

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EVOLUTION AND STRUCTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS IN NIGERIA AND LIBERIA

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Abstract- The Comparison of the evolution and Structure of Local Government Systems in Nigeria and Liberia offers fascinating insight into the study of comparative local government administrations in the world in general, and Africa in particular. Some of the structural and apparent problems facing local government system in most developing countries are structural dysfunctionality, and absence of acceptable and ideal structure, functions, and responsibilities that will make them responsive to the yearnings and aspirations of the rural populace. Besides, local governments in developing countries have not incorporated the criteria of locale, democratic/participatory and efficiency which Jones (1947), former Secretary to States for African colonies enunciated in their approaches to local government governance. The paper adopted descriptive, historical and comparative analysis. Secondary data were sourced from books, journals and official publications. The paper advocates the combination of federal and unitary elements inherent in their local political systems to restructure their respective local government systems. This would assure the realization of the desired roles of the local government system in the two countries.

Index Terms- Comparative study, local government, concept of local government system, evolution of local government system, structure of local government system, Nigeria, Liberia

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of modern local government systems in developing countries, including Nigeria and Liberia is replete with the episode of “trial and error, the blending of tradition with modernity” (Ekpe 2007). However, some of the notable problems facing local government systems in most developing countries are structural dysfunctionality, absence of acceptable and ideal structure, functions, and responsibilities that will make them responsive to the yearnings and aspirations of the rural populace who form the greater proportion of the population in the developing nations. Besides, local governments have not incorporated the criteria of locale, democratic/participatory and efficiency as enunciated by Jones (1900-1947) former Secretary to States for African colonies in their approaches to local governance (Mill 1964).

Author Greech Jones enunciated the three criteria which he considered as ideal for African local government system in this manner.

Locale, because, the system of local government must be close to the common people, and their problems, efficient, because it must be capable of managing the local government services in a way which will help raise the standard of living of the people. That is to say local government should thrive to render services to the people at the least cost (Mill 1964:41). Democratic and representative, because it must not only find a place for the growing class of educated men and women, but at the same time command the respect and support of the masses of the people.

Therefore, the comparative overview of the evolution and structure of local government systems in Nigeria and Liberia undertaken in this study is a conscious attempt to expand the frontier of literature in the study of comparative local government systems in the world in general, and Africa in particular.

II. THE AIM AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to compare the evolution and structure of the local government systems of the Federal Republic of Nigeria with that of the Republic of Liberia. To achieve this aim the following objectives were set out:

1. To examine the conceptualization, evolution and the structure of local government systems in Nigeria and Liberia respectively.
2. To highlight the comparative juxtaposition of the local government systems of the two countries.

III. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

According to Akindele (1990), Local government is defined as:

An essential instrument of National and State government for the performance of certain basic services which could best be administered locally on the intimate knowledge of the needs, conditions and peculiarities of the areas concerned. As local government unites people in a defined area in a common organization whose functions are mutually complimentary to those of the central government and in the interest of the local residents for the satisfaction of common community needs. As government, it is the means by which the common problems and needs of a community consisting a country are economically and effectively catered for, so local government is the means by which a local community satisfies jointly its common problem and needs which would have been difficult by individual.

Furthermore, according to the federal government of Nigeria guideline on the local government reform 1976 Local Government is defined as;

Government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers, within defined areas. These powers should give the council substantial control over local affairs (including staffing) and institutional and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal governments in their areas, and ensure, through devolution of functions to these councils and through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.

From the foregoing the following are the main features defining the local government:

- A. A given territory, population and constitutional jurisdictions (that is representative body).
- B. A range of powers and functions developed and delegated to it by higher tier of government – central and state governments.
- C. A political entity, with power to sue and be sued.
- D. A creation of a state, superintending government thus, a subordinate government.
- E. It is not totally a sovereign government, but should enjoy substantial autonomy though relative or guided form of autonomy (Lohdam, 2001).

IV. EVOLUTION AND STRUCTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM IN LIBERIA

Liberia as a political entity is one of the oldest countries in West African sub region that was founded in 1822 and had her independence in 1847, with the Late Honourable J.J. Roberts as the pioneer president. The Liberian local government system offers a big contrast in comparison with other countries in West Africa (see Fig.1). For instance, the members of the Liberian local government are appointed by the central government, and have no defined powers and functions.

All decisions regarding policies, programmes, and the expenditure of money are made at the centre, and the local governments are compelled to carry out the directives of the central government. On the other hand, the local government system in Nigeria originated from the formal political institutions that existed in the pre-colonial era. The 1976 Local Government Reform which most scholars described as “magna Carta” of the local government in Nigeria introduced uniformity to the local government system in all parts of the Federation. In contrast to what obtains in Liberia, the members of the local government are elected by popular votes by the people (electorates) and have defined powers and functions as entrenched in the Fourth Schedule of (1999) constitution. Besides, local governments have powers at the instance of the state legislature (State House of Assembly) to make bye-laws, and these laws are binding as long as they conform with the general guidelines provided under the constitution that created them.

