



KNITTING THE WEB OF GOVERNANCE: RETHINKING POLITICS- ADMINISTRATION DICHOTOMY USING COMPLEMENTARY APPROACH

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Abstract

The politics-administration dichotomy has been one of the most disputed theories of public administration. The dichotomy has been advocated on the grounds that the dichotomous division of labour and authority between elected and administrative officials increases the democratic accountability and planning ability of public administrators. The paper seeks to situate the inseparable nature of political and administrative practices in the web of governance. To achieve this objective, the paper relied on secondary data where scholarly expositions are correlated, synthesized and presented in logical sequence. The paper observed that, public bureaucrats are consciously or unconsciously charged with policy formulation and implementation which in practice, make roles-differentiations difficult. The paper submits that, to ensure efficient and effective service delivery, both political office holders and public bureaucrats should complement each other and interact in cooperative manner, to initiate and implement policies that would promote the well-being of the generality of the populace.

Keywords: Public Administration, Public Bureaucrats, Complementary, Policy & Politics

1. Introduction

The administration of a country entails governance issues dealing largely with the means by which governmental powers are exercised in the management of a country's affairs, generally. In governance parlance, policy creates and provides a sense of direction by which governmental affairs are run in the most desired directions. In the main, public administration is inherently an instrument of policy formulation and policy implementation is by extension, the doing part of government business. Accordingly, in all governmental systems, there are two primary or ultimate functions of government, viz. the expression of the will of the State and the execution of that will. These functions are, respectively, '*politics and administration*'.

Public bureaucrats possess the machinery, the repository of knowledge stored in files and in their memory, the institutional discipline and hierarchical command to formulate and tender advice on various options and alternatives of policy open to the government. Public bureaucrats outline the various options; examine each one for advantages and disadvantages in terms of cost, time factor and political acceptability; it is for the policy-maker to choose and decide (Adebayo, 2009).

Indeed, in spite of structural-functional differentiations in role performance, a great deal of coordinative and interfused relationships exists between the political actors and the public bureaucrats in the scheme of public affairs. For example, the bureaucrats, being professionals often provide intelligence services to political directorates, manage public information system,



perform law and order functions and so on. Strangely enough, Permanent Secretaries have been officially designated State functionaries, and given conflicting responsibilities and roles. The end result is that public bureaucrats are charged with policy formulation and execution as well as the custodian of public funds. These in effect, make bureaucrats to be the heart of the problem of modern government and their efficient services as ultimate in the web of governance.

More importantly, understanding the nature of these intertwined and complex relationships would help in promoting the very existence and survival of our societies on the one hand, and reconciling the tensions between them is yet another important area of concern to students of political science and administration, policy makers and the general public on the other (Idris, 2012). The significance of this paper, therefore, lies in the fact that students of public administration are gradually discerning due to the paradigm shift in the role of the state in the management of affairs.

This paper is anchored on Complementarity approach to governance as its theoretical guide. The nature of subject under discussion necessitates the use of secondary data where scholarly expositions are correlated, synthesized and presented in logical sequence. This enabled us to analyze descriptively, the contentious nature of politics and administration practices and relevance more lucidly. Structurally, the paper is divided into four sub-sections. Section one is the introductory, section two covers conceptual review and framework of analysis whilst section three deals discussion and the last section concludes the paper.

2. Literature Review

Conceptual and Empirical Issues

The politics-administration dichotomy, as traditionally interpreted, prescribes roles that are neither practical nor realistic in the operations of modern States. The public bureaucrats, as Waldo (1984) puts it, are to be politically neutral but the reality is otherwise. This is because bureaucrats are often engaged in policy formulation and administration as well as forming the spirit of the governmental system. The dichotomy model is traced to the politics-administration dichotomy, which grew out of the early administrative reform movement and its reaction against spoils system in the USA's period of 1887. The model presupposes that political interference in administration would erode the opportunity for administrative efficiency, that the policy-making activities of government ought to be wholly separated from the administrative functions, and that administrators had to have an explicit assignment of objectives before they could begin to develop an efficient administrative system (Shafritz and Hyde, 2012).

