

Nature, Sources and Causes of Political Instability

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Abstract

Political instability is a social reality. Not even the advanced states of the world are completely immune from it, hence measures are put in place by serious state leaderships to reduce its occurrence to its barest minimum. However, a grasp of the nature, sources and causes of political instability is essential in any attempt to address the problem. This is the task this paper sets out to achieve. The paper is, therefore, an exposition of the nature, sources and causes of political instability.

0.0. Introduction

In this paper, we examine what constitutes the sources and causes of political instability. In other words, we look at those factors responsible for man's recourse to actions considered inimical to the continued existence of the state. These we locate in (1) the ontological and (2) the social-economic and political sources. However, before examining these, we attempt to have a glimpse of what political instability is.

1.0. Denotations of Political Instability

To have an understanding of what political instability is, we need to know what its opposite, political stability means. In view of this, we considered elsewhere varying conceptions of political stability and came to the conclusion that political stability is *the steadiness of a government and its activities aimed at fulfilling its obligations to the citizens* (Jegede, S. B., n.d.: 9). Political stability entails national security, good governance, i.e., pursuance of the common good, social harmony, and it leads to social, economic and political development.

In line with the above conception of political stability, we take political instability to mean the absence of the above. We may, therefore, define political instability as *the unsteadiness of a government and its activities aimed at fulfilling its obligations to the citizens in such a manner that its essence is negated*. On the subject of political instability, Unah is of the view that:

The phenomenon of change itself, that is, frequent social change especially where it is disruptive of the existing political order is another name for political instability... Political instability is a form of social instability... (Unah, 1995: 106).

Going by the above, there is no better description for a politically unstable society than the Hobbesian hypothetical state of nature where everyone does what he or she wants; where he or she wants; and how he or she wants. The sordid situation in the state of nature is such that there is a perpetual state of war and its attendant uncertainties. All facets of societal life suffer the consequences of this state of affairs; hence, life is poor, nasty, brutish and short.

2.0. The Philosophical Sources of Political Instability

The concepts of political stability and instability are, strictly speaking, political concepts. However, when philosophy beams its searchlight on politics, such concepts become socio-political and philosophical. Man is the source of philosophizing. At the same time, he is the author and beneficiary of civil society. There is, therefore, a strong link between philosophy and society. This is because “All human transactions, be they intellectual or practical, take place within the matrix of society, within a social context.” (Unah, 2002: 10).

In the course of their living together, men interact with one another, conflicts arise and are resolved, compromises are arrived at, all in the interest of both the individual and society at large. But there are occasions when society is shaken to its very foundation as a result of the absence of social harmony. The philosophical root of such social disharmony or political instability has been traced to (1) the nature of man and (2) the dynamism of society.

2.1. The Nature of Man

The question of the nature of man continues to generate interest in philosophy. While some philosophers see man as essentially egocentric and evil, others see him as good. Yet, others see him as a combination of both.

For Thomas Hobbes, the only way to move from the state of nature (a state of anarchy, political instability) is for society to be ruled by the Leviathan, an absolute ruler. This is premised on Hobbes' perceived root cause of his hypothetical state of nature, i.e. the nature of man. Hobbes' conception of man is summarized thus:

Man is essentially selfish; he is moved to action not by his intellect or reason, but by his appetites, desires and passions. Men living without any common power set over them... would be in that condition which is called Warre: and such a warre, as in every man against every man-not war in the organized sense but a perpetual struggle of all against all, competition, diffidence and love of glory being the main causes. Law and justice are absent. The life of man is poor, nasty, brutish and short (Appadorai, 1968: 22).

Appadorai, too, looks at the nature of man, and probably influenced by Hobbes' perception, maintains that:

When we observe the life of man around us, we cannot fail to be struck by two facts as a rule, every man desires to have his own way, to think and act as he likes, and at the same time, everyone cannot have his own way, because he lives in society. One man's desires conflict with those of another. The relations of the individual members of society with one another, therefore, need regulation by the government (3).

Although John Locke and J.J. Rousseau disagree with Hobbes on the state of nature being equivalent to a state of war, they nevertheless see it as a state full of fears and continual dangers.

Whichever aspect of man we want to emphasize, we cannot discountenance the other. Man has, on many occasions demonstrated his rationality and on others, his bestiality. It is on the basis of man's appetitiveness that the root cause of political instability has been traced to him.

