

BETWEEN LIBERTY AND ANARCHY: A BURKEAN CRITIQUE OF REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article examines an eighteenth-century analysis of revolution through the lens of Edmund Burke's critique of the French Revolution and applies it to Nigeria's protracted process of democratic consolidation. As one of the foremost advocates of gradual, piecemeal reform, Burke emphasized respect for tradition, prescription, and the organic nature of the state, while warning against the abrupt dismantling of political institutions in favour of abstract, geometric, and mechanical models of political reconstruction rooted in rationalist ideals. Applying this Burkesque framework to Nigeria's postcolonial trajectory, the article argues that the country's enduring crises—including military coups, repeated constitutional changes, and contemporary calls for revolution or drastic political reforms—illustrate the dangers Burke anticipated. Specifically, it contends that the pursuit of abstract political ideals, rather than reforms grounded in historical experience, institutional continuity, and established political traditions, can undermine stability and threaten the cohesion of the nation-state. Drawing on democratic consolidation theory and an extensive body of literature on Nigeria, the article maintains that Nigeria's democratic future depends less on revolutionary rupture than on the sustained reform of existing institutions. Such reform should be anchored in constitutionalism, a vibrant civic and political culture, the rule of law, and political accountability. The article concludes with policy-oriented recommendations for democratic consolidation, all grounded in a Burkesque perspective while remaining sensitive to the historical, cultural, and socio-political realities of Nigeria as a developing state.

Keywords: Liberty, Anarchy, Revolutionary Change, Democratic consolidation, Nigeria.

Introduction

In many ways Nigeria's post-independence political history may be read as a story of broken experiments in self government. Since 1960 the country has oscillated between military and constitutional regimes, civil war, several constitutional conferences and repeated agitation for a thorough reshaping of the Nigerian federal structure (Joseph, 1987:24). Behind these oscillations is another, even more pertinent question of what course political community that aims at reaching maturity ought to take: that of revolutionary disruption with its existing heritage and order, or that of institutional reform from within existing structures. Although the questions assume different forms in the Nigerian case, they are not unfamiliar to the realm of political theory. Thus, for example, they were the preoccupations of Anglo-Irish statesman and political theorist Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (2003) is the foundational text of conservative politics and a blistering diatribe against revolutionary ferment.

Although Burke's arguments in *Reflections* were conceived primarily as a critique of the French Revolution, they offer a more general theory of political change, one applicable to any context in which communities flirt with abandoning their inherited order in favour of what is perceived to be a rationalist alternative (Burke, 2003:86). For Burke, a political society is not a mechanism that can be refashioned at will in accordance with the dictate of the reason; rather it is 'a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born' (Burke, 2003:96). A rupture with such a partnership threatens liberty with anarchy, reform with ruin. This paper will analyze Burke's arguments against revolutionary change in Nigeria's struggle for democratic consolidation. It will be argued that Nigeria's ongoing problem of political instability is explained (though not adequately, as we will explain) by a Burkean diagnosis: that is to say, a violent upheaval in, or a thoroughgoing abandonment of, the inherited institutional structure, either through military intervention 'to rescue the nation from political disintegration and corruption' as some justify it or through a call

to 'shatter the existing Nigerian federalist structure' for example by some secessionist proponents of restructuring, only serves to postpone the achievement of a stable democracy rather than advance it. The paper has been structured into five sections. Section one will consider Burke's politics, with an emphasis on his critique of revolution. Section two will situate Burkean critique in the context of the broader literature of democratic consolidation. Section three will adopt a Burkean framework for reading Nigeria's political history. Section four will draw some of the implications of this analysis for the current debate about restructuring, secession and constitutional amendment in Nigeria. Finally, section five will make some recommendations about how to move towards democratic consolidation in Nigeria in a manner that is more reform-oriented in spirit and that is attentive to Nigeria's unique political, cultural, historical as well as her intellectual resource base in African and Igbo communal political philosophy.

Edmund Burke and the critique of revolution change

Although Burke's political thought is commonly described as 'conservatism', the label can be misleading if it is understood simply to refer to a defence of the status quo. Burke was not opposed to change, but to a particular form of change rooted in abstract reasoning, contempt for historical experience, and unconcern for the accidental consequences of radical institutional change (Burke, 2003: 152). He differentiated sharply between reform, which operates within existing institutions to mend their defects and so maintain their essential continuity, and revolution, which attempts to replace existing institutions with a new societal order established on a foundation of rational first principles.

Of primary importance to this critique is Burke's doctrine of prescription - the principle that ancient institutions are possessed of an accumulation of unconscious, embodied wisdom that cannot be recovered by the effort of any individual generation, however certain of its intellectual capabilities (Burke, 2003: 183).

