NIGERIA: A
PURVIEW OF RAWLS' COMPLEX EGALITARIANISM

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Abstract

The question of justice in the history of political philosophy becomes necessary as a result of men's struggle or quest to get shares of the limited resources. In such a struggle, the weak ones are elbowed out and the strong ones get hold of the resources. In view of this, the advent of John Rawls' "A Theory of Justice" (1971) provides a procedural method of distributing political rights, economic benefits, opportunities, as well as other social goods – like health, shelter and education. The Nigerian Quota System doctrine reflects Rawls' theory of 'justice as fairness', which is intended to provide modalities for the march to nationhood and enthronement of a stable democratic socio-political order as against the parochial sentiments and mutual suspicion built by ethno-political zones against each other through the nation's political sojourn. Using the critical and expository methods, the paper seeks to demonstrate that, as a result of the undue application of zoning principle and the lack of regard for merit or competency in the application of federal character principle, standard and professionalism are compromised and endangered, particularly in the public offices and educational sector. Hence, the paper suggests ways to be adopted by Nigeria which ethnic politics and sentiments would be dethroned, in order to ensure a stable democracy and socio-political order.

Keywords: Quota System, Ethnicity, Politics, Justice, Education, Equality.

Introduction

In more recent time the advent of John Rawls' political philosophy has become an epoch-making. It has indeed drawn attention from different quarters. Rawls tried to formulate a workable formula of 'fair' equal distribution of rights and liberties of individuals and the method of distributing socio-economic benefits that will cover income, health, education, and other political rights.¹ His two principles: the basic principles and the difference principles seem plausible because he fashioned them in a more complex way such that to fit-in in every society to a large extent.

This articulated complex idea of justice by Rawls is meant to provide a procedural method of distributing political rights and economic benefits to the citizens as moral agents in any given society, especially, in a democratic set up where there is free economy and individual liberty. This perhaps aims at maximizing the welfare of the citizens, especially the worst off group. It is in accordance with Rawls' doctrine of procedural principles of fair treatment that Nigeria adopts the federal character or the

zoning system as a formula of distributive justice which aims at achieving a fair play in politics as well as equal distribution of burdens or opportunities and other social goods (economic and social benefits).

Admittedly, Nigeria consists of several ethnic groups with diverse cultures, languages, religions, socio-political and economic formation as well as administrative styles, social norms, personality types and disproportionate population sizes. Although, federal structure was introduced at the formation of Nigeria to ease governance, but it is not adequate to meet with the demands of such complex composition. Through the course of its history other mechanisms such as Federal Character principle or the Zoning System were introduced and entrenched into the constitution to cater for yearnings and aspirations of the diverse cultures. The phenomenon of zoning is considered a high stake politics in Nigeria's democracy, "this is because zoning is seen as a mechanism of uniting various diverse people."² In the words of Simbine:

Zoning formula seems to fit into the heterogeneous and federal nature of the Nigerian state, helping to accommodate all groups as much as possible and therefore reducing complaints of domination and marginalization. To this extent, it helps to make the system more inclusive (of identifiable groups), and therefore more supportive of the democratic culture.³

Hence, the paper argues that, due the sectional politics and parochial sentiments of each geo-political zone the mechanism still promotes the endemic problems of ethno-regional, religious and sectarian bigotry which it is set to address. In view of this, recommendations which are in line with Rawls' principles are suggested to check the problem.

Rawls's Complex Egalitarian Principles

John Rawls is thought to have reinvigorated political philosophy with strikingly original ideas during his forty years as a Harvard philosophy professor. He entwined together strands of political, legal and moral philosophy in his book *A Theory of Justice* (1971). His concern was to establish the basis of a just society, and his approach was perhaps labelled Justice as fairness.⁴

Rawls's 'political' conception of justice is worked out in a contractual procedure, where if parties bargain and agree on a fair procedure then they will accept the end product of that procedure; which means, they will accept the principles of justice without having to embrace any particular comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrine.⁵ Since he set to work out procedure of attaining a well ordered society, he therefore stretched these procedural principles to embrace political rights (liberty) and social benefits (economic shares and other social goods) to the advantage of all, especially the worst off group. And this end product, which he assumes to be the outcome of the rational deliberation of the contractual members, should equally be entrenched into the constitution; which is designed for a liberal democratic culture.⁶

