

Ethnicity Problems and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

It is a known fact that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation state with socio cultural differences among its component ethnic groups resulting into cultural dissimilarity. This is made manifest for instance in the differences in language, diet, dress, religion and other types of social system. It is on the basis of this fact that the study examined ethnicity problems and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The study is anchored on the Modern Conflict Theory which argued the strive for power, resource and control and a belief in the unique value and righteous of one's own group. Data for this study were obtained through secondary source such as textbooks, journals, dailies and ex-post facts type of research. Findings from this study revealed that ethnicity is a major problem afflicting the growth of democracy in Nigeria thus portraying Nigeria as a democratizing state. To curb this menace, the country deserves a leader that recognizes and respects the many people that make up this nation, and threats all communities as its consistency thereby allaying the fear of ethnic domination.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ethnic Groups, Conflicts, Democracy and Democratic Consolidation.

Journal Reference Format:

Akinseye, R.A. (2018): Ethnicity Problems and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria. Humanities, Management, Arts, Education & the Social Sciences Journal. Vol. 6. No. 2, Pp 31-38

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity is a worldwide phenomenon, which has fascinated researchers for a long time. As late as the later part of the 20th century, researchers of cultural change generally assumed that direct and continuous contact between groups of different cultures would lead to a decrease in difference among them. Studies on ethnic diversity have shown that Nigeria is a country of over four hundred (400) ethnic groups and numerous sub-ethnic groups with different backgrounds. Though these ethnic groups interacted with one another before the advent of colonialism, colonial administration fostered ethnic consciousness among the people through the creation of artificial boundaries. Ethnicism was therefore brought to the fore in the political dispensation of the country (Ukiwu 2005). Since the inauguration of democratic rule in May 29, 1999, violent ethnicity conflicts have erupted in different parts of the country with consequent threat not only to the sustenance or consolidation of the hard-earned democracy but also the corporate existence of the country. Ethnic conflicts have become a common features of the Nigerian society. Conflicts that are violent resulted into loss of lives as well as properties. Moreover, ethnic conflicts take a toll on established relationships between groups, and pose a serious challenge to national cohesion and sustainability of democracy. Going by the scenario above, it is truism that the Nigeria political landscape is replete with forms of conflicts of various dimensions.

One of such conflicts, which has become a constant feature in the history of country, is ethnicity/ethno-religious conflicts. This unfortunate situation has become more monstrous during the last fourteen years of civil democracy in Nigeria. It is estimated that within this period alone, there has been over seventy ethnicity/ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria in which over 35,000 lives were lost and properties worth billions of Naira destroyed (Tempo 2002: The Week, 2004). The more popular of these conflicts were the Kaduna ethno-religious conflict of 2000 and 2001, Jos 2001 and 2004 and that of Nassarawa, Benue in 2013 and 2014 respectively. What this portends is that, the legitimacy of the Nigerian state is being questioned by the upsurge atmosphere for consolidation and sustenance is under serious threat. The paper therefore examines ethnicity problems and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The paper is divided into six parts. They include introduction, conceptual clarifications of ethnicity and democracy, theoretical framework, interlinkages between ethnicity and democratic consolidation with the last part covering the summary and conclusion.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

(a) Ethnic Groups/Ethnicity

A sense of common origin, common beliefs and values, including a common sense of survival has been of great importance in uniting people into self-defining groups, Devos and Romanucci-Ross (1975:9) in their discussion of ethnic identity put forward the following definition:

An ethnic group is a self-perceived group of people hold in common a set of traditions not shared by the others with whom they are in contact. Such traditions typically include 'folk' religious beliefs and practices, languages, and sense of historical continuity, and common ancestry or place of origin.

