

Ethnicity and the National Question in Nigeria

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Abstract: Nigeria is still a house divided against itself. Ethnic mistrust and tension run high, tribal loyalty remain stronger than national loyalty. Ethnic problems have not only persisted but in some cases, intensified leading to meaningful suggestions in some quarters that the country should be broken up into two or three parts. This paper examines the nature of ethnicity in Nigeria, how it has affected and negated national development. The study observed that Nigeria is multi-ethnic and the inter-play of this ethnic factor has created more obstacles to the corporate existence of Nigeria as a nation. Consequently, politics by its nature and character constitutes a democratic structure capable of engendering stable development which is at the center of national question. This study analyses the need for democratic consolidation because of its volume impact of ethnic politics on national development. The problematic nature of ethnicity and its negative effect on nation-building is explained with elite pluralist theory. The study relies on analytical concepts and secondary source of data. The study recommends among others that political education and training are vital in creating a new social order and also the crisis of national integration needs to be solved before political parties should be allowed to appear.

Key words: Ethnicity • National question • Democratic consolidation • Nation-building • Ethnic politics

INTRODUCTION

The problem of evolving a political structure that would accommodate the interests of the various nationalities which constitute the “Nigerian nation” started from independence. Ninety-four year after the first (the Clifford) constitution was drafted in 1922 and the several other constitutions since independence on October 1, 1960, Nigeria is still battling with a workable structure that has been severely challenged by the protraction of the ‘national question’.

The national question is conceived by scholars as consisting of the political mobilizations and struggles by dissatisfied and aggrieved ethnic groups to redress and exact more just and equitable accommodation from the Nigerian nation-state [1]. National question is tied to the erosion of the state and its failure to meet the needs of the citizens evident in the injustice in the protection of lives of the individuals of various groups inhabited in the nation space.

The problem has to do with the politics of ethnicity and the intervention of the military in politics. Levels of educational development between the Northern and Southern part of the country caused imbalance in the level of political development and was to affect the direction of national politics even during the struggle for independence. In fact, while the Southern part of the country was ready for and had indeed embraced self-governance in 1957, the North did not do so until 1959 [2]. Post independence political history of Nigeria, therefore, is more or less the story of how Nigeria has since tied to grapple with its problem of apparent lack of unity and how best to accommodate the competing socio-political and ethno-cultural problems of its people.

The problem must be examined against the background of certain colonial actions that in variably put the Nigeria nation where it is. First, the balkanization of the country into three regions of unreasonably unequal sizes was a grievous error of political judgment on the part of the British. The Northern region, the largest, was

more than the Eastern and Western regions put together. This was as it ought to have been very clear to the British authorities, a perfect recipe for an unhealthy national diet. To make this worse, the division of the regions conformed, amazingly, with the British perception of the ethnic composition of the country (Nnoli, 1980). The North was Hausa-Fulani, the East; Igbo and the West, mainly Yoruba.

Yet, there are over 250 and not three tribes in Nigeria. There was no way that the social and political interests and aspirations of 247 distinct ethnic groups, no matter how small in population each of them was, could be satisfied in a political arrangement that, subverted those interests. This however, explains the nature of ethnic relations and political dynamics that have shaped the content and direction of national unity irreconcilable differences among the peoples that constitute Nigeria; educational imbalance, regional politics expressed in tribalism, disunity and fear of domination. All these prevented the development of real patriotism or national-spirit but rather paved the way for inter-ethnic hatred, bickering, nepotism, corruption, abuse of power, politicization of census, election and security system. This paper examines the impact of ethnicity as it effects national development in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification: The major concepts that need some brief clarification especially with regard to their usage and meaning in the paper include ethnicity and the national question. Ethnicity or tribalism is interchangeable. Much of the difficulties and hazards that scholars face are of course based on the person's perception and background. Ethnicity or the related term tribalism is thus a psycho-social phenomenon. But more than this, ethnicity is confliction; it involves conflicts among diverse communal groups. [2] define ethnic groups in the African context and assert that ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal characters of the boundaries. The relevant fact may be language, culture, or both. In Africa, language has been the most curial variable. Similarly [3] sees ethnicity as a culture that has complex whole, which include knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom and other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of society or group.

