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ETHNIC POLITICS IN AFRICA: THE NIGERIAN EXAMPLE

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Introduction

Every African State is a multi-cultural, multinational and multilingual state, a state that comprises several nations or ethnic-groups different in terms of size, culture, and historical root. Ethnic diversity or pluralism usually inclines to conflict and coercive political behavior in a society¹. The ethnic conflicts are usually struggles and wars of subordination, rebellion and hegemony. These are characteristically struggles for autonomy and freedom from exploitation by small groups from large groups, for example the ethnic struggles that led to the breakup of the Soviet Union, or by large groups under the thumb of powerful minorities, for example, the wars in Rwanda between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi powerful minority. The bid to gain relative advantage in competitive access to goods and benefits catalyze these struggles or wars. The result is usually a crisis of state power which leads to ethnic unionization, to seize the apparatus of the state as an instrument for seeking advantage or exclusive aggrandizement².

This paper examines the effects of ethnic factor on the developmental process in Nigeria. While examining the political implication of this phenomenon and the problems created by it for the survival of democracy in Nigeria, the paper also strives to proffer solutions for the reduction of the problem of Nigerian ethnic diversity.

The notion of ethnicism

Cohen defines an ethnic group as an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other ethnic groups within the society because they share a number of things such as kinship, religious and linguistic ties³. For Nnoli, an ethnic group is a social

¹J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*. Cambridge; Cambridge: University, Press, 1948.

² O. Otite, The challenge of Ethnicity. *Vanguard*, February 5 and 6: 2001, pp 33 and 34.

³ P. Cohen, *Sociological Theory* 4th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Company. International Edition, 1974

formation which is distinguished by the communal character of its boundaries⁴. In this definition, Nnoli laid emphasis on language as the most crucial variable in ethnic identify. From Nnoli's analysis therefore, an ethnic group consists of those who are themselves alike by virtue of their common ancestry, language and culture and who are so regarded by others.

The concept of ethnics denotes ethnic allegiance, a feeling of attachment to one's ethnic group. Such loyalty ordinarily carries with it the willingness to support and act on behalf of the ethnic group. Drawing from the above, ethnicist involves a degree of obligation and is often accompanied by a rejecting attitude towards those regarded as outsiders. This, in fact, constitutes the basis of ethnic discrimination and ethnic prejudice found in multi-ethnic societies, such as Nigeria.

Ethnicity leads to primordial sentiments in multi-ethnic society. This position is supported by the theory of ethnocentrism. On a general note, the theory of ethnocentrism simply denotes differentiation according to origin. This is to say that it is a kind of behavior where a group of people look down on others and discriminate against them. Thus, one can see ethnocentrism as a belief in the unique value and rightness of one's own group. This human attitude manifests in form of prejudice and tribalism (ethnic communalism and conflict). Peil claims that group solidarity provides security in situation of potential conflict and informal support when official agencies cannot or will not help⁵. Corroborating this view, Nnoli notes:

*...hostility is an important aspect of ethnicity. Destructive competition among ethnic groups gives rise to ethnicity and produces antisocial effects such as jealousy and deprivation. It becomes possible for the in-group to accept the expression of hostility toward the out-group.*⁶

⁴O Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 1978.

⁵M. Peil, *Consensus and Conflict in African Societies: An Introduction to Sociology* Addison-Wesley: Longman Ltd, 1977.

⁶O. Nnoli, *Ethnicity and Development in Nigeria*. Aldershot: Avebury Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1995, p.3.

In recent times, the interests in the critical implication of Marxists view on the salience of class and class conflict has influenced Marxist writers to contend most strongly the view that whereas, in African countries, the idea of ethnicity has gained prominent attention, what ought to be given a serious intellectual attention and academic analysis is the idea of class. In line with this perspective, Sklar argued that ethnicity was classified as a derivative of the class struggle, and its political role as a weapon forged and wielded by classes and fractions of classes for their own interests⁷. Such conscious manipulation was attributed to remnants of the traditional ruling class and its successors, the petty bourgeoisie. According to proponents of this view, to ignore the impact of colonialism on African societies is to downplay class relation while elevating ethnicity to the point of academic prominence. This Marxist interpretation, summarily, considers ethnicity to be a dependent variable, a form of false consciousness in which ethnic consciousness is superimposed over the interests of the masses and thus serves to camouflage the more fundamental and objective interests of competing classes. Hence, according to this interpretation, the real motivating force is that of class formation.