Rawls sought for alternatives to utilitarianism – the dominant political and moral theory in the Anglo-American world at the time he began his reflections. His ideas were drawn from three sources : (i) the social contract tradition, as found in the writings of Locke, Rousseau, and especially Kant. (ii) the notion of liberalism as set forth most notably in Mills on liberty, and (iii) the practice and theory of democratic politics.⁷

He wove these three materials or sources together to fashion out a more complex and plausible egalitarian principles that were never thought before. Modern socio-political and legal theorists contend that Rawls' egalitarian theory seems plausible than utilitarian and other dominant theories of his days because it provides a systematic basis for moral judgement in all circumstances, and perhaps conforms to all democratic principles.

Rawls believes that under the guide of the device of the *original position* and the *veil of ignorance* which impedes any prior knowledge the rational deliberators choose a public system of rules which defines offices and positions with their rights, duties and immunities;⁸ these culminate into his two egalitarian principles – rests on three prongs. The first statement of the two principles by John Rawls in “A Theory of Justice” reads as follows:

First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others.

Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.⁹

Rawls calls his first principle “the principle of *equal basic liberties*,” and this principle of liberty requires stringent protections for certain liberties. The principle of *basic liberty* is the first to be considered as principle of strict equality, where every individual counts as an ‘equal,’ and accrued with necessary constitutional rights as a citizen. Rawls contends that it is lexically prior to the other principles because it must be met before we can turn to the second, the *fair equality of opportunity* and the *difference principles*. In other words, once *basic liberties* have been maximized, an unequal distribution of other social goods and economic benefits may be introduced if they have the effect of maximizing the benefits of the group assumed to have lost in the natural lottery or the worst off group,¹⁰ this indeed is what Rawls always refers to the *permissible* or *allowable inequality* in “A Theory of Justice” (1971) and the “Political Liberalism” (1993). The protection of political liberties under the first principle is expressed in the ‘principle of participation’, according to which “all citizens are to have an equal right to take part in, and determine the outcome of constitutional processes that establish the laws with which they are to comply”. Thus, the basic liberties enumerated by Rawls are properly protected by explicit constitutional restrictions. “These restrictions publicly express on the constitution's face, as it were, the conception of social cooperation held by equal citizens in a well-ordered society”.¹¹ The essence of this complex articulation of the idea of justice as a fair play, according to Rawls, is to “nullify the effects of specific contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage”.¹²

The Composition of the Nigerian Polity and the Federal Structure

Nigeria as a political enclave came to be when the colonialists amalgamated the South and North protectorates on January 1st 1914. Flora Shaw, a British journalist called this enclave *Niger Area*, which later became Nigeria. The merging of the defunct protectorates (North and South) was done with the aim to bring the diverse cultures or ethnic groups and fatherlands and unite them politically as one people, which are heterogeneous in many respects. These consist of pluralism of language, religion, socio-political and economic formation as well as administrative styles, social norms and personality types. There are equally diversities among them resulting from factors of historical evolution, disproportionate population sizes, unequal economic resources and educational attainments, as well as range of social needs, preferences and talents. The integration of the North and South by the colonialists was intended to achieve certain specific objectives. Perhaps, this was meant to serve as a steering mechanism for a collective identity and distributive politics.¹³ To meet with the demands of the complex composition of Nigeria, federal structure was introduced to ease the act of governance in the polity.

Federalism is the system of government in which political powers are shared between the centre and the constituent states. There is no doubt that Nigeria operates a federal system of government, and the first major attribute of its form of federalism originates from the conglomerate protectorates. The original Nigerian union was an artefact of the amalgamation of what were known as the Southern provinces and Northern provinces by Fredrick Lugard in 1914, as indicated earlier. In 1939 these defunct provinces were further split into three administrative regions, with the south latter broken into two regions of East and West and the North left intact – but with the apparent understanding that the North was co-equal with the South. According to Peter Ekeh,

The Nigerian union acquired a federal format in 1954, de-emphasizing the relevance of the provinces and giving prominence to the regions... With the creation of the mid-west region from the western region in 1964 in political crisis, there were four regions in existence before military rule that lasted from 1966 to 1979 during which, first, twelve states, and, later nineteen states were created by two military regimes from the existing regions.¹⁴

Later on many states were carved out of these states. In a nutshell, the major attributes of federalism include territorially-based, though centrally enforced power and resource distribution.¹⁵ Since federalism is a standard concept of government units based on area to cater for racial, religious linguistic and other differences, it succeeds in bringing several nations within the Nigerian polity together, although with a heavily centralized power.

