

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LEGISLATURE IN NIGERIA: ANALYSIS THE PAST AND PROGNOSIS OF THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT: This article examined the development of the legislature in Nigeria from the pre-colonial era to the present constitutional order. It argued that although the modern legislatures are products of written constitutions, Nigeria has had various indigenous consultative, deliberative, advisory, and even representative bodies before colonial rule, which performed functions similar to modern representation, law making, and constituency accountability. The article traced the various epochs of legislative development; from Lugard's to Clifford's, Richard's, Macpherson's and Lyttleton's of the colonial era; to the Independence and Republican constitutional era of the first republic, under the parliamentary system, the presidential era of the second republic, the military era that engineered the still born 1989 and 1995 constitutions and the abortive third republic, and the constitutional order of the extant fourth republic. It further analyzed the structure, powers, achievements, challenges, and prospects of the Nigerian Legislature. The paper found the development of the legislature followed Nigeria's constitutional development as each constitution, except that of 1999, introduced both structural and jurisdictional changes to the legislature; instructively that the Military while departing from the political scene in 1979, decreed a presidential constitution with a legislature that differed from the parliamentary arrangements it overthrew. The article concluded that the legislature has

grown from consultative and advisory colonial councils into a constitutionally entrenched representative institution, but that its effectiveness will continue to depend on independence, public confidence, internal capacity, responsible leadership and respect for constitutionalism.

Keywords: *Legislature, Constitutional Development, Nigeria, Parliament, National Assembly, Democracy, Law-Making*

1. INTRODUCTION

The legislature is one of the three principal organs of government in a constitutional democracy. Its central functions include law-making, representation, deliberation, approval of public expenditure and oversight of the executive. In a democratic state, legislature is the institutional expression of popular sovereignty because elected representatives deliberate on public policy and convert the collective will of the people into binding rules.

In Nigeria, the development of the legislature cannot be understood only from the standpoint of the 1999 Constitution. It is a product of a long historical process beginning with pre-colonial systems of governance, moving through colonial constitutional experiments and continuing through post-independence constitutional changes. Each era contributed something to the present character of the Nigerian legislature: pre-colonial communities supplied indigenous models of consultation and accountability; colonial rule introduced formal legislative councils; independence constitutionalism brought parliamentary government; and later constitutional arrangements adopted the presidential system and bicameral federal legislature.

The central objective of this article is to examine the development of the legislature in Nigeria in a historical and analytical manner. The discussion is arranged around the major eras of Nigerian constitutional development, with particular attention to the nature of legislative authority, the degree of representation, the relationship between the legislature and the executive, and the extent to which the legislature reflected democratic ideals at each stage.

2. CONCEPTUALISATION AND IMPORTANCE OF THE LEGISLATURE

A legislature is a deliberative body constitutionally or legally empowered to make, amend and repeal laws. In modern constitutional theory, it performs more than the formal function

of passing bills. It represents constituencies, scrutinises public expenditure, holds the executive accountable, approves certain appointments, investigates matters of public importance and serves as a forum for national debate.

The importance of the legislature is particularly significant in a country like Nigeria because of the country's ethnic, religious, regional and political diversity. Legislative institutions provide a platform where different interests can be represented and reconciled. Through debate, committee work and constituency representation, the legislature is expected to moderate executive power and ensure that law-making reflects the needs of the people rather than the preferences of a single authority.

Therefore, the story of legislative development in Nigeria is also the story of Nigeria's search for representative government, constitutional order and democratic accountability. The legislature has at different times been weak, restricted, suspended or dominated by the executive, but it has remained central to Nigeria's constitutional aspirations.

3. PRE-COLONIAL ERA: INDIGENOUS FORMS OF LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Before British colonial rule, the various societies that later became Nigeria had their own systems of governance. These systems were not legislatures in the modern constitutional sense because they were not created by written constitutions and did not operate through elected members in the contemporary democratic sense. Nevertheless, many of them contained institutions that performed legislative or quasi-legislative functions, especially in relation to custom, communal regulation, dispute settlement and public decision-making.

3.1 Hausa-Fulani Emirate System

In the Hausa-Fulani emirates of Northern Nigeria, governance was centralised under the Emir. The Emir exercised political, administrative, judicial and religious authority. However, he did not govern alone. He was assisted by title holders, advisers and officials such as the Waziri, Galadima, Madaki and other members of the emirate council. These councils advised the Emir on matters of administration, taxation, security, justice and public order.

