The implications of Acemoglu and Robinson’s critical junctures and the weight of history on the Nigeria socio-political development: a philosophical analysis

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Abstract

The study focused on ‘the implications of Acemoglu and Robinson’s critical junctures and the weight of history on the Nigeria socio-political development: a philosophical analysis.’ The study explored the critical periods and moments of the country’s socio-political development by interpreting and interrogating events and establishing the necessary connections of such events as related to the political development of Nigeria. The study also analysed the various critical junctures in Nigeria like the independence, the first military coup, the Nigerian-Biafra civil war, annulment of June 12 1993 general election hence its implications to the critical juncture of Nigeria socio-political development in that the most significant challenge this country has faced in every crucial juncture is the kind of leaders that emerged. They continued and consolidated on the extractive institution created by the previous leaders and have not taken it as their moral responsibility to change the trajectory of the nation. The study concluded thus, building inclusive economic and political institutions at every critical juncture is an economic transformation answer for Nigeria’s socio-political development and human flourishing everywhere in the country and at all time. Finally, the study recommended that ‘inclusive institutions’ are akin and pivotal for the realization of prosperity and human thriving.

Keywords:
Acemoglu and Robinson’s critical junctures; the weight of history; socio-political development

1 INTRODUCTION

Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, p. 101) call their points of origin ‘critical junctures’. As they explain, critical junctures “are major events that disrupt the existing political and economic balance in one or many societies.1 Critical junctures launch nations to their respective dependent paths. Because of small differences in initial conditions, the same critical juncture can send nations in radically different directions. But a lot is muddy here in terms of understanding the historical foundation of a particularly critical juncture. Events happen, and until another critical juncture occurs; a nation is pretty much locked in an institutional straightjacket. Present events often have their root in the past, which cannot be ignored. This is because the outcome of events during critical junctures are shaped by the weight of history as the existing political institutions at the time largely shape the balance of power and delineate what is politically feasible. A great historian Carr (1961, p. 46) observes that “these so-called account in history represents a sequence of cause and effect interrupting and so to speak clashing with the sequence of happenings. This shows that the weight of history in the critical junctures, critical period and moments of a country is not just about separating the intractable sequence of event in the country’s socio-political development, rather it is about interpreting events and establishing the ‘necessary connection’ of such event as it relates to the political development of that country. Kant cited in Collingwood (1946) would say that “the human mind is not just contented with simply knowing that certain event happened; it wants to know the cause and the significance. The principle of cause and effect is an aged philosophical problem. It is an a priori principle which, according to Kant, is presupposed by “necessary connection.” This means that events that happen at any critical juncture have a necessary connection with where we are as a country. A cause is that which brings about a certain effect; it is that which something (an effect) is produced.

A critical juncture is a double-edged sword that can cause a sharp turn in the trajectory of a nation’s socio-political development (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012). On the one hand, it can open the way for breaking the cycle of the extractive institutions and enable more inclusive institutions and governance to emerge. Therefore, understanding how the weight of history and critical junctures shape the path of economic, social and political development of a nation will enable us to look at economic, social and political development of Nigeria and the path followed by our previous and present leaders at the various critical junctures as shall be discussed by this work. Hence, the thrust of the work is to look at Nigeria as its various critical junctures like the independence, the first military coup, the Nigerian-Biafra civil war, annulment of June 12, 1993, general election, etc. shall be discussed in work and how it has contributed to the intractable challenges the country faced since independence. The work is particularly interested in knowing if the socio-political development of Nigeria would have been different if we have followed a different path at those critical moments.

