

# The 1988 Reform of The Nigerian Civil Service : A Critique

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## Introduction

In his 1988 budget speech to the nation, General Ibrahim Babangida, the President of Nigeria, announced some fundamental changes in the structure and management of the Nigerian Civil Service. The changes were made as a part of the preparation for the Third Republic scheduled to take off in 1992. They constitute what we refer to, in this paper, as the '1988 Reform'. The reform has, since its announcement, aroused nation-wide interests mainly because of the claim that it would redeem the image of the Civil Service and improve its performance which had, in the past, attracted more criticisms than praises. The changes include the following.<sup>1</sup>

- (a) The Ministry - The Minister will now be both the Chief Executive and Accounting Officer, rather than the Permanent Secretary.
- (b) Tenure of Office - The Permanent Secretary's appointment is already political, and its duration is at the pleasure of the President. Henceforth, holders of the position will retire with the Government which appoints them unless, of course, an in-coming administration decides to re-appoint them. It follows that any officer, who is offered the post of Permanent Secretary may have an option whether to accept it.
- (c) Professional Service - Each ministry will now be professionalised. Every officer, whether a specialist or generalist, will now make his career entirely in the Ministry or Department of his choice, and thereby acquire the necessary expertise through relevant specialised training and uninterrupted involvement with the work of the Ministry or Department.

- (d) Federal Civil Service Commission.- Under the new arrangement, each Ministry will undertake the appointment, discipline and promotion of its staff under general and uniform guidelines to be provided by the Federal Civil Service Commission.

The question that arises from the sweeping changes enumerated above is 'what could be their possible implications on both the service and the public it serves?' A cursory glance at the changes reveals that the issue of their implications does not appear to have been critically examined by the government. Such implications are examined in this paper. The rest of the paper is divided into three parts: the circumstances that made the changes inevitable, a critique of the changes and the conclusion.

### **The Need for the Reform**

The changes as enumerated in the foregoing section appear to suggest that organizational responsibilities have been re-arranged to ensure an effective and efficient delivery of services or to produce an environment ideal for the optimum realisation of the objectives of a development-oriented society. In essence, the reform seems to have been inspired by the increasing need to re-orient the service as an agent of implementation of government policies.

Reform of any public institution is not only a concept but also an everyday occurrence. By virtue of this, a reform constitutes a symbol of the dynamics of the society.

It involves what has been described as attempts to rationalise the machinery of government through re-organisation, re-distribution and consolidation of similar activities, to eliminate small inefficient and competing units, to reduce overlapping and duplication in the delivery of public services and generally to simplify administrative processes.<sup>2</sup>

In essence, reform of any public institution is always planned. As Caiden has rightly noted<sup>3</sup>, reform is the inducement of administrative transformation against resistance. According to him,

it is .... man-made, deliberately planned ; it is not natural, accidental or automatic. It is induced because it involves persuasion, argument and ultimate threat of sanctions ; ... it is under taken in the belief that the end results will always be better than the status quo and so worth the effort to overcome resistance<sup>4</sup>

The assumption from the foregoing is that the performance of the institution dictates whether or not it should be reformed. The need for reform may be symbolised by the inability of the institution to cope with the changing needs of the society it serves. Reform is thus aimed, essentially, at removing the factors responsible for such inability. The institution, after the reform, is assumed to be relatively more capable of meeting the challenges posed by the demands of the society, especially when the society is development-oriented. In other words, an **administrative** reform is meant to bring about an improved public institution capable of an efficient delivery of government services.

What then can be said to be the compelling circumstances or factors that would necessitate a civil service reform of the dimension being carried out in Nigeria? Mosher<sup>5</sup> has Identified four major factors. They are : (1) the need to change the operating policies and programmes especially the scope of operations of the service; (2) the need to improve administrative effectiveness ; (3) the need to respond to ecological/environmental factors such as public opinion or threats ; and (4) the need to improve personnel especially in terms of performance, qualifications and welfare. Each of the above-mentioned factors, or a combination of all, can influence a reform programme of a country's civil service. It is not an overstatement to say that the reform in Nigeria has been influenced by the degree of inefficiency, low productivity, lack of initiative and redtapism which have characterised the Nigerian Civil Service. Indeed, the Nigerian Civil Service has never enjoyed any public confidence. As succinctly put by Adebayo,

**the Nigerian Civil Service has always been the but of ridicule and object of contempt among the generality of the public ... Among the charges constantly levelled against it are inefficiency, lack of productivity, redtape and lack of initiatives.**<sup>6</sup>

There are other serious lapses<sup>7</sup> in the Nigerian Civil Service. Suffice to say, however, that a civil service with the characteristics mentioned above cannot but perform poorly. Thus, the poor **performance** of **the** civil service in Nigeria has always been a source of concern for Nigerian leaders. The present reform in Nigeria can therefore be said to aim at eliminating the perennial problems **affecting** the civil service.