The Emergence of Ethnic Balancing and Justice in Nigeria

Before independence in 1960 it is believed that the population of Nigerians who lived in the defunct Northern Region was two-third; and almost two-third of the

parliamentary constituencies for the pre-independence elections were from the North. No doubt, the predominant political party, the Northern People's Congress (N.P.C.), won enough seats which made it the largest party in the federal parliament. To gain the two-third majority vote of the parliament as required by the constitution, the N.P.C aligned with the N.C.N.C., which was the predominant political party in the then Eastern region, as against the Action Group (A.G.) of the West and its allies which formed the parliamentary opposition. In the words of Bodunrin;

The regions were at that time identified with specific ethnic groups. When one spoke of the Northern region, the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group came to mind, just as the Ibo and the Yoruba ethnic groups came to mind in talking about the Eastern and Western Regions respectively.¹⁶

Although the political power at independence was manned by the Northern group, the administrative and technocratic power was however exercised largely by the defunct south (East and West). It is held that most of the senior posts in the federal civil service, the statutory corporations, the judiciary, the universities and embassies were in the hands of personnel from Southern region.

It might be seen, on a plausible assumption, that the influence the majority party had on the public service was not proportional to its political strength compared with the influence of the minority allies (especially the N.C.N.C.) of the south that was predominant, because most of the heads of public sectors were from the South. And, for the dominant party to command loyalty, and to avoid stiff rivalry and distrust from the civil service while implementing policies, the majority party that formed the government ensured it had its loyalists in various key positions.¹⁷ It was at this point, according to Bodunrin, that more permanent secretaries, Heads of corporations and embassies (etc) were appointed in favour of the Northern region to replace their *qualified* counterparts of the southern region.¹⁸

With the braking of the Action Group (A.G) into factions which others joined the ruling majority (N.P.C.), and the mutual distrust amongst the allies that made the majority in the federal legislature, yearnings for fair or equal share of the 'national cake' was agitated for. It was at this point that the diverse composition of Nigeria was recognized and introduced in its politics, because the conception of the state as a giant corporation which all the ethnic nationalities are shareholders became paramount in the national discourse. This perhaps seems to be the political origin of the ethnic balancing in Nigeria.

The constitutional drafting committee set by the military government of Gen. Murtala Mohammad which was inaugurated on August 1st 1975 devoted the first few days of its inaugural session discussing the problems of the ousted first civilian regime and the cause of the subsequent instabilities in the country, in view of proffering possible constitutional remedies. The discourse recognized the heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian society; different formulations of constitutional provisions were discussed by the committee to help build confidence amongst various regions, and to unite Nigeria into

one indissoluble nation. It was during this debate that the fundamental principles and objectives of the new constitution that the term “Federal Character” came to be used.¹⁹

The Nigerian Federal Character Doctrine

The federal character commission is an independent governmental agency, which is constitutionally charged with ensuring fairness and equity to all geo-political units of the country on matters of employment, provision of infrastructural facilities and socio-economic amenities. In a more proper sense, the labour and providers of services, particularly in the public sector conduct themselves correctly in the performance of their duties, without fear or favour.²⁰

According to Gboyega, the term *federal character* gained wide acceptance only after it was enshrined in the 1979 constitution, although the ideal itself can be traced to the colonial period and the nationalist agitation for participation in the administration of colonial Nigeria.²¹ Like the *Veil of ignorance* which is understood to be the situation of the mutually disinterested contractarians in the *bargaining game theory* in Rawls’s doctrine of *justice as fairness*, the federal character commission has been established to implement the decision of the national constitutional conference provided in section 15, subsection 3 and 4 of the 1995 draft constitution which stipulates that:

The composition of government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states groups in the government or any of its agencies.

