
ETHNICITY AND FEDERAL STRUCTURE IN NIGERIA- WHICH WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

The paradox of the Nigerian situation is that the issues of national unity are intrinsically interwoven within the confines of ethnic loyalties, sectionally motivated violence, secessionist threats, ethno-religious conflicts among others. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines ethnicity, militia formations, economic and politically based violence as issues and challenges increasing the tempo of ethnic consciousness vis-à-vis the factors bedeviling Nigeria's unity. The paper concludes that a total federal restructuring via true federalism may promote lasting national unity in Nigeria.

Key Words: Ethnicity, Ethnic consciousness, Federalism, National unity, Nigeria

Word counts: 3, 390

Introduction

Between 1914 and 2012, Nigeria had recorded more than eight secessionist attempts, which have all been premised on ethnic differences and intolerance. The Biafran War (1967-1970) was a major epoch of the secessionist movements within this period (Okpu, 1977; Rakov, 2012). One of the reasons that could be advanced in line with this assertion is that Nigeria is a man-made nation with colonial history; and that the boundaries of the formerly English colony were drawn to serve commercial interests, largely without

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regard for the territorial claims of the indigenous peoples. As a result, about three hundred ethnic groups that comprise the population of Nigeria has been consistently under siege of distrust and suspicions, which are all pointing to the fact that ethnicity is a factor in national unity especially in Nigeria.

The count of three hundred ethnic groups mentioned above also involve ethnic minority groups, that do not have political voice, nor do they have access to resources or the technology needed to develop and modernize economically. They therefore often consider themselves discriminated against, neglected or oppressed. Indeed, there are only three ethnic groups which have attained "ethnic majority" status in their respective regions, namely the Hausa – Fulani in the north, the Ibo in the southeast, and the Yoruba in the southwest. This is why the issue of unity in Nigeria's diversity over the years has been given various interpretations. In fact, recent developments in the country have proved that most frequently, the term "unity in diversity" is only remembered when the need arises for one to take undue advantage of the other (Max – Alalibo, 2012).

Ethnicity is phenomenally problematic in Nigeria. It is held partly responsible for the underdevelopment of the country. It has been blamed for misplaced norms and values and regressive consciousness, which has fostered corruption and destructive conflicts, at the time when nations around the globe – especially in this 21st century are prospering, educating their young generations and motivating them to achieve great things, Nigeria is lagging behind and anti-progressive elements like Boko Haram, ethnic jingoism, bias and hatred, injustice, poor and corrupt leadership, looting of public treasury, money laundering and monumental corruption characterize every aspect of the nation's life (Ekeke, 2012).

However, unfolding events in Nigeria, over the last few years are threatening to weaken the nearly a century old labour of our founding fathers and subsequent generations in building a strong, united and peaceful nation that can accommodate and cater for the needs and aspirations of our diverse communities. Inter-ethnic crises are raging across the land unabated with damaging consequences on the social, political and economic life of the nation.

and in the process, untold hardships are being visited on all citizens in one form or another on a daily basis (Max-Alaibo, 2012).

Currently, the nation is gripped by a regime of fear and uncertainty that virtually make all citizens have difficulties going about their normal day-to-day lives with great anxiety and trepidation. A deeply worrying trend that is emerging from this terrible situation is that ethnicity, secession and pervasive cynicism is so much that Nigerian patriots are starting to question the platform upon which the unity of this country rests. It is against this backdrop that this paper aimed at examining the current federal structure via the issues and challenges increasing the tempo of ethnic consciousness in Nigeria's nationhood.