The politics-administration dichotomy is traditionally traced to these two sources: Wilson, "*The study of Administration*", in *Political Science Quarterly* (June 1887) and Goodnow, 1900 in his "*Politics and administration: A study in government.*" For Goodnow (1900), modern administration presented a number of dilemmas involving political and administrative functions that had now supplanted the traditional concern with the separation of powers among the various branches of government. Politics and administration could be distinguished, he argued, as "the expression of the will of the State and the execution of that will." Thus, the dichotomy plays a legitimizing role for public administration by maintaining the idea that public administration operates solely as a neutral body with no involvement in politics and policy (McSwite, 1997). Demir and Ronald (2008) wrote that as Wilson (1887) puts it long ago, "although politics sets



the task for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices.” Wilson (1887) expressed, “administration was removed from the hurry and strife of politics.” Wilson (1887) sought to make a functional distinction between political activity and administrative activity in public organizations. In his own view, public administration is only concerned with the implementation of public policies, which are politically decided. Wilson (1887) treated administration as the operation side of government and further argued on the need for a separate science of public administration when he said, “it is getting harder to run a constitution than to frame one.” Thus, Wilson’s essay laid the foundation for a systematic and separate study of public administration. In a nutshell, Wilsonian (1887) views largely set the tone for the early study of public administration.

Goodnow (1900) elaborates the Wilsonian (1887) theme of politics-administration dichotomy and argued that politics and administration are two distinct functions of a government. Clearly in Goodnow’s (1900) view, the locus of public administration is identified in government’s bureaucracy, whilst that of political activity is identified in the legislature. Corroborating this view, White (1955) accepted the earlier Wilsonian theory of politics-administration dichotomy. In another development, Willoughby cited in Adebayo (2009) went to the extreme of not merely separating administration from politics, but setting it up as the fourth arm of government along with the legislative, the executive, and the judicial. The central argument of the dichotomy model is that governments come and go, but the public service remains. Therefore, as instruments of governance, the public service needs to be characterized by professionalism.

The usefulness of the dichotomy model lies in its intentions- to protect public administration from interference by elected office holders and members of political parties in the day-to-day administrative activities. It also helps to protect public administration from political patronage, where party political connections become the over-riding criteria in public personnel functions such as recruitment, transfer, training and promotion. The primary argument of the proponents of this characterization of the relationship is that the public service needs to be neutral, professional and shielded from the world of politics. Pfiffner had also submitted that:

Let no apostle of political realism think that advocates of such a separation of powers are unaware of its doctrinaire pitfalls. They do not advocate that it be embalmed into constitutional breakwaters designed to stand for centuries, as was the classical threefold division into legislature, executive and judicial functions... There is no denial that in a considerable number of instances questions of policy will be closely intermingled with administration (Pfiffner, 1998).

As other scholars, Pfiffner (1998) recognized that “politics and administration cannot always be separated and isolated but that one should not encroach upon the other in a meddlesome manner.” The blurring side of the scene is that bureaucrats have assumed extensive role to setting policy- initiating proposals, exercising discretion, manipulating expertise, writing budgets, and determining the delivery of services and through implementation, they shape policy formulated by elected officials. Thus, there is a complete intermixture of roles in policy making by both elected officials and top bureaucrats. Interaction between elected officials and bureaucrats is common in policy, as administrators give advice and make recommendations to elected officials. As one would expect, administration is largely the domain of the bureaucracy. As aptly captured by Ali (2008) in Nigeria, policy questions have always concerned people and their management



of common affairs. Public policy formulation and administration provide the mechanisms through which societal norms (as law of the land) are set and enforced upon all who live within the boundaries of the State. This, in effect, is the fundamental preoccupation of public policy and administration in the modern state.

In Nigeria, at federal level, the practice of administrative system is designed in such a way that a Permanent Secretary for example, is seen as the embodiment of the instrument of policy who will be in constant touch with his Minister to seek approval or convey information on matters of policy (Adebayo, 2009). Equally, an Assistant Secretary to the Head of Civil Service is expected to assist in formulating policy and also in executing decided policy. His schedule of duties should therefore, be policy-oriented in content. A public bureaucrat should be able to analyse a given set of facts, figures, or situations and be able to deduce formal logical sequence of conclusions as a basis for the formulation of policy. So, at the higher levels of administration, public bureaucrats in Nigeria are directly involved in the formulation of policy and to take a large share in the shaping of policy implementation. How and why do top public bureaucrats have to be involved in policy? Adebayo (2009) provide reason thus, by taking decisions on every vital issue that comes before it, a government makes policies every day. This notwithstanding, the practice is almost the same in some of the other advanced nations. In France for example, political and administrative roles are more mixed and blurred than in Britain.

