

Democracy and Ethno-Nationalism in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Nigeria is an amalgam of rival ethnic groups pitched against each other in a contest for power and resources that have reflected in the political processes, sometimes threatening the corporate existence of the country. Right from the constitutional conferences organized during the colonial era down to the ones organized after independence, the question of an acceptable system of co-existence has been contentious. However, the intervention of the military in the political affairs of the country and their long duration in governance succeeded in abating the full manifestation of ethno-nationalism. But the return of the country to democracy in 1999 has enabled the suppressed ethno-nationalism grievances to explode, throwing up issues beyond the capacities of democratic institutions. Ethno-nationalism has become a threat to the survival of the nation's nascent democracy and its existence. As a result, the democratic government has resorted to the tactics of military administration in the management of these challenges. This paper examines the state's response to an emboldened ethno-nationalism and its implications on the process of democratization. It adopted both descriptive and analytical methods, using the theory of instrumentalism to explain the factors responsible for ethno-nationalism.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, ethnicity, nationalism, conflict, violence.

1 INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is the fourth largest and most populous country in Africa with around 170 million people, comprises about 300 ethnic groups. It has the largest Muslim population in Africa. The dominant ethnic-national groups (ethnic groups with a political agenda) in the northern two-thirds of the country are the Hausa and the Fulani (29 percent of the total population) most of who are Muslims. Other ethnic-national groups in the north are Nupe, Tiv and Kanuri. The Yoruba people (21 percent) about half of whom are Christians and half Muslims predominate in Nigeria's south-west. The largest ethnic-national group in the south-east is the Igbo or Ibo (18 percent) who are majorly Catholics. Conflict among these ethnic-national groups is not surprising insofar as they represent a huge diversity of culture and ways of life, and they occupy different types of cities and terrain.

The situation in a polity such as Nigeria becomes more problematic when the politics of who get what, when and how gravitate towards ethnic clashes and antagonism. These contentious ethnic national groups are governed by a federal system like the United States, India and Brazil. Nigeria is faced with the challenging goal of rebuilding a petroleum based economy and trying to make democratic governance work. Unfortunately, the revenues from its resource rich economy have been squandered by corruption and mismanagement. Despite the unequal sharing of oil revenues and tremendous difficulty in institutionalizing democracy, Nigeria held presidential elections in 2007, 2011 and looking forward to conducting the 2015 elections, which demonstrates successful transferring of government between civilian administrations. Though, the previous elections were blemished by chaos, violence and fraud.

Consequently, with the dawn of a democratic era in 1999, the expression of suppressed ethnic demands and religious conflicts bottled up by years of repressive military rule has been opened up. Some of these ethno-nationalist sentiments have manifested insurgencies in the Niger-delta region under the auspices of the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger-d-

Delta (MEND), the renewed demand of Biafra spearheaded by the Movement for the Actualization of sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the incessant ethnic clashes in the Middle belt region, sharia instigated riots in the North, the notoriety of the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) can't be overlooked, and frequent religious disturbances cum Boko Haram terrorist activities in the Northeastern part of the country and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT).

2 CONCEPTUALIZING "DEMOCRACY"

Democracy varies in different places and historical periods. The current position is that democracy like human right should go beyond voting, it should encompass the right to make economic decisions in government chosen by the citizens. However, many associate democracy at first thought with one true United States president, Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865) when during the Gettysburg address, which was made to mourn those who have fallen during the great battle of Gettysburg, gave a speech which was been considered as one of the most eloquent statement of the democratic fight ever made. He coined "democracy as the government of the people, by the people and for the people" (Ogunboyede, 2014).

Schumpeter (1997) defines democracy as "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of competitive struggle for people's votes" cited in Abdulhamed (2004). Thus democracy can be seen as the system of governance under which people exercise their governing power directly or indirectly through their representatives periodically elected by themselves. Indeed, a democratic government is invariably a government that is founded on the principle of the rule of law, accountability and transparency devoid of arbitrariness, highhandedness and dictatorship.

3 CONCEPTUALIZING "ETHNICITY"

The concept of ethnicity refers to a social identity formation that rests upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology. Ethnic culture is one of the important ways people conceive of themselves, and culture and identity are closely intertwined (IDEA 2001).

According to Osaghae (1994), ethnicity refers to a social formation resting upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology. To understand ethnicity and its potency in an ethnically segmented society such as Nigeria, there must be a proper grasp of the meaning of an ethnic group. Ethnic groups may be defined as categories of people characterized by cultural criteria of symbols including language, value system and normative behaviours and whose members are anchored in a particular part of the new state territory (Otite, 2000). In similar vein, ethnicity can be concerned as an interaction or relationship that exist among people of different ethnic groups who decides to base their relationship on the difference, such exist when two or more ethnic groups relate with one another which normally brings about competition on issues like power or wealth.

4 CONCEPTUALIZING "NATIONALISM"

Nationalism is an ideology that creates and sustains a nation as a concept of a common identity for groups of humans (joireman, 2003). Nationalism is intensified by politics of exclusion and occurs when an ethnic group is politically mobilized. Therefore, nationalism is politicized ethnicity and manifests whenever a group of people particularly targeted for ill treatment or oppression especially in a heterogeneous political system (joireman 2003).

Nationalism is a belief, creed or political ideology that involves an individual identifying with, or becoming attached to one's nation. Nationalism involves national identity, by contrast with the related construct of patriotism, which involves the social conditioning and personal behaviours that support a state's decisions and actions (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2014). This is based on two perspectives; the primordialist and modernist perspective. The former describes nationalism as a reflection of the ancient and perceived evolutionary tendency of humans to organize into groupings based on affinity of birth. While the modernist perspective describes it as a recent phenomenon that requires the structural conditions of modern society order to exist.

