Socio-Political Conflicts and the Challenges of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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27 Ethno-Religious Conflict: A Menace to Nigeria's Democratic Consolidation

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ABSTRACT

The paper carefully and critically traces the antecedent of ethnic conflict to pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial era (independence) by given historical surveillance of some ethnic and religious crises. The paper considers the causes of ethno-religious crisis and ways of managing intra ethnic relationship and religious tolerance. Some religious leaders, sects, politician, traditional rulers, chiefs and policymakers were interviewed on the measures to be taken to encourage cooperation and peaceful co- existence in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Religion and ethnicity are two relevant issues that cannot be ignored in social/cultural life of human society but if the application is not properly placed, they have power to rock the peace and stability of any nation. Theoretical approaches to ethnicity or ethnic group defines it as a community of people who share common cultural and linguistic characteristics including history, tradition, myth and origin. Scholars have been trying to develop a theoretical approach to ethnic conflict for a long time. Horowitz, Tedguri and Azar, agree that the ethnic conflict and religious crisis experienced today are deep-rooted. These conflicts over religion, language and identity have become so complex that they are difficult to resolve or manage.

Nigeria came into being as a creation of her colonial masters. One of the results of colonialism is the creation of a multi-ethnic

nation state in Nigeria while the amalgamation of Southern and Northern Protectorates in 1914 ushered in a conglomerate of ethnic groups. No doubt, Nigeria today is a plural society with different tribes, cultures and religious sentimental belief.

According to Ajayi, Nigeria comprises about 394 ethnic groups with different origins, history, religions, cultures, languages and various levels of social and political organs. Although prominent recognition is given to three ethnic groups — Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa — because they are dominant among the numerous ethnic groups, people of different cultures, religious beliefs who live politically separate from one another fought religious wars in the name of religion, were made to come together within the political boundary to accept common citizenship, one national name and one unified administration in the name of colonialism. Could this be identified as the genesis of the problem and the source of Nigeria's disunity as Akintoye suggests in his work? Ethnic and religious consciousness is manifested in all spheres of the nation's life. It plays a great role in elections, census exercises, military, the civil service and in all other aspects of national life to the extent that it is today threatening the corporate existence of Nigeria while some aggrieved citizens clamoured for secession.

In the past few decades, or nearly half a century, African societies and the emergent nation-states have been undergoing difficult times in terms of ethnic conflicts and antagonism. This is not to say that conflicts did not exist before this period. The history and oral traditions of most African societies contain elements of conflicts and intra-ethnic conflicts society. Ethnic conflict and religious crisis have taken different shapes and dimensions which vary from those of the pre-colonial period. Some scholars have argued that inasmuch as ethnic conflict in Africa preceded the advent of colonial masters, the problem was, indeed, exacerbated and effected by the colonial administrative machinery in the colonies. Investigation into the forms and causes of those conflicts in contemporary Nigeria are of significance for the proper management of the situation.

A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT SINCE INDEPENDENCE

Ejimofor asserts that ethnic diversity is a political concept liable to many interpretations. He stresses that difference in race, religion, culture and geography are factors that bring ethnic diversity very closely associated with strong belief in a perceived cultural and linguistic difference of the country which is often regarded as the inevitable consequence of socio-cultural differences. Generally speaking, violence does not occur unless there is existence of conflict, but conflicts may exist without necessarily having violence. Since independence, violence has rocked Nigeria political and religious spheres and has been a recurrent plague in almost every state.

Nigerians perceive themselves along tribal diversities before thinking of national interest. Also, ethnic diversity has cost Nigeria so much politically, socially and economically since independence. The same has led to the development of political parties based on ethnic affinities.

The result of this is tribal consciousness with its disintegrating tendencies, instead of national consciousness. This welds the various sections into a unified individual nation. Eleagwu defines national unity as a re-socialisation process into the symbols of the new large political community, which is an attempt to unite and bring together groups of people with different culture, history, language, religion and belief system.

Religious conflict has to do with the crisis or problem that emanates from a group of people due to their differences in religious belief or sentimental attachment. Talabi opines that before the advent of Islam and Christianity, Nigerians used to interact with one another. Religion was one of the factors that enhanced unity and interaction among the various groups. Though there existed various religious groups, each respected the religious tenets of one another. Even at religious festivals, adherents of other religious groups were invited and things went well in Nigeria. The story has changed today. What Nigerians experience now as rightly observed by Akinola are religious prejudices and cultural baggage associated with rival and antagonistic beliefs and doctrine modes of worship, rituals and