The legislative character of this system lies in the fact that rules and policies affecting the community were considered through established councils and traditional offices. Islamic

law and customary rules provided the normative foundation. Although the system was not democratic in the modern sense, it had a recognisable structure for consultation and decision-making. Its weakness, from a modern perspective, was the concentration of power in the Emir and the fusion of legislative, executive and judicial functions.

3.2 Yoruba Political System

The Yoruba kingdoms, particularly the old Oyo Empire, also had elaborate political institutions. The Alaafin or Oba was the political head, but his powers were moderated by the Oyo Mesi and other traditional institutions. The Oyo Mesi served as a council of chiefs and performed advisory, deliberative and checking functions. The Ogboni society also acted as a significant institution of restraint and social regulation.

The significance of this system to legislative development lies in the existence of institutional checks on monarchical power. The king was not expected to rule arbitrarily. Public decisions required consultation with recognised organs of the community. This demonstrates that pre-colonial Yoruba governance had elements of accountability and deliberation, even though representation was based on status, lineage and traditional authority rather than universal franchise.

3.3 Igbo Republican System

The Igbo system of governance was largely decentralised and republican. Authority was dispersed among village assemblies, councils of elders, age grades, titled societies and kindred groups. Public decisions were commonly taken through assemblies where adult male members, elders and other recognised groups participated in deliberation. Unlike the centralised emirate and monarchical systems, the Igbo system placed strong emphasis on communal participation.

The legislative feature of the Igbo system was its participatory character. Rules were made, modified and enforced through community consensus. While it cannot be described as a modern parliament, the village assembly reflected a form of direct democracy. Its limitation was that participation was not always equal for women, strangers and younger persons, and decision-making could be slow because consensus was often required.

3.4 Assessment of the Pre-Colonial Era

The pre-colonial era shows that legislative development in Nigeria did not begin with British rule. What colonialism introduced was the formal legal structure of legislative councils and written constitutional instruments. Indigenous societies already had mechanisms for rulemaking, consultation and accountability. However, the major differences between pre-colonial institutions and modern legislatures were the absence of written constitutions, limited formal separation of powers, reliance on customary or religious authority and restricted participation in many societies.

4. COLONIAL ERA AND THE GROWTH OF FORMAL LEGISLATIVE INSTITUTIONS

British colonial rule transformed the character of legislative authority in Nigeria. The colonial government introduced formal legislative councils, but these bodies were initially designed more to assist colonial administration than to represent Nigerians. The colonial legislature developed gradually from nominated councils to limited elective representation and later to regional and federal legislative structures.

4.1 Central Legislative Council and the Nigerian Council: Frederick Lugard's Constitutional arrangements.

Upon amalgamation, Lugard reconstituted the existing Legislating Council in Nigeria but restricted its coverage to the Southern Protectorate and the Colony of Lagos. Lugard, who as Provincial Commissioner in the Northern Protectorate, administered the area through proclamations, continued to do so directly even as Governor-General of the amalgamated Country. He established the Nigerian Council into which he nominated 6 African members while the other members were ex-officio and expatriate whites. It was purely advisory and bereft of legislative competence. He argued that it was for the gathering of intelligent public opinion. However, due to geographical non-contiguity and transportation problems, as well as the illiteracy of the African members, the Council hardly met, and when it did, the meetings were perfunctory.

These early colonial legislative councils were established in Lagos. Their composition was largely official and nominated. The Governor-General headed both Councils as well as the

Executive Council and retained decisive control. Nigerian participation (in the Nigerian Council) was minimal and largely symbolic. These councils cannot be regarded as democratic legislatures because they lacked broad representation and operated under the dominance of colonial executive authority.

4.2 Clifford's Constitution 1922

The Hugh Clifford's Constitution of 1922 is important because it introduced the elective principle in Nigeria. For the first time, a limited number of Nigerians were elected to the Legislative Council. The Constitution provided for elected seats in Lagos and Calabar. This was a major step in the development of representative institutions, even though the franchise was extremely restricted by income and residence qualifications.

The legislative council under the Clifford Constitution was, however, limited in scope. Northern Nigeria was excluded from the council's legislative competence. As a result of the obvious problems the Nigerian Council had, Gov. Clifford abolished it and expanded and strengthened the existing Legislative Council. The Governor, however, retained extensive powers and could override legislative opinion. Therefore, although the Constitution introduced electoral representation, it did not establish legislative supremacy or responsible government. Its significance lies in laying the foundation for political participation and nationalist agitation.

