

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Nigeria is a plural society. By this is meant the country is a melting pot of ethnic nationalities, class, regions, religions and other socio-cultural markers. Its pluralism has shaped and continued to manifest in its politics. The political class, in collaboration with their religious counterparts has exploited ethnicity and religion as symbols of mobilization and instrument of negotiation for patronages and sharing of national resources. Thus, most conflicts which ordinarily could have been seen as distribution based had assumed ethnic and religious character. These conflicts are virulent and had caused destruction of lives and property of innocent Nigerians. The conflicts have also undermined the peaceful coexistence among the Nigerian peoples, thus scuttling the integration efforts of the country. This study Is both interrogative analytical. It is interrogative to the extent that it searches for the causes of ethno-religious conflicts in the country. The study is also analytical in the sense that it explains from the frog's eye view, the variables responsible for those interminable conflicts. The study concludes that the failure of the Nigerian political elite to establish good governance, forge national unity and promote economic development is at the base of communal, ethnic and religious conflicts in the country. The study opines that the country might suffer disintegration if this trend persists, especially with the internecine Boko-Haram insurgency and the perennial settler-indigene conflicts in the Middle-belt, that is, Plateau and Benue sections of the country.*

KEYWORDS: Ethnicity, Religion, Ethno-Religious Conflict, Integration, Good Governance.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria presents a complex of individual as well as a conflation and recursive identities of which the ethnic, religious, regional and sub-ethnic (communal) are the most salient and the main bases for violent conflicts in the country. This is both from the point of view of the identities most commonly assumed by citizens especially for political purposes and the identities often implicated in day-to-day contestations over citizenship as well as competitions and conflicts over resources and privileges. To emphasize the interconnectedness of ethnic, regional, and religious

identities and the fact that they are often mutually reinforcing, they are sometimes compounded or hyphenated as ethno-regional and ethno-religious (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005).

While some diverse countries in the world have taken advantage of their diversity, in Nigeria it has remained an insurmountable difficulty. The nation's diversity continues to threaten the unity of the country and the deepening of her nascent democracy thereby making the future of the country unpredictable. This is reflected in the occurrence and re-occurrence of ethno-religious and political conflicts and violence before and after independence. For instance ethnic and political differences played a prominent role in the crises and violence that followed the motion calling for independence in 1956 by Chief Anthony Enahoro, a member of the then Action Group at the floor of the House of Representatives in Lagos in 1953.

The lack of cohesiveness in the nation's polity has also manifested itself in the present democratic dispensation. This has been demonstrated by the trenchant call for Sovereign National Conference in some parts of the country, resource control as well as persistent wave of political, inter-ethnic and sectional violence. After about thirty years of military dictatorship, Nigeria found herself again in the mainstream of democratic governance. While this development was seen by some people as an avenue to explore dividends and goodies of democracy, others saw it as an opportunity to express grievances, the outcome of which is the occurrence and re-occurrence of ethno-religious and political conflicts. Since the re-emergence of democracy in May 1999, not less than one hundred politically, ethnically and religiously motivated conflicts have occurred in Nigeria. This paper examines the persistent waves of ethno-religious and political conflicts and the threat they pose to the nascent democracy in Nigeria. The paper concludes that good governance, accountability, poverty and unemployment reduction and restructuring of federalism are important issues to be addressed in order to solve permanently the problem of ethno-religious and political conflicts that have continued to threaten Nigeria democracy.

This study is justified by its three fold utility. One, it offers the potential of presenting an in-depth analysis of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria that had threatened peaceful co-existences of different groups that constitute the Nigerian federation. In that wise, it complements the extant literature on the subject. The strength of this study is also in its micro-focus on a single case in contradistinction to extant macro studies on ethno-religious conflicts that pervade Africa. The study also holds a promise and interest for several groups, but it would be of discerning benefits to at least three sectors. To the academics nothing could be of greater value than the objective revelation and unraveling of the socio-political backlash of the conflicts in focus. The political class would benefit tremendously from this work, if only to avoid a re-occurrence or continuation of the acts that precipitate these crises, while exploring those peace-generating factors that exist among the various ethno-religious groups. Finally, this work would enhance our understanding of the seeming complexities in the intra-ethnic and ethno-religious conflicts and their nexus with cross-ethnic conflicts and the intractable problems they pose to national integration and unity in the country.