Further study by Demir (2008), *the Politics-administration dichotomy: An empirical search for correspondence between theory and practice* reveals that neither the theoretical logic nor the empirical foundation of the dichotomy has been clearly articulated or comprehensively tested. In other words, as a theory, the dichotomy remains vague. For instance, numerous studies used historical analyses, case studies, and interview data and so on to evaluate the dichotomy (Montjoy and Watson, 1995; Nalbandian, 1999) amongst others. However, prior research on the politics-administration relationship has largely focused on specific concepts and practices related to the dichotomy (the political activities of public administrators).

More importantly, scholars (Svara, 2001; Sapru, 2006; Ademolekun, 2006; Demir, 2008; Adebayo, 2009) have focused exclusively on whether public bureaucrats engage in politics, or elected officials interfere with public administration. Indeed, little attention has been devoted to the question of what happens when a dichotomous division of labour and authority between elected officials and public bureaucrats is not practiced as envisioned by the theory. For Demir (2008), public bureaucrats are powerful players in the policy process because they participate in critical decisions that virtually affect every aspect of citizens' life. Specifically, elected officials are responsible for framing and responding to value-laden questions and making policies, the public bureaucrats are charged with implementing those policies formulated by elected officials. The sole criterion that guides administrative decisions, according to the traditional model, is efficiency.

Demir (2009), undertook a theory-based empirical study of the politics-administration dichotomy and developed a theoretical model that is consistent with reality. The politics-administration dichotomy sought to minimize politics in public administration by prescribing expertise, neutrality, and hierarchy. Broadly stated, neutral competence refers to the ability to do



it according to explicit, objective standards rather than to personal or party or other obligations and loyalties. Thus, the dichotomy between politics and administration as a strict institutional separation cannot be realistically sustained. And, this is the situation in most of modern political systems.

As could be inferred from the foregoing scholarly submissions, the traditionalism of politics-administration dichotomy has been practically challenged. In the process, scholars concerned have created a new scientific and intellectual community premised on a completely new philosophical direction. Through this, they had jettisoned the hitherto (orthodox) existing belief which failed to properly recognize the moral values of the public bureaucrats and which instead treated and continue to treat them as mechanical robots. This new thinking has a lot of implications which on their own pose some challenges to the practice of public administration. This is particularly evident in the continuous recognition given to the notion of political neutrality in today's administrative processes in the affairs of the State despite its obvious negation by the impracticability of value-free interpretation and execution of governmental policy decisions by the public service bureaucrats. Dimock as cited in Adebayo (2009) further observed that the two processes of administration and politics or policy are 'co-ordinate rather than exclusive.' Friedrich (1940) concludes that the idea of a dichotomy between politics and administration is a 'misleading distinction' which had become 'a fetish, a stereotype in the minds of theorists and practitioners alike.' These challenge according to Akindele (1995), call for consensus on the paradigm of public administration as politics, are mostly identifiable in the area of practical application of the theoretical constructs on public administration. These challenges are practically obvious in the areas of the concepts of bureaucracy, representative bureaucracy, (quota system and federal character), political patronage and conflict of interest all of which demand impartiality on the part of the public bureaucrats.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is hinged on Complementarity model as its theoretical guide. Svava (2001), one of the proponents of the complementarities of politics and administration propagates that political office-bearers and administrators are joined together in the pursuit of sound governance. Complementarity stresses interdependence along with distinct roles; compliance along with independence; respect for political supremacy along with a commitment to shape and implement policy in ways that promote the public interest; deference to elected incumbents along with adherence to the law and support of fair electoral competition; and appreciation of politics along with support for professional standards. The issue is not whether public administrators are 'instrumental' as Heady (1984) puts it, the standard dichotomy versus non-dichotomy options but, how they are both instruments and contributors to the political process, that is, instrumental and contributive. Political office holders could, in theory, dominate administrative practice but, they are constrained by a respect for administrative competence and commitments. Complementarity as a conceptual framework acknowledges the different roles and responsibilities of these two (2) inseparable actors but sees the need for interaction and interdependence as an alternative to the dichotomy model.

