THE MENACE OF ETHNIC MILITIAS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATION FOR NATIONAL UNITY

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Abstract

Unity and development are threatened by the spate of violent conflicts in Nigeria. The operations of ethnic militias threaten peace, security and unity. The competition for ethnic domination has over the years assumed varying forms in the politics of Nigeria. This paper examines the meaning and the origin of ethnic militias in Nigeria. It also discusses the factors influencing the development of ethnic militias. A mini survey was conducted among 30 inhabitants of Oyo Township and the perceived effects of the menace of ethnic militias were identified to find out the degree of severity of the menace and their scope on different spheres of the Nigerians. The menace of ethnic militias breeds destruction of lives and property, displacement of people from one state to another leading to overpopulation in the state where they fled for safety. The scope of the effect on national unity may have health implications. The paper suggests among others that the Nigerian government should target the reduction of poverty among her citizens, and that economic justice should be a priority resulting in engagement of all resources for the common survival of Nigerian nation.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ethnic Militias and Unity.

Introduction

Nigeria, as it is today evolved from varied ethnic groups. Before the intrusion of the British into what is now known as Nigeria, the various ethnic and cultural groups that make up the country existed autonomous political entities. These entities had their own political system social and religious values distinct from one another (Okafor 1997). The aim of the British government in bringing these entities together was purely for exploitation of capital. The British therefore employed divide and rule tactics in order to consolidate and preserve British foothold with little interest in the social, economic or political development of the country and its people (Asia, 2001). Nigeria, by 1900 was made up of three different geo-political entities: Northern, Southern protectorate and the colony and protectorate of Lagos. By 1914 all the varied societies of Lagos protectorate and North and South were declared by British government to be members of a single state called Nigeria (Ekundayo, 1999). Hence, Nigeria can best be described as a heterogeneous society with numerous ethnic groups each of which has its own distinct religion, language and cultural background. With over four hundred (400) ethnic groups belonging to several religious sects, Nigeria since independence had remained a multi-ethnic nation state, which had been grappling and trying to cope with the problem of ethnicity on one hand and the problem of ethno-religious conflicts on the other (Salawu 2010). The British Colonial policies, were not tailored to foster unity among the disparate groups that constitute Nigeria, rather it was intended to exploit the varied differences, create distrusts, suspicious and cleavages among them (Uzoigwe, 1996). The

entrenchment of these differences and competition among the ethnic groups to control the soul of the Nigerian state led to several violent confrontations between them prior to the country's independence (Okafor, 1997).

The post-colonial regime that succeeded the colonialist, instead of carrying out comprehensive reforms of the Nigerian state so as to reduce sub-nationalism, had largely continued the pattern of the receded colonialists (Adejumobi, 2002). These successive post independence regimes failed in coalescing ethnic differences into positive ventures that could create a pan-Nigerian identity. These heterogeneous characteristics have tended to produce a kind of foreigner relationship among the sub-units, devoid of commonly shared values, goals and natural consciousness which are necessary and inalienable attributes of national unity and development.

The ethnic militias are not as harmful as perceived by so scholars like Agbu (2004) Badmus (2006) and Ikelegbe (2001)

However; they arose for a particular reason. They arose as a consequence of a repressive state forcing them underground and making them into ethnic militias after being formed as a civil society.

According to Adejumobi (2003), many civil society activists claim that the ethnic militias are mere manifestations and frustrated expression of the dysfunctional structure of the Nigerian federation and the character of the Nigerian state. He further stated that the solution to this problem is according to civil society groups, solved through addressing the national question which should be solved through a Sovereign National Conference. As the ethnic militias arose, they were treated as illegal militant organizations which are evident by the ban imposed on them in

2002 (Adejumobi, 2003). He claimed that groups like the Odua People Congress (OPC), the Arewa People's Congress (APC) and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) are not rebel movements as their goal is not to capture state power in order to influence the structuring of power in the country but to create awareness to deteriorating political situation and perceived marginalization of their group or social environment.