But it is one thing to conceive a reform of the civil service, it is quite another for the reform to achieve its objectives at the implementation stage. Indeed, it is quite possible for a set of reforms to produce unintended consequences. This has been the practice in Nigeria, and the present Civil **Service** reform in Nigeria may not be an exception.

### A Critique of the reform

#### 1. The New Position of the Minister as the Chief Executive and Accounting Officer :

This implies that the functions of Chief Executive Officer and Accounting Officer will henceforth be performed by only the minister. These functions were hitherto performed by the minister and permanent secretary respectively. The minister now has full control over and responsibility for the ministry's human, material and financial resources which are the indispensable inputs in the management of the ministry. There is no doubt that the new arrangement has greatly enhanced the status of the minister at the expense of the permanent secretary. The arrangement amounts to a concentration of too many functions in one person. This is bound to impair the efficiency and effectiveness of the minister. This is especially in view of the situation whereby, in most cases, the minister has a limited knowledge and experience of the civil service regulations and procedures. The actions of the chief executive officer as well as those of the accounting officer are expected to be guided by such regulations and procedures.

We believe that the provision for upholding the principle of financial accountability, made by the reform, is not adequate. Accountability, according to Ahmed, is

answering for the action, behaviour or conduct of someone to some superior authority, the giving of a reckoning of what has been entrusted of one to the party to whom he is responsible<sup>8</sup>.

Admittedly, the Federal Military Government has shown much interest in ensuring financial accountability within the service. Each ministry, for example, has been empowered to create an Internal Audit Unit to serve as a machinery for public financial accountability in the ministry. It has the responsibility to point out any waste of public resources. Despite this, however, the composition and mode of operation of the Unit still leave room for about. It is in fact not yet clear as to how the Unit will be able to restrict the misuse of public funds by the minister who is also the chief accounting officer. In the first places, the personnel of the Unit are to be appointed by the minister. He can easily fill up the Unit with his own favorites. They, in turn, would, naturally, not expose the minister even when his actions portray a glaring disregard of the principle of financial accountability. In other words, the Unit may not be ready to expose the minister even when he is involved in misappropriation of the resources put at his disposal.

## 2. Tenure of Office of the Permanent Secretary :

The designation of the permanent secretary has been changed as a part of the reform. He is now called the director general of the ministry. The director-general is, essentially, a deputy to the minister. He has less power, authority and influence when compared to the erstwhile permanent secretary whose power and authority derived from the constitution. In addition, the director-general is expected to leave office with the government that appoints him. Indeed, his tenure of office is at the pleasure of the president. The implication of the foregoing is that the position has now been formally politicised. It is true that the permanent secretary, by provision of section 157 of the 1979 Constitution, had been a political appointee who was expected to leave office with the government that appointed him. In practice, however, this requirement was neither taken as automatic nor enforced. Rather, what operated was an informal arrangement for the permanent secretary to continue in office even after the government that appointed him left office. The informal arrangement however created the erroneous impression that the position of the permanent secretary was that of a civil service career one. The formalisation has, thus, removed this erroneous impression. In its place, it has brought the hitherto top-most position in the service in line with the spoils system usually identified with the American presidential system of government.

The new arrangement however contradicts the principle of tenure. The principle holds that an appointment is for the period of effective service which could be for the constitutionally-stipulated age of retirement. Prior to reform this principle governed the appointment of any permanent secretary in Nigeria. Thus, **whatever number of years an officer served as permanent secretary were regarded** as a part of his normal civil service career. As such, it became a position to which every average higher civil servant aspired. Indeed, the position was essentially reserved for only civil servants. This is, however, no longer the situation. The position of director-general, though meant to replace the permanent secretary, is open to both civil servants and non-civil servants alike. The implication of this is that the President is not obliged to appoint the director-general from within the service. In addition, any civil servant so appointed is deemed to have ceased being a regular civil servant. As such, anybody offered the position from within the service can decline if he is not yet ready to leave the service. The assumption here is that such a person would, in no way, be victimised or placed in an invidious position for declining the offer.