Barth (1969) has distinguished between ethnic identification of individuals, and the ethnic organization of a group. In the case of ethnic identification the ethnic group is composed of people, bearers of the culture. On the other hand, Barth explains that an ethnic group is first of all a form of social organization in which the participants themselves make use of certain cultural traits from their past, a which may or may not be verifiable historically. In other consideration of ethnicity, Roosens (1989:12) describes the process of ethnogenesis thus:

The cultural traits by which an ethnic group defines itself never comprise the totality of the observation culture but are only a combination of some characteristic that the actors ascribe to themselves and consider relevant. These traits can be replaced by others in the course of time. For the vindication of the group, it is sufficient that a social border be drawn between itself and similar groups by means of a few cultural values that make it different in its own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Scholars of political science, public administration, peace and conflict studies used several connotations for ethnicity. Salawu and Hussan (2011) states that to fully grasp a clearer understanding of ethnicity, certain built conceptual variables are important viz: ethnic group and ethnicity. The duos are exclusively but mutually reinforcing. In the first place, ethnic group means an informal interest group whose members possess distinct characteristics from members of other groups. In the same token, members of such groups have similar peculiarities including kinship, religious and linguistic affiliation (Aluko 2003; Nnoli, 1978). To further buttress the foregoing, Nnoli (1978) states that one major distinguishing factor between and among

such conglomerates is differences in languages, mode of behaviour and psychology, and in most cases, differences in religious and socio cultural repertoires.

On the other hand, ethnicity denotes the feelings, attachments, nationalistic mind and the level of vindictiveness demonstrated by persons of groups as a show of solidarity for where they came from. Ethnicity is therefore defined in terms of loyalty, love, obligation and the desire to propel group aspirations over and above opposing view. The ideology of ethnicity therefore finds expression in sectionalism, prebendalism and it is in itself a manifestation of outward show of support or lack of support for persons occupying places of authorities in a nation's national psyche (Ogundiya 2010, Osaghae, 2001, Osadolor 1998). Incidentally, however, ethnicity breeds hate, suspicion, lack of support for perceived foreigner in the helm of affairs of governance, insecurity and group agitations, tension and socio- political uprising. It therefore provides adequate template for democratic and political instability and hence, calls for a swift change of government.

(b) Democracy and Democratic Consolidation

Democracy as a system of governance was simply defined by Abraham Lincoln as “a government of the people and for the people”. The term democracy actually originated from the Greek root words “Demos” which means “the people” and Kratiem which means government or rule (Ujo, 2004).

Several authorities have shed more light on the concept of democracy. To enable us benefit from their views, it might be necessary to briefly consider them so as to see where certain applications of Nigeria's brand of democracy fits.

According to Schumpeter (1967), democracy is an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's votes. Here one notes that democracy is an instrument for our political decisions. Those elected according to Ujo (2004) are supposed to make laws and policies for the people. Accordingly, he submits that for an elected body to be fully democratic the following conditions must be met:

- a. The people electing the body consist of all those affected directly by the decision it takes.
- b. the members of the body must be completely accountable to those who elected them.
- c. all electorates must have equal votes (Smith 1960).

Furthermore, Dibble (2002) sees democracy as a system of government in which the exercise of political power and authority is vested in the people through their elected representatives. The basic elements of modern democracy are supremacy of the people, representation and popular participation (Olisa and Nwabufo, 1990). And according to Nwachukwu (2004) the major features of democracy are:

1. There is more than one political party or individual competing for power
2. The competition in election is free, open and fair
3. The election comes up at intervals and usually by secret ballot
4. Adult citizens have free right to vote in the elections
5. There are fundamental freedom, civic liberties, freedom of speech, religion, association, freedom from arbitrary arrest
6. There is the separation of powers and the assemblies have some control over the executive arm. The judiciary is free and independent of the other branches of government
7. There should be a rule of law as well as supremacy of the constitution nobody is above the law
8. Decisions are arrived at by majority rule
9. There should be independence of mass media

Democratic consolidation can therefore be linked to the ability of the political system to reduce the probability of the breakdown of democracy such that the political actors will have a reasonable confidence that democracy will be sustained overtime. O'Donnell's silent regression from democracy to semi democratic rule as against Bratton's widespread acceptance of rules to guarantee participation and political competition cannot consolidate or sustain consolidation involves behavioural and institutional changes that normalize democratic politics and narrow its uncertainty (Diamond cited by Ojo, 2006). This is in line with Linz and Stepan's definition of a consolidated democracy as political rules and patterned incentives and disincentives has become phrase the only game in town (Linz and Stepan 1996).