4.3 Richard's Constitution 1946

The Arthur Richard's Constitution of 1946 attempted to bring the whole country under a more unified constitutional structure while recognising regional differences. It introduced Regional Legislatures in the North, West and East and expanded the Central Legislative Council. The Constitution is often associated with the beginning of formal regionalism in Nigeria.

The Constitution established for each Region a House of Assembly, which was however, merely deliberative, lacking in legislative capacity. This was followed with the creation of a House of Chiefs which was appointive while the House of Assembly was elective. To be elected to the Central Legislative Council, a person needed to first be elected to the Regional House of Assembly. It was from the Assembly that members were elected (or

seconded) to the Central legislative Council in Lagos. The first of the Regional House of Chiefs created under this Constitution was the House of Chiefs for the Northern Region.

Its legislative importance was that it acknowledged Nigeria's diversity and created institutions through which regional interests could be expressed. However, it was widely criticised because it was imposed with inadequate consultation. The Governor remained dominant and the regional legislatures had limited authority. The Richards Constitution therefore advanced legislative development structurally but not sufficiently democratically.

4.4 Macpherson's Constitution of 1951

The John Macpherson's Constitution of 1951 was a response to criticisms of the Richards Constitution. It was preceded by wide consultations at village, district, provincial, regional and national levels. This made it more participatory than previous constitutions. It reconstructed the established Central Legislative Council and changed it into House of Representatives and strengthened regional legislatures.

The Constitution marked a major development because it increased Nigerian participation in governance and created a more elaborate legislative structure. Following the criticism that trailed the Constitution, particularly the fact that the Regional Houses of Assembly lacked legislative capacity, the Macpherson's Constitution provided for a limited number of items over which the Houses of Assembly could legislate. This marked the introduction of legislative list into Nigeria's constitutional (legislative) annals and signaled the introduction of the federal system of government. However, it also created constitutional tensions between the central and regional governments. The political disagreements that followed revealed the difficulty of managing Nigeria's diversity through a centralised constitutional arrangement. Nevertheless, the Macpherson Constitution remains important for introducing a more consultative approach to constitution-making and for widening legislative participation.

4.5 Lyttleton's Constitution of 1954

Under the Oliver Lyttleton's Constitution of 1954, the legislative list introduced was expanded and entrenched, thus firmly establishing Nigeria as a federation. It clearly divided legislative powers between the federal and regional governments through legislative lists. The Constitution gave the regions greater autonomy and strengthened

federal principles. It also marked a decisive shift from unitary colonial administration towards federal constitutionalism.

The legislative significance of the 1954 Constitution was profound. It recognised that Nigeria's diversity required legislative authority to be distributed between central and regional institutions. This arrangement allowed regional legislatures to make laws on matters within their competence while the central legislature handled federal subjects. The Constitution became the foundation for later independence arrangements.

5. INDEPENDENCE AND REPUBLICAN CONSTITUTIONS

5.1 Independence Constitution 1960

Nigeria became independent on 1 October 1960 under a parliamentary system of government. The federal legislature consisted of the Senate which was established in 1957 and the House of Representatives. The Senate was, however, appointive. Executive authority was exercised by ministers who were members of parliament and were collectively responsible to the legislature. This system reflected the Westminster model inherited from Britain.

The Independence Constitution represented a major advancement because legislative institutions became part of a sovereign Nigerian state rather than colonial administration. The British Monarch however remained Nigeria's Head of State and a Member of its Parliament. The legislature had law-making powers, and the executive was answerable to parliament. However, the system operated under a highly competitive regional political environment. Ethnic and regional tensions affected legislative stability and contributed to the political crises of the First Republic.

5.2 Republican Constitution 1963

The Republican Constitution of 1963 retained the parliamentary system but replaced the British monarch with a Nigerian President as ceremonial Head of State. The federal legislature remained bicameral. The Prime Minister and Ministers continued to be drawn from parliament and remained accountable to it.

The 1963 Constitution was significant because it completed Nigeria's formal constitutional independence. It also reflected the continuing importance of the legislature in

parliamentary government. However, legislative development during the First Republic was undermined by electoral disputes, census controversies, regional crises, party conflicts and allegations of corruption. Consequently, the military intervened in January 1966 and terminated the First Republic, suspending democratic legislative development.

6. MILITARY RULE AND INTERRUPTION OF LEGISLATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Military rule had a disruptive effect on legislative development in Nigeria. Under military regimes, elected legislatures were dissolved and law-making powers were exercised through decrees at the federal level and edicts at the state level. The Supreme Military Council, Armed Forces Ruling Council or Provisional Ruling Council performed law-making functions without democratic representation.

