

Reflections on the Nigerian Public Service: Way Forward for Governance

By

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Abstract

This is a lead paper delivered by Dr Bukar Usman, former permanent secretary in the presidency and current president of the Nigerian Folklore Society. The paper, which is an overview of the Nigerian civil service from colonial times to the present day, was delivered at a symposium organised by the Council of Retired Federal Permanent Secretaries (CORFEPS) of Nigeria to mark its maiden Annual Week, held at Rotunda, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abuja, on March 5-7, 2024. The author marked the distinctive character of the Nigerian Public Service by reckoning its performance during each of the country's political configuration as defined by the nature of the political system in place as well as by the nature of the selectors and/or commanding operatives of the system. He used the three systems of government under which the Nigerian public service had operated in post-colonial times as the basis for grouping and assessing its performance from 1960 to 2024. The paper, using vital performance indices, compared the culture of the Nigerian civil service in colonial and post-colonial times and concluded that the integrity of the application and observance of civil service practices and procedures that obtained during the colonial era had receded in post-colonial times, giving rise to serious public misgivings about the Nigerian Public Service. The paper recommended the following as some of the ways of moving the service forward: private-public partnership, adherence to universal principles of management, financial probity, reduction in the cost of governance, and conduct of free and fair elections.

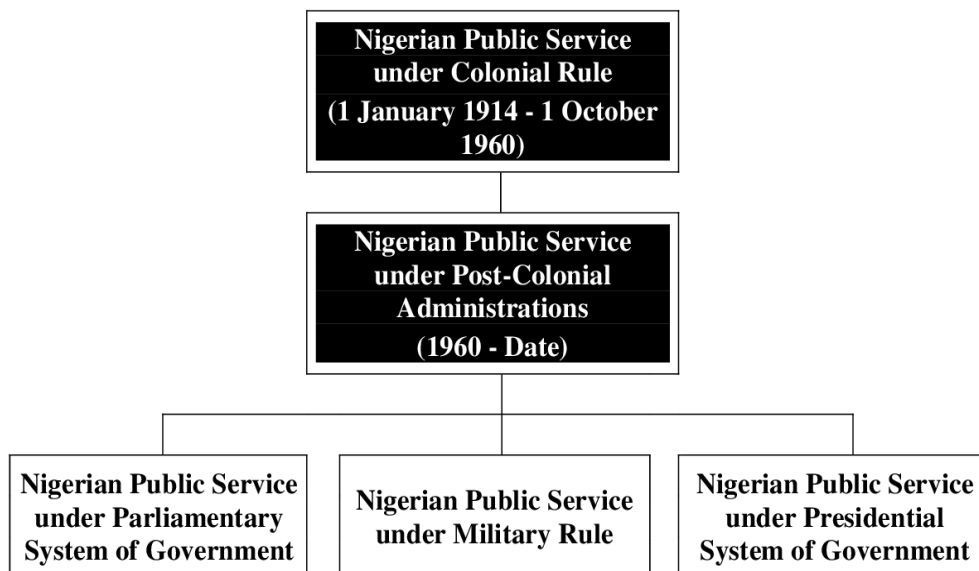
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Introduction

Broadly defined, the Nigerian Public Service embraces the structure and all posts for which financial provision is made in the government budget at all levels of governance –Federal, State and Local Governments. It includes the legislative houses, the courts, statutory commissions, public

corporations, the armed forces, the police and paramilitary services (Customs, Immigration, Prisons, Federal Road Safety Corps and the Civil Defence Corps). It also extends to companies and enterprises in which government has controlling shares. So, the Nigerian Public Service, in extensive terms, is the all-inclusive umbrella that covers the Nigerian Civil Service and all other services and undertakings that run or oversee Nigerian public affairs.

A complete reflection on the Nigerian Public Service should date back to the colonial service, the precursor of the post-colonial service. The post-colonial service has passed through several periods, each of which brought unique challenges to the service; in some cases, these phases redefined and reshaped the nature and quality of the service. Since a country's public service structure reflects or accommodates its political or governance system, the most periodic way of marking the distinctive character of the Nigerian Public Service in post-colonial times is to reckon its performance during each of the country's political configuration as defined by the nature of the political system in place as well as by the nature of the selectors and/or commanding operatives of the system. Hence, I intend to reflect on the structure, character and performance of the Nigerian Public Service under two broad political eras (colonial and post-colonial), taking into account its peculiar shape and reshaping under post-colonial era's different political systems, as reflected in the following graphic:



I regard 1914 as the take-off date of Nigerian colonial public service. One might have opted for 1886 (when the Royal Niger Company was chartered and mandated to exercise British imperial control over what later became Nigeria and other parts of West Africa following the Berlin Conference's allocation of "spheres of influence" in those territories to Britain in 1885)

or 1900 (when the Royal Niger Company transferred direct control over the territories to Britain). However, 1914 must override these earlier dates because that was the year Nigeria became a unified entity, geographically, politically and administratively, under British Governor-General Frederick Lugard.