Conceptual Clarifications

Ethnicity: The concept of ethnicity requires definition. Okpu (1977) and Rakov (2012) define an ethnic group as a group of people having a common language and cultural values. An ethnic group forms one of the many bases of cleavages in plural societies. It constitutes an increasingly important strategic unit for making claims to citizenship as well as demands for resource control. It involves "plural persons" expressing loyalties to their ethnic groups on the basis of which they relate to others in the wider society (Otite, 2000). Ethnicity may thus be defined as the contextual discrimination by members of one group against others on the basis of differentiated systems of socio-cultural symbols (Cohen, 1969; Otite 1975; Otite 2000). This definition has the advantage of combining the two vital aspects of the concepts, that is, its static and objective structural properties on the one hand, and its dynamic and analytic sense, on the other. Ethnicity is real; it is not an imaginary phenomenon. It involves a perception of group difference, as well as manipulation and exploitation of that perception.

Federalism: Federalism is usually viewed as a form of governmental and institutional structure, deliberately designed by political "architects", to cope with the twin but difficult task of maintaining unity while also preserving diversity (Jinadu, 1980). In its simplest sense, federalism is a system of government whereby governmental

powers are shared between the central government and the component or federating units. Wheare (1963) defines federalism as a government where the powers of the government are divided substantially according to the principles that there is a single independent authority for the whole country in respect of some matters and independent regional authorities being co-ordinate with and not subordinate to the others. He went further to state that federalism is a method of dividing powers so that general and regional governments are each within a sphere and a coordinate and are also independent.

While *theorizing federalism*, Wheare stresses the prerequisites for a federal structure explicitly as: constitutional delimitation of powers, bi-cameral legislative, independent electoral systems for both levels of government, multi-party but preferably a two-party system and a supreme court. On the other hand, Carl Friedrich as quoted by Jinadu (1980) argued that federalism is a process rather than a design. Indeed, if understood as a *process of federalizing*, federalism may be operating in both the direction of integration and differentiation. Thus, federalism is a general principle of social organization and that the degree of federalism in a political system is a function of sociological and not a legal criterion.

From another perspective, Etzioni (1962) suggested that federalism belongs to a class of political system devised to bring about the unification of political communities. While it is probably impossible to offer rigorous differentiation in order to distinguish between federation and the formulation of political entities, the merits of Etzioni's perspective is that it makes plausible the classification of federalism as a species of unitary government, wherein local autonomy as defined in terms of either ethnicity, language, religion or race – is preserved and encouraged (Jinadu, 1980). Viewed in this light, the euphemism about unity in diversity that is expressed in Nigeria context becomes meaningful. Therefore, federalism is the most convenient system for the multi-ethnic Nigerian community (Yakubu, 1996; Jekayinfa, 2012)

The current Federal Structure and the Question of Nigeria's Nationhood

The Nigerian federation was established to 'hold together' the diverse ethnicities and nationalities that had been forcibly and arbitrarily incorporated into a unitary colonial state under British imperialism (Suberu & Agbaya, 2004). Regrettably, devolutionary federation is lacking in Nigeria for integrative identities, civic reciprocity and mutual respect. Rather, Nigeria is besieged by the disruptive local and ethnic loyalties that made the constitutional fragmentation of the state necessary (Suberu & Agbaya, 2004). The kind of federal structure and system of government practiced in Nigeria has continuously been criticized as the fundamental factor in Nigeria's inability to attain nationhood. This system has no immediate or remote resemblance to features of federalism or practices elsewhere (Ejiofor, 2012). Nigeria is rapidly falling apart and disintegrating and the rulers care less about it. Going by the United States Federal Bureau of Intelligence prediction on Nigeria's demise in 2015, one would agree that their prediction is on the track of being fulfilled (Ekeke, 2012).

Collectively, the issues of Nigeria's nationhood are summarized in the now famous "National Question" and its answers are found in determining why nations federate. One of the basic reasons is to form a more perfect union to provide for efficient economic, social and political cohesion cum advancement, while at the same time, the federating units maintain some levels of autonomy and right to self determination. This is why a federation tries to balance the centrifugal and centripetal forces to achieve the purpose of nationhood (Ejiofor, 2012); and just as pointed earlier, the paradox of Nigerian situation is that, the issues of national unity are intrinsically interwoven within the confines and the parameter of ethnic loyalties and sentiments. Consequently, the trend has been for the southern region to canvass for a resolution of the national questions, while the northern section provides a fierce refusal to open up any discussion on those "volatile" issues. This creates a kind of stalemate. Every time, every Nigerian thinks that, national unity once achieved would benefit one section at the expense of other regions (Ejiofor, 2012).