2 CRITICAL JUNCTURES AND THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY IN ACEMOGLU AND ROBINSON

Political, social and economic growth or backwardness of any society depends largely on the political structures and institutions in place and policies that emanate from those that wield power, given that in any society, the political structures and distribution of wealth determines the country’s economic prosperity or poverty. The plague that ravaged Europe from 1346-1348 which is at the center of Acemoglu and Robinson’s (2012, p. 96) argument of the weight history in critical juncture is capture thus;
In 1346 Bubonic plague, the Black Death reached the port city of Tana at the mouth of the river Don on the black sea. Transmitted by fleas living on rats, the plague was brought from China by traders traveling along the Silk Road the great trans-Asian commercial artery. Thanks to Genoese traders, the rats were soon spreading the fleas and the plague from Tana to the entire Mediterranean. By early 1347, the plague had reached Constantinople. In the spring of 1348, it was spreading through France and North Africa and up the boot of Italy. The plague wiped out about half of the population of any area it hit.

The plague affected most of the world, and everywhere a similar fraction of the population perished. Thus, the demographic impact on Eastern Europe was the same as in England and Western Europe. The social, political, and economic forces at play were also the same. Labour was scarce and people demanded greater freedom. But in the East, a more powerful contradictory logic was at work, since fewer people meant high wages in an inclusive labor market, this gave the lords a greater incentive to keep the labor market extractive and the peasant servile (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012, p. 100). This institutional divergence was the result of a situation where the difference between these areas initially seemed very small; in the East, Lords were little better organized, they had slightly more rights and more consolidated landholdings, and towns were weaker and smaller, peasants less organized. In the grand scheme of history, these were small differences, yet these small differences between the East and the West became very consequential for the lives of their populations and the future path of institutional development. When the feudal order was shaken up by the Black Death and took to inclusive institutional breakthrough. The Black Death was a clear example of a critical juncture, a major event, or confluence of factors that disrupted the existing social-economic and political balance of a society. The trajectory of the moment launched Western Europe into inclusive institutional breakthrough and subsequent economic prosperity.

Inclusive institutions emerged in England after the Black Death. England was unique among nations when it made the breakthrough to sustain economic and political growth by introducing major political institutions, much more inclusive than those of any previous society. Politics is the process by which a society chooses the rules that will govern it. Political institutions of a society are a key determinant of the outcome of the development of a nation and determine who has power in a society and to what end that power can be used (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). The emergence of political and economic inclusive institutions was the resultant effect of England posture from the critical junctures of the Black Death. The inclusive institution creates incentive and economic growth. Nigeria emerged from independence in 1960, survived first military coup on 15 January 1966, fought its way during the 30th month's civil war and the tension of the annulment of June 12, 1993, presidential election but has not been able to build enduring inclusive institutions that will bring prosperity.

3 NIGERIA AT VARIOUS CRITICAL JUNCTURES

At this point, we shall look at Nigeria socio-political development in the light of the various critical junctures we have experienced as a nation. But the thrust of the work will center on few selected critical junctures in Nigeria historical development like; the 1960 independence, the first military coup, the Nigerian-Biafra civil war and the annulment of June 12, 1993, general elections. These are critical junctures and moments in our history. Again, we are putting into consideration Carr’s argument that contingency path in history is not relevant. However we equally consider the principle of cause and effect in history as a metaphysical foundation for the work. Some traditional writers have placed history and its weight and socio-political philosophy in a very close relationship. Gauba (2007, p. 108) observes that “history without political theory and science has no fruit; socio-political philosophy without history has no root.” Corroborating Gauba’s view Freeman in Gauba (2007) observes that history is past politics, while politics is present history. Hence, the necessary connection of cause and effect is the footprint of addressing the intractable challenges that have beset our socio-political growth and development.