theologies. Violent riots that spill over to the political and economic lives of the citizen. Since twenty years ago, ethnic religious crisis has become more pronounced in the Northern part of Nigeria. Maitasine religious riot of 1980 and 1981 in Kano could be said to have opened the gate of religious crises and since then, Nigeria is yet to know peace. This was followed by another one in 1982 at Bulunktu in Maiduguri and in 1984 the Maitatsine struck again in Jimeta, Yola. The Yola crisis spread to Idi-Araba in Lagos, but was nipped in the bud. In March 1986 and 1987, University of Ibadan faced a religious crisis which would have consumed it if not for God's intervention. Another was recorded in College of Education, Kafanchan in the same year. The Tiv and Jukun of Taraba state had a share of ethnic conflict. By March 1992, over 5,000 people were killed. The Ijaw, Urhobo and the Itsekiri are always at loggerheads over land matters. The clash which started in 1997 rendered many homeless.

The incessant ethnic and religious crises continued to tear the nation apart. In the 1990s, Shite crises erupted in Katsina, Zango-Kataf in 1992, Gombe in 1995, Owerri in 1996 Lagos and Kaduna in 1998. The 20th century also witnessed ethno-religious crises. At Saki in Oyo State, there was a crisis between Fulani herdsmen and farmers and also religious crisis where lives, houses and religious centres were destroyed. Kaduna and Bauchi recorded a similar event in 2003 and 2004. Jos has been experiencing religious and ethnic turbulence since 2004. It was so tense that a state of emergency was declared by the Federal Government for six months in 2009. Today, the religious crisis has taken another ugly dimension. A religious sect called 'Boko Haram' has become a dangerous threat to national peace and security. Operating from their hidden place, they have used explosive weapons such as bombs to destroy innocent citizens, destroy government and public property, religious centres, especially churches. This evil act has threatened both the economy and socio-political activities of the nation. Adding to the ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria was the Yoruba boycot of the 1994 Constitutional Conference which was meant to resolve the national delicate over ethnicity. Inspired by pan-Yoruba militant groups, Afenifere and

the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in southwestern Nigeria's threatened secession and intensified violent protests across the country.

The federal structure has developed deep cracks and this demands urgent attention to mend it. The most worrisome challenge of the 20th country Nigeria is the religious dimension of ethnic competition for power and oil wealth in Nigeria. The multiple ethno-religious conflicts in the northern cities of Kano, Kaduna, Jos, Borno, Kebbi, Bauchi and Zamfara are deep-rooted in political scenario of Nigeria and introduction of sharia courts and the South's demand for autonomy.

There have been reports of disparities in the distribution of oil resources in Nigeria for many years. This contentious issue has fuelled most of the recent ethnic conflicts in the country. System of resource allocation, ethnic groups from the oil and mineral producing areas see the new system as inadequate not receiving enough money for their own regional development. These are the dynamics behind the Ogoni crisis recent ethnic violence in the oil producing Niger Delta state and the unhealthy activities of Niger Delta youth.

Ethnicity has a strong influence on one's status in a community. Ethnic conflicts are, therefore, often caused by an attempt to secure more power or access to more resources or domination of a group by another group.

CAUSES OF ETHINIC AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

Various factors have been expounded by scholars as being responsible for disruption of existing social order and law. Among such are colonial factors, ethnic consciousness, economic factor, religion, psychological factor and favouritism and discrimination. The antecedents of ethnicity and conflict in Nigeria could be traced to the colonial period. So, the first and major ideological framework or background to ethnic conflict in Nigeria is the issue of colonialism and Westernisation contexts and situations that gave rise to and even promoted ethnicity and conflict in Nigeria. These included the political structure, economic and social transformation of the societies to nation-state. Colonial situation in Nigeria created interlocking

conflicts situation through their patterns of action.

Osaghae comments that conflicts in Africa are both inevitable and expected. This is not because Africa is the home of conflicts but because of its peculiar recent story. From the pre-colonial period through the colonial and post-colonial periods, Africa has been the centre of all kinds of conflicts. Colonial rule imposed its values on the existing instruction manipulated and played one group against the other in order to promote antagonism among African peoples.

Ethnic Consciousness

From this point of view, a high degree of ethnic consciousness can result to ethnic tension and conflict where two opposing views converge. There are more of ideological consciousness reasons towards ethnic rivalry and conflict situations. National consciousness may be a story factor towards nation building. On the negative aspect, with which this paper is more concerned, ethnic consciousness may entirely be divisive and of parochial form. It is known as sheer tribalism.

Unemployment

Increasing level of poverty resulting in joblessness. Eighty percent of Nigerians live below and 1 dollar per day. The vast majority of the people live in poverty, 85 percent of Nigerians lack access to any formal financial services (World Bank, 2007). Mismanagement of resources by Nigerian leaders. Lack of quality functional education. Idle youths readily rise to any conflict and are easily and ignorantly dragged into social disorder which leads to looting, arson, bombing and destruction of public and government property.