The composition of the government of a state, a local government and the conduct of the affairs of the governments or such agencies shall be carried out in such a manner as to recognize the diversity of the people within their area of authority and the need promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all the people of Nigeira.²²

In the inaugural speech on the 27th December, 1995 the then Head of state, Gen. Sani Abacha stated the terms of reference of the commission as follows:

- (a) To work out an equitable formula for the distribution of all cadres of posts in the public services of the federation and the states and government owned companies and parastatals.
- (b) To promote, monitor and enforce compliance with the principles of proportional sharing of all bureaucratic, economic, media and political posts at all levels of government.
- (c) To take such measures against any individual or any ministry or government body or agency which fails to comply with any federal character principle or formula prescribed or adopted by the commission.

General Abacha extended the terms of reference to include the distribution of social and economic benefits where he said inter alia:

Every Nigerian has a right to share in the resources of our country, just like we all must collectively shoulder the responsibility of her development and progress. The effective management of the economic calls for the appreciation of the sensibilities and aspirations of the various groups in the country and an acceptance of the dire need for balanced development and equitable access to socio-economic opportunities.²³

This indeed, is compatible in all respects with John Rawls' theory of justice; it expresses his egalitarian principles of justice which includes the basic liberty principles, the fair opportunity principle and the difference principles.

On the basic liberty which it expresses, the federal character or the Quota System doctrine recognizes the equal liberty of every citizen which has long been entrenched in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It defines all the necessary rights accrue to every individual. Similarly, the federal character provision for 'fair equal opportunity' of representation of all geo-political units of the federation in all public offices is in line with Rawls's second principles of *Fair Equality of Opportunity* that hinges (but not exclusively) on meritocracy. The apostle of meritocracy however contends that merit too is good enough in determining who gets a public appointment. The fear of this school is that upholding the federal character principle only without recourse to merit will compromise on the requisite competence for holding such appointments.²⁴ The *Deference Principles* which is squarely welfarist in nature is the second part of the second principle; this allows some "permissible inequalities" for 'fair' representation of all geo-political units of the country. The expansion of the terms of reference by Sani Abacha that includes the distribution of social and economic benefits is in all ramifications compatible with the 'Difference Principles'. This gives to every Nigerian the right to share in the resources of the country.²⁵

It is argued that in a 'deeply' segmented society like Nigeria, equity is one of the strongest means of establishing confidence among the groups. For it is through it that the citizens can feel the sense of belonging and so commit themselves to the continued existence of the union. Despite its shortcomings the federal character as equity principle is an integrative principle if arrangements are made to respect it in a political set up. Perhaps a brief survey of Nigeria's experience suggests that the equity principle, through public office appointment and equal sharing of economic benefits and other social goods is realisable.²⁶

Sectional Politics and Weakness of the Nigeria's Zoning System Policy

There is no doubt that Nigeria is largely segmented within the ethnic divides based on the influential tripod tribes, that is, Hausa in the north, Igbo in the east, and Yoruba in the west.²⁷ Sad enough, the tripod structure often emphasize political rivalry, unjust distribution of common good, strife and competition. Many Nigerians tend to identify

themselves with their tribal distinctiveness and preference than seeing themselves as Nigerians whose goals should aim at transforming the possibilities for a more solid national identity. Indeed, these ethnic groups pay allegiance and consider the good of their respective nations before the good of the entire Nigerian nation.²⁸ Hence, Kabuk maintains that, “we have to contend with the fact that ethnic consciousness or ethnicity is one type of political groupings within the framework of the modern state, which often function as informal interest groups involving elements of rational goal-oriented behaviour and affective attitude.”²⁹ Usoh reiterates this by saying:

Since ethnicity owes its continued vitality to the keen nature of the struggle for power and resources in a context of scarcity, insecurity or lack of confidence in official norms and regulations, as informal groupings, it cannot function in the same way as trade unions or other professional associations. Thus, ethnicity is characterized by a common consciousness of being one in relation to the other relevant ethnic groupings. Exclusiveness is also an attribute of ethnicity. Ingroup and outgroup boundaries emerge with it and, in time, become marked, more distinct than before, and jealously guarded by the various ethnic groups. This fact of exclusiveness is usually accompanied by nepotism and corruption, merit is sacrificed on the altar of ethnic chauvinism and solidarity.³⁰

Such politics of ethnic loyalty fans the ember of sectional struggle in the distribution of rights, opportunities and other social goods among the various ethnic groups thereby weakening the zoning principle that is designed for fair or equal representations.