This study agrees with the existentialists that man, as a being thrown into the world, soon finds the need to make meaning of his life. He always finds himself in a situation out of which he and he alone, can free himself. Realizing the vacuum in his being, man does everything possible to remove all encumbrances to his existence. Man's constant battle with nature and his fellow men snowballs into fundamental insecurity, the source of which J.P. Sartre traces to *nothingness*. *Nothingness* captures the emptiness of man and the absurdity of life. It propels him to strive to fill the vacuum of his life and save the numerous situations in which he finds himself.

In the light of the above, Unah says, "The origin of every form of instability lies in the fact that we are human" (Unah, 1995: 105).

2.2. The Dynamism of Society

If the nature of man is dynamic, it follows that since society is made up of individual men and is governed by them, society itself cannot but be dynamic. The products or manifestations of man's rationality and appetitiveness are given concrete expressions in society.

In their attempts to reshape their worlds, philosophers, especially social philosophers have put forward ideas aimed at setting societal tasks. According to E. K. Ogundowole, "The life endeavour of a society, national groups, social organizations, and other human communities as well as of individual personalities in a sense, consists in a process of the formation and resolution of tasks" (Ogundowole, 1991: 1).

The resolution of set societal tasks involves combined efforts of authentic individuals including the leaders and the led. This is because society is an aggregation of individuals. These submissions tally with

the ontological meaning of society as *being with others*. According to Unah:

The first original meaning of society is being with others, existing socially, interacting with other human beings. But because of inevitable clashes and strife attendant to such open interaction, it became imperative for human interaction to be guided and regulated (Unah, 2002: 11).

The difficulty of aggregating individual and group interests sometimes hinders the attainment of social harmony. What constitute the societal tasks of an epoch may not be the same even to members of the ruling class. Even when the ruling class is in agreement, the execution of the set tasks may not be done to expected pattern. What the above sums up to is that change, resulting from disagreements and conflicts, is inherent in society even in its very conception. This is because in giving up some of his rights and freedoms to society, man still retains those that are fundamental and inalienable. These he is not willing to give up.

Plato's insistence that philosophers should become rulers or rulers should become philosophers was borne out of his understanding of the nature of man and the translation of this nature to society. Only those fit to rule can co-ordinate a just society. Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx and others, too, were mindful of the influence of the nature of man on society.

3.0. The Socio-Economic Causes of Political Instability

The socio and economic causes of political instability are indeed, an empirical manifestation of the social and economic conditions of society. They constitute man's reaction, in specific terms, to the reciprocation or otherwise of the state, of his submission of part of his rights, freedoms and sovereignty to the state. Such causes are often bound up with the individual's or group's estimation of justice denied and or injustice done to them. It follows, therefore, that such are individual or group reactions to government policies and programmes or lack of them. These causes we shall discuss under four sub-headings: economic, ethnic discrimination, absence of good governance and tenacity of office

3.1. Economic Causes

Apart from his life and health, the next important thing to man is his economy. A sound economy is required for man to be able to protect his life and health as humanly possible. It is therefore, not surprising that most men would do everything possible to enhance their economic capabilities. However, part of man's economic right is surrendered to the state for the simple reason that if every man enjoys an unrestrained liberty to pursue his economic interests, society would be thrown into chaos. It, therefore, behoves government to regulate the citizens' economic activities in such a way that nobody is denied the opportunity to fully realize his economic potentials. Economic crises culminate in political instability, or have the potential of culminating in it when there is economic inequality and/or economic mismanagement.

In his statement to the United Nations Security Council on 20th July 2002. Ambassador Jean David Levitte, Permanent Representative of France, on behalf of the European Union, maintained, "The first aspect of conflict prevention is economic and social development" (Levitte: 2000). According to him, "Poverty leads to frustration and revolts which may degenerate into conflicts."

The Freedom House Incorporated is of the view that income inequality leads to political instability. According to it, "The net result of income inequality is instability, which leads to slow or negative growth and hence weaker democracy" (Freedom House: 2000).

Economic crisis is not limited to economic inequality but also extends to harsh economic conditions that are brought about by government economic policies or lack of them. Economic mismanagement and government's inability to effectively direct the economy also have the potential of culminating in political instability. This had been the major sources of political instability and change of regimes in Argentina, Brazil and Indonesia in recent times. It is, of course, not a subject of debate that the economic conditions of the workers in Western Europe of Marx and Engels' time played an important role in the evolution of the philosophical and economic cores of Marxism: *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism*.