The three systems of government under which the Nigerian public service had operated in post-colonial times should form the basis for grouping and assessing its performance during this period. This is because each of these governance systems (parliamentary, military, and presidential) affected the Nigerian public service structurally and administratively. Chronologically, only the parliamentary system had neat start and end dates. The other two systems were operated in an intermittent manner because of military coups that disrupted civilian administrations at different times between 1966 and 1999; no doubt, those irregularities were sources of notable instabilities for the Nigerian public service, as each governance phase had its peculiarities, beliefs and orientation that affected the nature and style of administration during each period. There was even a time when both systems seemed to have co-existed, with a military President at the helm of affairs at the federal level while elected civilians served as governors in the states. All of that had operational implications for the Nigerian public service.

Structural Changes

Nigerian public service during the colonial era was comparatively simple when compared with the intricate structure of the post-colonial era. Although territorially Nigeria remains virtually the same, less Bakassi, administratively it has been restructured. During the colonial era, we had Divisions, Provinces and Regions. This minimal structure was bequeathed to the country at independence in 1960.

Post-colonial structural changes began in 1967 when a 12-state structure replaced the colonial regional arrangement. Subsequent restructurings took place, and now we have 36 States grouped into 6 Zones, Federal Capital Territory (FCT), and 774 Local Governments comprising 768 Local Government Areas and 6 Area Councils in the FCT. The three arms of government, the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary, are in place and fully functional with an expanded Foreign Service. Several agencies and institutions have been established over the years and all are geared towards providing service delivery to the people. The Nigerian Public Service is thus larger and has become much more complex than what it was in the colonial era.

A reflection on the Nigerian Public Service must therefore address its

characteristics and performance in its primary function of service delivery during the colonial and post-colonial eras. I will attempt to do so briefly.

Colonial Public Service

I was not a participant in the colonial era. However, I have heard and read of the practices prevailing in the Nigerian Public Service of that era. The impressions I gathered were that rules and procedures in governance were strictly observed with high level of predictability and accountability. Infractions were duly sanctioned and good conduct was rewarded. Privileges were assured and probity was high. Postal and other public services were efficiently rendered.

The prevailing culture of the Nigerian Public Service in the colonial era could be summarised as follows:

- There was wholehearted devotion to service delivery.
- Privileges were not only certain; they were also obtainable as and when due and without tears.
- Discipline was meted out promptly for any infraction and there was nowhere to hide, as there was no ethnic, religious or political consideration.
- Greed was not very visible nor was it openly exhibited. This was because in those days open exhibition of ill-gotten wealth by the public servant attracted immediate query and censor.
- There were tools, though unsophisticated, for service delivery; and officers were fully accountable for such tools put in their care.
- There was transparency in disbursement of funds and hardly did one hear of large sums of money circulating outside official accounting procedure.
- People generally believed in the integrity of the public servant who himself was competent and inspiring. People hardly complained of missing files and incidence of bribery.
- Even the road maintenance labourer was fully devoted and took pride in his job. That was why in those days you would see those maintaining public roads even in the remotest places.
- The much-talked about “due process” which is being revived today with fanfare was taken for granted in those “good old days”. May be what accounted for the relative integrity of the public servant in

those days was that the State took pains to fulfill its own obligations towards the officer. The public servant could even requisition an electric bulb from the Public Works Department (PWD) for his or her official quarters.

- Estacode was granted and dutifully accounted for.
- Effort was made at National Planning and serious attempt was equally made to achieve planned targets.
- Protocol was scrupulously observed at public functions and in appointments.

Post-Colonial Public Service

This era commenced from the Nigerian Independence in 1960 to date. I had been a participant from 1965 as a junior officer (3rd Class Clerk) and bowed out in 1999 as a senior officer. That period embraced parliamentary, military and presidential administrations. With all sense of modesty, I can speak with a fair amount of knowledge about the practices and procedures in the Nigerian Public Service of those periods. It is left for those in the Nigerian Public Service, post-1999, to state what currently obtains. Ultimately, though, what matters most is not how the Nigerian Public Service sees and appraises itself but, rather, the kind of public image it commands from the generality of Nigerians who, as the recipients of its service, are in the best position to judge it. Unfortunately, the image, at the moment, is not all that complimentary.