At her early stage of existence as a political entity, there was no organized system of local government in the interior parts of Liberia as the entire country was divided or segmented into districts; each of the districts was placed under the charge of a District Commissioner. However, the local people protested this arrangement on the ground that the district commissioner wielded too much power that disallowed them to appoint the chiefs

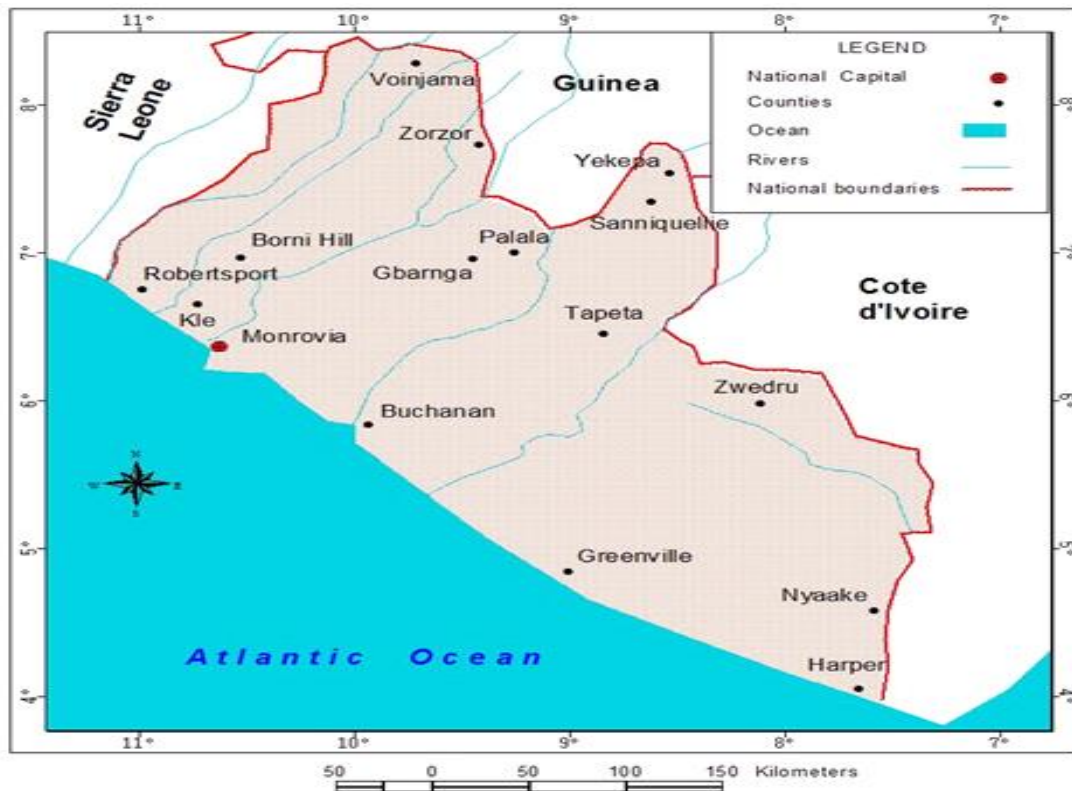


Fig. 1: Liberia showing the locations of major cities

A relief to this vexing development came in 1932 when President Arthur Barclay introduced some forms of incipient indirect rule system of local administration. This development according to Olawale (1980) removed all forms of mistrusts that had hitherto existed between the government and the people of interior in Liberia. By 1939, Liberian local government structure was further improved when the entire country was divided into provinces, each of which was governed by provincial commissioner. Each of the provinces was in turn divided into a number of districts and headed by district commissioner. Like the predominant roles, the traditional chiefs, namely Emirs in the north, Obas in the west and Obis in south east and Obongs in south-south respectively played in Nigeria during the pre colonial period, the paramount chiefs in Liberia wielded enormous powers and served as the links between the people of the interior and the central government in Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia. Paramount chiefs in Liberia are designated agents to the central government, who assisted in the collection of taxes and rates from the local people. The reformed local government system in Nigeria came in 1976 and reinvigorated the inherent structural dysfunctionality of the local government generally in the country. The Local Government Reform in Liberia took place in 1964 as a direct response to satisfy the desires of the hinterland people who felt neglected and sidelined by the central government in Liberia. This is why Campbell (1976) noted “the Liberian local government system was regarded as structurally differentiated between the hinterland, which had three provinces, ten districts and forty-seven tribal authorities as against the coastal areas which had only five counties, five territorial districts and forty-two tribal authorities”.