4 THE 1960 INDEPENDENCE

Independence is the quality or state of being independent, free from any external influence. Nigeria was granted independence on Oct. 1, 1960. A new constitution established a federal system with an elected prime minister and a ceremonial head of state. The NCNC, headed by Azikiwe (who had taken control after Macaulay's death in 1946), formed a coalition with Balewa's NPC after neither party won a majority in the 1959 elections. Balewa continued to serve as the prime minister, a position he had held till 1957, while Azikiwe took the mostly ceremonial place of president of the Senate. Following an UN-supervised referendum, the northern part of the Trust Territory of the Cameroons joined the Northern region in June 1961, while in October the Southern Cameroons united with Cameroon to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon (Encyclopedia, Britannica Reference Suites, 2014). The Nigeria independence of 1960 is one of our critical moments in development. It was a moment that some writers believed today could not be exonerated from the intractable institutional decade we have in the country. As a critical juncture in our socio-political development, Achebe (2012, p. 40) in his narrative captures the general feelings of Nigerians.

The general feeling in the air as independence approached was extraordinary, as the building anticipation of the relief of torrential rains after a season of scorching hot Harmattan winds and bush fires. We were all looking forward to feeling the joy that India- the great jewel of the British Empire must have felt in 1948, the joy that Ghana must have felt years later in 195712.
Achebe (2012, p. 40) further adds that

_We had no doubt where we were going. We were going to inherit freedom that was all that mattered. The possibilities for us were endless, at least, so it seemed at the time. Nigeria unbridled destiny, of overwhelming excitement about life promise, unburdened by any knowledge of providence’s intended destination._

This is a demonstration that the independence moment was indeed a great moment and critical juncture for Nigeria. It was supposed to bring about deepening growth of inclusivity in the Nigerian political system, but this never happened as Madiebo (1980, p. 4) explicitly observes

_At independence, therefore, Nigeria became a federation and thus remained one country. Soon afterward the battle to consolidate this legacy of political and military dominance of a section of Nigeria over the rest of the federation began with increased intensity. It is this struggle that eventually degenerated into coup d’État and bloody civil war._

5 The First Military Coup d’État

Coup d’État is the sudden and violent overthrow of an existing government by a small group. The chief prerequisite for a coup is control of all or part of the armed forces, the police, and other military elements. Unlike a revolution, which is usually achieved by large numbers of people working for basic social, economic, and political change, a coup is a change in power from the top that merely results in the abrupt replacement of leading government personnel. A coup alters country fundamental social and economic policy and does not significantly redistribute power among competing political groups. Among the earliest modern coups were those in which Napoleon overthrew the Directory on Nov. 9, 1799 (18 Brumaire), and in which Louis Napoleon dissolved the assembly of France's Second Republic in 1851. Coups were a regular occurrence in various Latin American nations in the 19th and 20th centuries and Africa after most the countries there gained independence in the 1960s.

On January 15, 1966, Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu led the first ever-military coup in Nigeria that led to the death of Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and Premier of Northern Nigeria, Chief S.I. Akintola, the Premier of Western Region, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Prime Minister of Nigeria, Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh, Federal Minister of Finance and other military officers. The coup was poorly carried out in certain parts of the country, and there was a strong accusation of tribalism. The Northern People accused Chukwuma as well as his fellow coup plotters of staging an Igbo coup. This is because most of the officers killed during the coup were those from other parts of the country (Encyclopedia, Britannica Reference Sutes, 2014). The then general officer commanding the Nigerian army, Major-General Johnson Thomas Ununakwe Aguiyi Ironsi was sworn-in as the Military Head of State of Nigeria. From then on, Nigeria experienced a chain of military coup or military intervention. No doubt, the first coup was a landmark effort that triggered the rest, so the work shall discuss the first coup as a critical moment in the nation’s journey to prosperity. It was a critical juncture in our history because till today, political scholars believe that it destroyed our foundation and led the foundation for the unitary-federal government we have today.

6 The Nigeria-Biafra Civil War

The English philosopher, Warnock (1970), once wrote that the human predicament is inherently such that things are liable to go badly. His statement presupposes that in the actual reference situation, things are not so bad, but harbor in their very essence the tendency to flounder, thereby making life more uncomfortable. For Warnock cited in Oguejiofor (2001, p. 7), this inherent tendency is due to both natural and human factor; limited knowledge, limited resources, limited rationality, limited sympathy, etc.