The significance of this approach to this paper lies on the compelling force and the interplay of these two (2) actors in the web of governance. For example, the administrative component needs political and strategic direction from political heads, and the political heads need effective



administrative machinery for the translation of the political programmes into government policy. The challenge is not how to insulate the public/civil service from the political process, but how to properly locate the public bureaucrats within the broader political process and governance. Whilst it is critical for elected office holders and public bureaucrats to appreciate this separation of powers, in the real world the distinction between the two (2) is often blurred. The public bureaucrats cannot be separated from politics hence; it is difficult to draw a line of demarcation between the policy formulation process and the implementation process (Adebayo, 2009). Thus, the challenge appears to be the need to define and strengthen the relationship and the interplay between the two (2) actors rather than separating them. These two (2) actors are not incompatible or perform conflicting roles, but are rather reinforcing and complementing each other's role. As Svava (2001) puts it, "...there is continuity between the political and administrative spheres, not a separation of the two, except as it applies to insulating administrative staff from partisan political interference."

In the light of the above point of views, therefore, the notion of an independent and depoliticized public service is not a workable relationship and does not match reality. The public/civil service is expected to embrace the policy agenda of the governing party and this, by itself, draws the public service into politics. To effectively execute their professional mandates, public bureaucrats are expected to be appreciative of, and responsive to, the political context within which public administration takes place.

3. Results

In democratic governance, the involvement of public bureaucrats in policy formulation and administration amounted to a positive contribution in the political process. This implies a positive self-image for the core role performance of top bureaucrats in the policy formulation domain. Moreover, there is a general agreement amongst scholars (Dye, 1995; Adamolekun, 2006; Sapru, 2006) that the involvement of the public bureaucracies' top leadership in policy formulation is a political exercise that largely takes the form of advice and analysis. In fact, whilst the bureaucrats lay down the policy, the political actors, in most cases simply sign the dotted line and in rare cases, political actors lay down broad lines whilst the bureaucrats chalk out the details.

The bureaucrats as policy analysts have a near monopoly of policy talent, information and experience on which policy formulation is based. Thus, they involved ...specificity of expertise, higher qualification, self-education, ethical self-sustenance, fiduciary relation, colleague control and recognition. Through observance of professional and ethical values (quality, efficiency, integrity, honesty, respect, equity, fairness, *etc*), bureaucrats tend to uphold ideals of democratic and good governance (responsiveness, representativeness, rule of law, *etc*). This partly explains why in most cases, political executives depend on them for advice and development of policy proposals.

Nevertheless, the execution of policy requires tact, courage and skills which of course the bureaucrats possess in an ample measure. If they find a particular policy unworkable, they more often than not, point out flaws to the Chief Executive, Minister or Commissioner and suggest modifications in the policy contents. Therefore, the indispensable role occupied by higher bureaucrats in the realm of governance give them the necessary confidence required to make



inputs and execute policy. In fact, as planners and doers, they possess the psychological talent, regularity and predictability needed to look ahead from the stand point of present reality. These go along to provide them with a sense of mission. The involvement of public bureaucrats into the realm of politics however, is noted by Adamolekun (2006) as inevitable as they are called upon to perform political roles in a polity where there was/is no consensus on operational political norms. This not only solidified their role in policy formulation but made them more visible political actors. Tukur (1971) had earlier classified the functions of this top echelon of the civil servants into two, namely: advice on policy formulation and implementation; and housekeeping. Tukur, took a cue largely from Marx (1964) who stated the traditional functions of public bureaucrats as: to keep the machinery of the bureaucracy orderly for proper use by the executive; they operate the machinery of administration in order to translate the aims of the political leadership into action; and finally, advice the political leadership about the optimum means of utilizing the instruments of the bureaucracy to carry out its aims. In this traditional perspective, the public bureaucrats are a complete instrument of the political leadership. Its body and mind are deemed to be fashioned to serve the political order that sets the agenda and direct public affairs of the State.