The idea of perceiving democratic consolidation, as being the only game in town is itself predicated on a tripod operationalization, which comprise behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional dimensions. Behaviourally, democratic regime can be regarded as consolidated when no significant actor (political, social, economic, institutional) attempt to achieve democratic regime by authoritarian means. In additional terms, democracy is consolidated when the overwhelming majority of public opinion is consistency supportive of democratic procedures. In constitutional terms, democracy is consolidated when governmental and non-governmental actors become subject to and habituated to the resolution of conflict within the bounds of the specific laws, procedures and institutions sanctioned by the new democratic process.

Thus, in order to be regarded as being consolidated, democracy must develop behavioural attitude and constitutional dispositions and qualities completely supportive of democratic ways of life. These are qualities that are sadly lacking or at best minimal and are badly needed in Nigeria. The inadequacy of these qualities tends to breed ethnicity conflicts and consequently starve Nigeria of the bounties of democratic politics.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory that best explains the phenomenon of ethnicity in Nigeria is the modern conflict theory. As propounded by Wright Mills argues that society is not best understood as a complex system striving for equilibrium but rather for competition. It further maintains that society is made up of individuals and groups competition for resources in their inherent inequalities, some people, groups and organizations have more resources, power and influence and use the resources to maintain their positions of power in the society.

The main assumptions of the theory are that, firstly, competition over scarce resource is at the heart of all social relationships, competition rather than consensus characteristics human relationships. Secondly, the theory assumes that inequality in power and reward are built into all social structures. Individuals and groups that benefit from any particular structure strive to see it maintained. Finally, the theory assumes that change occurs as a result of conflict between competition interests rather than through adaptation. It insists that change is often unexpected as revolutionary rather than evolutionary (gradual development).

The centrality of modern conflict theory as a basic presupposes the desire of groups or persons to compete with other persons or groups for space and acquisition of available scarce resources. The differences in value system therefore constitute a major force in the determination of power play, resource control and ultimately the determination of which group gets what, when and how.

4. INTERLINKAGES BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATIONS IN NIGERIA

Nigeria in her post jubilee years, precisely over half a century since her political independence still gropes in the dark in search of viable political re-engineering. The main reason for this state of affairs is a function of self identification by contending forces and ethnic nationalities in the affairs of state in the process of competition and struggle for space. This self esteem therefore in their social alignments (Erunke, 2011 Saro-wiwa 1994). The position above has been further corroborated amongst scholars of the Nigerian political system who have increasingly argued that sectional nationalism and the quest for group identity as currently (of course it has always been) practiced portends grave dangers for Nigeria's nascent democracy, national integration and democratic consolidation. Salawu and Hassan (2011) opine that.

One of the main causes of ethnic problem in Nigeria is ethnic nationalism. First and foremost Nigerians see themselves as members of an ethnic group rather than members of an ethnic group rather than members of a nation. This tendency has been shown in some ways and particularly in the allegiance people pay to their ethnic group. In Nigerian, society today, many prefer identification with their ethnic group rather than with the nation or even state. This shows that Nigerians still exhibit a strong allegiance to ethnic group and this has consequently encouraged primordial sentiments among Nigerian people (2011:31).

Over and above the foregoing conceptions are the ideological and if you like philosophical underpinning of the historical context of the Nigerian state. Most scholars (Osaghae 2011, Ihonvbere, 1995 Yakubu 2010 and Okpaga, 2002) have variously argued the inevitability or otherwise, of men inordinate activities of capitalism manifestation itself in colonialism. Thus, colonialism can be said to have left behind the virus of non hegemonic state and has further aggravated the crisis of ethnicism in the Nigerian system (2001) argue that:

The pervasiveness of ethnic politics in the country is taken to be symptomatic of aggravated crisis of legitimacy that has engulfed the state, and is explained in terms of the proven efficacy of the ethnic strategy, the weakness of alternative identities and political unities, the prevailing milieu of lawlessness that has enveloped the country's political landscape, and the inability of the state to act as effective agency of distributive justice.

To be sure, it is instructive to affirm that the management of primordial identifies and politics and even Nigeria's future hereafter. Ihonvere as cited in Aaron and Egwu (1995) have maintained that this trend has generated very many contradictions not only in terms of mutual suspicion and contradictions between ethnic, religious and regional interests, but also within each primordial consistency. Thus, the tendency has been to focus so much on the contraction between the majority Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa ethnic group, and until recently, minority groups (Ejembi, 1983 and Nkom, 1994) whose aspirations are to gain a pride of place in socio political spheres of the Nigerian state.