I testify that the culture and momentum in terms of practices and procedures obtainable in the Nigerian Public Service of the colonial era as described above were inherited and observed to a reasonable extent in the immediate post-colonial years. As a public officer occupying government apartment, I requisitioned an electric bulb from the Public Works Department (PWD) at Ikoyi, Lagos. For accountability, there were inventories of government properties in offices and government-owned premises. The lists hung up on the wall were regularly inspected and updated routinely with high sense of responsibility and accountability.

The General Orders (GO) and Financial Instructions (FI) as guides to general conduct and financial administration were there for induction of public officers at all levels and strictly applied. I witnessed, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Dr Russel Aliyu Barau Dikko and Shettima Ali Monguno, as political heads of my ministry (Ministry of Mines and Power), dutifully and routinely retire their estacode (travel allowance) whenever they returned from overseas official engagements: they paid

back into government coffers any unspent amounts. It is quite apparent that the integrity of the application and observance of those practices and procedures had receded with time; hence, the present misgivings about the Nigerian Public Service.

Existing working relationship was worsened by two “earthquakes” or “hurricanes” which the military inflicted on the public service. They were the purge in the civil service in 1975 and the civil service reforms of 1988. While the purge destroyed the “security of tenure” hitherto enjoyed in the service, the reforms which reposed financial control in the political head of the ministry remains one of the root causes of the financial recklessness prevailing in the civil service in general. To rectify the damage, subsequent reviews restored some aspects, like the nomenclature of the “permanent secretary” and his status as the accounting officer. However, the reviews did not go far enough. It is maintained that not only the form but the content should have been restored as well.

Given the misgivings and going by public opinion, there is a long-standing and continuing serious concern about the performance of the Nigerian Public Service regarding the following areas or matters:

- Adequacy of Power Supply
- Provision of healthcare
- Pay as You Go (PAYG) pension administration
- Municipal Water Supply
- Management of the education sector
- Conduct of Elections
- Financial Management
- Public Safety
- Contract Awards
- Cost of Governance
- Foreign Influence
- General Deviations from Correct Conduct

Way Forward for Governance

Due to the complexity of Nigeria's governance issue, solutions to the problem are multifaceted, in terms of the diversity of the areas where critical changes are required and the challenge of putting in place the requisite administrative reorientation and attitudinal shift. I will address briefly some of the major concerns in order to stir our minds towards resolving them.

Private-Public Partnership: Although the greater responsibility for delivery of the badly-required public services falls on the shoulders of the Nigerian Public Service and, therefore, calls for serious reforms, it requires the involvement and contributions of other stakeholders in the society and these stakeholders should be seriously cultivated and continually engaged. They include the academia, labour unions, private sector, the media, professional societies, traditional and religious institutions, among other pillars of stability in the country.

A serious attempt was made at forging private-public partnership in the conception of Vision 2010. That effort, in spite of its laudable objectives, somehow fizzled out without producing any sustainable tangible achievement. That was due largely to a culture of lack of continuity and sustainability of policies and programmes in the Nigerian Public Service.

Adherence to Universal Principles of Management: Nostalgic about the "good old days", some people yearn for and advocate a return to the past practices, procedures and performances of the Nigerian Public Service and general conduct of public affairs. Others advocate a new constitution for the country. I do not share the view for a new constitution and have made my position clear in my publication, *Restructuring Nigeria: An Overview*. We have had several constitutions and I believe the existing one is workable given a change of attitude in conduct of public affairs. Besides much has changed in terms of the governmental structure and size of the population and it will be practically impossible to return to or replicate the past, exactly as it used to be. However, universal principles of management remain ever constant and I earnestly believe that if they are applied with all sincerity and seriousness in the Nigerian Public Service, they would have salutary positive results to the appreciation and applaud of all concerned.

Conduct of Elections: If only the conduct of the elections could be improved upon significantly and transparently, it would save time and resources that are otherwise dissipated in post-election acrimony and fight for legitimacy. It would also create a more conducive atmosphere to utilize

the long transition period provided in our electoral system to harmonise the policies and programmes of incoming and outgoing administrations with little or no anxiety. Induction and orientation of new public office holders could be undertaken on a timely basis and without much fuss.

Financial Probity: The subsisting arrangement in public financial management whereby one public agency commands the resources of the country and only doles out leftovers to be shared among the larger arms of government leaves much to be desired. Likewise, it is necessary to restrict government agencies to their core functions and disallow them from delving into other portfolios for which they are not professionally equipped to discharge. For sure, a general reform of financial management in the Nigerian Public Service would provide the resources to fund the much-needed critical infrastructure and services.