Evidently, since the return to democratic government in 1999, Nigeria has allowed itself to wallow in religious and sectarian violence, political leadership failure, economic crises, moral crises, corruption and security challenges (Ekeke, 2012). Pitiably as it may seem, this demonstrates how petty and strong ethnic cleavages and suspicion of one another is in Nigeria in spite of the nearly half a century of independence. In the various agitations and clamours for a just and equitable nation, the need to convene a sovereign national conference; the fear of marginalization, insecurity, oppression, right to self-determination and civil war including the ever unending Niger – Delta and Boko Haram crises are all indications that something is definitely wrong with the system. There is therefore the need to address them and other issues, so as to allay all the fears associated with the issues listed here, with the view to forming a more stable union.

Prior to independence, Nigerian leaders never had a consensus of what type of nation they wanted. Each of them was concerned with ethnic and regional interest and no conscious effort was made to inculcate a true Nigerian dream (Ejiofor, 2012). Various issues that were divisive at independence were the status of Lagos, unequal representation, revenue allocation formula, minority question among others. However, the search for the elusive nationhood via national unity in Nigeria follows the pattern of deceit and insincerity of purpose. This is because the struggle since independence was characterized by selfish ethnic parochialism, ethnocentrism and overt regionalism, as there was no unanimity of purpose by the leaders to form a united country. It was and still ruled by constant suspicion and fears of domination by one ethnic group over the others.

Issues of National Unity and the Challenges posed by Ethnicity in Nigeria

The unabated spate of violence, insecurity and ethnic clashes are already threatening the century old aspirations of the founding fathers (Alarape, 2012). Basically, the problem of national unity in Nigeria is manifested in various challenges posed by ethnicity in the following forms:

Ethno-religious conflict

Communal and societal conflicts according to Ibrahim and Igbuzor (2002) have emerged as a result of new and particularistic forms of political consciousness and identity often structured around ethno-religious identities. In all parts of Nigeria, ethno-religious conflicts have assumed alarming rates. It occurred in places like Jos, Adamawa, Sagamu, Abia, to mention just a few. In these conflicts, new logics of social separation and dichotomy have evolved in many communities. Specifically, ethno-religious conflicts ravaged Bauchi, Jos, Kaduna, Maiduguri and Yobe States between 2000 and 2011 (Next Online Newspaper, 2011). These ethno-religious crises have become disintegrative and destructive social elements threatening the peace, stability and unity of Nigeria (Adagba, Ugwu & Eme, 2012).

Politically-Based Violence

Politics in the current civil dispensation like the previous republics have been politics of anxiety which has played down on dialogue, negotiation and consensus. Consequently, inter and intra-political party conflicts have become rife in which political gladiators are deploying large resources to outdo each other, changing the rules and regulations, distorting laws and employing violence and political assassination to settle political scores (Adagba *et al.*, 2012). Among the politically motivated killings are the killings of Chief Bola Ige, Funsho Williams, Dikibo, Ogbonna Uche, to mention just a few. To this end, Onyemaizu (2006) remarks thus:

A resort to violence, including armed militancy, assassination, kidnapping etc, have somewhat suddenly become attractive to certain individuals in seeking to resolve issues that could have ordinarily been settled through due process. The end products of such misadventures have often been catastrophic. They include the decimation of innocent lives, disruption of economic activities, and destruction of properties among others (p.10)

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Economic-Based Violence

Gries of resources control and revenue sharing regularly rent the air between proponents and opponents. The most prevalent campaign about the link between resources and conflict focuses on oil and the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. Put differently, there is evidence to suggest that oil has given rise to vertical and horizontal conflicts between national, state and society or between dominant and subordinate geo-political zones, classes and groups across Nigeria, given the pivotal role that oil plays in the restructuring power relations in Nigeria. The other thesis is that conflict in Nigeria, especially the Boko Haram insurgency is poverty-induced (Adetoro, 2012). This explanation is closely related to relative deprivation vis a vis abject poverty (Adagba *et al.*, *ibid*).

