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The dialectics of reform: The theory and methodological praxis of reform

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From a purely theoretical perspective, this article explored the concept of reform which is usually taken for granted. It built a typology of the concept in terms of content, context, scope, cause, strategies, actors, outcome, etc. with the simple objective of providing a suitable conceptual framework for evaluating social, economic and political reforms in an operationally useful manner. Using this typology, the article explored the dynamics of the reform processes with special attention on developing parts of the world. Noting that reform is basically a process and using the theory of dialectics, the article posited that every reform outcome, is a temporary antecedent and argued that the duration of the “cease-fire” before the resumption of hostilities between the societal forces and the nature of the renewed “hostilities” is dependent on the relative extent to which the constitutive elements and conditions for successful reform are available in any given context. It x-rayed these constitutive elements and conditions. Narrowing down on the structural elasticity of democracy, the article concluded that reform of whatever type and democratisation cannot be separated, and that, reforms within democratic regimes are more successful.

Key words: Third world, reform, democracy, dialectics.

INTRODUCTION

Political, social and economic changes are common and permanent features of our contemporary world. Again and again, power relations inter and intra nations, domestic political structures and social processes, have had to undergo planned or unplanned change in response to either internal or external dynamics or a combination of both (Obi, 1999). We are interested in understanding that category of change/s that is/are planned: reform. Many Third World Countries including those in Africa have over the years simultaneously embarked on a number of reforms: social, economic and political. In doing that, they have principally viewed reform more as a goal, a valued condition to be attained and less as a dynamic process that has, theoretically speaking, no end. In their view, they make obsolete the Heraclitian concept of “*Omnia fluit*”, which says that change is the only thing that is permanent. Liberalisation of their political systems, reinvigoration of their economies with the now almost discredited stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes of the IMF and World Bank, market reform in all its ramifications including market-based paradigm of development designed to encourage individual initiative and enterprise by giving ordinary

people greater control over their own lives and rewarding them directly for their efforts, monetary reform, fiscal, trade or regulatory reforms, etc. were essentially seen as goals, which once attained in the given period, their societies will begin to function as those of the so called developed nations, a state where, probably there will be no need for further reforms.

The consequence is that reforms in these nations are short-term and narrow in perspective and approach. Their reform policies are so straight jacketed such that the ramification of a single reform on other sectors, are hardly taken into adequate consideration. And when the intended effect (goals) of a particular sector reform (A) is not achieved, or have negative effects on other sectors (B, C) which, as is usually the case, neutralises the expected effect of A, reform becomes for many persons moribund. Today, reform is a concept, which the ordinary man in Nigeria detests for several reasons, above all, because of previous “failure to achieve expected goals”. They fear and in fact dread reform especially when mentioned in connection with the economy.

The question is why this kind of general attitude towards reform and why has reforms failed as a routine in

many Third World nations? Taking a cue from Sartori (1987) that “wrong ideas about democracy make democracy go wrong”, it is hypothesised that wrong ideas about reform is at the background of the dread and failure of reforms in Third World nations. These nations lose sight of the fact that reform is a permanent feature of all societies, and not just a feature of Third World nations, that in the industrialised nations, its principles have been so internalised such that it functions like an autopilot.

Indeed, even as a goal, the ability of governments to initiate and sustain reform is a current question in which two constellations of thought present themselves (Glutz et al., 2002). The one suggests that all good things go together and consequently that the society must engage simultaneously in varied reforms. It argues for instance that democratic reforms and economic liberalisation are inter-dependent and should therefore, go on simultaneously (Ake, 1992; Bienen et al., 1996). Thus, the US Agency for International Development (AID) insists that it supports what it calls “fundamental economic and political democracy”. This view, its planning and implementation processes which failed to take differing contexts into adequate consideration: social, cultural educational, economic, ecological (Tolba, 1982), forced several Third World nations into undertaking chaotic reforms. More positively, it led scientists into studying the relationship between regime-type and economic performance with inconclusive statistical evidence. It is important to emphasise that the focus of the scientists was more on outcomes: establishing a correlation between political liberalisation and economic performance, which Przeworski (1992), referred to it as a new-literal fallacy.

