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Ethno-Religious Conflicts and Democratization in Nigeria

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Abstract

Since the returned of civil rule in 29 May 1999, Nigeria has witnessed increasing incidences of ethno-religious and communal conflicts resulting in the destruction of lives and properties. Ethnicity and Religion have been manipulated by political entrepreneurs to gain power and control resources. Additionally, the conflicts constitute one of the fundamental threats to institutional cohesion. This paper looks at Government responses to tackle ethno-religious conflicts. It analyses the peaceful outcome of the 2015 general elections that was evidence of harmonious relationship among ethnic groups and religion that contributed to the deepening of democracy in Nigeria.

Introduction

The wave of democratization, popularly referred to as the ‘Third wave’ (Huntington, 1991), swept across Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. Nigeria was not exempt from this wave and it adopted a national multi-party political structure however, a de facto one party rule persisted in the regions and states (Ukiwo, 2005). Nigeria is usually characterized as a deeply divided state in which major political issues are vigorously – some would say violently – contested along the lines of complex ethnic, religious, and regional divisions (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Carol Lancaster, in Ake (1993), has argued that political divisions increasingly fall along

ethnic or religious lines heightening tensions and ultimately, threatening national unity. Indeed, despite the democratization process, Nigeria, beginning in 1999, has witnessed Ethno-Religious conflicts that have resulted in loss of lives and property.

It is quite evident that democracy in Nigeria gave rise not only to political structures but also to economic, social and cultural relations among communities which fuel ethno- religious conflicts. The democratic structures of governance in Nigeria were too weak to enforce the principles of checks and balances and institutionalization of democracy giving way to ethno-religious conflict, which inhibited attempts at good governance. The conflicts includes: Tiv-Jukun conflicts, Hausa-Yoruba clashes, Aguleri-Umuleri crisis, Ife-Modakeke crisis, Kafanchan-Kaduna crisis, Jos crisis, Zango-Kataf, Kano, Illorin (Ojukwu and Onifade, 2010).

The paper is organized into four sections. Section one, Introduction, which has been addressed in the preceding discussion. Section two delves into theoretical clarifications, trying to define the key concepts. Section three addresses the role of elections. Section four discusses ethno-Religious conflicts, highlighting and analyzing some of the causes while section five examines Government response to ethno-religious conflicts and conclusion.

Conceptual clarification: Conflict

Conflicts are inevitable and inherent in all interdependent relationships. Conflicts usually reflect the diversity and complexity of human societies and are not necessarily a dysfunctional experience. Conflicts can be defined as a situation involving people or social groups with different interests and mutually antagonist tendencies and opposing influences competing for the use of limited resources to ensure or enhance their livelihoods (Ojukwu & Onifade, 2010). As people live together in close proximity, conflict is bound to occur. Conflict is a critical mechanism by which goals and aspirations of individuals and groups are articulated; it is a channel for the definition of creative solutions to human problems and a means to the development of a collective identity (Lamle, 2015).

Ethno-Religious conflicts have been recognized and rated as one of the most fundamental threats to institutional cohesion in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria. The uncertainties, political exclusion and pervasive fear of domination breed desperation and inform the organizing principle of identity mobilization. The uncertainties generate and escalate tension thus igniting an upsurge for the struggle for rights and autonomy. Democracy has pushed the claims of ethnic boundaries and belonging further. According to Nnoli (2005), ethnic conflict is understandable

because African countries are experiencing the two most stressful transformations in human history. These are: state-building and rapid development. Nnoli notes that of the two, state building is better known, for its violence. The state-building process in Africa, which started in colonial times and is still going on, seeks to centralize power within the state. In the process it has spread fear and terror in the subject population by its autocratic and violent methods, forcing many people to take refuge in primary identity and solidarity groups or to undertake armed resistance and confrontation.

The conflictual nature of development paradigms is significant in the explanation of ethnic conflicts. Like the state-building processes, it destabilizes status and power hierarchies. It concentrates efforts on changes in production and distribution, which intensify the struggle for wealth and power. Ojukwu and Onifade (2010), sees ethnic conflict as 'the struggle for preeminence'.

According to Rupesinghe and Anderlini (1998) cited in (Ojukwu & Onifade, 2010), ethnic conflicts are caused by:

- i) resource-based conflict, where competition for economic power and access to natural resources are given more attention.
- ii) Conflicts over governance and authority, based on competition for political power and participation in political processes. As Ronen (1975) puts it: not to be in power means not only to be out of power but also to be ruled by another region or regions which are in power. It means not only to be 'out' but also to be 'under', to be politically overpowered by others.
- iii) Ideological conflicts based on competition between rival ideologies and value systems.
- iv) Identity conflicts based on competition between rival ethnic, political and economic power and social justice.