The military era weakened legislative culture because it replaced debate, representation and accountability with command-style governance. Although some military regimes created advisory bodies and constitution drafting committees, such bodies were not substitutes for elected legislatures. The repeated interruption of democratic rule affected the institutional memory, autonomy and continuity of legislative institutions in Nigeria, as the legislature was always the first institutional casualty each time the military struck, successfully.

7. THE 1979 CONSTITUTION AND THE PRESIDENTIAL LEGISLATURE

The 1979 Constitution introduced the presidential system of government in Nigeria. Unlike the parliamentary model, the executive was separated from the legislature. The President was elected separately, and ministers were not required to be members of the National Assembly. This arrangement was intended to reduce instability associated with the First Republic and to promote separation of powers.

The legislature under the 1979 Constitution was bicameral at the federal level, consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives. It was however unicameral at the State level with States Houses of Assembly. The National Assembly was empowered to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Federation on matters within the Exclusive and Concurrent Legislative Lists.

The 1979 Constitution was important because it established the institutional design that later influenced the 1999 Constitution. It strengthened the doctrine of separation of powers

and gave the legislature oversight functions over public finance and executive action. However, the Second Republic was again affected by political conflict, corruption allegations, electoral disputes and executive-legislative tensions. Many of the operators were practicing the new presidential system with the spirit of parliamentary democracy. The military coup of December 1983 again interrupted legislative growth.

8. THE 1989 AND 1995 CONSTITUTIONAL EXPERIENCES

The 1989 Constitution was prepared during the military transition programme of General Ibrahim Babangida. It retained the presidential system and proposed legislative institutions similar to those under the 1979 constitutional arrangement. Although parts of the transition programme operated, the Constitution did not fully come into force as a stable democratic constitution because the transition was eventually aborted. Consequently, it was not promulgated into force.

The 1995 Draft Constitution was produced under the military government of General Sani Abacha. It also contemplated a presidential system and legislative institutions. However, like the 1989 Constitution, it did not become the operative democratic constitution of Nigeria. These constitutional experiences are nevertheless important because they show that even under military transition programmes, the idea of an elected legislature remained central to Nigeria's constitutional design.

9. THE 1999 CONSTITUTION AND THE CURRENT LEGISLATIVE STRUCTURE

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) established the current Fourth Republic. It vests legislative powers of the Federation in the National Assembly, which consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives. At the state level, legislative powers are vested in one State House of Assembly for each of the States of the Federation. In other words, unicameralism was retained at the State level.

The Senate is composed of three senators from each state and one from the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The House of Representatives is composed of members representing federal constituencies. This bicameral structure reflects Nigeria's federal character. The Senate protects state equality while the House of Representatives reflects population-based representation.

The 1999 Constitution gives the National Assembly extensive powers. It may make laws on matters contained in the Exclusive Legislative List and, together with State Houses of Assembly, on matters in the Concurrent Legislative List. It also controls public funds through appropriation, authorisation of expenditure and oversight of the Consolidated Revenue Fund.

10. FUNCTIONS OF THE MODERN NIGERIAN LEGISLATURE

10.1 Law-making Function

The primary function of the legislature is law-making. Bills may originate from the executive, individual legislators or even from the public. Before a bill becomes law, it usually passes through first reading, second reading, committee stage, consideration by the chamber, third reading, passage by both chambers and presidential assent. Where the President withholds assent, the National Assembly may override the veto by the constitutionally prescribed majority.

Law-making is not merely a mechanical process. It requires policy analysis, legal drafting skill, public consultation and constitutional scrutiny. The quality of legislation depends on the competence of legislators, legislative aides, committees and drafting institutions. Poorly drafted laws can create ambiguity, litigation and implementation difficulties.

10.2 Representative Function

The legislature represents the people. Members of the National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly are expected to articulate the interests of their constituencies. Representation includes speaking for citizens in debates, addressing constituency concerns, participating in public hearings and ensuring that legislation reflects the needs of the people. In a diverse federation, like Nigeria's, representation also helps to manage regional, ethnic, religious and economic interests.

10.3 Oversight Function

Oversight is one of the most important democratic functions of the legislature. Through committees, investigations, summons, budget defence and public hearings, the legislature monitors the executive and public agencies. The 1999 Constitution empower the National Assembly to conduct investigations for the purpose of making laws and exposing corruption, inefficiency or waste in the execution of laws.

Effective oversight promotes accountability and prevents abuse of power. However, oversight must be exercised responsibly. When oversight becomes a tool for political intimidation, personal benefit or unnecessary interference in administration, it loses legitimacy and weakens public confidence.