The other constellation, which suggest a more piecemeal approach to reform is process oriented and focuses on the decision-making. It looks for instance on economic policy debates within the framework of existing institutions and how changes move on stage by stage and which may even involve frequent failures and reversals (Nwankwo, 2003). It is within this frame that we shall explore the concept of reform. No doubt improved understanding of the concept, its dynamic character and its other salient features is vital in increasing its effective implementation and sustainability.

THE CONCEPT AND SCOPE OF REFORM

Reform, generally defined, implies planned change which could be in the political institutional system or in any specific field of its activities: policy. Policy decision could be in the political, social, economic area and/or in the manner in which certain activities of the state are carried out. In other words, reform is a consciously planned change in polity and, or policy (Krokov, 1976). The operative word is change: change in institutions and or in behaviour. Change can variously be typologised in terms

of its form, process, structure and other variables. The broadest categorisation is between violent and non-violent forms. Violent change is illegal, forceful and bloody method of altering an existing social, political or economic order. Insurrections, coups and revolutions are examples. They are all characterised by the feature of abruptness, the abrupt termination of an existing order. Of all, revolution is the most deep and total form of violent change. It usually involves the abrupt termination of a polity and the inception, in its stead, of its successor (Glutz et al., 2002). As Wertheim (1974) also puts it, it aims at overthrow of an existing social order and of a prevalent power structure. It is not the same thing as system change, which coup and insurrection may effect, and which, as in various coups in Nigeria provide no evidence of polity change, that is, change in the basic political, social and even economic arrangement by which a national community governs itself. Besides, apart from not sharing the basic feature of fundamental change in polity which is the defining mark of revolution (Nnoli, 1986), system change may also be constitutional or legal.

Non-violent change on the other hand is that kind of variation in social economic or political behaviour or institutions characterised by the near or total absence of physical or raw force. On the contrary, it follows laid down procedures and relies principally on conviction and the goodwill of the people concerned. Generally, it is claimed that non-violent changes do not often lead to fundamental and deep changes in society but rather to slight and incremental changes in the political social and economic structure of the society. They aim at making series of adjustments that would make the system more efficient and stable (Ologbenla, 2006). Reform shares these characteristics. It may involve use of demonstration, petitions, strike, protests and moral persuasion to demand for change but not violence.

Changes do not just occur. They take place always in response to societal stimuli and have their direction determined by the constellation of societal forces (Obi, 1999). Two key variables arise here as important factors in understanding reform:

1. Societal stimuli.
2. Constellation of societal forces/actors, that is, the power relation between social groups.

In the first instance, changes take place because of some situation perceived by some actors as undesirable or as unsatisfactory. (Heidemann, 1987). This unsatisfactory state causes them to struggle or work towards a more satisfactory state of affairs. This assumes that they have an idea on that more satisfactory state of affairs. The important word here is “satisfactory” The nature of the unsatisfactory state of affairs, social, economic or political, defines the nature of the change: social, economic or political. If for instance politics has to do with human decisions (Almond et al., 2004) and is defined as

authoritative allocation of values (Easton, 1957), or who gets what, when and how (Lasswell, 1936), then political change has to do with changes in who gets what, when and how. It encompasses changes in who decides who gets what, when and how, in how these decisions are made and implemented, and therefore, implicates changes in political institutions and structures in the state, in leadership and even human behaviour towards constituted authority. Social change is a much wider concept encapsulating changes in human society, human behaviour: his values, his culture, his norms and inter-group relations as well as human organisations, all in response to a given set of stimuli (Obi, 1999). Social change is pervasive, leading to fundamental changes in people's life, their attitudes, expectations and goals (Lehnert, 1977).