Democratization

Samarasinghe (1994) sees democratization as a process of political change that means the political system of any given society towards a system of government that ensures peaceful competitive political participation in an environment that guarantees political and civil liberties. Rummel (n.d.), defines democratization as a process through which a political system becomes democratic. He further states that democratization refers to the transformation process from a non-democratic regime to a procedural democracy and subsequently to a substantive democracy, either as the first government in a newly independent country or by replacing an authoritarian system in an older one. Huntington (1991) defines a wave of democratization as a

group of transitions from non-democratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specific period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposition direction during that period.

Boutros Ghali (1996), defined democratization as a process, which leads to a more open, more participatory, less authoritarian society. This is not to say that democracy is without its detractors. In some quarters, the charge is made that there can be no democracy in times of trouble or war, that democracy violates minority and community rights, and that democracy must wait until development is fully achieved. However, whatever evidence critics of democracy can find in support of these claims must not be allowed to conceal a deeper truth: democracy contributes to preserving peace and security, securing justice and human rights, and promoting economic and social development. Ake (2000) cited in Ukiwo (2005) notes,

...far from being prone to generating ethnic conflict, democratization is actually an antidote to those things, which promote ethnic identity and what passes for ethnic conflicts in Africa. What are these causes? The most important is the character of the post-colonial state in Africa... its power over economy and society is enormous, arbitrary and it is largely privatized for all but a few of its citizens, it is alien and remote, uncaring and oppressive... many of them have turned away from the state and given their loyalty to sub-national formations.

As Ake argued most of the conflicts that erupted in post-military period in Nigeria have been linked to the state in one form or the other (Ukiwo, 2005). Since the state is regarded as an obstacle to democracy and ethnic harmony it has become expedient for scholars to advocate significant state retrenchment. Nnoli (1995), has advocated the devolution of state power from the centre to regions and divesting the state of its economic enterprises and holdings, and their privatization and/or commercialization. A great deal of ethnic conflict has emanated from the struggle over the location of these enterprises, recruitment of their personnel and the use of their resources thus, divestment would allow impersonal market forces to assume control of the allocation of resources of these enterprises. It is clear from the Nigerian situation that whenever such market forces are in control, the distribution of the national cake follows the lines of relations of production (class) rather than ethnic lines.

Berman (2010) assert that the decay of the state and resulting intensified struggle for control of resources and accumulation of wealth in circumstances of growing poverty and uncertainty for the mass of the population has increased both the horizontal and vertical inequalities between and within ethnic communities and the conflicts of moral ethnicity and political tribalism. There are strong indications that perceptions of horizontal inequality and the resultant ethnic rivalry have centered on contestations over control of resources and power.

Elections

Omotola (2014), define election as ‘primarily a contest among groups mainly political parties’. Nelson (n.d.) states that election is an enduring democratic practice, which allows people to make choices about who will govern them. It facilitates leadership succession, promotes accountability in politics and guarantees the participation of the citizenry in the political process. This is one of the reasons why some theorists regarded elections as an essential part of the process of consolidating democracy. Huntington (1991) has posited a ‘two turn-over test for measuring democratic consolidation in electoral systems. A democracy is said to have been consolidated if there is at least two succession turn- over of power from one political party to another via elections. For the first time, this happened in Nigeria in the 2015 general election, where the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in power lost to the opposition, All Progressive Congress (APC) party.

The conceptual anchorage of elections on popular choice generally gives an impression of equity in the electoral process. It is on this note that this paper argues for the 2015 general election as a consolidation of the deepening of democracy in Nigeria. Boutros- Ghali (1996) noted that democratic institutions and processes channel competing interests into arenas of discourse and provide means of compromise which can be respected by all participants in debates, thereby minimizing the risk that differences or disputes will erupt into armed conflict or confrontation. Given that democratic governments are freely chosen by their citizens and held accountable through periodic and genuine elections and other mechanisms, they are more likely to promote and respect the rule of law, respect individual and minority rights, cope effectively with social conflict, absorb migrant populations and respond to the needs of marginalized groups. Indeed, such governments are less likely to abuse their power against their people. Democracy within states fosters the evolution of the social contract upon which lasting peace can be built. In this way, a culture of democracy is fundamentally a culture of peace. There are strong indications that the peaceful post election outcome from the 2015 general election will minimize or tackle ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