Writing in the same vein, [4], believed that ethnic groups are groups that think of themselves as sharing special bounds of history and culture that set them apart from others. Ethnic group is a social group which, within a large cultural and social system claims or is accorded a special status in terms of complex or traits (ethnic traits) which it inhibits or is believed to exhibit. Such traits are

diverse and there is much variety in the complexes that they form [5]. [6], opined that ethnicity is a belief in superiority of one's own cultural group or corresponding hatred or misunderstanding of other such groups.

[7] defined ethnic group as an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other ethnic groups within the larger society because they share kinship, religious and linguistic ties. He further explained that ethnic groups are social formation distinguished by the communal boundaries.

It is obvious from the definitions above that ethnicity as a concept has everything to do with identification of groups within a given country. This identification as [8] indicated is based on those common features that tend to distinguish the members of a group from other groups; stressing that an important feature of ethnic identification is the fact that relations among members of the group are based on origins, decent and the evolution overtime of common cultural features such as language.

However, ethnicity has the capacity to acquire passionate attribute; where the ethnic group are aware of socio-cultural difference with other group but continued to live together in peace and aggressive attribute, when competition for socio-economic and political privileges or rights in a geo-political set-up is the case [9]. He further asserts that, political competition and rivalry seems to be the most flammable instrument of ethnic aggression. Thus ethnicity has the potential of being manipulated to the level that it generates conflicts within society, as [10] avers that ethnicity is a social phenomenon which is capable of altering its form(s), place and role in the life of a society. In other words it can jeopardize meaningful development in general.

That brings us to the concept of national question. National question is a term used for a variety of issues related to national development; how to structure the Nigeria Federation in order to accommodate groups and guarantee access to power and equitable distribution of resources. The national question focuses on the competition and conflict between different ethnic groups to control the political power and resources of the nation. The background to national question is the perceived domination of some ethnic groups by the other engendered by the structural nature of the Nigerian Federation, the heavy lopsidedness in center-state relations [11]. Ajayi[11] argued that the National Question is the perennial debate as how to order the relations between the different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groupings so that they have the same rights and privileges, access to power and equitable share of national resources [12].

[13], noted that the national question is fundamentally related to the question of rights and privileges of nations and peoples particularly in the context of oppression. The under-listed issues to, [14] are very vital to the national question:

- What should be the component units and tiers of government in the Nigeria federation?
- How should they be constituted, based on ethnic contiguity or administrative expediency?
- How should political power and administrative responsibilities be shared among the levels and tiers of government?
- How should the ownership of economic resources be structure in the Nigeria federation?
- What should be the acceptable formulae for sharing federally collected revenue?
- What should be the nature of inter-governmental relations in Nigeria?

Virtually all the various ethnic groups in Nigeria today talk about marginalization and domination; all the ethnic groups are affected one way or the other by the national question. For the Niger Delta and oil producing minority it is exploitation and environmental degradation; for the Igbo it is marginalization; for the Hausa Fulani, it is uneven development; for the minorities of the North, particularly the Middle Belt it is one of internal colonialism; for the Yoruba it is power exclusion. Hence everybody is demanding empowerment on the basis of one assumption – xenophobia [13].

[14], in his contribution, noted that the domination of some ethnic groups by the other engendered by the structural nature of the Nigerian Federation, the heavy lopsidedness in center-state relations. The fears and demands of ethnic militias basically revolve round the issues of National question. For instance, the concern of MASSOB is marginalization of the East in the power equation in Nigeria; that of OPC is about “power shift” and restructuring of the federation and the quest for self-determination by group (Avengers) in the Niger Delta region is based on the social injustice, neglect and marginalization that the area suffers in the Nigerian nation.