The new arrangement, with regard to tenure, can also be criticised on the following ground : The abolition of tenural appointment for the permanent secretary, and indeed its re-designation, is an indication of the present Federal Military Government (FMG) : subscription to the notion widely held, since the **Murtala/Obasanjo** regime, that the permanent nature of the permanent secretary's tenure has hardened him into treating every regime with levity. We tend to believe

that the government's decision to make the position unpermanent is meant to check the **pervasive** influence of the permanent secretary. This line of argument becomes tenable in view of the role often ascribed to some permanent secretaries, approbiously dubbed 'super permanent secretaries', during the **Gowon** regime (1966-75).<sup>9</sup> The new arrangement can result in frustration for a large number of civil servants who can no longer aspire to the position of permanent secretary. Most of them would now opt for the private sector where more opportunities abound.

Furthermore, the new arrangement appears to have disregarded the importance of upholding the principle of continuity in the civil service system. The importance of continuity can never be over **emphasised**, especially when there is a change in government. As argued by Adebayo,

another important role of the Civil Service is that it **stands** for the continuity of policy .... The civil service role of providing continuity is most valuable in times of political instability when governments change abruptly and frequently ... At such times there can be political vacuum and uncertainties, and it is the Civil Service, with its store of knowledge and experience, that keeps the ship of State steady and afloat until the political storm **subsides**.<sup>10</sup>

The permanent secretaries, as the senior civil servants, had always provided the leadership necessary for the civil service to ensure the continuity. They were able to do this by virtue of the fact that most of them were always retained in their position by subsequent regimes. Under the new dispensation, however, it would be difficult to ensure such a continuity which is necessary for the survival of the governmental system. This is because each regime, **expecially** during civil rule, would want to come to power with its own set of people including the **directors-general**. In other words, the director-general may not always be retained in office by subsequent regimes. Their not being retained, coupled with the non-existence of a career civil servant designated as a coordinator of activities within the ministry, would adversely affect the principle of continuity of policy traditionally upheld by the civil service. This is to say that the leadership role hitherto played by the permanent secretaries in the process of ensuring continuity would no longer exist.

### 3. The Professionalisation of the Civil Service :

Professionalism, as a principle, necessitates a scientific classification of jobs. It involves a description and definition of such jobs, prescription of the qualifications as well as the training and experience required for their effective performance. Professionalism, according to the Fulton Committee, has the following two attributes :

one is being skilled in one's job-skill which comes from training and sustained experience. The other is having the fundamental knowledge of, and deep familiarity which enables a man to move with ease among its concepts. Both spring from and reinforce a constant striving for higher standards.<sup>11</sup>

The implication of the foregoing for Nigeria is that public administration in which both the so-called generalists and specialists are equally involved, has now become a profession. In addition, civil servants in Nigeria would henceforth require specialised training and the development of skills and attitude which would contribute to their professionalism. In other words, professionalisation of the service implies a division of labour as prescribed by the Weberian bureaucratic model. As such, we expect the Nigerian civil servants to be "(a) appointed, on the basis of their job-related skills, (b) full-time and career-oriented, and (c) paid a regular salary and provided with a retirement pension."<sup>12</sup>

This is however not to say that what obtained within the Nigerian Civil Service before the reform was much different. Rather, the emphasis now is how to use professionalisation to reduce functional overlap among the various units within the civil service. The members of each unit would henceforth have to be exposed to training programmes that not only bear relevance to, but are also adequate for the requirements of their area of specialisation. Such an exposure, as argued by Sharkansy,<sup>13</sup> would make the members desirous to stay abreast of the latest developments in their area of specialisation.

Because of the gains involved it has become the practice the world over to encourage professionalisation within the civil service. The encouragement has been mostly, through exposure to rigorous training. This has been most noticeable in the advanced countries where specific institutions exist for the required specialised training. We cannot, however, say the same of the Nigerian Civil Service now embarking on professionalisation. This is because there is no such specialised training institution for the Nigerian Civil Service. True, the Administrative Staff College of Nigeria (ASCON) has been established to provide training, in the field of management for civil servants. But the record of its performance and indeed its scope of operation tend to show that ASCON cannot cope adequately with the requirements of professionalisation.