Economic Factors

Economic factors are also identified as another major causes of conflict in many ethnic Nigerian societies, where ethnic communities violently compete for property, rights, jobs, education, language, social amenities and good health care facilities. Nigerian ladies are daily accused of being ethnic conscious while the minorities are not

satisfy with being neglected in the national issue and little or non-representation in the political offices.

Uneven Development

This is another cause of ethnic conflict in Nigeria. There is a need for equality in community development. Most of the ethnic conflict in Nigeria could be traced to uneven development which caused ethnic groups to mobilise themselves to compete for resources along ethnic lines. It could be noted that the Motion by Anthony Enahoro, a member of the Action Group (AG), for self-government to be granted Nigeria in 1956 was due to the unbalanced development of the three main ethnic groups, that is Yoruba, Hausa and the Igbo.

Psychological Factor

Psychological factor is another major ethnic conflict in Nigeria, especially the fear of insecurity of ethnic groups during transition. It has been opined that extremists build upon these fear to polarise the society. Additional memories of past trauma magnify these anxieties. Historians continue to refer to effect of Biafran War, the Nigeria Civil War of 1967-1970. The reminiscences could never be erased among the Igbo. At the end of the war Gowon pronounced 'No victor, no vanquished'. These interactions produce a topic brew of distrust and suspicion that leads to ethnic violence.

Favouritism and Discrimination

Favouritism and discrimination cannot be overemphasised. According to Rothschild and Lake, ethnic conflict is a sign of weak state or a state embroiled in ancient loyalties. In this case government acts with bias to favour a particular ethnic group or religion and such behaviour acts as preferential treatment that fuels ethnic conflicts. Therefore, in critical or difficult political situations, the effectiveness of governance is dependent on its ability to address social issues and human needs. Recently, scholars have come out with different approaches to conceptualising ethnicity. Forced with the proliferation of separatist conflicts in North America, the

inadequacies underlying the modernisation theory are being exposed. The motion that modernity would result in smooth transition from *gemeins* chaff (community) to *gosellchraft* (association) with gradual dissolution of ethnic affiliations simply did not work. Ethnicity has persisted in North America, Africa and elsewhere. This failure simply means ethnicity will remain but government should not discriminate against groups or they will create conflicts. Rather, a measure or policy should be put in place to reduce, rebrand the policy for equal representation and lessened ethnic division and separation.

MANAGEMENT OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

Since independence, the situation in Nigeria has been fraught with ethnic politics, whereby the elite from different ethnic groups scheme to attract as many federal resources to their region as possible, neglecting issues that could have united the country. The anarchy, competition and insecurity led to the demise of the First Republic. Military intervention culminated in the gruesome ethnic war from 1967 to 1970 when the mistreated Igbo of eastern Nigeria (Biafrans) tried to secede from the federation. The Igbo grievances were caused by the denial of their basic human needs of quality citizen (Burton, 1992), autonomy and freedom.

While the politicians tried to cope with the colonial legacy that lumped incompatible ethnic groups together into one country, military aberration set in making a mockery of democracy in Africa's most populous and promising country. The corruption, era of ethno-religious conflict slipped into the social order of the day until 1990s. Nigerian politics still followed ethnic lines. There is always disagreement about the rule of the game. The military intervened under the pretext that the civilian leaders were inept and indecisive.

However, the southerners distrusted the military administration because they felt it was trying to maintain Hausa-Fulani hegemony in Nigeria. June 12, 1993 was another historical era when democracy was disrupted. M.K.O. Abiola, a Yoruba from south-western Nigeria

won Nigeria's presidential election but his mandate was annulled by the military regime. In retaliation, the southerners began to form militant organisations to protest unfair treatment and demand a democratically elected government.

The authoritarian rule of General Sani Abacha a northerner, made southerners increasingly fear political marginalisation and use various political rallies to demand an end to Hausa-Fulani domination of the political arena. This development signified the weakness of the government and its lack of effective mechanisms to manage ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

I would argue that unless this is resolved by a sovereign national conference, the economic base of the country may be jeopardised. By acts of omission or commission ethnic conflicts have become major problems in most countries today. It could not be tackled by mere pious declaration of intents or future to match actions with words to free the country from the clutches of bad politics and social retrogression.

Re-orientation of the elite. This may sound cynical but accusing fingers are being pointed to our leaders that they are the problem. The re-education of the elite is the education of the masses. The elite need to appreciate their roles as opinion leaders and be more positive in their attitude to national issues.

The press is a fundamental instrument of mass education and should avoid false information. Nigeria's ethnic conflicts have a fairly long history in the course of our political development as a people. The interplay of diverse force has given mutual ethnic suspicion a new urgency.

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