Suffice it to stress that inter and intra-ethnic conflicts in an ethically and culturally plural society as Nigeria is expected. The reason according to Fayeye (2010) is that inter-ethnic conflicts in such societies emanate from elite competition for power and authority. It has been established that the elite manipulated ethnic loyalties in order to realize political and other ambitions (Sanda, 1976, Fayeye, 2010)

Ethnicity seems to be detaching itself from being a cultural group symbol. It is now being shaped by political-economic considerations (Oladoyin 2001). This reveals that the compelling motive around which ethno-communal consciousness is built. Ethno- communal violence in Nigeria results from either a contest for power and influence at all levels of the society or a contest over economic resources (Oladoyin, 2001)

The failure of the conventional security sector to curtail ethno-communal conflicts has resulted in the development and growth of auto-security in which the poor citizens act as their own police- vigilantism and militia. Coupled with that are the unemployed youths who have been disproportionately involved in ethnic militia. Warlord formations and Street gangs alike have recruited preponderantly from the rank and file or the youths (Hutchful 2001, Fayeye 2010)

Succinctly, development is being threatened by the spate of violent conflicts in Nigeria. Economic growth, development of human capital and physical quality of life cannot be enhanced in conflict and violence-prone zones. No remarkable development could be recorded in an atmosphere of build, destroy and rebuild (BDR) as it amounts to cycling within the same circle. The operations of ethnic militia threaten peace and security. These cannot continue unabated. This paper therefore examines the menace of ethnic militias in Nigeria and its implication for national unity

Conceptual Clarifications

Ethnicity

The word 'ethnic' has to do with a group of people sharing a common origin, culture or language. Thus, ethnicity is a form of relations or identity formed with regards to ethnic group. This account for the view of Olu Adeyemi (2006) that the concept of ethnicity refers to a social identity formation that rests upon culturally specified practices and unique set of symbols and cosmology. Ethnicity can also be described as a group of people having a common language, norms, symbols and cultural values etc. (Otite , 2000).

Ethnic Militias

The civil conflict does present the varying conceptions of the term militia. Militias are citizen army constituted of men who freely enlist to perform occasional mandatory military service so as to protect their country or state (Bristow, 1998, Francis, 2005, Laitin, 2007). As a people force, it is also seen broadly as military force consisting of citizens available for service in emergencies or citizen force kept reserve to combat any threat to the state and its people Bristow, 19980.

They are also trained bands of locals who could be mobilized on short notice for the defense of a cause (Francis, 2005). Ethnic militias can also be described as an organized violence-oriented group populated by diverse elements, cutting across different age strata, but drawn membership exclusively from an groups ethnic group and established to promote and protect the interest of an ethnic group. Ethnic militia is an extreme form of ethnic agitation for self-determination and occurs when ethnic group assume militant posture. They serve as a social pressure group designed to influence structure of power to the advantage of and call attention to the deteriorating material condition or political deprivation and perceived marginalization of their group or Social environment (Adejumobi, 2002).

Militias are simply obliged to meet and are drilled frequently in readiness for emergency uses. Ethnic militias are extreme form of ethnic agitation for self determination. It occurs when the ethnic group assumes militant posture and gradually metamorphosis into militia purporting to act as the machinery through which the desires of its people are sought and realized (Badmus, 2006). The membership is exclusively people or individuals with common cultural traits. Its manifestation is borne out of past repression usually in a heterogeneous society when an out of out-group ethnically dominated incumbent government is controlling the levels of power (Guichaoua, 2007). assume militant posture. They serve as a social pressure

Unity

Unity is a state of being joined together to form one unit, one entity. It entails being in agreement and working together. In this context, we may look at 'unity

as the coming together of Nigerians as one nation, identifying together as one. Agreeing that we all belong together and doing everything to stay as one.