Another aspect of the professionalisation requiring a critical re-examination is the provision that every civil servant, be he a generalist or specialist, would begin and end his career in a single ministry. This provision applied in the past, to only the specialist. The generalist always had the opportunity of moving round from one ministry to another throughout his career. In the process he acquired not only

cumulative experience but a comprehensive service exposure. He was also able to establish a sort of personal rapport with a larger number of fellow civil servants than any specialist could have an opportunity to establish. Granted that personal relationship could fetch in most cases personal benefits it could still be used in getting things done. All these would no longer be possible since the new arrangement expects the generalist, like the specialist, to acquire all his experience in a single ministry. Personal rapport established by the generalist, in the process of moving round, had always been found useful in inter-ministerial communications and cooperation. Being restricted to only one ministry would thus reduce one's inter-ministerial communication and cooperation to the impersonal level ; and hardly does this alone get things done within the Nigerian Civil Service. Secondly, the new arrangement would only not lower the morale of the generalist but would create considerable frustration and alienation in him. This is more so if he has to operate in the so-called specialist ministries like works, Agriculture, Health, Education and Justice - often regarded as the 'home ministries' of the specialists. This is because the tension in the relationship between the generalist and cadres is still very much existent within the Nigerian Civil Service.<sup>14</sup> Moving towards professionalisation has not been able to remove tension within the civil service. The generalists and specialists still do not see themselves as fellow professionals within the same administrative machinery.

#### 4. The New Role of the Civil Service Commission :

Prior to the 1988 reform, the Civil Service Commission had responsibility for ensuring a uniform standard in the recruitment of potential civil servants. In this regard, the Commission was directly responsible for recruiting all senior civil servants on behalf of the various ministries. The recruitment of the junior civil servant was done by the specific ministry requiring his services, though with guidelines laid down by the Commission. The Commission was also involved, to some extent, in the post-recruitment career management of both categories of civil servants because it had the final say on promotion, discipline and where applicable, inter-ministerial transfer of the civil servants. This latter involvement, like the Commission's other responsibilities, became necessary for the purpose of ensuring uniformity in civil service personnel management. Secondly, it ensured the insulation of the civil servant from any form of pressure, especially political and ethnic.

The new arrangement has however divested the Commission of much of the above-mentioned power and responsibilities. The uniformity hitherto maintained by the Commission would no longer be there. Rather, what we would have henceforth is the situation where each ministry would only try, at best, to operate within the Commission's guidelines and, at worst, disregard the guidelines. For instance, the Commission had, in the past, tried as much as possible to ensure compliance with



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the 1979 Constitutional provision<sup>15</sup> for the juxtaposition of the principle of merit with federal character in terms of the composition of the civil service. The performance of the Commission in this regard, seemed to have satisfied most of the ethnic groups in the country. But the new arrangement, that each ministry should now recruit and manage most of its own personnel, is bound to dissatisfy most ethnic groups in the country. It is believed that the minister will invariably adopt the principle of favouritism rather than merit and federal character in hiring and firing his ministry's personnel. People hired in such a manner will be tempted to tell the minister only what will please him. This would result in inefficiency and indiscipline. Above all, the civil service "will gradually cease to be innovative, goal-setting and problem-solving"<sup>16</sup> when such primordial ties and loyalties as the family, locality and ethnicity are allowed to compete or take precedence over loyalty to the civil service and the nation. Thus, the claim that "the endemic problem of indiscipline in the civil service can now be adequately tackled, given the decentralisation of central management functions of the Public Service Commission"<sup>17</sup> cannot be sustained.

## Conclusion

We have examined important aspects of the 1988 reform of the Nigerian Civil Service. We have found that the unintended consequences of the reform far outweigh the anticipated gains. We believe that the unintended consequences can be minimised if the following suggestions are given into consideration. First, the 1979 Constitution as it affects the civil service needs to be reviewed in line with the 1988 reform. This would remove the various ambiguities which had in the past, led to a disaffection between political appointees and career civil servants. Second, the position of director-general should, ideally, be reserved for a specialist in the functional area of the ministry. For instance, a medical doctor should be appointed the director-general of the Ministry of Health. This would enhance the performance of the ministry especially when the minister is likely to be limited in his knowledge of such a functional area and civil service regulations and procedures. Thirdly, the system of checks and balances, as provided by the 1988 reform, should be clearly defined and strengthened. This is necessary as a way of blocking possible loopholes in their application. The internal Audit Unit of each ministry should be directed and controlled from outside the ministry. This would prevent the minister from appointing his favourites to man the Unit thereby negating its purpose.