A word needs to be said about the situation of the Nigerian Public Service at the States and Local Government levels. The Governors seem to preside over the affairs of the States with little or no checks from the legislatures and the Local Governments are not functioning according to the intendment of the constitution. As a result, unlike the Native Authorities of the past, the Local Governments have virtually no impact on delivery of services to the people at the grassroots. They should be empowered financially and otherwise to do so to arrest the drift of the rural population to the urban areas with consequent social problems.

Conflict of Interest: As regards deviations from correct conduct, it is quite perceptible in the Nigerian Public Service that the spectre of “private interest” looms large to the detriment of “public interest”. This calls for restraint and a re-orientation of all involved in the governance of this country. The greater responsibility for ensuring this falls on the leadership at all levels in the Nigerian Public Service. They should lead by example in public and private life. Public officers should stand by the truth as their armour, and exhibit transparency and accountability in their conduct.

Dispensation of Justice: Much is expected of the courts, Code of Conduct Bureau and tribunals, EFCC and ICPC in the enforcement of the rules. Without conscientious and unbiased enforcement of the rules, disorder and violence reigns; as Aristotle said, “At his best, man is the noblest of all animals; separated from law and justice he is the worst.” Those entrusted with the dispensation of justice, in particular, should abide by the following legal dictums: “Justice should not only be done but it should be seen to be done”; “Justice delayed is justice denied”; and “Where politics enter the palace of justice, justice leaves by the back door”. Above all, our judges and other law enforcement officers should always remember the

legal Latin maxim, “*Salus populi est suprema lex*” – “The welfare of the people is the supreme law”.

Cost of Governance: Though presidential system of government may be inherently costly, the huge costs involved in running it in this country is partly our own making. Cost of governance needs to be seriously reviewed and drastically reduced by checking glaring cases of leakages through embezzlement, misappropriation and diversion of public funds. Government quarters have largely been done away with and other benefits and privileges monetised long ago. Unfortunately, the lifestyle of some high-level public officers tends to betray the wisdom and objectives of the earlier laudable measures instituted primarily to prune down the cost of governance. The National Salaries, Incomes and Wages Commission should function as intended and its recommendations respected.

Given the reality of globalisation, international engagement is unavoidable in governance. In that regard, memoranda should be prepared on cost implications of personnel and logistics before embarking on foreign trips. This would be of tremendous help in implementing cost-saving measures. Movement and official engagement of top-level members of government should be programmed for the year in advance, with exact financial implications that should not be altered unnecessarily.

In summary, the agenda for items requiring government attention may be short but critical as it includes looking into financial leakages in the oil industry and the maritime industry, perks of public officers, corruption, devolution of powers, review of the revenue sharing formula, and internal security.

Public Safety: Regarding public safety, it should be stressed that distant hoses can't put out local fire. Local knowledge and intelligence are vital in fighting crime. There should be no safe haven or ungoverned spaces for criminals to take refuge and mount daredevil raids on the society. Much should be done to prevent committal of crime in the first instance; to reassure the public and calm down nerves, there should be an improvement in the capacity of our security personnel to detect and foil crime, and to arrest and prosecute offenders immediately.

The framework for national security under our presidential system vests ultimate responsibility for maintaining national security in the president as an embodiment of national cohesion. All other bodies assist him in an advisory capacity. To ensure this, several avenues for interaction have been provided at all levels of governance.

The framework also provides for a Peace and Security Committee at the LGA level. The Committee is supposed to serve as early warning system so as to enable the appropriate government agencies take pre-emptive action. It is necessary for State Governments to ensure that these Committees are not only established but are functioning effectively.

Currently, the roles of the security-intelligence agencies of the Nigerian Public Service appear diffused. What is expected of them is to focus on their core functions as defined by law and cooperate with other agencies in discharging those functions.

Power Supply: Looking back at the celebration of the Golden Jubilee Independence Anniversary in 2010, I wrote a pamphlet *Dreams and Realities: Issues in Nigeria's Golden Jubilee Independence Anniversary*. Therein, among others, I noted that:

Some achievements are pretty obvious like the country remaining one after all the numerous squabbles Nigeria had gone through including a devastating civil war. It is a no mean achievement considering that other countries which are less diverse than Nigeria had broken up between the end of Nigeria's civil war and 2010...However, the internal dynamics of chronic malfunctioning of democratic institutions and systems, corruption, decline in shipping and rail transportation, poor urban and intercity transportation, extreme shortage of electricity and other basic amenities, especially when compared with the performance of less-endowed countries...reflect the depth of peoples' feelings and disappointments...