Ethno-Religious Conflicts: A Conceptual Clarification

Defining conflict, Weber (1971) argues that conflict is any action that is oriented intentionally to carry out actor's own wish against the resistance of the other party or parties. For Coser (1966) social conflict is a struggle over status, power, and scarce resources in which the sole aims of the parties involved are not only to gain the desired value but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals. Generally, conflict entails struggle and rivalry for objects to which individuals and groups attach importance. These objects can either be material or non-material. The material objects may include scarce resources like money, employment, and position including political ones, promotion in both the private and public organizations. The non-material objects include culture, tradition, religion and language (Osaghae, 2001).

According to conflict theorists, conflicts, whether political, communal, ethnic or religious are often influenced or motivated by disparity rather than similarity among the people especially unequal ones. Karl Marx wrote in 1937 in the "Communist Manifesto" that "the history of all existing society is the history of class struggle". In other words, be it agrarian, feudal or capitalist society, conflict is constant because of class differences. Arguing from this perspective, one could say that conflict is inherent in human relationships. Although this perspective has gained momentum especially among its adherents, it never suggests that every underlying relationship must be expressed with the same magnitude of hatred and jealousy neither does it suggest that such conflict cannot be minimized (Duverger, 1980).

To properly situate and understand ethnic conflict, a few words on the nature of ethnic conflicts are in order. First, ethnic conflicts include not only conflicts between members of different groups (inter-group conflict) but also between members of different segments or sub-groups of the same group (intra-ethnic conflicts, many of which belong to the category of so-called communal conflicts) which makes them more expansive than it is often assumed. Second, ethnic conflicts often take the form of zero-sum contests, and this makes them particularly prone to violence (Osaghae, 2005). At the religious level, conflict arises when each of two different religious persons in the same religious space claims a monopoly of religious truth. The two of them cannot hold the same truth at the same time, hence the occurrence of opposition, friction, incompatibility, antagonism, hostility, clash, dispute, fight, quarrel and war between them (Ayantayo, 2005).

From the above, we can define inter-religious conflict as a state of disagreement between two religious persons regarding who is, or who is not holding absolute religious truth. It occurs when members of different religions are engaged in argument which often goes with bickering, controversy, demonstration, debate, or squabble over religious beliefs and practices.

Democracy

One common conception of democracy is that it means 'government by the people', or at least by the people's elected representatives – since it is generally accepted, rightly or wrongly, that in large modern states, all the people themselves cannot govern. But since 'the people' are likely to be divided among themselves, the government is likely to be representative, not of all the people, but at best of a majority of them. Already then, the need has arisen to redefine democracy. So in practice, it means government by the representatives of a majority of the people.

Janda, et al (1992:37) submit that there are two major schools of thought about what constitutes democracy. The first believes democracy is a form of government. It emphasizes the procedure that enables the people to govern-meeting to discuss issues, voting in elections, running for public office. This procedural approach focuses on how decisions are made. It prescribes that a group should decide to do what the majority of its participants (fifty percent plus one person more) wants to do. This principle is called majority rule. According to procedural democratic theory, all adults should participate in government decision making process. This means everyone within the boundaries of the political community should be allowed to participate in decision making process. This is referred to as universal participation. The theory emphasizes the need for all votes to be counted equally. This is the principle of political equality.

Democracy as a concept is based on certain assumptions, which are regarded as the tenets of democracy. These are liberty or freedom, equality and interests (Graham; 1986). This could be explained to mean that all human beings are equal and are equally free and that they have interests, which they should be at liberty to pursue. These tenets are based on natural laws, which existed in the state of nature (Barry, 1981:208). Dahl (1971:37) however, opines that Democracy consists of three dimensions that consists of the acceptance of majority rule; and three, respect for the rule of law, protection for individual and minority rights, and the safeguard of the interests of the disadvantaged groups.

Democracy and Ethno-Religious Conflicts: A Conceptual Linkage.

Ethnic and religious issues are part of the most recurring issues in Nigeria's body politic. The issue has permeated the landscape since the colonial period and up till the present time, there seems to be no solution in sight to the accompanying conflicts of ethnic rivalry and religious intolerance. The dominant and minority ethnic groups treat each other with suspicion and the different religious worldview clash at the slightest provocation (Olu-Adeyemi, 2006).