The trajectory of building a nation like Nigeria is intractably engulfed with challenges. These challenges are our critical junctures; some moments are to define Nigeria as a country in the path of prosperity. But, this never happened because leaders that emerged after these critical junctures ignorantly or deliberately refused to build strong mechanism for inclusive political and economic institutions to emerge. The absence of having inclusive political and economic institutions invariably led to the Nigeria civil war. This is partly because, the Federation of Nigeria, as it exists today, has never really been one homogeneous country, for its widely differing peoples and tribes are yet to find any basis for true unity. This unfortunate yet obvious fact notwithstanding, the former colonial master had to keep the country as one to effectively control her vital economic and political interest in the region and for their administrative convenience by amalgamating the Southern and Northern protectorate in 1914. Hence the only thing these peoples had in common became the name of their country. That alone was not a sufficient condition for the basis of our true unity devoid of rancor and hatred (Anyim, Chukwunathi, Anyim-Ben & Chijioke 2017, p. 361). So, the then Republic of Biafra was located in the former Eastern Region of Nigeria inhabited majorly by Igbo people. In the 1960s economic and political instability and ethnic chauvinism characterized Nigerian public life. In mostly Hausa North, resentments against the Igbo minority erupted into violence. In September 1966, about 30,000 Igbo people were massacred in the Northern Region, and this led to the fleeing of Igbo citizens from the Northern region. Anxious efforts by representatives of all regions to come to an accord were unsuccessful. On May 30, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, (late General) the military governor of the Eastern Region with the authorization of a consultative assembly, declared the region a sovereign and independent republic of Biafra. General Yakubu Gowon, the military head of state of the federal republic of Nigeria, refused to recognize Biafra's secession. The hostilities that ensued the following July lasted for about 30 months. With time Biafra occupied area shrank to one-tenth its original area in the course of the war. By 1968 it had lost its seaports and became landlocked; supplies could be brought in only by air. Hunger and disease followed; estimates of mortality were very high and were about a million or more (Madiebo, p. 3).
The African Union (AU), the Papacy, and others tried to reconcile the combatants. Countries like the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union did not recognize Biafra while countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Tanzania, France, and Zambia recognized Biafra as an independent state. Biafran forces were finally routed in a series of engagements in late December 1969 and early January 1970. Ojukwu fled to Côte d'Ivoire and Major-General Philip Effiong, the Chief of Defence Staff of the Republic of Biafra surrendered to the federal government on January 15, 1970. Biafra, on the point of total collapse, thereupon ceased to exist.

7 REMOTE CAUSES OF THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA CIVIL WAR

- The Nigerian army was polarized along the ethnic lineage. This created a rift and suspicion within the rank and file of the Nigerian army, and promotion in the military became ethnic-based.
- The assassination of the top political elite during the first military coup of January 15, 1966, involved the killing of eminent Northern and Western leaders like Tafawa Balewa (Prime Minister), Ahmadu Bello (Sarundu of Sokoto), S.L Akintola, etc. The argument was that no eminent Igbo politician was killed.
- Ironsi’s promulgation of decree no 34 of 1996. This decree introduced a unitary form of government in place of the federal system of government as practiced. Because of this decree, the North believed that power would be concentrated in the hands of a few Igbo political leaders.
- The inability of the civilian-led government to conduct a free and fair election.
- The fear of domination in the army, the army nursed the fear that the Igbo will dominate the military. Because of this, there was a counter-coup which left about 185 Igbo officers dead (2012, p. 95).
- Political parties in the first republic such as NPC, NCNC, and AG were anchored on ethnic lineage; this further increased the rift and suspicion between the ethnic groups.