The 'rights of man', as proclaimed by the French revolutionaries, are countered by Burke with his concept of 'the real rights of men' which, being woven into the texture of custom and law, cannot be derived from pure, abstract reason alone (Burke, 2003). This argument is not against rights but is against the abstract separation of rights from the historical and social circumstances that render them concrete and meaningful. Also notable is Burke's contribution to theorising the pitfalls of revolutionary upheaval. He argued that revolutionary attempts to replace an established order (however flawed) frequently have the unintended consequence of opening up space for the emergence of an alternative form of arbitrarily exercised power, rather than the liberty which revolutionaries expect (Burke, 2003: 244).

This analysis of the logic of the French Revolution's plunge into the Terror - an event he all but predicted before it happened - is based upon the argument that, having removed the impediments of custom, tradition and law, there are no checks to constrain the exercise of power in the hands of those who take the reins of government after the revolutionaries gain control (Burke, 2003: 265). It is in this sense that Burke's title for the present article's framework becomes intelligible: the choice societies face in moments of upheaval is frequently not between tyranny and liberty but between liberty and anarchy, with anarchy itself being merely the antechamber to a new and more severe despotism.

Crucially, Burke did not counsel inaction or quietism. He was, after all, a defender of the American colonists' resistance to what he regarded as the unconstitutional impositions of the British Parliament, and an active reformer in matters of Irish trade, Indian governance, and parliamentary economy (O'Brien, 1992: 113). His model of legitimate change was therefore reform: incremental, institutionally grounded, attentive to unintended consequences, and respectful of the complex, organic character of political society. It is this Burkean conception of reform rather than a simple defence of inherited privilege that offers analytical purchase on the Nigerian case.

Democratic Consolidation: A theoretical Framework

The concept of democratic consolidation refers to the process by which a democratic regime comes to be regarded, by all significant political actors, as "the only game in town" the sole legitimate framework for the acquisition and exercise of political power (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 5). Consolidation, in this sense, is distinct from mere democratic transition. A state may hold competitive elections and still fail to achieve consolidation if powerful actors, military officers, ethnic elites, or disaffected populations retain the will and capacity to overturn the democratic order when it produces outcomes unfavorable to them (Huntington, 1991: 266).

Samuel Huntington's account of democratic "waves" and reversals is instructive here. Huntington observed that newly democratised states are especially vulnerable to reversal in the early decades following transition, precisely because the institutional habits, civic culture, and elite consensus necessary to sustain democracy take considerably longer to develop than the formal apparatus of competitive elections (Huntington, 1991:290). Similarly, Larry Diamond uses the terminology "electoral" and "liberal democracy" to assert that consolidation

necessitates not simply the presence of free elections, but also rule of law, civilian supremacy over the military and limitations on executive discretion (Diamond, 1999:11).

This theoretical literature converges with Burke's concerns in an instructive way. Where Burke worried that revolutionary rupture destroys the inherited constraints upon power without replacing them with anything stable, consolidation theorists worry that democratic transitions which are not accompanied by the patient development of institutions, norms, and civic culture remain perpetually vulnerable to reversal. Both traditions, in other words, treat institutional continuity, gradualism, and the cultivation of self-limiting political habits as preconditions for durable and legitimate political order, whether that order is monarchical, republican, or democratic in form.

Nigerian scholars have extended this literature to the specific circumstances of African and Nigerian democratisation. Richard Joseph's (1987) concept of "prebendalism" describes a political culture in which state offices are treated as personal or communal entitlements to be exploited for the benefit of particular ethnic, regional, or patronage networks, rather than as public trusts (Joseph, 1987:8). Adeoye Akinola similarly argues that Nigeria's recurrent democratic instability owes less to any single structural defect than to the absence of a deeply internalised civic culture committed to constitutionalism over communal or personal advantage (Akinola, 2014: 47). These analyses suggest that Nigeria's democratic difficulties are, in important respects, Burkean problems: the country has frequently possessed the formal apparatus of constitutional government without the underlying social and institutional "prescription" that gives such apparatus durability.