3.2. Ethnic Discrimination

Ethnic discrimination in multi-ethnic societies in many cases lead to political instability, even in some of today's advanced societies. In the United Kingdom, for example, the situation that led to the formation of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) has not been completely wiped out. The situation is worse in less advanced societies where social discrimination is bound up with ethnic competition for state resources. Caprioli and Trumbore see as taking the risk of being politically unstable "A society that arbitrarily discriminates against some of its citizens – a state in which political and economic inequalities are perpetuated through policy and social practice..." (Gledisch, 2003: 7). They go further to adopt Van Evera's position that "The more severely nationalities oppress minorities living in their states, the greater the risk of wars" (8). In such societies, ethnic inequality in access to political and economic resources affects political stability. Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan and Nigeria are good examples of states where ethnic discrimination has often led to political instability.

3.3. Absence of Good Governance

Good governance has been defined as

The ability of a government to effectively manage the resources of the state in such a manner that it is capable of providing for the basic needs of the people and the people are allowed to develop their full potentials under a democratic political framework based on the rule of law (Abati, 2000: 4).

In line with the above, The Africa Leadership Forum has identified the indices of good governance as follows:

1. Efficient and responsive public service;
2. Good management of the economy;
3. Equity, justice and fair play in government policies and programmes;
4. Effective improvement of the welfare and quality of life of the citizenry;
5. Fundamental human rights and the rule of law;
6. De-politicization of the public service;

7. Enhancement of the capacity of the people to sanction public and political leadership through democratic means;
8. Transparency and accountability;
9. Public security and order;
10. Discipline
11. Implementation of good foreign policies; and
12. Political stability (Somorin: 2001:1).

The observance of the above helps the state in the realization of its objectives. Their absence, however, denotes the absence of good governance and this may lead to revolts and conflicts, which may result in political instability.

3.4. Tenacity of Office

A modern socio- political cause of political instability is the tenacity of office or the sit- tight syndrome of public office holders. Even when good governance is obviously lacking, some leaders still hold on to the reins of power, thereby exacerbating the conflict between the ruling class and the ruled.

This syndrome has wreaked havoc on many societies among which are Cameroon, Togo, Algeria, Haiti, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya to mention but a few. The frequency of this syndrome in African States probably influenced Babarinsa to conclude that, “African leaders always find it difficult to go on retirement because they regard political office as traditional stool from which there is no exit except to God’s headquarters” (Babarinsa: 2005: 5). This problem has attracted the attention of Goerge Ayittey. Ayittey (1993) is of the view that to arrest the sit-tight syndrome and the conflict situations in Africa, there must be (1) truly independent electoral commissions (2) attainment of press freedom (3) independent judiciary and (4) professional and neutral security agencies.

What usually happens in societies where the above are missing is a struggle between holders of office in the obsolescent order and their adherents on one hand, and those who believe in the overthrow of the old order and the enthronement of a new one. In the ensuing struggle, more often than not, the old order collapses, leading to the fall of the

office holders. The victory in such a struggle brings but a short relief to the citizens and the state as the new leaders map out strategies to perpetuate themselves in office right from the very beginning. This results in a fresh antagonism and the state of instability continues.

In this part of the paper, we have dealt with the causes of political instability. Political instability often has negative effects on the individuals and groups, which make up a state, and the state herself.

4.0. Social and Economic Effects of Political Instability

Political instability retards the political and economic progress of the affected state as well as impoverishes its citizens. Socio-political instability creates an environment of uncertainty.

In their attempt to manage political instability, governments of affected states invest more in police and military forces at the expense of competing welfare interests of the people. This often leads to more instability. Further, political instability leads to capital flight, which takes its toll on the economy.

Overall, political instability leads to low political and economic growth of affected societies. The result being that such societies are branded least developed. Africa – the centre of political instability, *ipso facto* – registers as the least developed continent, with African states occupying 52 of the bottom 75 states of the total of 175 listed least developed states in 2003.

5.0. Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt was made to clarify what constitutes political instability. We also traced its sources and causes. These we found in the philosophical sources and socio-political causes. According to the philosophical source, man is dynamic by nature: he oscillates between egocentrism and altruism. Being the author and occupant of society, Man's nature translates into the dynamism of his project-society-where it becomes a difficult business aggregating the interests of groups and individuals to arrive at the common good.

Socio-economic and political sources are to be found in man's reaction to the policies of the state. Of course, it is ingrained in man, to pursue his happiness as much as possible and minimize pains to himself as humanly possible. Looking at the effects of political instability on society, individuals and groups, it is our view that political instability stultifies the growth of both the citizens and the state.

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