A deeper reflection however shows that although ethnicity is powerful, it is neither absolute nor immutable. Ethnic consciousness and loyalties lend themselves to easy manipulation particularly because other loyalties are either weak or altogether absent⁸. Femi Taiwo contends:

⁷ Idowu William, "Ethnicity, Ethnicism and Citizenship: A Philosophical Reflection on the African Experience", *Journal of Social Science*, 8(1), 2004, p.47

⁸ O. Kokole, "Ethnic Conflicts Versus Development in Africa: Causes and Remedies." in Luc Van De Goor, Kumar Rupesinghe and Paul Sciarone (eds.) *Between Development and Destruction- an Enquiry into the Causes of Conflict in Post Colonial States*. The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 1996, p. 126

*the absence of genuine citizenship is not unconnected with the dominance of ethnic politics driven by the requirements of rootedness in physical space*⁹.

It is important to state here that ethnicity as a concept is politically neutral. It is its politicisation, especially for the purpose of political advantage, that results in inter-ethnic opposition, hindered group interaction and political conflict. In every modern state, the implication of such group interaction and the effect altogether is the emergence leadership problems as well as citizenship crises.

For Okwudiba Nnoli, access to state power in Africa is important for various ethnic groups because of the extensive intervention of the African state in the sphere of life of the African society: “... *ethnic group access to state power or lack of it, is an important element in ethnic politics*”¹⁰. In the bid to control and dominate the state, what result is the ‘politicisation of ethnicity’. But this political dimension of ethnicity should not be considered a constant factor in every plural setting, although the potential for it may be present. What activates this potential differs from one setting to the other, but, essentially, they are variables contingent upon other factors which can be distinguished one from the other.

Background of ethno-political chauvinism in Nigeria

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa with a population of over 150 million people, consists of multiethnic groups and different religious assemblages. Historically, the country can be traced to pre-colonial times when there were “*elaborate systems of governance, which varied in scale and complexity depending on their geographical environment, available*

⁹ F. Taiwo, “Of Citizens and Citizenship.” In *Tempo*. Lagos. Sep.-Oct., 1996, p. 19

¹⁰ O. Nnoli, *Ethnicity and Development in Nigeria*. Aldershot: Avebury Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1995, p. 6.

military technology, economic, spiritual and moral force."¹¹ There were various kingdoms and empires such as the Yoruba kingdom, the Benin kingdom, the Fulani emirate, the Igbo traditional system, the Urhobo gerontocratic system etc. All these changed with the conquest of Lagos in 1861 by the British and the subsequent amalgamation of Southern and Northern Nigeria in 1914. As a result of a lot of struggle, Nigeria gained independence in 1960. A survey of the political scenario in Nigeria since independence will show the extent to which ethnic loyalty has affected the nation's dream to have democratic governance, including the constant military incursions which have made the development of a democratic political culture a difficult task in Nigeria.

When Nigeria attained independence in 1960, she had a federal structure that was made up of three regions namely: the North, East and the West. Soon after Nigeria became an independent nation, the differences among the three regions became clear, amplified by the emergence of three regionally-based and ethnically sustained political parties. They were the Northern People's Congress (NPC) led by Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto from the North, the National Convention of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) led by Dr. Azikwe from the East, and the Action Group (AG) led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo from the West.

It was against this ethnic background that the problem of Nigeria's first attempt at democracy started. Between 1960 and 1965 the ethnically loaded political arrangement described above coupled with other factors threatened the existence of Nigeria as a nation. In the bid to win the most political power by these ethnic leaders, the situation degenerated into political riots, arsons, killings and other acts of vandalism especially in the west. Subsequently, there was a bloody military coup, which terminated the First Republic in 1966.