Institutional efforts which were made to satiate these tendencies since independence in 1960 has proved inadequate. The long years of military rule increased the gap of distrust as the elites deliberately employed state power to pursue primordial sentiments thereby increasing the gap of intolerance in Nigeria. The current political cum religious battles is fuelled by certain quarters and individuals who benefits at the expense of the state and citizens. According to the international Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2001), numerous actors have a stake in the promotion of ethno-religious conflicts because the associated arithmetic of numbers underpinning the conflicts translates into jobs, contracts, the creation of local governments and states as well as representation in the National Assembly.

Ethno-religious violence appears to be the most common form of armed violence in post-military Nigeria, although less so in Lagos. The reoccurrence of ethno-religious armed violence in the north region has led to extensive killings and material destruction. The outbreak of violence is strongly linked to the growth of the Sharia criminal code/movement, which swept through the northern region immediately after the return to democratic governance in 1999 and which has led to clashes in many states of the region.

The mere existence of different ethnic groups or diverse political worldview in one society does not automatically produce tension or conflict. People with different ethnic and political learning can and do coexist, without tension but this may change in times of stress or in situations of mutual distrust. The fear of democracy catalyzing disintegration due to cultural pluralism is rife but according to Claude Ake (1990:2), 'democracy implies precisely the assumption of differences to be negotiated, to be conciliated, to be moved into phases of higher synthesis. Former President Obasanjo averred that as human beings, we will always have friction when we live together, but it should not lead to violence or the urge to take life' (Obasanjo, 2001:28). This position was borne out of the idea that this wanton destruction of lives and properties is sponsored by people who want to protect their own interest at the expense of the Nation-State.

According to Nnoli (1978), conflict as an aspect of ethnicity is more pronounced in societies where the inter-ethnic competition for scarce resources is the rule, particularly when inequality is accepted as a given and wealth is greatly esteemed. In this typical scenario, no group wants to be consigned to the bottom of the ladder. Hence groups exploit every means in their bid to remain at the top. In a democratic society, where the fight to choose is a guiding principle, ethnic groups may show undue interest in who gets what, how and when. In other words, democratic traditions in ethnically plural societies may be influenced by keen competition, ethnic rivalries and jostling for power and resources. These societies, therefore, may witness social protest which often takes the form of ethnic conflicts. While the spirit of competition may be seen as healthy for democracy, anchoring this competition on ethnicity or ethnic factors may be counterproductive to the democratic process.

When individuals and groups turn to violence to as a means of solving problems, conflict takes a second dimension; security and survival. Conflict resolution becomes multifaceted as conflict itself; solutions must seek to satisfy the hunger of individuals for justice. At every point of reflecting on the cause(s) of the Nigerian phenomenon, one discovers that the elites are insincere towards the need for genuine national integration. Although, democracy asserts, as against monarchy or aristocracy, that the mere fact of free birth is sufficient to constitute a claim to a share in political power, the elites more than ever before utilizes the present opportunity to pursue selfish agendas. Also, the unfavourable state of the economy gives room for the affluent in the society to influence the downtrodden for personal purposes. This nonetheless creates opportunity for Nigerians to be sponsored for conflictual purposes at the slightest provocation (Olu-Adeyemi, op cit). Apart from the above, the several years of military rule which according to David Barber (1988:3) was characterized by 'sudden and drastic overturning of the existing structure of institutional power in favour of a particular group', already created some bottled agitations and anger that became easily expressed under democracy.

Democracy is about freedom, but it is not freedom to be irresponsible. It is freedom within certain understandable limits but events in the Nigerian fourth republic has shown that the freedom allowed by democracy is being abused. Although the constitution guarantees freedom to form and hold an opinion, the Nigerian situation is such that the competitors for power are known to have taken control on issues that are definitely well beyond their sphere of competence, and are making personal profits out of them at the expense of the corporate existence, economic revival and integration of the nation-state. Thus, concrete efforts must be

made to tackle the wave of clashes across the country, since political and ethnic affiliations are human attributes and conflict is inevitable.

To begin with, developing African models of conflict resolution and applying it in Nigeria may not be a bad idea, after all, before the advent of colonialism and the introduction of Western models of conflict management, Africa had effective cultural mechanisms by which conflicts between groups, communities or even kingdoms were settled within the shortest possible time proximate to the occurrence of the event.