Ethno-religious conflict

Since the return of civil rule in May 1999, Nigeria has witnessed increasing incidences of ethno-religious and communal conflicts. These conflicts are attributed to ethnic grievances with people believing that democratic dispensations can listen to their grievances. According to Kalejaiye and Alliyu (2013), the proliferation of communal associations, which attracted a large proportion of urban dwellers triggered intra-class and inter-individual socio-economic competition especially among various town unions. The ethno-religious conflicts are what Blagojevic (2009), refers to as the presence of historical memories of inter-ethnic grievances; manipulation of historical memories by political entrepreneurs to evoke emotions such as fear, resentment, and hate towards the “other”; and an inter-ethnic competition over resources and rights. Nnoli (2003) points out that ethnic conflict is the product of political or administrative policy of divide-and-rule that mobilizes and manipulates ethnic consciousness. Aduba (n.d.) has identified other causes of what we now refer to as ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria including: accusation and allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation, victimization, discrimination, marginalization, nepotism and bigotry.

Stavenhagen cited in Ukiwo (2003) notes that:

Conflicts between ethnic groups are not inevitable nor are they eternal. They arise out of specific historical situations, are molded by particular and unique circumstances, and they are constructed to serve certain interests by idealists and ideologies, visionaries and opportunists, political leaders and ethnic power brokers of various kinds.

The contingent nature of ethnicity is what Sylvester (n.d.) observes constitute such conflicts as; Shari’a and insecurity in the North; ethnic and communal conflicts in the Niger-Delta area, where armed community gangs terrorize and abduct personnel working for foreign oil companies; South-West; Odua Peoples’ Congress (OPC), an armed Kombi group campaigning violently for the restructuring of Nigeria, and for a Sovereign National Conference (SNC); Middle-Belt, conflicts between Fulani herdsmen and Farmers; and, the Tiv-Jukun crises. Osaghae and Suberu (2005) notes that Ethno- Religious clashes have proved to be the most violent instances of inter-group crisis in Nigeria. They have occurred mainly in the middle-Belt and cultural borderline state of the Muslim north, where the Muslim Hausa-Fulani groups are pitted against non- Muslim ethnic groups in a “dangerous convergence of religious and ethnic fears and animosities... in which it is often difficult to differentiate

between religious and ethnic conflicts as the dividing line between the two is very thin”.

From the incidences of ethno-religious conflicts cited above there is a thin line between ethnic conflict and religious conflict due to the fact that these conflicts are often manipulated and what begins as ethnic conflict ends up as religious conflict and vice-versa. Two trends are discernible from the discourse on ethno-religious conflicts and democratization. Ukiwo (2003) provides a lens to look at the two trends. First, he emphasizes the contribution of ethnicity; second, he focuses on the nature of democratization. Ethnicity, whether seen from the primordialist, instrumentalist or constructivist perspective is perceived as inherently conflict prone. It has been argued that ethnic groups are supposed to be evidence of harmonious relationship. This is evidenced by some ethnic groups like Pyem ethnic group in Gindiri in Mangu Local Government Area and Chalya ethnic group in Bokkos Local Government Area all in Plateau State who live in harmony.

Further evidence is given by the Ngas ethnic group found in Pankshin and Kanke Local Government Areas and Bokwom ethnic group found in Kanem (Dengi) Local Government Area of Plateau State who equally live in harmonious coexistence. The second perspective is on democratization, which is viewed as inherently conflictual because it entails a radical redistribution of power as well as the acceptance of a political culture of equality. Ukiwo (2003) observes that in cases where there is no such redistribution of power or equalization of opportunities to hold offices, as some African examples poignantly show, the limitation of democratic transition could also ignite violent conflicts as the already sensitized public realizes that no changes are forthcoming. As already pointed out, the 2015 general elections is a framework of democratic consolidation where the post-election was peaceful and did not ignite any violent conflicts as was had been the case in the past. As noted, Ethnicity and Religion were not used, and nor should they be used, in the acquisition of power and the electoral body has been institutionalized. In sum, incidences of conflicts were avoided in the 2015 general elections a factor that contributes to the deepening of democratization.