Moreover, national question is believed to be at the question on the crisis of the Nigerian state and the problem of peaceful co-existence. This question varies in time and in space, it depends on the inter group relations and on the issues of marginalization, domination, inequality fairness and justice among ethnic groups.

Theoretical Explanation: The negative aspect of ethnicity can be analyzed by linking it to the theoretical

framework of the pluralist theory. Pluralists posit that society is made up of several groups with interests which may be at variance; in the framework of the theory of pluralism, ethnic groups are perceived as folk groups from a former era that are now under transformation as a result of the individual freedom offered to individuals in a modern society [15]. Pluralists stress the continuing viability of ethnic groups and they promote the idea of pluralistic and multi-cultural societies. Thus, there could be conflicting interests such as economic, religious, power sharing etc.

Advocates of this theory sees social conflict as a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aim of the conflicting parties are not only to gain desirable value but also to neutralize, injure and/or relegate their opponents [16]. This could be applied to Nigeria leadership, where personality interest in policy or decision making plays a vital role as a result of ethnic chauvinist when politics is involved. This human attitude manifests in form of prejudice and tribalism (ethnic conflict). Prejudice can as well be turned to discrimination. If this happens, there will be strong pressure to exclude outsiders in the sharing of commonwealth of the nation.

In the pre-colonial era and since the independence of Nigeria, ethnicity played and is still playing manifest and latent roles in the body politics of Nigeria. [4], rightly observed that, the ethnic virus has been one of the most important causes of social crisis and political instability in Nigeria; and ethnicity has been perceived in general as a major obstacle to the overall politic-economic development of the country [15].

Ethnicity in Nigeria: a Historical Overview: Nigeria as a nation is a child of British colonialism. Even its name came from Lady Lugard, wife of Fredrick Lugard, the country’s first governor –general. Nigeria, therefore, did not exist as a national entity before the British, who had administered the northern and southern provinces more or less as separate and distinct territories, amalgamated them from 1914. Nigeria’s problems were man-made partly tailored, if perfectly, by nature itself. It is man-made in the sense and manner of the country’s colonization, while problem created by nature concerns its geography and ethnic composition.

By 1962, there were traceable political conflict, between Action Group (AG) and rival party, Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP) formed by Akintola. The leader of AG, Awolowo accused the NPC of subverting Western regional government by collaborating with S. L Akintola (Afigbo, 1986). As a result, by 1963,

Awolowo and his key political supporters were accused of the highest offences of treason and felony. They were tried and found guilty and Awolowo was imprisoned for 10 years. However, it was not until 1964 that the Western region election that witnessed a complete breakdown of law and order. They were also discriminate killing, confusion and massive looting that led to state of anarchy. As a result, some radical corps was drawn into Nigeria politics, masterminded by Major Chukwuemeka Nzeogwu and others [2]. Notable among the victims killed were Prime Minister himself, Tafawa Belewa, Saduna of Sokoto, Premier of Western region, Akintola, the most flamboyant Nigerian politician, Okotiebo. Funny enough, the Eastern region premier, Michael I. Opara was not involved because the military men sent to kill him failed in their duty, forty-eight hours after Nzeogwu's coup.

Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, a major-general and general officer commanding the Nigerian Army, assumed power as head of a federal military government and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Nigerians began to do one of the things they do best; ask some pertinent questions. They found answers in the motives of the coup planners: a planned Igbo-ethnic domination. Whether this was correct or not, there was some evidence for those looking for some. For the fact that the coup planners were mainly Igbo officers led by the late Chukwuemeka Kaduna Nzeogwu [18].