We reject, however, the undifferentiated explanation of Ologbenla (2006), that political and social changes are the outcome of failures in the political system and the failure of society to respond to demand put on it. As shall be seen, this defines only a type of change, revolution for instance and not all changes including reform. Reform is a type of change. It is the outcome of the need to modify and adjust the state and society in order to guarantee peace and stability, and make the system work better. Initiation of change does not, therefore, always mean that an existing situation is "bad" but that it could be better, theoretically for the majority of the people living in the society. This last assertion leads us to the second key variable in defining reform, namely, the constellation of societal forces which determine the direction of the change. We shall spend much time on this variable. In the meantime, suffice it to say that the asymmetrical relationship or class differentiation which is a feature of every society is foundational in understanding reform. In the planning process, answer must be found to the question of the existing relationships in the society.

From the above, reform is a peaceful change while revolution almost always implicates violence. Secondly, it is claimed by some (as earlier indicated) that reform is a change or reorganisation that may not have any major or decisive effect on the fundamental structure of the society. Such opinion group are quick to point to some examples like the extension of franchise to all adult citizens, removal of the so called subsidies, which have not resulted in a major change in the distribution of wealth between the rich and poor. This is very controversial as distinguishing character of reform. History is replete with cases where particular reforms have led to fundamental changes in societies. For instance, the great English electoral reform of the late 19th century and early 20th century had the same radical effect from feudalism to popular democracy which the French earlier achieved through three successful revolutions (Glantz et al., 2002).

In the absence of reform or reform possibilities, the ground for revolution is watered. The conditions for revolution are achieved when a nation's institutions institutionalise injustice and those who benefit from this

system of injustice do not allow reform. Thus, it is only when peaceful change or reforms are blocked that violence especially revolution usually set in. Thus, the ability of systems to allow and manage change is the bulwark against revolution. We must be able to distinguish genuine revolution like the French, Russian, Chinese, Cuban revolutions (and in fact Iranian revolution) that led to fundamental changes (Obi, 1999) from pseudo-revolutions that are carried out for purposes of preserving the existing power structure as typified in fascism. The first half of 20th century witnessed a number of Pseudo revolutions and mobilisation of the masses for counter revolutions. Similar situations existed and exist today in Africa even though in rudimentary forms. It took place in Ghana, in Uganda, in Burkina-Faso and even in various coups and encounter coups by dictators in which Nigeria occupied an unenviable position.

But even after revolution, nations usually settle down to reform. In other words, revolution can never replace reform; rather it lays the foundation for reforms. This is particularly the case in such circumstances where the structural and institutional system are inflexible to allow reform or in cases where the ruling elite are clearly agents of oppression. In the later scenario, these agents may use all sorts of means to prevent needed reforms including the initiation of pseudo-reforms. The constitutional reform conferences of Abacha and even Obasanjo consequent upon the pressure for national conference fall under this category.

Again as a planned change in policy, politics and or polity, reform usually takes place within the framework of structures and process of existing political and legal order. This is the key distinguishing feature of reform when compared with revolution. In a politico-theoretical usage, it applies specifically to such changes in rules and institutional structure which goals at any particular point in time can be summarised, thus:

1. Redistribution of power in the society.
2. Expansion of freedom and, or rather.
3. Increasing the participation chances of a particular social group: the beneficiaries.

The last implies that every reform has its beneficiaries. It is always relevant to ask within the context of any reform who the beneficiaries are. Most recent reforms, especially economic ones have been more often than not aimed at benefiting the less privileged. In such situation/s when the existing institution and other legal frameworks are flexible enough as to permit changes in favour of the less privileged, the reform is said to be progressive. On the other hand, if changes are introduced to pre-empt or scuttle such objective, it is termed reactionary (Nwankwo, 2003).

FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS OF REFORM: THE THEORY OF DIALECTICS

Historically, Socrates was credited with the doctrine of

opposites as a method of inquiry. The doctrine of opposites is primarily a logical system of inquiry which begins by making a proposition (stating the thesis) and then its direct opposite (the antithesis) that is, a proposition that is antithetical to the thesis. Attempt is then made to reconcile the two opposed propositions. In the Socratic Method, the outcome of this reconciliation process is that a new proposition emerges: the synthesis. This synthesis is posited as a new thesis, a thesis that is away from, and indeed advancement on the first thesis. The new thesis in turn generates its antithesis and then a synthesis (Igwe, 2006). Through this approach of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, which can go on and on, knowledge of a particular issue is refined. This is because in each stage of the argument, each new synthesis indicates a progress.