Although it has been argued from different quarters that the Federal Character principle or the Zoning System formula stresses the need for ethnic-balancing as a necessity for ensuring less acrimonious relationships amongst the diverse cultures in Nigeria, it has however been established that the doctrine is not free of some glaring shortcomings. It is imperative to consider the weakness of the federal character doctrine, which will enable us to suggest alternative forms of social justice for Nigeria.

It is important to note here that state-creation exercises are considered as an expression and determinant of federal character and appear to have satisfied states claims to representation and at equalizing access to the means of political power and other social goods. Perhaps, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees that “no Nigerian shall have cause to feel aggrieved or excluded on the grounds of his place of origin, sex, religion or ethnic grouping”. Osaghae observed that, this situation is one of the emergent paradoxes of the Federal Character principle, where, instead of achieving unity through balancing, the country is further divided. He therefore drew attention on the dangers inherent in consolidating statism in the guise of federal character principle, which unavoidably threatens the appropriateness of the formula as well as the unity and stability of the federal system in Nigeria.³¹ In view of this, Uroh accentuates that “people who are discriminated against either in admission into public schools or employment into government establishments, are the same group of people who do not have access to political or economic powers of the country. They are therefore discriminated against in

more than just one way". He therefore concludes that the application of the principle of federal character has not been totally achieved.³² This, of course, reflects the political game in Nigeria; the Quota policy or Zoning system properly so-called, which is tailored to the advantage of the worst-off group is used by the better-offs to exclude those minorities who have already lost out in what Rawls refers to *natural lottery*. Traditionally, when economic benefits and other social goods (like appointments into key Federal positions) are to be shared, this is often done within the circle of the major tribes of the three conglomerate regions, namely: Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba. If not for the significant changes that were noticed in the last political dispensation of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (where minority tribes were recognized in some of the juicy positions), appointments that are for the Northern and Eastern extractions are exclusively meant for Muslims and Christians respectively, all under the guise of Federal Character. This violates Quota System principles that reflects Rawls' doctrine of *justice as fair play*; which forbids any political system from embracing any particular comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrine.

It is argued from deferent angles that the Quota System formula has not adequately addressed the problems of the minorities, especially, in states made up of different and unequal ethnic groups. While stressing the imperative of ethnic-balancing, the zoning principle invariably enthrones ethnicity and de-emphasizes the nation. It is noted too that, the mechanism strengthens the parochial, particularistic orientations and primordial ethnic attachments of Nigerians. In the words of C. C. Agbodike, "these tendencies form the basis of disaffection among various groups in the Nation".³³

Agbodike doubted the propensity of the policy towards meaningful achievements. He argues that the zoning policy has been manipulated by, and channelled to serve the overall interest of the petty bourgeois ruling class. In his words, "it is the members of this class who formulated and operate the principle..." Under the guise of the federal character principle or zoning system, the members of the bourgeois class, he said, get themselves entrenched in power and exercise control over the machinery of the state. Agbodike further stresses that:

...through the application of the principle, too, they strive to reconcile their class differences through the operation of acceptable formulae for the allocation, distribution and sharing, of national resources and benefits among themselves. While they do this, they capitalize on, and fan the embers of, the ethnic differences among the various Nigerian peoples to win the support of the masses in their areas. And in the course of the elite game, members of this class climb to positions, amass wealth and enrich themselves.³⁴

Thus, Gboyega supports this view by saying that the federal character principle is merely "an elite play which would not materially improve the lot of the down trodden in whose name it is raised".³⁵

The apostles of meritocracy are seemingly the strongest opponents of federal character; this group holds that only merit is good enough in determining who gets a public appointment or admission. In the civil and public services of the federation, it has

been noted that as a result of the undue application of quota and the lack of regard for merit or competency in the application of zoning principle, standard and professionalism are compromised and endangered.