The reformation led to the creation of a total of nine counties(variant of local government units in Nigeria) in Liberia. The nine counties are Montserado, Grand Bassa, Sinoe, Maryland, Cape Mount, Nimba, Bong, Lofa, and Grand Gedeh. The structure of local government system in Liberia is graphically depicted in Fig. 2. In Nigeria, there are a total of thirty six (36) states, including the Federal Capital Territory – Abuja, 774 Local government units, including 6 area councils in the Federal Territory, Abuja, 8,648 wards and 388 Federal Constituencies (see Fig. 3). In terms of land mass, Nigeria is bigger than Liberia. Liberia has a total of 9 counties, variant of local government units in Nigeria, and subordinate units of 34 Districts, and 126 chieftains respectively. The pace of local government development in terms of creation and structural development has been faster in Nigeria than Liberia between 1976 and 2001 is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The development of Nigerian Local Government Structure between (1976-2001)

Federal/Central Government	1976-1979	1979-1981	1981-1983	1984-1987	1988-1991	1992-1996	1997-2001
Federal Government	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
State Governments	19	21	21	21	30	36	36
Local Governments, (inclusive of six Area Councils in Abuja)	301	301	684	301	499	589	774

Source: Authors' initiative (2013)

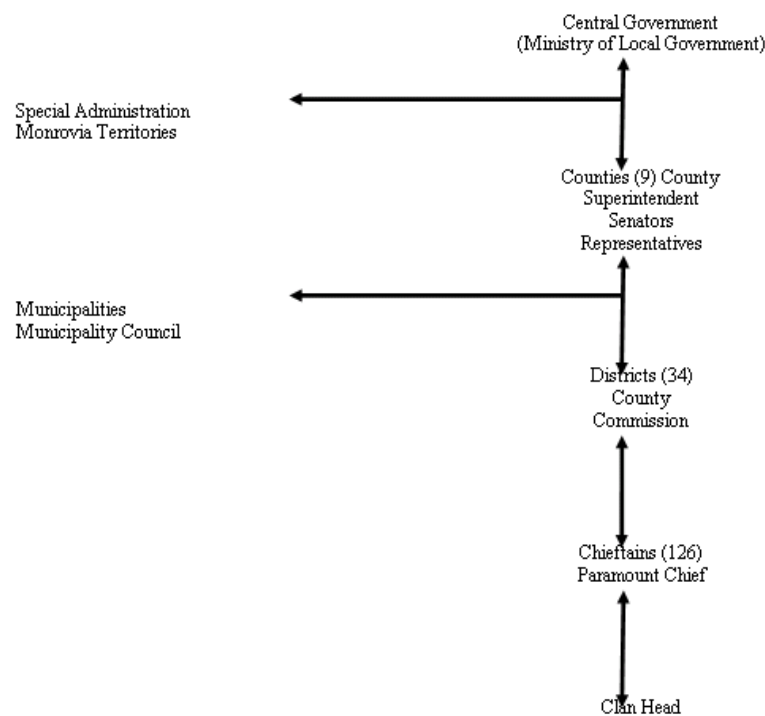


Fig. 2: Structure of Local Government in Liberia
 Source: Paul, C. (1976)

In a conservative assessment, Liberia can be compared with Akwa Ibom State in terms of land mass and population. Akwa Ibom State has about four (4) million people, according to 1990 projected population figure, and a land mass of 6,900.00 sq km. In the absence of official population figure, Liberia has been variously estimated to be as high as three million people, according to Stockwell (1968). However, according to the 2013 Year book of Jehovah's Witnesses, the population of Liberia is put at 3,994,122 people.

Local government in Nigeria has its evolutionary antecedent in diverse and segmented forms of formal political institutions (Olusola 2009) that existed in the pre-colonial period. Under this arrangement, colonial local administration centred around the traditional rulers, Emirs in the north, Obas in the west, and Obis and Obongs in the south-east and south-south respectively. This system of local administration was partially successful in the northern part of the country, and partially in the west. According to (Oyewo 1987:37) there was no systematic order of local government in Nigeria, until 1914 when Lord Lugard amalgamated the three provinces into what is now known as Nigeria, such as what took place in Liberian colonial rule between 1930-1932. The local government ordinance of 1950, in the Eastern region of Nigeria ushered in the birth of multi or three tiered local government system. The western region in Nigeria had its own form of three tiered, Divisional, districts and local councils. The north maintained its own structure until the erstwhile civilian administration was overthrown in (1966-1967), and by 1976 new states

were created. The Liberian colonial rule under president Arthur Barclay witnessed the creation of provinces and districts, as well as the appointment of chiefs by the people themselves. The chiefs, apart from functioning as agents of the central government were channels through which the localities or local people reached the central government. The advent of the 1964 local government reform in Liberia led to the creation of four extra counties of Lofa, Bong, Nimba and Grand Gedeh. In Nigeria the advent of 1976 Local Government Reform ushered in the single tiered and multi-purpose structure. The single tier local government structure entails the combination of two or more local governments sharing responsibilities for the provision of wide range of services to the people. On the other hand, multi purpose structure which is common in developed countries allows local government administration get closer to the people and makes them have a sense of belonging, as well as give them opportunity to develop at their own pace (Ekpe 2007).