8 IMMEDIATE CAUSES OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

- The massive killing of Igbo in the North, Achebe (2012, p. 82) in his narrative observes that: 

  I watched horrified as northern officers carried out a revenge coup in which they killed Igbo officers and men in large numbers. If it had ended there, the matter might have been seen as a very tragic interlude in nation building, a horrendous tit for tat. But the northerners turned on Igbo civilians living in the north and unleashed waves of brutal massacres that Colin Legum of the Observer (UK) was the first to describe as a pogrom.

  Because of this pogrom, Ojukwu asked non-Easterners living in the East to leave and at the same time asked the Igbo to return to the East.
- The Aburi accord declaration, this was the agreement held in Aburi Ghana between Ojukwu and Gowon and other government dignitaries at the instance of General Ankrah who was then the Ghana head of state on 4th January 1967. Gowon came back and could not keep to the agreement.
- The declaration of the Republic of Biafra on 30th May 1967 by Ojukwu was the final blow.
- Both Gowon and Ojukwu saw war as the only justifiable means of resolving conflict.
- Gowon became head of state after Ironsi; this was not acceptable to Ojukwu who was then senior to Gowon and as well the military government of the Eastern region.

9 THE ANNULMENT OF JUNE 12, 1993, GENERAL ELECTION

The annulment of June 12, 1993, general election is one of the critical junctures to be discussed because it provides us with a socio-historical context for assessing the essential moments of our socio-political development as a nation. Politically, the general election would have installed a fledgling democracy that would have thrown dictatorship overboard then, in Nigeria, the decision to annulment election was a critical juncture. Kukah (2011, p. 29) captures the essential nature of the moment this way;

  It is to be noted that at the time Abacha staged his coup, the country was at the height of the crisis that arose from the annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections. The country was in a state that was reminiscent of the events of January 1996 just after the coup of January 15th that year. There were massive movements of citizens from the north to south and vice versa. On the whole, the country was seemingly spinning out of control.

Indeed, it was a critical moment referring us back to the definition of essential junctures as a significant event or confluence factors that disrupts the existing economic and political balance of a society. Again, the 2015 general election in Nigeria is one of our country’s critical junctures, Oguejiofor in one of our class discussions on the text Why Nations Fail” The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty argues that due to the tension, anxiety, and uncertainty that engulfed the preparation and conduct the 2015 General Election, that it a critical juncture in our country’s socio-political development. The intractable ethnic challenges in Nigeria invariably make every general election critical juncture. Hence, the impacts of elections are critical moments in our history.

10 THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FEW CRITICAL JUNCTURES TO NIGERIA’S SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Nigeria social, political, and economic development has severally being punctuated by critical junctures at one point of our history or the other. The impact and result of critical junctures in our development depend on the kind of institution that emerges after the juncture and how the society responds depends on the institutions that are in place. Omorogbe (1996, p. 68) argues that “we cannot afford to ignore the experience and events of the past or pretend to do without it that we can simply sweep away the past and begin afresh, for man can achieve development by making recourse to experience.”
Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, pp. 436-37) observe that “because of contingency path of history, it is difficult to know whether a particular interplay of critical junctures and existing institutional differences will lead towards the more inclusive or extractive institution. Therefore, in looking at the implication of Acemoglu and Robinson’s critical junctures in Nigeria political, economic, and social development, we shall consider the kind of institution that emerged after each critical juncture. Omoregbe (2010, p. 96) in his word observes that “history presupposed that nature is rational otherwise the very idea of explaining events would be meaningless, except on the presupposition of the rationality of nature.” We have explained few historical events as critical junctures in socio-political development we shall now look at these events as “cause and effect.” That is, as one event having the necessary connection to the outcome of another event, one critical juncture, becoming a sufficient cause for other critical junctures.