The quota system as applied in education leads to lowering of standards against national interests, and also bastardized the whole educational system as a whole. Decline in educational standards in Nigeria could be traced to the nation's policy on education which seeks to up-grade underprivileged regions to catch up with those who are educationally advantaged. Such policies like catchments area or quota system in education exclude some competent or qualified candidate to secure admissions.

Chinwe D. Okafor has decried how Nigeria through successive administrations consistently and tacitly bred dunces in public schools in some parts of the country by virtue of the federal character and quota system through the years. She cites the release of 2013 cut-off marks for admission into Federal Government Colleges otherwise known as Unity Schools, where Yobe, Zamfara, Taraba, Kebbi and Sokoto States had two, four, three, nine, and nine respectively, over 200% as the cut-off marks; in the same country, states such as Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, Delta, Lagos and Ogun had their cut-off marks within the range of 130 – 139 over 200%. She reiterates that this discriminatory requirement for admissions continues even in our Universities and polytechnics. Okafor argues that:

The nagging question in any sane person's mind is: What curriculum or syllabus is being used to teach pupils in Taraba, Zamfara, Kebbi states among others, to warrant this mass failure? Is it the same one approved by the Federal Ministry of Education and being used nationwide? What has been revealed by the cut-off marks from these states is that zero teaching is going on there – an indication of a gradual descent into sub-national illiteracy...³⁶

The Quota system or zoning doctrine which aims at satisfying the quest of representativeness and proportion in allocating resources, and also, in making appointment among various interest groups, has indeed become morally reprehensible, and an act of injustice, because in many ways the policy has not been adopted appropriately towards achieving meaningful goals. In areas such as education, the concomitant effect is more glaring than what it sets to achieve.

Conclusion

It is assumed that successful regimes have made efforts to address some national questions in the Nigerian federation through state creation, federal character or quota system, and of recent, rotational power sharing or 'power shift' among the six geo-political zones of the country;³⁷ however, still persist are the endemic problems of ethno-regional, religious and sectarian bigotry which the federal character principle was tailored to address. Rather than checking the various factors of mutual distrust and rivalries among the diverse groups and interests in Nigeria, the principle constitutes serious threats to the survival of the Nigerian federation which 'retards the march to nationhood as well as enthronement of a stable democratic socio-political order'.³⁸

Unless quota system principle conforms with Rawls' 'complex egalitarian' doctrine of 'fair-play' totally, it would continue, as it is the case, to spurn meritocracy in the public sector and educational system; and deny other rights or the basic liberties of the disadvantaged group (especially the minorities), as well as imbalance on the sharing formula on economic benefits and other social goods among the geo-political spread of the country.

Recommendations and Suggestions

There are always two extreme camps in the distributive justice, the Welfarists and the Meritorian. The meritorian believe in treating individual equally according to their relevant merits. The welfarists or the egalitarian contend that justice is distribution of society's goods according to needs and not merits. Hence the protagonists of the federal character basically fall under the welfarists tradition.

Modern day political theorists hold that, to understand politics of any nation one needs to go beyond sheer formalism. One has to search for those intangible buildings block that give meaning and intelligibility to real process and structure of politics. The dialectical framework of analysis articulated by Rawls in his three egalitarian principles goes beyond this formalism. And if these are 'properly' entrenched into the Nigeria's political system it would help in redressing the glaring disparities of the country.

As noted elsewhere in this work, the diversities found in Nigeria range from factor of historical evolution, disproportionate population sizes, unequal economic resources and educational attainments. These disparities in the nations body-politic has militated against the political stability, as such, threatens the integration of the country. It was in view of this complexity that the term "federal character" was coined by the Constitutional Drafting Committee (CDC) of 1975.

Given Nigeria's plural ethnic composition and present multi-state federal structure, the prevalence of the North – South dichotomy and the curious assumption that the country consists of "Northerner" and "Southerner" raises a number of questions. What is the essence of federal character? What are its potentials for national integration, or disintegration? How much have minorities benefited or perhaps more remarkably, suffered from the application of federal character? The question may indeed be posed: What stands to benefit most from zoning system, or whose interest does federal character serves? The range of these and other related questions made the constitutional Drafting Committee of 1975 to plan the distributive formula on how economic benefits and basic opportunities will be shared amongst different geo-political zones, more relevantly, to the advantage of under privileged group. This finds its fulfilment in the establishment of the Federal Character Commission during the reign of Gen. Sani Abacha.