¹¹Report P B . Abuja, : MAMSER/ Federal government of Nigeria, 1987.

After 13 years of military rule, the Second Republic was born on October 1, 1979. The politics in this Republic was not better than what was obtained in the first one. As in the First Republic, parties were formed along ethnic lines. The political scene and actors were almost the same. The Second Republic was little or no improvement upon the experience of the First Republic in terms of ethnicism. The Second Republic political parties were reincarnations of the ethnically aligned parties of the First Republic. Both their formation and leadership conspicuously reflected this. This does not mean that the parties of the Second Republic absolutely did not enjoy membership from other ethnic groups outside their domain, but where they did, such memberships were weak and insignificant. The problem of ethnic politics, particularly the reckless struggle by the ethnically inclined political leaders to gain control at the centre, and controversies that surrounded the general elections of 1979 and 1983 contributed largely to the demise of the Second Republic.

Ethnic politics was downplayed significantly in the aborted Third Republic. The process of formation of the two political parties, namely Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC), did not give room to ethnic influence because the parties were military creation and the two party system prevented ethnic dominance of any political party. However, the annulment of the June 12 presidential election that was believed to have been won by M.K.O. Abiola eventually led to the truncation of the Third Republic and rejuvenation of ethnicity in Nigeria. The experience of the aborted Third Republic was an indication of existence of an inverse relationship between ethnicity and good governance.

Since then, ethnic politics has been a characteristic feature of Nigerian politics with a lot of negative consequences for the nation's movement towards democratization to the extent that it remains an enduring threat to institutionalization of democracy in Nigeria. Among its resultant

negative consequences, as observed by Babangida , are wastage of enormous human and material resources in ethnically inspired violence, encounters, clashes and even battles, heightening of fragility of the economy and political process, threat to security of life and property and disinvestments of local and foreign components with continuous capital flight and loss of confidence in the economy; and increasing gaps in social relations among ethnic nationalities including structural suspicions and hate for one another¹². It is equally responsible for upspring of ethnic militias that have become a recurring decimal in Nigeria, an example is what is obtainable in the Niger Delta, the Oodua People's Congress, the Bakassi Boys and Boko Haram. As a result of the activities of these various ethnic militias, the Nigerian state has experienced wastage of enormous human and material resources, constant threat to security of lives and property, disinvestment of local and foreign components, with continuous capital flight and loss of confidence in the Nigerian economy.

Past measures to deal with the problem of ethnic pluralism in Nigeria

Various attempts have been made by different governments in Nigeria with the objective of containing ethnic conflicts in the polity. The colonialists were apprehensive of the intrinsic potentiality of ethnically diverse societies in catalyzing conflicts and instituted the 'Sabongari' policy in northern Nigeria, which enforced separate existence between the local population and migrants both from the south and other parts of the north. This was done in the erroneous belief that the 'Sabongari' policy would minimize inter-ethnic contacts and ethnic problems. The native authority system was another colonial policy that was aimed at the creation of ethnic citizenship different from the civic citizenship of the urban areas. The policy permitted each ethnic group to

¹²I. B.Babangida, *Ethnic Nationalities and Nigeria State*. Excerpts from a Lecture delivered at NIPSS, Kuru, Jos, 2002.

sustain its particular heritage in accordance with colonial interests. Unfortunately these measures failed abysmally as their only success was in the exacerbation of ethnic divisions, thus creating a new symbolic focus for ethnicity in Nigeria¹³.

The adoption of Federalism, characterized by the decentralization and evolution of state power to ethno-regional entities was another policy to douse ethnic tension in the Nigeria polity. The states were relatively autonomous and tenuously linked to the centre. Federalism, has been practiced in Nigeria since 1953, beginning with the three regions; north, west and east. These have since metamorphosed into the present thirty-six states and the federal capital Abuja. The irony of it is that ethnic sectarianism and tension have not only persisted but intensified. In fact, it is argued that it is at the heart of corruption among high office holders, who see their appointments as privilege, not responsibility, and are primarily concerned about enriching themselves and their people¹⁴. Another problem with the policy of federal character is that it subverts the principle of justice and fair play to the individual citizen. It sacrifices national progress and development on the altar of ethnic sectarianism as mediocrity takes precedence of meritocracy in the conduct of state affairs. These are evident in the admission of students into our national and state institutions, appointments to positions in federal and state governments and parastatals, localization of industries and amenities¹⁵. These actions are directed by the imperative to satisfy ethnic yearnings rather than the pragmatic genuine desire for sustainable national development.