We would also want to suggest the introduction of codes of ethics to guide the professional conduct of the civil servants. This would ensure consistency in the actions of the civil servant. Also the top career civil servants in each ministry should be made responsible for a continuous coordination of activities within the

ministry. This does not however mean that we are advocating a rebirth of the 'super permanent secretaries'. Finally, we suggest that seminars and workshops be held on periodic basis for both political appointees and the higher career civil servants. This would enable them appreciate the nature and extent of the role of one another within the administrative machinery. Such seminars and workshops would also help in **proffering** modifications where necessary to existing guidelines within the machinery. The themes of such gatherings should include comparative study of administrative machineries in various federal systems of government as well as the advanced countries of the world. Through such a comparative study, the participants would learn new lessons and keep abreast of latest developments. In the **same** regard, facilities for the rigorous **training** required by **professionalisation** should be given utmost attention.

## NOTES

1. Federal Government of Nigeria, *Budget* 88, (Lagos : Ministry of Information, 1988) pp. 30-31.
2. Caiden, G.E., "Reform or Revitalisation of the American Bureaucracy", *Quarterly Journal of Administration*, XIII (April/July 1979). p. 247.
3. Caiden, G.E., *Administrative Reform*, (London : Penguin, 1970) pp. 65.
4. *ibid.*
5. Moser, F., "Some Notes on Reorganisation in Public Agencies" in Roscoe Martin (ed), *Public Administration and Democracy*, (Syracuse : University Press, 1968) pp. 137-138.  
Adelbayo, A.O., "Future Ministers and Civil Servants" (a lecture delivered to participants of an Advanced Management course at the ASCON on 12 July, 1978).  
This is because the factors have been extensively discussed by various writers including ; (i) Asiodu, P.C., "The Civil Service : an insider's view" and Olugbemi, S.O., "The Civil Service : an outsider's view" ; both in Oyediran, O. (ed). *Nigerian Government and Politics Under Military Rule. 1966-79* (London : Macmillan, 1979) pp. 73-109. (ii) Adebayo, A.O., *Principles and Practices of Public Administration in Nigeria* (Ibadan : Spectrum Books, 1981) and (iii) Public Service Review Commission, *Main Report* (Lagos : Federal Press, 1974).
8. Ahmed, Y.B., "Public Accountability : The role of the account in the public Sector of the Nigerian economy" in *The Nigerian Accountant*, vol. X No. 1 (January - March 1977) p. 18.
9. Some of the then Federal permanent secretaries identified with the group of super permanent secretaries were Allison Ayida, Phillip Asiodu, Ime Ebong, Abdul Atta and Ahmed Joda. This group was allowed, by the Gowon regime, to become a force to reckon with in the governmental policy-making process ; even at the expense of the traditionally-acknowledged public policy makers ; i.e. the ministers. It is generally **believed** that this was made possible by the fact of a national emergency of war, especially at the initial stage of the war.
10. Adebayo. A.O., *Power in Politics* (Ibadan : Spectrum, 1985) p. 85/86.
11. Quoted in A. Adedeji "Formulating Administrative Reform Strategies in Africa", *Quarterly Journal of Administration*, vol. VI No. 3 (April 1972) p. 240
12. Gordon, G., *Public Administration in America* (N.Y. : St Martin's Press, 1978) p. 158.
13. See Ira Sharkansy, *Public Administration, Policy-making in Government Agencies*, 3rd edition, (Chicago : Rand McNally Publishing Co., 1975) p. 22.  
We say this because we discovered in the course of our investigation that many of the so-called generalists would prefer not to choose, or be transferred to, the **so-called** specialist 'home ministries'. For example, about 71 % of the generalists in the Oyo State Civil Service indicated, when asked, their preference for ministries other than the 'home ministries'. This implies that the home ministries would be denied the committed **service** of the generalists.
15. See The *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979*, Section 14 (3) and (4)
16. Nwosu, H.N., *Political Authority and the Nigerian Civil Service* (Enugu : Fourth Dimension, 1977) p. 80  
Anifowose, R. and Ofondu, N.C., "The New Civil Service Structure and Prospects for Efficient Implementation of Mobilisation Objectives and Strategies" (a paper presented at the 15th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Political Science Association, 26th June - 1st July, 1988) p. 10