The reason for the implementation of the principle is to ensure social harmony among all Nigerians and to promote the stability and national integration of the nation. National integration is a process leading to political cohesion and sentiments of loyalty

towards a central political authority and institutions by individuals belonging to different social groups or political units.³⁹

To a large extent quota formula plays significant role in allocating revenue to all its constituent states. The mechanism eases the transfer of the financial resources generated in one part of the country to another, especially, those areas that have surplus to the deficit areas. This promotes optimum resources use and balanced development in the country. In the 'basic opportunities' to public offices "open to all", this ensures equal representation of each geo-political zones in the public offices regardless the backwardness in education of some of the regions. Here, merit is not the yardstick, it has little role to play in equal opportunities; the aim is to provide equal opportunity of presentation of each zones which makes them have sense of belonging. In respect to this P. P. Ekeh has this to say:

There is no doubt that the consequences of federal character have been destructive for Nigerian political system. First of all, federal character attacks standards and professionalism. Its unrestrained application in civil service and other public services, usually without respect for minimum standards has meant that professionalism is in danger in the public services of the federation. As long as tenure and promotion are not safeguarded from the province of federal character we are in danger of weakening and damaging the services... It is, of course, public knowledge that the Foreign Service has had a full share of imposition of federal character as seasoned career ambassadors are withdrawn and even removed from service. In this, the Nigerian political system is weakened, not strengthened.⁴⁰

The danger here is, if competency is being traded for preference it would definitely hampers the productivity of the nation, since ill-fitted or incompetent personnel are preferred under the guise of equal representation policy. The stand here is this, even though the full representation of every zone is equally important but merit should not be dismissed completely, especially in the public services that are technically inclined.

Another area where Quota policy creates more problems is the educational sector. Since this basically deals with mental capability, it objects completely the welfarists' tendencies. The policy was forcefully introduced into the nations politics which, in the words of Chris Uroh, was meant "to hold down a part of the country considered to be educationally advanced states, so that those fellow compatriots who are from the reverse side could catch up with them".⁴¹ Even though it is argued that this is done to achieve national integration but the concomitant effect is more glaring than its achievements. The crux of the matter is, federal character in this sense could mean lowering of standards in favour of some preferred groups, and this results to nothing but bastardizing the educational system.

The only alternative or remedy that seems workable in this situation is, since the backwardness of these areas, especially the far North, is attributed to the social orientation peculiar to them, instead of imposing preferential policy like

Quota policy, catchment area, remedial courses, nomadic education, almajiri education etc using the tax payers resources without providing alternatives for their qualified Southern counterparts who are denied the opportunity, effort should be put in place to create awareness in them on the imperativeness of western education. When this is done, merit should be enthroned in the system (to a large extent) so that it would not bastardize the educational sector. This is because no section of the country is endowed with natural intelligence more than the other, and no special curriculum or syllabus is designed for a particular section of the country. Perhaps, Aminu observed that the imbalance has nothing to do with the basic intelligence of the people that the cause lies in their socio-political history and is sustained by persistent attitudes and in lower level education facilities. He further argued that:

The first and foremost cause is the fact that western education came much earlier in the south than in the north. Even in the south, the early efforts were made by Christian missionaries. The concomitant proselytizing activities of those educationists rendered them unacceptable in the Muslim North.⁴²

The backward North is predominantly Muslims who have preference on Islamic/Arabic system of education because they conceived western education as an attempt of introducing Christianity. The only solution here is, since their problem involves social and religious orientation, instead of imposing ‘fruitless’ policies by the government attention should be shifted to upgrade their elementary and post-primary schools; and work on their psyche so as to have interest in western education.