The 1999 Nigerian Constitution section 7 (1) also guaranteed the existence of local government structure through constitutional provision as follows “The system of local government by democratically elected local government council is under this constitution guaranteed, and accordingly the government of every state shall, subject to section 8 of this constitution ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils”.



Fig. 3: The Thirty-six States of Nigeria

V. A COMPARATIVE JUXTAPOSITION OF NIGERIAN AND LIBERIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS

The Nigerian Local Government System under the auspices of the 1976 local government reform allows citizenry participation in the administration that has direct relevance to the rural populace, Liberian local government system does not. This is why (Olowade 1980) noted “one of the criticisms leveled against Liberian local government system is that it prevents the development of a local pride by the people in their local affairs. This is so because the system in the local government arrangement, does not encourage the people to provide for themselves certain essential services”.

Again, Liberia operates a unitary system of government with characteristic resemblance of both USA and British forms of constitutions. Like British constitution, Liberian constitution is unitary and rigid, and powers are concentrated in the hands of the president. This coupled with the overriding supremacy of a one-party system (True Whig Party) makes other levels of government,

Regional and local subordinate to the central government. The Liberian True Whig Party exerts firm control over political and economic affairs of the entire country right from the national to the local level. All governmental units in Liberia are more or less cells of the party and they function in strict conformity with centrally planned programmes of the central government (Ibodge 1999). Olawole (1980) noted that “the main responsibility of local government in Liberia is to carry out to the letter instructions of the central government and to implement the laws and programmes of the central government”.

Whereas both countries evolved their local government systems in fulfillment of the decentralization process, Nigeria adopted a single tier multi purpose structure, while Liberia adopted a three tier local government structure. The local government functionaries in Liberia are appointed by the president and they owe total loyalty and obligation to the president who has powers to either hire or fire them at will. In Nigeria, the local government officials are elected through popular election by the people in consonance with the provision of Section 14(2c) of the 1999 Constitution which recognizes the right of the people to participate in electoral process as well as other activities that concern them. It is apt to say that the local government system in Liberia is embedded in the inherent ethnic divide that existed between the tribal Liberian people and the Americo Liberians. Thus, the modified system of indirect rule introduced at the instance of president Arthur Barclay did not only keep the tribal people divided into twenty or more districts, ethnic groupings, but provided the ruling True Whig party with rationale for excluding them from participation in the national life of the Liberian State (Karnaga 1926).

Comparatively, the Liberian local government system exhibits the features of the socialist or communist system, where the local government, apart from functioning as cells of the ruling political party, is established for the purpose of managing the centrally planned programmes, and to run its public affairs. On the other hand, Nigerian local government system takes on the pattern of Anglo Saxon or British model which she inherited right from the colonial era. Under this system, the local government has relative autonomy in which Ibodge (1999) claimed “the local councils can function at least as miniature governments in their own right”. It is in consideration of this that some scholars regard “the British local government system as miniature political system” (Stanye 1976). The impression here is that, Nigerian local government system being a prototype of British system does not confer absolute autonomy on the local government, rather it is a relative or ‘guided’ form of autonomy, where the higher levels of government; Federal or State government have supervisory roles or duties to ensure that the services provided by the local authorities in the country are reasonably efficient, uniform and conformed with established policy framework of the national government. Viewed against the foregoing, it can, therefore, be concluded that, the Nigerian local government system belongs to the devolution category of decentralization and places a lot of premium on liberal democracy with the essence of facilitating local participation and mobilization of the grassroot people for developmental activities. This is not the case in Liberia, where there is absence of popular and participatory democracy, and election of local government’s representatives is done through appointment by the president.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper analyses from a comparative standpoint, the evolution and structure of local government systems in Nigeria and Liberia. It is revealed that the 1976 local government reform in Nigeria and the 1964 uniform local government reform in Liberia had engendered radical transformation in the respective local government systems. Though the two reforms were direct responses to certain and apparent similar problems, they were executed within different framework of a very different system. Nigeria operates a Federal system, while Liberia operates a unitary system; also both Nigeria and Liberia are developing nations. It is advocated that both Nigeria and Liberia should combine both federal and unitary elements inherent in their local political systems to structure their local government systems which will, better assure the realization of the desired roles of the local government systems in the two countries. In both countries, there is also need to decentralize, to give more powers and responsibilities to the local units which are the closest to the rural populace.

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