From the foregoing, this article holds to the analytical framework that the Nexus between Ethnicity, Religion and Democratization is the absence of the manipulation of ethno-religious conflicts in the democratic consolidation of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The discussion focuses on ethno-religious axis because some of the violent conflicts in the past were as a result of manipulation by elite to acquire power and/or solve other grievances. The succeeding section examines the

Government response to ethno-religious conflicts in its quest to consolidate democratization in the country.

Government response to ethno-religious conflicts

There are three main ethnic groups that historically dominate politics in Nigeria: the northern Hausa-Fulani, who are mainly Muslim; the Yoruba in the West, who are Christian and Muslim; and, the Igbos in the East, who are largely Christian. There are pockets of other population who belongs to other minority groupings. According to Ukiwo (2003), these groupings have resulted in unbridled competition for political relevance and spheres of interests among politicians, especially in the context of the division of the country into geopolitical zones, states and local governments and the fact that distribution of benefits among the political class depends on the ability of each member of the ruling class to deliver his constituency. Ukiwo goes further to say that in such circumstances; ethnicity, religion and other sectarian identities are exploited, resulting in avoidable violent conflicts among component units of the country. Osaghae and Suberu (2005) point out that the colonial tripartite Federal legacy also exacerbated ethno-regional conflicts paving the way for ethno-military infighting and secessionist warfare in Nigeria.

The government has undertaken some measures to strengthen Federalism, encourage unity, and promote political inclusion of ethnic, religious and regional groupings. It is hoped that these measures will also help in consolidating democratic institutions and mechanisms in order to promote peace in the country.

The federal character and indigene principle

The Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), chapter II section 14, subsection 3 and 4, state clearly that the composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that Government or in any of its agencies. Subsection 4 follows that, the composition of the Government of a state, Local government Council, or any of the agencies of such Government or council, and the conduct of the affairs of the Government or council or such agencies shall be carried out in such a manner as to recognize the diversity of the people within its area of authority

and the need to promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all the peoples of the Federation.

Chapter VI, part 1B, Section 153 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), states that there shall be established for the Federation the federal character commission. The third Schedule Part 1C 8(b) underlines the need to promote, monitor and enforce compliance with the principles of proportional sharing of all bureaucratic, economic, media and political posts at all levels of government. Chapter VI, Part 1A Section 147(3), states clearly that the President shall appoint at least one Minister from each state, who shall be an indigene of such state.

Despite these noble measures, there is no doubt that there are grievances that occasionally exacerbate violence however, the focus of this paper is to look at those measures that bind and unite Nigerians.

States creation

Nigeria is comprised of thirty Six independent states and a Federal Capital Territory - Abuja. Baker (2012), has opined that if more states were created by the Federal Government by subdividing existing states, there would be more than one state per ethnic group. This would mean that for revenue allocation, Federal elections, government appointments, employment, contracts, and other Federal benefits, Igbos would compete with other Igbos, Yoruba with other Yoruba's, and so on. This would make it difficult for any ethnic group to consolidate secessionist sentiment within one territorial area, government agency, or base of political power. Such a sub-division would enable resources to reach states and Local governments for development. In addition, the sub-division would, probably, enhance transparency and accountability.

Presidential election requirement

Baker (2012), states that another measure to discouraged ethnic voting, prevent secessionist tendencies and avert violence is a constitutional formula for declaring a Presidential Candidate a winner. Chapter VI Part 1A Section 133(b) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), states that to declare a Presidential Candidate a winner, he/she should have not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the states in the Federation and Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. This provision enables the election of the President to be based on National Unity and Mandate devoid of any ethno-religious influence.

Religious institutions

Aduba (n.d.), observes that government should leave the religious space to religious institutions. The question of government sponsoring religious bodies, for example, to go for pilgrimage should not be allowed but rather left solely to the religious institutions. This principle was demonstrated by the administration of Governor Ahmed EL-Rufai of Kaduna state that withdrew government sponsorship for pilgrimage in 2015.

Conclusion

The paper has focused on the general election of 2015 in Nigeria. The election was peaceful and saw the change of government from the ruling to the opposition party. The transition of power minimized and tackled potential ethno-religious conflicts in the country. There were measures being undertaken by Government to respond to ethno-religious conflicts, which if adhered to will deepen democracy and mitigate the manipulation of religion and ethnicity in the quest to capture power.

It is time to have the electorate choose credible leaders that will not undermine national unity. The government responses to the ethno-religious conflicts suggested in this paper, once adopted and operationalized, can contribute significantly not only in mitigating ethno-religious conflicts but also in deepening democratization in Nigeria

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