Notwithstanding the theory of mutual exclusivity of opposites which denies any such synthesis, Hegel, Marx and Engel, adopted and adapted this Socratic logical system in their explanation of history and of relations among and within Nations. Thus for Hegel, the fundamental logic of history is the struggle that will ultimately bring about a change (Baradat, 1997). Taking off from Hegel but rejecting his metaphysical interpretations of the process, Marx claimed that the process was that of conflict among worldly interests and between opposing social classes (ibid). This basic framework is used here to explain the concept and phenomenon of reform. Reform in any society is centred on the existence of contradictions between the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, the privileged and underprivileged etc. These are ever present in all societies including the so-called developed ones. That is to say, that it is not alone a phenomenon of the Third World.

With the above understanding, and as long as the demand for change is not set in motion by forces outside the particular society, reform implicates compromise: compromise between two social forces of unequal power configurations. The first one, a more powerful social force, may be a class, caste, ethnic group, professional or any other interest group. The other, the less influential and less privileged force, can equally be variously classified as above. What is important is that genuine reform cannot take place where there is no differentiation and contradictions, where there are no cleavages and such other lines of conflicts or where the lines of conflicts are blurred. Of all differentiations, class is most formidable for effective reform.

In praise of contradictions

Reform usually emanate from societal crisis: crisis of clash of interests between social forces. The crisis become manifest either when the existing rules and regulations prove in reality functionally incapable of regulating relations

of the reciprocal impacts between sectors of the society, or when a notable social force/group, with the capacity to attain its demand refuses to accept such rules and regulations as frame for its resolutions, or begin to make demands for more recognition, or for more power or for increased participation. In such a scenario, the reform becomes the next line of action, and in fact an imperative since ignoring such a vital group could only be at the risk of more damaging crisis (Kohli, 1986).

In the Marxist tradition, all such reform-initiating crises have economic connection. This relationship between economic development, the process of social emancipation and the demand for political reform is very complicated. Karl Marx demonstrated how the capitalist mode of production of goods and services and its manner of exchange of these goods and services constitute the basis of all social processes and institutions. He insisted that it is the economy that determines politics. Economic change, he noted cannot be prevented and a change in the economy, he goes on to argue forces social change, and which in turn drives political change. That is to say, whenever the economy, which is fundament of human existence, changes, it forces a change in the social and political superstructure (Sabine et al., 1973).

An important concept in the Marxist analysis of society is class. Capitalism fostered factory work leading to sharp divisions in the society between the workers and owners of capital (Obi, 1999). The tension between the two classes, Marx believed is consequent upon the demand by the underprivileged (the workers) to be part of the power, and therefore, the demand for reform. We have used reform here but for Marx, it is revolution (Olegbonle, 2006). A traditional criticism of Marxist economic basis of reform movement and of revolution notwithstanding, it is instructive to note that most reforms and movement for reforms in Third World nations have more often than no economic foundation or at least connection. The Educational reform of the Obasanjo administration is an example.

It seems to us that no genuine progress can take place without opposition, without conflict and without antagonistic groups (Nwankwo, 2005). In classless societies or in societies in which class differentiation is insignificant, reactionary reforms may be initiated and, as earlier indicated reactionary reforms are self-serving. The process of reform is a very dynamic one in which the antagonistic groups are involved: the privileged and the less privileged. The two camps work towards compromise. In other words, compromise is a key feature of reform. Every compromise reached represents a piece of growth in the power of the less privileged (Glutz et al., 2002) who usually, in contradistinction to revolution, do not demand the seizure of the entire power. To the extent that the reform is genuine, it is progressive and is an important development strategy. And to this extent, we praise contradictions that bring about it.