Origin of Ethnic Militias in Nigeria

The origin and the rise of ethnic militias in Nigeria have come under two broad perspectives. One perspective views the development from the angle of militarization of the state by repressive government while the other perspective sees it from a materialistic point or vi borne out of economic frustration. The state militarization perspective contends that ethnic militias are logical outcomes the increased militarization of the state, especially during those many years of military dominance of politics in the country (Richard, 1999,Anugwon, 2000) Scholars who project this view anchor their argument on the fact that the Nigerian state was a product of coercion and that this character of violence has struck with the state because subsequent ruler in the country has always caught to maintain control and hegemony through the mechanics of violence. The culture of Violence suppresses debate and open challenge to the ruling elite, thus leaving those disadvantaged by the power equation to put up counter railing ethnic resistance as the only option of response (Adeoye, 2005)

Even though there was a common understanding that the annulment after 1993 elections led to the formation of ethnic militias in Nigeria (Agbu l 2004,Sessay et al 2003), it should be stressed that the ethnic militias have different aims and were formed for different reasons, and that the annulment was merely a trigger cause(Ukwo, 2007). The annulment and later detention of late chief MKO Abiola seem to have triggered the formation of Oodua People's Congress(OPC) as feeling of injustice, anger and resentment within the Yoruba community. This at the

same time made the North feel threatened, and the Arewa People's Congress was formed as a counterweight to the OPC (Oyvind, 2009).

Other ethnic militias did not arise as a counterweight to this rather they came about for other reasons. For instance, the Bakassi Boys was formed as a vigilante group in Anambra state, as crime got out of control in the largest Igbo market in Nigeria .The Niger Delta militia arose in response to the repressive state and irresponsible environmental policies and because of tension between the dominant minority groups.

Coupled with the above reason was the age-long tension between the Hausa/Fulani and the Yorubas as well as the Igbos and to a lesser extent, between Hausa/Fulani and Igbos. Since each geo-political zone in Nigeria is a composite of multiethnic multicultural citizens, the influence of ethnic militias may cut across geopolitical boundaries. However, it may not be possible to have a detailed list of ethnic militias in a country with over 400 ethnic groups. Hence, intense communal conflicts according to (Salawu 2010; Fayeye, 2005) have given prominence to the operations of the under listed militias:

-Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Arewa People's Congress (APC), the Bakassi Boys, The Egbesu Boys, Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC), Igbo People's Congress (IPC), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Ohanaeze N'digbo The Plateau Youth, Jukun Youth Movement, Benue/Tiv Youth Movement, Kano-based Atjdid Movement, and Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) etc.

The above list made it obvious that ethnic militias have become a factor in ethno-religious and ethno-communal crises in Nigeria,

Factors Influencing the Development of Ethnic Militias in Nigeria

The development of ethnic militias in Nigeria is traceable to a number of factors. Among others, the following have been identified by Fayeye, (2003) Salawu, (2010) and Albert (2011). These include:

i.   Politically-Motivated Factors: Fear of domination, marginalization and subjugation has put different ethnic groups on the edge. For instance, the introduction of Federal character and quota system, fairness in distribution of state portfolio and resources has been difficult. Hence, ethnic militia has been drafted to protest against such presumed marginalization.

ii.   Resource-Related Factors: It is a fact that nature endows regions and localities differently and that some people by birth have the privilege of being situated in a resource-endowed zone. Such people in some cases have sought the use of ethnic militias to fight against unjust distribution or allocation of resources.

iii.   Boundary-Related Factors: Many a times in Nigeria, land and territory demarcations have resulted in inter-ethnic clashes leading to the deployment of ethnic militias (Albert, 2011)

iv.   Poverty and Unemployment: Poor management of state resources by visionless leaders has resulted in widespread poverty and youth unemployment. It is poverty that has pushed many unemployed youths to become common fodders violent conflicts in different parts of Nigeria (Fayeye, 2010). Apart from being an avenue for showing up their

emotion, ethnic militias have remained a basis for opposing unpopular government policies.

Other factors in this regards are factors of intolerance because of diverse ethnic and cultural values, values become an issue of conflict when people try to force their value system on others or when values are politicized (Albert, 2011). There is also indigene settler factor, government abandonment of welfare, security and development of nation and so on.

Effects of ethnic militias on national unity

In the mini survey conducted among 30 inhabitants of Oyo town, the following perceived effects were identified:

The menace of ethnic militia breeds destruction of lives and property. Wherever this happens, resources which would have been used to improve the economic well being of individuals and the country as a whole have to be used on restructuring and replacing what had been damaged during the crises. In most cases government has to compensate the victims of these crises and this gulped millions of naira which could have been used for other national developmental projects. Also, ethnic militia operation which always culminated in violent clashes is inimical to human capital development of the nation. This is because many virile men of the nation are seriously affected or killed during the crises. Many able bodied youth, men and women who were suppose to be the glory of this nation have died prematurely as a result of the menace of ethnic militia in Nigeria.