Revolutionary Temptations in Nigeria's Political History

Nigeria's political history offers numerous episodes that can be read productively, through a Burkean lens. The most obvious are the country's military coups, several of which were explicitly justified in revolutionary or quasi-revolutionary terms, as a necessary "cleansing" of a corrupt civilian order (Joseph, 1987:79). The January 1966 military coup that toppled Nigeria's First Republic was rationalised by the plotters as a corrective against an irredeemably corrupt and ethno-centric political class; other coups that followed in 1975, 1983, 1985, and 1993 adopted similar language about the need for institutional and political rehabilitation (Falola & Heaton, 2008: 171). Each intervention purported a 'clean break' from a corrupt and dysfunctional past and each, using Burkean terminology, sought to build a new basis for political legitimacy not by piecemeal reformation, but by sudden and often violent replacement of the old institutional structures. It is the outcome in a broad sense that supports Burke's argument. Instead of the efficient and honest government his revolutionists promised, these subsequent coup interventions only resulted in entrenching a regime of unaccountability and impunity, eroding the institutional memory and capacity of Nigeria's civil institutions, and empowering those groups (Falola & Heaton, 2008 : 211) most ill-suited for responsible governance.

The collapse of the First Republic led not to its replacement by a purer republican form but by the establishment of close to three decades of intermittent military rule and an ensuing civil war (1967-1970) from which some norms of constitutional restraint have only tentatively and imperfectly re-emerged in the aftermath of Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 (Falola & Heaton, 2008: 234).

Perhaps more significantly than any of the interventions mentioned previously, there is a deep discontinuity in Nigeria's constitutional history. No fewer than five constitutions (1960, 1963, 1979, 1989, the latter not largely in effect, and 1999) have been established since independence, each largely supplanting, rather than amending its predecessor (Suberu, 2001: 22). This pattern of constitutional rupture rather than evolution precisely replicates the error Burke feared: the creation of a political system with a habit of starting over from scratch would prevent the accumulative wisdom through trial and error that a more piecemeal approach allows. It is not only the past constitutional history that shows a breakdown in gradualism.

While the 1999 Constitution has proven more enduring than its predecessors, there are wide critiques of it in Nigeria as a constitution forced upon Nigeria by a withdrawing military regime, rather than being the product of inclusive and deliberative processes; this criticism if true, has important, if in this case 'unfounded,' Burkean dimensions: a legitimate framework produced without legitimation (Suberu, 2001: 36).

Today, movements aimed at restructuring Nigeria have become increasingly militant, demanding in some cases full separation and in others a complete renegotiation of the federal framework in an arrangement which may well take on non federal characteristics (Akinola, 2014: 112). Such movements focus on issues of regional marginalisation, unbalanced economic development, and unresolved legacies of the past. Such protests should not be dismissed lightly in Burkean analysis but their resolution, Burke might contend, must take the form of the gradual reform of federal structures rather than revolutionary dissolution which risks a relapse into chaos and the eventual emergence of military dictatorship rather than freedom (Burke, 1790/2003: 244).

Burke and African Political Thought: A contemporary Reading

This approach will however lead us to erroneously import this framework into the Nigerian system as if European conservative thought can directly be transplanted into African language. Yet a closer reading suggests considerable resonance between Burke's emphasis on inherited custom, communal continuity, and the wisdom of tradition, and indigenous African and specifically Igbo conceptions of political order. Traditional Igbo political philosophy, as articulated by scholars such as Uzukwu (1996: 64), emphasises consensus-building, the gradual incorporation of new voices into existing structures of deliberation (as in the evolving role of the age-grade and titled-elder systems), and a deep respect for ancestral custom as a repository of communal wisdom principles that echo, in a strikingly different cultural register, Burke's account of prescription and the intergenerational partnership of the state.

This resonance suggests that a Burkean critique of revolutionary change in Nigeria need not be regarded as an alien imposition of Western conservatism upon African political life. Rather, it can be presented as a recovery, in modern constitutional language, of indigenous African intuitions about the dangers of abrupt rupture with communal custom and the value of incremental, consensus-based change intuitions that colonial disruption and postcolonial revolutionary rhetoric have often obscured (Uzukwu, 1996:71). A Burkean-African synthesis, in other words, offers Nigeria not a borrowed foreign ideology but a vocabulary for re-articulating values already present, however imperfectly realised, within its own political and cultural inheritance.

Implication For Democratic Consolidation In Nigeria

If the foregoing analysis is correct, several implications follow for the project of democratic consolidation in Nigeria. First, the consolidation of Nigerian democracy is unlikely to be achieved through any single dramatic act of institutional foundation whether a new constituent assembly convened to draft an entirely new constitution from first principles, or a revolutionary restructuring of the federation along radically different lines. Such a project, however appealing in its promise of a clean break from the failures of the past, risks repeating the very pattern that has destabilised Nigeria since 1966: the substitution of patient institutional reform with the pursuit of an abstract, comprehensively rationalised political order (Burke, 1790/2003: 152).