Reform is an evolutionary process through which

nations move progressively towards the attainment of the fullness of development. However, this fullness of development, like in the theory of dialectics goes on and on with each stage pulling the nation to a higher frontier. No nation has attained it, and none may even attain it. Therefore, no nation can claim to be “developed” in the sense of attaining the fullness of development. Such a claim would make obsolete the very concept of reform in that society, and which in turn goes further back to deny the existence of contradictions in such a society. It is therefore, more theoretically sound to say that all nations are developing nations, that is, in the process of becoming developed. In saying this, we have bracketed the political meaning of developed and developing. Like Dahl’s (1971) Polyarchy, it may be possible to rank societies according to their levels and their stages in the ladder of development. None has reached the top ladder which implies end of development. Some may be further up the ladder than others but all are, and will ever remain (as long as the world exists) in a continuous evolution, or change or progress towards that unreachable ideal. Every stage in the ascension process is a product of compromise, and like Rostow’s (1960), stages of sociological growth a precondition for the next higher level. This is an acknowledgement of the gradated character of development. Definitely, there comes a stage in a nation’s history corresponding to the last stage in Rostow’s theory when these contradictions become self-regulatory and are able to reach compromise, like auto-pilot through internal control system: the stage in which most of the industrialised democracies have reached.

Summarily, reform is the road to progress and genuine reform is impossible in the absence of contradictions: contradictions between two opposed forces of development and non- or underdevelopment, between reality and possibility. The contradiction leads to misunderstanding and to struggle between the forces. This struggle provides a new effect that was not there before, in form of compromise. With the new understanding comes a “cease-fire” which itself is only temporal before a fresh struggle will begin and so on! As long as the reform is progressive, every compromise is a step forward in development, socially, economically or politically!

It is important at this juncture to emphasise that the road to this compromise is full of conflicts. In some systems, it may turn violent. Even the outcome, the substantive compromise, is uncertain and unpredictable and certainly a temporary antecedent. This is mostly the case if the reform issue deals with economic disequilibrium. The reason in this case is that most, if not all such reforms, use the assumptions of neo-classical economics. As is well known, in any state of disequilibrium, economic perceptions of the people and the reality are far removed from each other. This is the same as saying that the participants’ perceptions are always at variance with the actual state of affairs. This variance, which is an important factor in shaping the

course and outcome of any reform, is dependent on cultural, psychological stereotypes, historical evolution, political trend, etc in a given society: the context of reform. It is known that the assumptions of neo-classical economics pay little attention to such factors making the applications of its assumptions in respect to reform questions very problematic. In other words, the essentially compromise-character of reform should not lead one to play down on the dangers of the associated conflict. Nor should one lose sight of the weight that the changes it brings about carries.

Democracy and reform

The Politics of reform promises to be successful to the relative extent to which the actors, the state and society are convinced of its need and of the direction. Most contemporary authors agree that the process of reform in a democracy is fundamentally violence-free, evolutionary in nature, and takes place on the basis of the legitimising principles of government. In today’s democracies, it takes place in the parliament, the legitimate law-making organ of the state. That amounts to asserting that in a democratic environment, the compromise is dependent on the will of the majority as expressed in the parliament. This legitimisation of reform through the will of the majority is a distinguishing feature of reform done in a democracy.

In all developed democracies, the forces of reform mobilise to, and, in all cases, achieve their objective through parliamentary majority. This includes cases of coalition of forces within and outside the parliament. A powerful social force outside the parliament may, for instance, initiate reform, but it is always the parliamentary majority that translates it into reality. The reform that ended racial discrimination in South Africa came in consequence of protracted and even violent social debate. It is also a contemporary fact that even in the Western democracies, reform most often comes as a consequence of difficult and sometimes violent social debate. But in all cases it is the parliament that finally mobilises and translates them into reality.

Much more theoretically, democratic system has two properties which ally it, and in fact make it indispensable, to reform: persistence and adaptability (Gurr, 1974). Persistence from the perspective of Gurr is understood here to implicate longevity. More specifically it means the length of time a system endures without major and abrupt change in the authority structure of the state, that is, without noticeable interruption in the set of structures and process through which directives applicable to members of the state are made, issued and enforced. Persistence is certainly correlated to decisional efficacy, legitimacy, civil peace, social justice and other aspects of performance.