Technically, bureaucrats are required to perform loyally the duties assigned to them by the government of the day, whatever its political persuasion. It is essential that Ministers/Commissioners and the members of the public should have confidence that the personal views of public bureaucrats do not influence the performance of their official “political” duties, given the role they play in serving successive governments formed by different political parties. Some common roles of public bureaucrats are generally in the following areas but not limited to: inform and advice elected office bearers, completely and on time; implement policy and ministerial decisions effectively and efficiently utilize, in the carrying out of these functions, all relevant sources of data and advice, especially within the machinery of government, so as to give their political heads the broadest basis for policy consideration and determination amongst others (Ali, 2008).

Weber, in Fry and Nigro (1996) reiterated that the role of the political office holders in a democracy is to give direction to policy and expression of common interest. The honour of political office holders, Weber argues, lies in their personal, ethical responsibility for their actions. To take a stand and to be passionate is the function of the political office holders. This role is opposed to that of the public/civil servants who are engaged only in the impartial administration of their offices. The honour of the public bureaucrats, Weber states, is vested in their ability to execute conscientiously the lawful orders of superior political authorities. In performing their duties, a sense of duty is more important than personal opinion. The function of bureaucrats is predominantly, impersonal and passionless application of the rules. For instance, in a democracy, it is expected that the political leadership initiate policy proposals, usually with the inputs of the top bureaucrats, whose specialized departments are expected to develop proposals that the Chief Executive (President, Governor or Local Government Chairman) could approve before being sent to the Federal/State Executive Councils or Local Government Councils, for (approval or) onward transmission to the National/State Assemblies for legislative endorsement or to the Ministry for Local Government (as in the case of local authorities). The real bureaucrats had to prepare details of policy proposals in accordance with the perceived



wishes of their political masters. This is consistent with the conclusions reached by (Akpan, 1982; Ayida, 1987; Gboyega & Abubakar, 1989; Udoji, 1999; Adebayo, 2001).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

We have seen from the foregoing that, the complexities of modern times made the classic dichotomy between politics and administration fallen as the role of public bureaucrats in the policy process becomes apparently in the conduct of government business. Uncontrovertibly, in many political systems, however, there is no clear separation between policy formulation and administration either in terms of decision-making processes or the respective roles of administrators and politicians, which are often fused together. In Nigeria as in many other countries, public bureaucrats cannot avoid some policy-making responsibility at all levels of government and at all times. Therefore, administrators' responsibilities are being constantly thrown into the area of decision-making, and their decisions add up to major policies in the subsequent course of events.

Consequently, much of the policy-making responsibility on the part of the administrators takes place in the course of the application of administrative processes. Public bureaucrats are required to perform loyally the duties assigned to them by the government of the day, whatever its political persuasion. It is essential that ministers and the members of the public should have confidence that the personal views of civil servants do not influence the performance of their official "political" duties, given the role of the public service in serving successive governments formed by different political parties.

Being professionals, bureaucrats have to weigh and consider conflicting demands and interests and reconcile them. In the process, they make consultations and try to balance and synthesize the conflicting demands. However, in all democracies, the accepted practice is that responsibility for policy rest with the political Chief Executive who sets the broad lines of policy to be pursued or, as Self (1972) puts it, his role is that of climate-setting in deciding the way certain issues are to be approached. The bureaucrats, on the other hand, are the instruments through which the policy is carried out. This paper, therefore, submits that to ensure efficient and effective service delivery, both political office holders and public bureaucrats should complement each other and interact in cooperative manner, to initiate and implement policies that would promote the well-being of the generality of the populace.

One major limitation of this paper is relying on theoretical postulations with very limited practical aspects of governance to unleash the supposed dichotomy between politics and administration as one of the oldest issues in public administration hence this important aspect continues to hold great relevance in the discourse of public administration in the web of governance, the world over. Further studies are therefore called upon to practically demonstrate the inseparable nature of public bureaucrats in the context of policy formulation and policy implementation using case study analysis.

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