5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this research study, the theory of instrumentalism as an approach would be employed for the analysis of democracy and ethno-nationalism in Nigeria. The theory of instrumentalism which views ethnic identity as manipulated to achieve a defined political or economic gain for the elites is the appropriate explanatory tool for the manifestation of ethno-nationalism in Nigerian democracy. The role of the elites in mobilizing ethnic sentiments is vital because these individuals

who participate in group action in the name of ethnicity has a choice to make and this is only done when they perceive that benefits outweighs costs of the choice. The theory also stipulates that these sentiments and the actions it brings, disappear when it is no longer politically expectant. The understanding is obvious because the notion of inclusivity that underlies state formation process does not apply to Nigeria because of the country's politicized identity based politics.

The Nigerian state has limited autonomy and is incapable of arbitrating among competing ethnic groups, this basically makes the state the core terrain for contestation by the desperate groups over its control and by extension its vast resources (Ake, 1996). Given its arsenal of patronage positions and public finance, elites bereft of crosscutting ideology, resort to ethnicity as a force to ascend the ladder of power and superintend over disbursement of the available resources (Obi, 2002). But the question that arises is, why are people inclined to participate in ethnically oriented programmes that are often risky to their lives? The answer is not farfetched; the people in Nigeria have persistent impoverishment and socio-economic insecurity that alienates them from the state, thus threatening the tenets of true democracy. Some of the past violent ethnic clashes are the Jos riots of 1945, the Kano riots of 1953, the Tiv uprisings of 1959-1960 and 1964, the Biafra war of 1967-1970 (also known as the civil war) was rooted in ethnic secession of the Igbo people, the 2011 post-election violence which took its toll in the northern part of the country, among others. While the present ethno-religious violence has the Boko Haram insurgent activities top on the list.

The tainted history of inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria which has been quite discordant has always been reinforced whenever the situation requires it. The elites capitalized on these situations to advance parochial interests by recalling mistrust, betrayal and acrimony that occurred in the past. Additionally, developments in the global political economy have had implications by reinforcing the undemocratic character of the Nigerian state with consequences for ethnic politics. This is because globalization needed authoritarian regimes that are ethnocentric in order to repress resistance involving those anchored on genuine ethnic grievance.

6 ETHNO-NATIONALISM IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SURVIVAL OF DEMOCRACY

Clearly indicate who is willing to handle correspondence at all stages of refereeing, publication and also post-publication. The effort made so far in the research study has been able to show that the inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria has been one of the conflicts largely caused by ethnic chauvinism, which manifests in form of ethno-nationalism. 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 true democratic governance. When Nigeria attained independence in 1960, she had a federal structure that was made up of three regions, namely: the North, the East and the West. The difference among the three regions became clear and amplified by the emergence of three regionally based and tribally/ethnically sustained political parties. They were the northern People's Congress (NPC), the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and the Action Group (AG). It was against this seemingly simple 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 continued 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.

There is problem with power relations in Nigerian politics. As events and reactions in the ongoing democratic dispensation have shown, the northerners are not comfortable that power is not in their hands. The propaganda of the northern oligarchy is that the south has always being in control of economic power. Since the inception of the fourth republic, the northern elites have begun to rock the boat. This is accompanied by cries of marginalization all the time. The fact that power has often been monopolized by the three dominant ethnic nationalities has also meant that the minority groups have been marginalized in the rat race for power. Again, power at the centre and the resources that comes with it in Nigeria is too attractive. This thus makes the competition for power so fierce, because if an ethnic group loses at the centre, it has lost all. The way power is obtained and used in Nigeria is usually in terms of what the various ethnic nationalities can benefit. But in many instances in the past, power has been used to pursue sectional or parochial interests. Marginalizations of some groups with inevitably arouse consciousness and then sensitize such groups for action, resistance, apathy and other related negative vices.

Consequently, the predominance of the spirit of ethnic-nationalism also gave rise to the emergence of ethnic militias all over the country in the first quarter of the fourth republic, the common ones are: Odua Peoples Congress (OPC) for the Yoruba nationality, Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) for the Hausa/Fulani nationality and Bakassi Boys for the Igbo nationality, also Egbesu Boys for the Ijaw nationality. The emergence of these ethnic militias mounted an increase in the level of political violence, riots and conflicts in the country. Though for sometime now, their activities have not been expressed.

The interplay of ethnic nationalism has also divided and fragmented the civil society in Nigeria. Oyedare (1994) posits that the problem in Nigeria is traceable to the heterogeneity and the adversarial nature of the civil society itself. The civil society in Nigeria is relatively weak, parochial in outlook and divided most especially along ethnic, religious and linguistic lines. If the civil society is divided, it is obvious that it will have adverse effects on the nascent democracy in place (Aluko and Ajani 2009).

7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has been able to discuss evidently that the sustainability is on shaky grounds as long as the problem of ethno-nationalism remain in place. That in spite nationwide increase in violence revolving around ethno-nationalist identities, Nigerian government is still treating them as “residue of the past and are therefore reluctant to recognize the inevitability of the ethnic identities that divide the population of the overwhelming majority of the people in Nigeria. In words of Sindjoun (2000), “plural societies are not only places where we identify clash, they also include dynamics of overlapping and crossbreeding, multiple positions and multiple allegiances.

In view of the above, this paper recommends that some form of power rotation or sharing must be institutionalized and entrenched in the constitution. It is absolutely ridiculous for any section in the country to have sole control of power while the other so called ethnic nationalities remain servitude (Olasebikan, 2002). It is however sad to note that the northern oligarchy have come to see power as their own inalienable birth right. Power must be made to rotate among the various ethnic nationalities using the six geo-political zones. Again some form of power sharing among the various ethnic nationalities so that no section of the country will be marginalized at any point in time must accompany this.

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