The second is adaptability. It refers to the extent of a

political systems demonstrated capacity for undergoing incremental changes in its authority structure and policies and the capacity of the system to respond to various kinds of stresses. According to Gurr (1974), a polity, which gradually changes itself in response to stresses, demonstrates a higher order of adaptability than one which suppresses or survives the effect of stress without change. This, in itself, is the real meaning of reformism. Suppression of stress lays the foundation for revolution. It is a considerable accomplishment for political system to deal with economic malaise or civil war, or crisis of integration or of distribution without itself changing or partially changing, and this is most feasible in democracy

Between the theory and the praxis of reform

The relationship between theory and praxis of reform is characterised by contradictions. On one hand, reform expectations could be very high, while the available resources and chances and the possibilities for the reform are critically limited. The critical limitation of resources (broadly defined) is a major factor in articulating reforms in Third World nations. Recommendations for reforms are very easily made to Third World nations. Nigeria for one has never lacked in theoretically sound reform policies internally or externally generated. However, translating the theory into praxis, it suffers at the limits set by context factors: limited capacities and possibilities. Conversely, both the reform expectations and the political chances and possibilities may be infinitesimal, but the real social-political changes taking place at the material time (which is unleashed) are very deep and expansive to the extent of having dramatic structural changes in the society and politics. This is part of the unpredictability of reform mentioned earlier. This type of contradictory relationship between theory and praxis dampens the euphoria of the Keynesian-based political planning, control and reform of the 1960/70s, basically because of the limits set by possibilities in a given society. This fact in turn has had negative effect on theory building. For instance, it is responsible for the contradictory evaluation of reforms by social scientists in Third World nations.

What are the consequences of this contradicting relation between the theory and praxis of reform as well as the essentially unending character of reform? To some, total resignation or abandonment of reforms is the answer. This is a wrong answer. It is good for instance to be aware of the societal limitations that contribute to the contradictory relationship between theory and praxis but it is defeatist not to aspire to move above such societal limits. Besides, the politics of reform is an art. This art consists of finding out the limitations but not allowing oneself to be tied down to such limits. Rather, through developing social coalitions and political majority, it incrementally move beyond such set limits, and so unto progress for the society. This, as noted earlier is the

meaning of reformism: the political strategy, which through a long-term planned and implemented change process aim at transforming the society, usually for the better. It acknowledges the necessity for socio-economic and political change even in the context of limiting factors, but endorses a gradual and piecemeal approach (Igwe, 2006).

CONCLUSION

This excursus on the concept of reform from purely theoretical perspective is aimed at a better understanding of the concept and through that, get the praxis right in those parts of the world where the need is urgent in all sectors. Every reform takes place within the framework of an existing political and legal order. This is a key element that distinguishes reform from a revolution. Reform as planned and consciously undertaken change/s, whether in the polity, or in a policy area is usually a compromise between societal forces. Compromise in the form of give and take after heated debates, is at the heart of democracy. It is known that fully developed democracies with sufficient participatory infrastructure, have sufficient elasticity (Gurr, 1974) for social emancipation process and permit possibilities that lead to reform, that is, because of its potential to quickly respond to demands for societal-economic changes and social emancipation process, even from above. What this implies is that democracy is the most suitable social and political form for the unfolding of any reform process. It is the only system that has the structural elasticity, which the power structure requires to adapt itself easily to economic and social changes. The depth of existing democracy measured in terms of contestation and participation (Dahl, 1971) and possibilities, is therefore of great significance in thinking about reform and reform's possibilities in Third World nations. Defect and half-democracies as are found in most Third World countries, lack this potential. This partly accounts for failed reforms and makes democratisation the first stage in any genuine reform effort. Only, it is the organised rule system, which can successfully and peacefully too, dethrone rulers. We have difficulty determining both theoretically and politically, whether in states with half-democracies or even pure autocratic rule system, the forceful removal of the rulership is really a precondition for reform as in the present policy of USA towards Iran that is thinking of regime change and which is seemingly oblivious of the Iranian context. It has not achieved that in Iraq. What is clear is that the system cannot be imposed and that sufficient participatory infrastructure needed for successful reforms cannot evolve without adequate consideration of contextual variables.

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