The event of independence in 1960 was a moment of happiness as alluded to by Achebe. Happiness because we are now free from the colonial administration. ‘Freedom,’ Omoregbe (2010, p. 29) would argue that “it is commonly believed that man is free, and that he makes use of his freedom the way he likes and is therefore held morally responsible for whatever he does.” But this freedom was not adequately managed because the leaders who emerged after independence were intractably enmeshed in ethnic politics instead of building inclusive political and economic institutions that would have taken Nigeria into prosperity, therefore should be held morally responsible for the nation’s socio-political decay. Nnoli (1978, p. vii) observes that:

A cursory glance at the history of ethnicity reveals that as far back as 1936 some Nigerians had warned about the negative effects. Ever since then, many Nigerian patriots, progressive and others have inveighed against it and suggested solutions to it. Some of these solutions have been tried but to no avail.

The leaders that emerged after independence allowed the intractable problem of ethnicity to ruin the critical moment of our independence and continued the extractive institutions created by the colonial masters. This caused the military first incursion, intervention, or involvement in Nigeria politics in 1966. The military came into power and just continued operating on the extractive institutions created by the outgone civilian. Impoverished Nigerians and Nigerians the more and caused a gravitating effect on the socio-political development of the country. The military has been attacked severely by many scholars on the ground that they Balkanized and pluralized the country during their stay in power. This implies that military involvement in Nigeria politics as a critical juncture did not bring any positive feedback by creating inclusive institutions to drive prosperity. Instead, what Nigerian got was a vicious circle where military oligarchy perpetuated themselves in Nigeria politics with the wealth they amassed from the extractive institutions they created. Similarly, the Nigerian civil war was another critical moment in our socio-political history; the war that lasted for 30 months ravaged the entire country, particularly the South East. The level of damage created was as massive as the Bubonic plague (the Black Death) that wiped out almost half of Europe in the 14th century. At the end of the plague England launched itself into prosperity by building inclusive institutions. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, p. 102) observe that;

England was unique among nations when it made the breakthrough to sustained economic growth through significant economic changes that were brought by a political revolution with the institution of a distinct set of financial and political institutions that were much more inclusive. These institutions have a profound implication on their socio-political and economic development.

This is the predicament of the Nigerian society as leaders come and go without building inclusive political and economic institutions to engine prosperity and set the country on the path of economics and socio-political development like Singapore.

Furthermore, the annulment of June 12th, 1993 general election adjudged to be the most successful election in the country was a critical juncture in our historical development. The moment that would have defined the Nigeria democratic system and build inclusive institutions for stability in politics was ruined. Also, the 2015 general election and most other general elections were another critical junctures, before the 2015 general election there were tension and anxiety. It was the resurgence of ethnic bigotry in our politics. But the decision of the then president Goodluck Jonathan to accept defeat and call his opponent of the All Progressive Congress (APC) General Muhamadu Buhari to congratulate him came as a historical moment in that juncture of our socio-political development. However, the greatest challenge this country has faced at every critical juncture is the kind of leaders that emerge. It then means that we, as a country, have leadership recruitment and selection as a challenge. The leaders that emerged consolidate on the extractive institution created by the previous leaders and have not taken it as their moral responsibility to change the trajectory of the Nation.

11 Concluding Reflections

The principle of cause and effect is at the heart of philosophy; it is an a priori principle which according to Kant in Omoregbe (1996, p. 95) is in the categories of human understanding which implies ‘necessary connection’ of events. David Hume as an empiricist would ascribe ‘cause and effect’ as a habit of associating things we have frequently seen together in the past (Omoregbe 1996). Whether we talk of ‘necessary connection’, ‘necessary condition’, ‘sufficient condition’ or associating event, the essence of the work is to establish the relationship between the various critical junctures in history and how the impact negatively to our socio-political development. Having said all these, one can easily adduce that a society without philosophical leaders minded like Plato’s Philosopher King and morally sound and responsible, is a society enmeshed in anarchy, chaos, terrorism, ethnicity, and poverty where socio-political development will be a mirage. Thus, building an inclusive economic and political institution at every critical juncture is a panacea for Nigeria’s socio-political development and human flourishing everywhere in the country and at all time. Inclusive institutions are akin and pivotal for the realization of prosperity and human flourishing.
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