Coupled with the above is the fact that the menace of ethnic militia has added to the fear of foreign investors from coming to Nigeria. Cases of kidnapping of expatriates in Nigeria are no more news. How could foreign investors decide to

establish in the war zone? There is also the effect of displacement of people from a state where ethnic militias are operating into another state where people's life are safe and this automatically would lead to over population of such area or state.

Succinctly, prominent among the degree of the severity of perceived effects was killing of innocent lives, destruction looting of property which was ranked 1". This was followed by the fear that prevented the foreign investors from establishing their firms or companies as no investor can establish in a war zone and this has greatly affected Nigerian economy and development are displacement of people from the state or area where militia are operating leading to over-population of where they run to was ranked 3.

The scope of these effects however can be seen in form of socio- economic, political, psychological and military spheres. The scope of socio-economic effect is manifested in the sense that where there is no peace, people will not be able to go about their businesses farmers will not be able to go to the farm and this would lead to reduction in the productivity level. This can further degenerate into poverty and hunger and when this happens, it can lead to socio economic problem because those who cannot get food to eat can indulge in other form of crime like armed robbery and the like.

Also, the imposition of curfew where militia is operating brings several economic activities to an abrupt end as it becomes difficult to move freely from place to place. This would make the area or state of crises to become desolated until the government restores peace back to the area. The scene Kaduna is a recent example. It can thus be said that the menace of ethnic militia which culminated

into crisis is a bane to natural unity and development as no development could take place in atmosphere of fear, anarchy and insecurity.

Politically, if there is no peace, administration would not be easy and when leaders have no peace of mind or where there is no leader, people would be doing what they like and in such situation anarchy may set in. Psychologically, the scope of the effect may have health implication. This is because of the activities of the ethnic militia can make the people live under fear of uncertainty since they are not sure of the next line of action of the militia. For instance gunshots, destruction of things, burning of tires, spraying of tear gas and time bomb explosions all have gross effect on both the environment and the people's health. There is no doubt that, lack of security has directly affected the unity as well as the welfare of the poor people in Nigeria. It has caused injury, untimely death, sickness, reduction family income and has generated a climate of fear (DFID 2000).

Militarily, the scope of menace of ethnic militia would make the government make efforts at restoring peace to where the ethnic militia has operated. Hence money that is supposed to be used for the development of the nation would be used to buy arms and ammunitions, sending military assistance and other detective devices, all in the name of restoring peace into such state or areas. ItIt should be stressed that the demand for weapons cannot foster unity at all.

Proposal for curbing ethnic militias

Having pointed out the origin, factors influencing ethnic militias, their degree of severity as well as the scope of their effect on national unity the following are proposed to curb the upsurge of ethnic militias in Nigeria:

1. Economic justice should be a priority resulting in engagement of all resources for the common survival of the Nigerian nation.

2. There should be social equality wherein no sector of the society is neglected or oppressed.

3. Pursuance of equal distribution of income in such a way that the gap between the rich and poor is significantly narrowed.

4. Emphasis must be placed on things that unite us as Nigerians

5. Nigerians should de-emphasize the culture of violence and genocidal tendencies among different ethnic groups. Tolerance should be emphasized instead of hostility

6. Government should discourage the marginalization of the minority groups. Establishing fairness in all aspects of national life will remove the fear of domination, marginalization and insecurity.

7. Government should target to reduce poverty among Nigerians So as to puncture the reservoir of recruit for ethnic militias in the country.

8. Since social studies is a problem solving discipline, learned should be encouraged to develop national consciousness which involve love for the nation, obedience, allegiance and loyalty to national unity as well as positive attitude to the national economy

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to clarify major terms. It has further discussed the factors influencing the development of ethnic militias, the effect their activities have on national unity and development. The paper also proposed some measure

for curbing the activities of ethnic militias in Nigeria. Efforts should therefore be made by Nigerian government to either disband ethnic militias or integrate them into the ongoing process of community policing.

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