¹³ O. Otite, The challenge of Ethnicity.

¹⁴ D. Okpako, 1998. Rotating Presidency or Looting. *The Guardian*, October 19, 1998, p.49.

¹⁵ A. E. Ojie, "Prejudice and Discrimination in Nigeria: A Sociological Overview" in: U.A. Igun & A.A. Mordi (Eds.), *Contemporary Social Problems in Nigeria*, Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publications, 1998, pp.35-49.

The therapeutic policies of the National Youths Services Corps (NYSC), unity schools, and federal government secondary schools were instituted for the evolution of a more harmonious inter-cultural perception leading to a reduction in inter-ethnic conflicts. The National Youths Services Corps is a policy that makes it mandatory for fresh Nigerian graduates of below thirty years of age, to undergo one year national services in ethno-regional area other than one's own. This was believed to enhance inter-cultural understanding among the youths and leaders of tomorrow.

Similarly, the unity schools and the federal government secondary schools were meant to bring youths from the diverse ethnic groups into close contact very early in life and create an enduring atmosphere of love and trust for each other that will lead to a reduction in mutual suspicion and mistrust. The increasing spate of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria belies the efficacy of these measures.

The unabated search for a just policy for the harmonious coexistence of the diverse ethnic nationalities has been the critical concern of Nigerian politicians before and since independence. The quest culminated in the doctrine of 'federal character' enshrined in the 1979 constitution. This means that the distribution of appointments to high offices must reflect the multiplicity of ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria¹⁶. The states must be similarly run to reflect the existence of different ethnic groups of local government areas.

Ethnic chauvinism: Implications for the Nigerian State

Okwudiba Nnoli has made it clear that in the distribution of basic socio-economic infrastructures in Nigeria, intense ethnicity for the equitable division holds sway¹⁷. This impairs meaningful resources allocation and utilization for development. At a theoretical level, ethnicity

¹⁶ D. Okpako, Rotating Presidency or Looting. *The Guardian*, October 19, 1998, p.49

¹⁷ O. Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 1978.

breeds primordial sentiment which relegates universalism to the background. This, as a matter of fact, hampers national development in general and affect the citizens in particular. As it leads to the tendency to want to exclude outsiders in the sharing of scarce resources¹⁸, the amenities that can improve the well-being of people and which can generally make a difference in the standard of living are denied people because they do not belong to the mainstream of the society or the power that be. In a circumstance like this, it is difficult to plan for an effective economic development that will really or possibly touch the lives of all Nigerians regardless of where they live or their ethnic affiliation.

Ethnicity also breeds social conflict among the gladiators, in struggle to neutralize, injure or eliminate others. While it is true and an uncontested fact that social conflict is a natural phenomenon in any social system, it becomes detrimental to the survival of the society if carried to the extreme. In Nigeria, such conflict emanating from intense ethnicity often results into political instability and inability to plan objectively for the generality of the Nigerian people, regardless of their location, ethnic and religious affiliations. The adverse effects of this on development may be indirect yet obvious.

The point being made in this paper so far is that problems of ethnicity and its fall-out of ethnic politics which have characterized the Nigerian political terrain since independence have made the realization of true democracy with its dividend impossible. Generally, with democracy, a nation hopes to build an egalitarian society. This, in the case of Nigeria, a mere dream by our emphasis on ethnic nationalism.

¹⁸ E.E. Osagbae, "Ethnic Mapping Project: A Brief Concept" In Osagbae (eds) *Ethnic Group and Conflict in Nigeria*. Ibadan :PEFS, Vol. 1, 2001.