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11. J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 280.
12. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 136.
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16. P. Bodunrin, "Federal Character and Social Justice," in Ekeh, P. and Osaghae, E (Eds.), *Federal Character and Federalism in Nigeria*, (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1987), 304-5.
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18. P. Bodunrin, *Federal Character and Social Justice*, 305.
19. *Report of the Constitution Drafting Committee*. Vol. 1, (Federal Ministry of Information, 1976), ix.
20. Federal Character Commission, First Annual Report, 1996, iii.
21. A. Gboyega, "The Public Service and Federal Character" in Kunle A, et al (Eds) *Federal and Political Reconstructing in Nigeria* (Ibadan, Spectrum Books Int.), 164.
22. Federal Character Commission, 28.
23. Federal Character Commission, 28 – 29.
24. D. Utume, "Federal Character as an Equity Principle" in Kunle A., Rotimi, S., Adegun, A. And Herault, G., (Eds.), *Federal and Political Reconstructing in Nigeria* (Ibadan, Spectrum Books Int.), 207.
25. Federal Character Commission, iii.
26. D. Utume, *Federal Character as an Equity Principle*, 208.
27. V.S. Kabuk, "Ethno-Religion Violence in Nigeria: The Bane of Nation Building",219.
28. See V.S. Kabuk, "Ethno-Religion Violence in Nigeria: The Bane of Nation Building",219.
29. V.S. Kabuk, "Ethno-Religion Violence in Nigeria: The Bane of Nation Building",219.
30. F. Usoh, *True Federalism as a Remedy for Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*. The Oracle:International Journal of Culture, Religion and Society.Vol.2. No.2, 2006, 96-7.
31. E. Osaghae, "Federal Character: Past, Present and Future" in P. P. Ekeh and E. Osaghae (eds.), *Federal Character and Federalism in Nigeria*, 453.
32. C.O. Uroh, *On the Ethics of Ethnic Balancing in Nigeria Federal Character Reconsidered* in Kunle, A., et al, 197.
33. C.C. Abodike, "Federal Character Principle and Nation Integration" in Kunle A., Rotimi, S., Adegun, A., Herault, G. (eds), *Federalism and Political Reconstructing in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Int.), 183.
34. C.C. Abodike, *Federal Character Principle and Nation Integration*, 184.
35. A. Gbouega, *The Public Service and Federal Character* in P. P. Ekeh and E. E. Osaghae (eds.), 183.
36. Chinwe D. Okafor, *Breeding Dunces through Quota System*, Retrieved on line on 13/06/2014. <http://www.punchng.com/?wpbmethod=ad&hit=y&id=33>.
37. Rotational power sharing or power shift among the six geo-political zones of the country is a principle adopted by the then ruling party, Peoples Democratic Party, to address the problems of mutual distrust and rivalries among the diverse groups and interest in Nigeria, with the aim of enthroning stable democratic socio-political order and march to nationhood. It is not entrenched in the Constitution of the Federal Republic.
38. D. Abubakar, *The Federal Principle, Consociationalism and Democratic Stability in Nigeria*, in Kunle, A., et al, 174.; Mutual distrust and rivalries among the diverse groups and interests in Nigeria is heightened at the present regime of Gen. Mahamadu Buhari, where over ninety percent appointments of both security chiefs (eg the Nigerian Police, National Security Adviser, Immigration, Prison, Customs, Civil Defence, Army, Defence intelligence, Air force, DSS, ministry of Interior, ministry of Defence etc) and other sensitive positions are manned squarely by

Northern Muslims. To support this claim, on 3/8/2016 one Ibrahim Banu listed the names of heads of agencies, commissions and parastatals, including those of education, petroleum, trust funds etc in his blog stating that, Hausa/Fulani of northern extraction occupy 98 percent of appointments in Buhari regime, with the exclusion of the southern Christian. This constitutes serious threats to the survival of the Nigerian federation which retards the march to nationhood as well as dethronement of a stable democratic socio-political order. These, of course, have become topic of discussions on social media across the country.

39. L.O. Ogunojemite, "Federal Character as an Integrative Mechanism: The Nigerian Experience at National Building" in Stephen O. (ed), *Alternative Political Futures for Nigeria*. (Lagos: Political Science Association, 1987), 224.
40. P. Ekeh, *The Structure and Meaning of Federal Character in the Nigerian Political System*, 26.
41. C.O. Uroh, *On the Ethics of Ethnic Balancing in Nigeria Federal Character Reconsidered*, 197.
42. J. Aminu, *Educational Imbalance: Its Extent, History, Dangers and Correction in Nigeria*. Available on <http://www.Yoruba.org>.