The above factors further reinforce the weak character of the Nigerian state vis-à-vis its leadership and the inability of the latter to steer a visible road map for overall transformation of the Nigerian people. The vortex of this argument revolves itself in the chequered system, which is hinged on elite idiosyncrasies to the detriment of the average Nigerian who is lost in the foray of ethnic strife and contestation for resource control of Nigeria's commonwealth. Literatures on Nigerian politics affirm volume of the ever-increasing embourgeoisment of virtually every fabric of the Nigeria elite who hardly find any constructive meaning to nation building. The average Nigerian elite is a sale out in the manner and character of its predecessor and colonial overlord. This trait has been largely transferred down to elite profile in Nigeria from the better part of 1960s to the present democratic space.

Thus, the character of organization, discipline, world view (against the backdrop of international capital) and politics of the Nigerian elite negates possibilities for democracy and corporate governance. As earlier noted, the Nigerian politics is associated with elite competition and ethnic imbalances. Against the backdrop of the first military intervention in January 15, 1966 and the preceding counter coups, ethnic strife holds war in the scheme of things. And beyond the orgies of the Obasanjo civilian administration from 1999 to 2007, the problem of ethnicity has manifested itself and has almost reduced the giant of Africa into the most unbelievable posture. Chief Obasanjo who himself was of Yoruba decent on one hand and a former military lord of the other, rigmarole in the murky waters of immense contradictions for the better part of his eight years term in office.

This administration no doubt, was the worse in terms of minority and even majority agitations for resources control, revenue sharing formula and ethno religious crisis. (Aljazeera, 2007). This struggle ushered in a breadth of fresh air and the corresponding transportation of power to the late Umar Yaradua who later died in active service as Nigeria's democratically elected president.

However, events following this political epoch have largely spelt doom for the Nigerian state. More so the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria bestows presidential powers on the vice president in event of death of substantive president. Thus, the coming of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan raises the many fundamental, but critical questions of who owns the land. Who is a valid representation of the hallowed office of the Nigerian seat of power, the Aso Rock Villa? Is Nigeria ready for a step forward in the 21st century when the world system looks forward to socio-economic recovery, and beyond primordial politics? What is the possibility of evolving a viable economic recovery in the midst of ethnic question? These are posers that beg for answers and the political space which is already over heating with wanton killings, blatant use of explosives sweeping thousands of innocent lives, invasion and killing of villagers who are rest in the height of their quiet nights, attack on security outfits, threat to peace and open calls on the destabilization of the unity of the Nigerian state, internal aggression, theft, scapegoatism, kidnapping, name calling, open assault on persons and groups, protests, conspiracy of either security officers or unscrupulous elements to let loose those suspected to be machinators of mayhem in the Nigerian society, and the like.

These are indications that politics in Nigeria now runs at the highest temperature and it can only take truly nationalistic, collective aspirations to nip the phenomena in the bud. Of particular importance is the period under which the events are unfolding ever since the assumption of office by Jonathan. These are strange and the level of insecurity now is unprecedented, and hardly have we witnessed this type of unrest since the history of the Nigerian state. It is instructive therefore to state here that the Nigerian state might be heading for a disaster if urgent steps are not taken to address critical issues of ethnicity and sectionalism in the affairs of the Nigerian state.

This tendency if allowed to flourish, may enable Nigerian to build a virile democracy. It can also deepen the agenda of ethnicity further. And what that means is that the Nigerian state will be enormously canvassing for ill-orientated leadership to man the affairs of the state since he/she is rated based on which ethnic groupings he/she belongs.

5. SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

Ethnic difference is perhaps one of the most volatile characteristics of Nigeria's diversity. This is evidenced by the various ethnicity uprisings witnessed under the current democratic regime. Ethnicity problem/conflict is a common phenomenon in Nigeria and a by-product of an accumulated deprivation, discrimination, anger, marginalization and frustration of the past. Ethnicity becomes a fashionable tool used in threatening the survival of Nigeria's democracy. It is therefore imperative for government to take a bold step in finding lasting solution to the problem of ethnicity in Nigeria. This will enable the institution of government to achieve the objectives of a good democratic governance. This is because democratic politics remain the only instrument for transforming Nigeria into an egalitarian society.

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