Conclusion

From what has been discussed so far, it is crystal-clear that Nigeria has failed to properly manage her ethnic pluralism. In contrast it has developed into an albatross, profoundly disabling the realization of equity, impeding socio- economic and political development in the country. Nigeria, since amalgamation in 1914, has witnessed several ethnic struggles and conflicts of varying magnitudes. The most devastating is the 30 month civil war between 1967 and 1970. Consequent upon these destabilizing ethnic conflicts, various public policy measures have been enunciated as remedies to the nagging problem of ethnic diversity.

The current paradigm in Nigerian democracy is the issue of zoning/power shift. The debate has engulfed the Nigerian political circle. The debate is hot to the extent that “*some self-appointed godfathers have vowed that unless you come from a particular ethnic group, you cannot aspire for any elected office*”¹⁹. Zoning/power shift has constituted a dilemma in the party politics in Nigeria especially among the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) members. The northern people and the ethnic group such as Arewa Consultative Forum have vowed that power must go back to the North in the year 2015 and other sectional group such as Ohanaeze Ndigbo wants the power to be shifted to the south eastern of Nigeria. The zoning formula promotes mediocrity at the expense of merit. The terrorist activities in the North East part of the country of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states championed by the “Boko Haram” sect apart from its agenda to Islamize the country aim to seize political power from the centre in line with the popular sentiment in the North

The problem is multi-dimensional. Hence it will take a combination of antidotes to penetrate its deep seated fabrics. The primary cause of the sociopolitical and economic instability

¹⁹ Suswan, D. (2010), “The Politics of Zoning” in The Punch, August 12.

in Nigeria is the issue of resource agglomeration and distribution at the centre. The presidency is the unique national institution vested with the authority to perform this function. Access to it entails conflicts and even confrontations involving units interested in its control. The practice of true federalism and resource control will not only reduce its attraction but will re-channel the dissipated energies of the various federating units to resource creation. This should be the practice in the short run to reduce the tension generated by ethnic struggles and conflict and create the enabling sociopolitical environment for an ultimate powerful centre. What is needed on the long run is a strong presidential institution reminiscent of the American pedigree.

The issue of national integration and nation-building should be given paramount consideration by government. There is the need to evolve a coherent policy and ideology of national integration and nation-building instead of the ad-hoc solutions to the problems confronting the Nigerian federation. Nigeria has not been able to abide strictly by the constitutional provisions guiding the true practice of federalism as a result of the drift from one crisis to the other since independence. Also the constituent parts of Nigeria have not strictly adhered to the intrinsic principles of federalism in the relationship of the various tiers of government. The search for political stability has been long and tortuous and the country is yet to find the road-map to stability.

The unrests and widespread disturbances in many parts of the federation are attributable to issues of fiscal federalism, ethno-religious matters and related issues which must be thoroughly and critically examined within the context of federalism.

Nigeria should aim at fashioning out a political culture that will downplay, if not totally eliminate feelings of mistrust, deep-seated animosity that exists among the various ethnic groups in the country and also examine the issue of perceived domination of some sections by others.

One of the many ways of doing the above is to operate a political culture that will promote equal opportunities for all Nigerians. If the country must progress, Nigerians must cultivate progressive habits and take steps that would ensure sustainable socio-political and economic development of the country. There must be political will on the part of the citizenry, who must resolve to build a stable political environment. There is the need for political dialogue which should be made one of the greatest strengths of the Nigerian federation. The citizens must promote and respect the mechanisms that enhance national consensus.

Finally, we recommend that ethnic violence should be addressed headlong by government in order to be able to consolidate the gains of federalism. It is therefore vital for government to re-examine how best to constitute the Nigeria federation so as to endow it with justice, fair play, equal opportunities, objectivity and neutrality in the treating of vital issues relating to all the ethnic groups in the country. In doing this, the paper believes that the country will attain greater heights and achieve greater future prospects. The Nation has been hurt and progress retarded as a result of the stress and anxiety to protect ethnic interest at the expense of national interest and cohesion.