Apart from the above, there is need to shift grounds from spontaneous military approach to solving disputes to focus on evolving basic amicable framework of co-existence between groups in a society. Emphasis should shift from the distribution of the national cake to the building of the cake; and from an emphasis on distribution of the cake along ethnic lines to its distribution along lines of the contribution to its production.

Ethnic militias should be prevented from determining inter ethnic relations and the lot of the minorities should be enhanced. Also, the agitations for better revenue sharing formula should be favourably considered and a culture of tolerance, trust and dialogue in inter-ethnic and inter-religious issues entrenched. The mass media, both the electronics and the prints have a great role to play in all these. The press will do the nation-state more good than harm if it could carry out objective journalism. Sensitive issues should be treated with utmost caution. Furthermore, secularism should not just be conceived as the withdrawal of the state from religious affairs but as a guarantee of religious freedom to all and sundry. As a multi-religious and multi ethnic state, the Nigerian society needed to be integrated in all frontiers. The 1987 report of the political bureau stated that ‘the two organized religions have the tendency to delay national integration society needed to be integrated in all frontiers. The 1987 report of the political bureau stated that ‘the two organized religions have the tendency to delay national integration’ because of their ‘negative tendency’ to ‘create compelling social orders’, and to define ‘the most basic community’ thereby challenging ‘the national community of Nigeria’. Thus, a holistic approach to tackle this tendency is expedient as the movement of democratic consolidation begins.

Policy Options for the Control of Ethno-Religious Conflicts

Despite measures taken to achieve some level of social integration and unity in Nigeria, political, ethnic and religious violence have continued to linger thereby threatening the very existence of the country and constituting the pandemic. First and foremost, the Nigerian constitution must be strengthened to cater for her unity in diversity. Federalism must be articulate enough to encapsulate yearnings of the majority and the minority groups. This requires that states of the federation must be constitutionally empowered so that they can be sufficiently independent to measure up to the expectations of their people. The present heavy reliance on the federal revenue and allocation should be discouraged.

Poverty reduction is another important step towards managing ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. The high rate of poverty in Nigeria has affected great number of youths and these are the categories that could be bought over by the elites in order to distort the nascent democracy in Nigeria. Addressing this problem has become very pertinent. For example, in 1960 about 15%

of the population was poor, but by 1980 this percentage had risen to 28%. By 1996, the incidence of poverty in Nigeria was 66% to put in glaring term 76.6 million Nigerians were affected by poverty (Ali, 2006). According to the World Bank estimation, about 70 percent of the Nigeria population lives under one dollar per day. If poverty is not addressed it certainly has the tendency to fuel crisis.

Also related to the issue of poverty is the problem of unemployment. Unemployment rate is high especially among the youth. In 1992 estimations put unemployment rate at about 28 per cent. To tackle the problem of unemployment the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) was established with mandate to alleviate the problem of unemployment both in the rural and urban centre. Unfortunately, this establishment is yet to achieve its stated objectives. This kind of programme needs to be pursued with vigour if unemployment is to be fought to a standstill (ibid).

Finally, governance that is devoid of corruption will bring democratic dividends to the teeming population of the country. Accountability and equity should be the watchwords of the political leaders. This will go a long way in addressing the problem of ethno-religious and political conflicts in the country.

CONCLUSION

It has been noted in this paper that the failure of Nigerian leaders to establish good governments, forge national integration and promote economic progress has led to mass poverty and unemployment, and the resultant communal, ethnic, and religious and class conflicts. Rather than the chains of poverty, the poor has little or nothing in the form of property, to lose and are easily engaged by war-mongers as mercenary fighters. Poverty increases the number of people prepared to kill or be killed for a given cause. It is also submitted that a true federalism with drastically reduced federal powers, responsibilities and resources, and greater local autonomy and self-determination for the federating units or states will reduce inter-ethnic tensions.

It is clear that democracy in Nigeria can only endure if perceptions of marginalization and acts portending the marginalization of ethnic groups are directly confronted. In this sense, the present attempts at democracy as a form of sustainable socio-cultural formation in Nigeria, can only be attained if fears of ethnic marginalization are erased. While ethnic cleavages may endure, practices and actions that give the impression that an ethnic group is being marginalized or singled out for discrimination should be curbed. It is in this vein, that means and ways of doing this need to be examined. One way of tackling ethnic conflict is by adopting a political culture that makes adequate provision for all the interests and groups in a given society. Nigeria should therefore learn from the experiences of multi-ethnic development nations.

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