Organized-Violent Groups

Organized violent groups take varying dimension and forms. These include: ethnic militia, vigilantes, secret cults in tertiary institutions and political thugs. There are cases of Egbesu boys of the Niger-Delta canvassing for resource control; the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in Eastern Nigeria; the Arewa Youths in the North calling for power shift; and the Oduduwa Peoples' Congress (OPC) from South-Western Nigeria asking for true federalism. These agitations are manifested in the culture of militarism that have root in military rule, the failure of the state and its institutions, economic disempowerment, the structure of the state and Nigeria's federalism. Other areas of manifestation are in ethnicity, non-separation of state from religion, politics of exclusion, culture of patriarchy and gerontocracy and poor political consciousness (Ibrahim & Igbuzor, 2002; Adagba *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, in the report of the Human Rights Watch (2011), it was noted that more than 15,700 people had been killed in inter-communal, political and sectarian violence between 1999 when Nigeria returned to civilian rule and 2011. This does not include the recent killings emanating from the politically induced Boko Haram insurgency.

The Way Forward

In order to ensure lasting national unity devoid of ethnic sentiments, true federalism must be promoted. True federalism as the most convenient system for the multi-ethnic Nigerian nation dated back to the 1994–1995 conference recommendations which provide that:

- It should be a true federalism with clear demarcation of powers and functions among the federal, state and local governments and in the exercise of the power, each tier of government should be autonomous.
- Suitable distribution of political and economic powers should exist between the centre and the other component parts.
- The judiciary should be strong, independent and impartial.
- The federal structure should promote peace, justice and growth in relation to the complexities of the federating unit.

Moreover, the people of Nigeria must not allow whatever sense of frustration, fear and despair currently being experienced to supersede our hopes for a collective destiny which lies in our continued existence as a nation since the continued unity of this nation is not only priceless but non-negotiable. As a federation tries to balance the centrifugal and centripetal forces, there should be fair and equitable management of federal resources among all the federating units and also through policies that are geared towards oneness of purpose. To this end, the current six geo-political zones in the country could form a federating unit for the Nigerian state. Together, Nigerians should decide what federal structure they want. They should be able to arrive at a modus-operandi for resources control that ensures equilibrium between the federal authorities and the states, and thereby ensuring even and rapid development of the country (Nnamani, 2012). The call for referendum from various quarters should be urgently embraced in this regard. Although futility of various attempts have been tasted, it behooves on modern day detribalized Nigerians to be able to tolerate one another's differences and iron-out their differences on a round table.

This is because it is evident that unity is achieved when everyone is comfortable within the federal arrangement and when the factors that gave rise to those fears, suspicions are not in existence. To achieve this, certain safeguards like guarantee for fundamental human rights, abolition of indigenization, etc must be vigorously pursued and enforced. Hence, federalism must be practiced pure as we all know it from the books with zeal and patriotism.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that the basis of Nigeria's national unity was not agreed upon prior to independence. The inability of successive government to assuage the various federating units the feelings of injustice and threats have exacerbated the fear of ethnic domination, marginalization and insecurity which consequently have eroded whatever iota of unity that may have existed. For Nigeria to remain a united, indivisible nation with its rich diversity, endowed natural resources and blessed human power, the anomalies and injustices in the Nigerian system must be rectified through genuine federalism. This is so because in diversities, federalism appears to be the most accommodating option. Indeed, true federalism becomes the best option for building a virile, stable and prosperous Nigeria.

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