The north and the west lost more people. In the north, nearly all its senior army officers; four of them while the west lost two. Both regions also lost their premiers. The north also donated the prime minister and the mid-west lost a federal minister to the coup. Ironsi strengthen the fears of the north about the alleged planned Igbo domination of the ethnic politics of the country when he abolished the four regions and introduced a unitary system. This political move, whatever informed Ironsi's decision, was fatal to him, his regime and Igbo in general. This to them, was unacceptable, as it was a threat to their socio-economic welfare and political aspirations. Seven months after Ironsi came to power, he was overthrown and Gowon took over as head of the federal military government.

In discussing the steps which led to the collapse of Nigerian First Republic, the disastrous events of 1966 and the massacre of Igbo in part of northern Nigeria; many will still remember the 30-months Biafra war of secession from July 1967 until January 1970, when the Igbo people were regularly portrayed overseas as the victims of systematic oppression in the federation [19]. As inexact as these general opinions might be, they still touch on what remains a crucial feature of Nigerian politics; the extent to

which conflicts tend to take on the character of a struggle among sectional groups, whether defined by language, ethnicity, region or religion.

From 1951-1962, three of the major parties; NPC in the north, NCNC, in the East and Action Group in the West, controlled governmental regions. The major political parties were commonly identified with "ethnic" group interest in a misleading manner. Since then till date, Nigeria has never had what can be described as a nationwide political party. Rather, what it has had changed name of the old establishments. For instance, it is well known that the political parties of the First Republic were the very ones that operated in the second Republic with changes only in name(s). All had their roots in their different dominant regions.

The Effects of Ethnicity on National Development: No matter what view one may take of Nigeria, its politics and economics and national aspirations, all agree that has come of age, no doubt, Nigeria emerged from British colonial rule as an unbalanced multi-ethnic federal state, the cultural diversity of whose component units could make political instability inevitable. Unfortunately, the colonial rulership made no serious attempts at integrating the disparate primordial ethnic groups into a coherent political entity.

It is, therefore not surprising that after exhibiting some semblance of unity in order rid themselves of the yoke of British colonial rule, the different nationalities latter gave vent to inter-ethnic animosities and ethno-cultural grievance in the struggle for power in Nigeria, resulting in several political crisis each of which seriously threatened the country's corporate existence.

Having been fragmented along regional and ethnic lines due to the organization of the colonial economy along enclaves isolated from each other, The Nigerian leaders tended to regard this regional enclaves as exclusive reservoirs of benefits for those of them the regional and ethnic homeland.

Therefore, under the prevailing socio-economic and political formation in Nigeria, the issue of equity, fair play and internal self-determination among the federating ethnic nationalities becomes a mirage. Accordingly, [2] asserted that Nigerian leaders have an objective interest in maintaining the ethnic pattern activities and imperialist structure, both of which are inimical to inter-ethnic harmony. The most pressing problem facing the Nigerian state and one which must be tackled is to find a lasting solution to the issue of uneven national revenue allocation and development (national question). This is because, the inordinate and irreconcilable ambitions of the

chauvinistic elites of the various ethnic groups, especially the big three ethno-cultural group; Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo who want to dominate and control the country, had led to the over-politicization of ethnicity in Nigeria, with a resultant effect of the state's failure to emerge as a reassuring instrument in the society.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the national question, beyond the effects of ethnicity with concerns on the disunity and prejudice challenges facing the country, it also has implications for the country's socio-political system. Social cohesion among various groups and interests is important in the process of national political and economic development. The activities of the Niger-Delta militants, militia groups like Oduduwa People's Congress (OPC), Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), EGBESU and constant sectarian turmoil exemplified by the activities of Boko Haram all expressing deep ethnic sentiments put together is a major obstacle to achieving sustainable development.

Unfortunately, all these developments are sure signs of disillusionment and tensions that are capable of tearing our country apart. They are all expressions of the fear of marginalization, domination, inequality, unfairness and injustice noticeable in our nation. They point to severe cracks in our inter-ethnic relations. And, they are a reminder of the National Question, which must be tackled to save Nigeria from disintegration.

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