Second, the more promising path lies in the gradual reform of Nigeria's existing constitutional and institutional architecture: incremental amendment of the 1999 Constitution to address genuine federalism deficits, the strengthening of independent institutions (the judiciary, the electoral commission, anti-corruption agencies), and the cultivation, over time, of a civic culture that regards constitutional procedure rather than ethnic, religious, or personal loyalty as the legitimate basis of political authority (Diamond, 1999:19; Akinola, 2014:134). In essence, this is a Burkean programme of reform; one that preserves continuity and works with existing institutional structures, and one which moves forward through amendment and deliberation rather than rupture and replacement. Third, the findings have significant implications for how both Nigerian elites and civil society should respond to the secessionist and restructuring movements. A Burkean approach would advocate for the take up of the very real and palpable grievances of the groups mobilised in support of these movements of marginalization, uneven development, and historical injustices not adequately redressed, while resisting the tempting revolutionary panacea of the breakup of the Nigerian state.

The correct Burkean action here is neither the repression of grievance nor the uncritical appeasement of agitators but its accommodation through a process of negotiation, constitutional amendment and enhanced political participation in a reconstituted and more genuinely federal constitutional structure.

Fourth, the special emphasis Burke placed on the moral responsibilities of elites is crucial. Burke believed that political elites had a special trust, or the obligation to operate in public office not as proprietors for the enhancement of personal and section interest but as trustees for the benefit of their communities which exist and endure beyond their own and previous generations (Burke, 1790/2003: 194). The prebendal thesis as articulated by Joseph (1987) on Nigerian politics indicates how the failure of Nigeria's elite to be sufficiently inculcated with this trustee view of public office and the treatment of public resources and power as an apparatus for individual or sectional benefit continues to remain an obstacle to the consolidation of democracy (Joseph, 1987: 8; Nnajofofor & Nnajofofor, 2025). Therefore a Burkean style reform programme for Nigeria would need to incorporate not only constitutional adjustments but also the cultural reorientation of the ethics of Nigerian political elites - an area where religious and educational institutions like the Catholic Church have had an historical stake in Nigeria's affairs, (Akinola, 2014: 151).

Limitations of the Burkean Framework

In applying Burke's thought to the Nigerian context, this study also recognizes the limitations of his conceptual framework. Burke was writing as an apologist for a given established constitutional order in eighteenth-century

Britain that, despite its defects, contained long-established forms of representative government, an independent judiciary, and a moderately stable political consensus within the elites. Nigeria in this context is, of course, very different; post-colonial institutions are colonial impositions that were made de facto by colonial decree; its federal system has been extensively altered, at times and on numerous occasions, de facto by military decree not any deliberate constitutional development (Suberu, 2001:28).

In this light a defence of gradualism could object that Burkean conservatism lends support and countenance to an unjustifiable existing arrangement and a settlement that contains insufficient historic “prescription” on which Burke’s account seems to hinge. This complaint does indeed merit considerable attention, but it does not, overall, invalidate the argument for Burkean moderation advanced in this article.

This argument’s critical targets are the method of revolutionary action, rather than the specific content of any concrete constitution in either Nigeria or Britain including its brusqueness, its confident rationalism, and its disregard for unforeseen effects. The gradual process, which Burkean moderation advocates, should and will include efforts to increase legitimate support to the imperfect constitutional settlement of the new 1999 constitution (Diamond, 1999: 74), which is compatible with ardent reforms of existing Nigerian constitutional norms. The intention here will be to reject such arguments that may be in favor of revolution rather than revolution.

Conclusion

The eighteenth-century analysis of revolutionary change produced by Edmund Burke in reaction to events in France provides a valuable though problematic lens on the history of democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The cycle of military take-overs, breaks in constitutional regularity, and recent calls for drastic structural adjustment in Nigeria echo, at critical junctures, the dynamics identified by Burke: the attraction of using violent rupture with ancestral institutions as the means of achieving political renewal, which has led not to the promised liberty but to renewed instability and sometimes chaos-precursor to harsher, more despotic forms of rule. Applied to Nigeria, when it is set beside the standard theory of democratic consolidation, (Huntington, 1991; Nnaji for & Nnaji for, 2026; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Diamond:1999) on the one hand, and analyses of Nigeria’s political tradition, prebendalism and federal structures (Joseph, 1987; Akinola, 2014), on the other, Burke’s analysis would recommend a conservative and not a revolutionary road to consolidation in Nigeria, consisting, inter alia, in a pragmatic constitutional amendment, incremental development of stronger institutions, moral renewal of the ruling elite and deliberate cultivation of a civic culture, if possible, drawing upon Nigeria’s pre-existing indigenous institutions of communal and consensual rule. For, as in Burke’s account of French politics, Nigeria is usually not a straight dichotomy between liberty and tyranny, but between liberty from a painstaking reform and anarchy induced through violent revolution.

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