10.4 Financial Control and Appropriation

The legislature controls public finance through appropriation and related financial powers. No money may be withdrawn from the Consolidated Revenue Fund except in the manner prescribed by the Constitution. This makes legislative approval central to public expenditure. Budget scrutiny is therefore a major instrument of democratic control over the executive.

10.5 Confirmation, Impeachment and Constitutional Amendment

The legislature also performs confirmation functions in respect of certain appointments. It may remove specified public officers through impeachment or address procedures where constitutional conditions are satisfied. It also participates in constitutional amendments. These and many other functions show that the legislature is not only a law-making body but also a guardian of constitutional balance.

11. ACHIEVEMENTS OF LEGISLATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Despite its challenges, the Nigerian legislature has recorded important achievements. First, it has sustained democratic law-making in the Fourth Republic since 1999, which is the longest period of uninterrupted civilian rule in Nigeria's history. Secondly, it has enacted laws in areas such as electoral reform, anti-corruption, public procurement, finance, petroleum industry governance, administration of criminal justice and constitutional alteration.

Thirdly, the legislature has provided a platform for national debate and public participation through committee hearings and constituency engagement. Fourthly, it has developed internal institutions, including standing committees, legislative budget offices, research departments and administrative structures. These developments show institutional growth when compared with earlier periods of colonial and military dominance.

12. CHALLENGES OF THE NIGERIAN LEGISLATURE

The first major challenge is executive dominance. Although the Constitution provides for separation of powers, the executive often possesses greater financial, administrative and political influence. This may weaken legislative independence, especially where the ruling party controls both organs. Also, patronage affects legislative decision-making. The cost of democracy may be high, but it pales into insignificance when compared with the effects of dictatorship. Similarly, bicameralism may be monetarily expensive but the elements of people's involvement; contentment and support are indispensable to governance and stability.

The second challenge is public perception. Many citizens view the legislature as expensive and sometimes disconnected from the needs of ordinary Nigerians. Allegations of corruption, excessive allowances and self-interest have affected the moral authority of the institution.

The third challenge is weak technical capacity. Modern legislation requires expertise in legal drafting, economics, technology, human rights, system of government, and regulatory governance. Without adequate research support, legislative committees may not be able to scrutinise complex bills effectively.

The fourth challenge is instability in party politics. Frequent defections, party discipline, leadership struggles and electoral litigation can weaken legislative performance. Where legislators prioritise party interest or personal ambition over constitutional responsibility, and institutional integrity, the quality of representation suffers.

The fifth challenge is military legacy. Decades of military rule weakened democratic habits and institutional continuity. The culture of executive command sometimes continues to influence governance, making it necessary for the legislature to constantly assert its constitutional role through lawful and responsible means.

13. REFORM OPTIONS FOR A STRONGER LEGISLATURE

To strengthen legislative development in Nigeria, there is a need to improve the technical and research capacity of legislative institutions. Legislative drafting departments, committee clerks, research units and legal advisers should be adequately trained and

equipped. Public hearings should be more meaningful and inclusive rather than treated as mere formalities.

There is also a need for greater transparency in legislative expenditure and constituency projects. Public trust will improve when citizens can clearly see how legislative funds are used and how legislative decisions benefit the public. Ethics rules should be enforced, and conflict of interest standards should be strengthened.

Finally, civic education is essential. Citizens must understand the role of the legislature and hold their representatives accountable. A legislature can only be strong where the electorate demands performance, integrity and responsiveness.

14. CONCLUSION

The development of the legislature in Nigeria has passed through several historical stages. In the pre-colonial era, indigenous institutions performed deliberative and rule-making functions through councils, assemblies and traditional structures. During colonial rule, formal legislative councils were introduced, but they were initially dominated by colonial executive power. Constitutional developments from Lugard to Lyttleton gradually expanded representation and laid the foundation for federal legislative governance.

At independence and under the 1963 Republican Constitution, Nigeria operated a parliamentary system in which the legislature was central to executive accountability. The 1979 Constitution introduced the presidential system and a stronger separation of powers. The 1999 Constitution was built on the 1979 Constitution to provide the framework for the modern National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly.

The Nigerian legislature has therefore evolved from customary deliberative institutions and colonial advisory councils into a constitutionally entrenched democratic organ. However, the value of legislature does not lie merely in its existence but in its effectiveness, independence, integrity and responsiveness to the people. For Nigeria's democracy to deepen, the legislature must continue to develop as a credible institution of law-making, representation and accountability.

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