Regarding power supplies, I observed that: "Nigeria @ 50 has 4,000MW but needs, according to the Nigeria Energy Commission 50,000MW of electricity to realize Vision 20:2020 goals." I then asked, "If it took us 50 years to achieve 4,000MW, how is it possible to achieve 50,000MW in 10 years?" And now, fourteen years after, in 2024, we are still hovering around 5,000MW, if not actually the same 4,000MW figure we had in 2010. It is not difficult to see that little has changed, for we still have the same nationwide load-shedding that the unfulfilled promises and seemingly intensified efforts of past administrations had failed to curtail.

Sometime in early 1970s while serving in the Ministry of Mines and Power, we thought it wise to merge the Electricity Corporation of Nigeria (ECN) and the Niger Dam Authority (NDA) to form the National Electricity Power Authority (NEPA). That was meant to check the incessant bickering between the two entities over supply of power by NDA and non-payment by ECN. To give the needed boost to development of

our solid mineral resources to support our industries, such as the steel mills, the mines portfolio was also merged with petroleum to form the Ministry of Petroleum and Solid Mineral Resources.

To improve power supply, reform of the power sector continued, and NEPA later became Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN). Today, in its place, we have a multiplicity of entities in charge of power supply to various zones in the country. The current entities or components are: power Generating Companies (GenCos), power Distribution Companies (DisCos) and power Transmission Companies. Unfortunately, due to lack of gas to power the plants installed by the GenCos, insufficient transmission lines to carry the power supplies, and with several DisCos being under receivership, the problem of power supply is still overwhelming. This has been and remains a serious handicap to socio-economic development of the country.

Iron, Steel & Aluminium Development: Another serious handicap is Nigeria's failure to develop a functional iron and steel industry, which is considered to be the backbone of a nation's economy. It is lamentable that for upwards of 40 years since the Ajaokuta and associated mills in Jos, Katsina, Oshogbo, and Aladja were initiated and later privatised for assumed efficient management in the hands of the private sector, they are yet to take off for inexplicable reasons. Add to that the failure of the aluminum smelting plant at Ikot Abasi and the disappointing outcomes, in spite of several touch-and-go repositioning, of the Defence Industries Corporation of Nigeria (DICON) at Kaduna, and some of the main obstacles to our industrial development become very obvious.

Mass Transportation: Rehabilitation of the rail lines appears to be at a standstill. However, it is noteworthy that construction work on the Kaduna-Kano and Kano-Maradi new railway projects is ongoing. When the two projects are completed, one may celebrate that the railways expansion programme is beginning to materialise. The Metro line in Lagos is being prepared for commissioning. A similar citywide railway network project for Port Harcourt has stalled, just like the uncompleted phase one of Abuja City light railway project.

Air Nigeria, launched with fanfare in the twilight of the last administration's tenure, is bogged down by controversy. And no where do we have functional water transportation we can be proud of. This has led many people to rely on rickety canoes that often capsize, causing the death of fellow citizens in various parts of the country. The concept of mass transit is virtually nil, despite our huge population and annual budgetary provisions for it.

Alien Domestic Policies: Some of the public resistance and misgivings to certain socio-economic and political policies and programmes being implemented by the Nigerian Public Service arose largely from the suspicion, not altogether unfounded, that they originated and were encouraged by some foreign bodies and interests that do not like to see our country grow and stand on its feet. It is on account of such suspicion that leading and notable personalities in the Nigerian Public Service of the past stood their ground and successfully resisted such policies and programmes in preference for substantially homegrown ones. They argued that they attended the same institutions and studied the same subjects as some of those that crafted those unwholesome policies and programmes that were recommended or even imposed on developing countries, including Nigeria. They further observed that some of the advanced countries that promoted such policies did not apply them in their countries on account of the negative consequences they would have on their people.

Conclusion

The Nigerian Public Service of the colonial era was not as large as the post-colonial service and did not command as much resources as we have today; yet, it was more effective in delivery of services. The challenge of the Nigerian Public Service now and in the future is essentially behavioural and calls for a change of attitude to the conduct and management of public affairs. The rules on the ground, some of which were fashioned since 1914 when Nigeria was created, are sufficient guidance. The challenges centre on compliance with and enforcement of the rules and this essentially rests on leadership at all levels of governance, particularly leadership at the topmost levels.

For sure, people's response to the implementation of policies and programmes, for which the Nigerian Public Service is primarily responsible, is the barometer for assessing the impact of governance. Unfortunately, at the moment, more negative than positive responses are coming from the populace. This should be a source of serious concern to all public servants.

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