



UNILAG Journal of Politics

4 • 2008

Rainy Season 2008

A Journal of the Department of Political Science, University of Lagos

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The Changing Context of Ethno-Nationalism in Nigeria

MOSES METUMARA DURUJI (Ph. D.)

Abstract

The Nigerian state had experienced a devastating civil war that accounted for the loss of over a million lives between 1967 and 70; yet the issues that led to that war still resonate and stare the nation in the face some decades after. Efforts by successive Nigerian leaders to create a national identity and foster unity among the diverse groups in the country have remained a mirage. The occasional frictions among the groups, which were largely repressed by military dictatorship, found expression following the return to democracy in 1999. The reason being that, it is unlikely that government will succeed in deliberately manipulating identities unless the new identity offers some reward, either material or psychological. The surge in ethnic conflicts, both of old and new forms, fundamentally question the approach of the government of nation building.

The paper looks at these new conflicts and the fierce ethno-nationalist assertiveness that challenges the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. We attempt to answer the question, whether this new ethno-nationalist assertive struggle is progressive or retardative to nation-building in the Nigerian context. There is no question that ethnicity is a potential that can be used or exploited for various causes, some positive, some negative.

The paper concludes that appropriate institutional arrangements that guarantee the rights of the people to

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maintain their identity, while at the same time freely choosing to form associations with others for the purpose of accomplishing common ends, should be put in place.

Introduction

Nigeria is an attempt to bring together people's whose customs, languages, history and degree of social, economic and political development varied widely... the political system so far adopted had not taken into consideration the most effective means of reducing the differences in social, political and economic development between the regions, namely the accommodation of ethnic differences." (Asia 2001:1, 14)

BEFORE the intrusion of British colonialists into what is now known as Nigeria, the various ethnic and cultural groups that make up the country existed as autonomous political entities. These entities had their own political systems, social and religious values distinct from the other groups (Okafor, 1997:1). The aim of the colonialists had been to consolidate and preserve British foothold with little interest in the social, economic or political development of the country.

British colonial policy rather than being tailored to foster unity among the disparate groups, exploited the varied differences, creating distrust, suspicion and cleavages. These differences and animosities spurred competition among the groups to control the soul of the Nigerian state manifesting in several violent confrontations before and after the country's independence.

The post-colonial regimes largely continued the pattern of the receded colonialists without far-reaching policy measures to coalesce the differences among them into positive ventures that can create a pan-Nigerian identity. However, most of the policies undertaken were aimed rather at suppressing

the development of ethnic consciousness that challenges the legitimacy of the state or the authority of the incumbent regime. This response mechanism to ethnic agitation contributed to keeping ethno-national expression at a minimal level during the military era in Nigeria. However, the return of democratic rule gave ventilation to most of these trampled ethnic questions.

This resurgence of ethnic assertiveness has taken such a new form that puts the new democratic administration in a dilemma. A resort to the old way of repression and suppression was readily deployed by the administration; yet, instead of abating, ethnic nationalism tends to again more support from the people and is spreading even to hitherto complacent groups. The implication is that the policies and responses of the government towards addressing these problems have been inadequate and insufficient, leading some to ask whether this was a manifestation of failure on the part of the state. Can there be advancement in the society if a new approach is adopted in dealing with ethnic agitations and ethnonationalist expression?

This forms the central thrust of this paper; but first, we focus on the problem of ethnonationalism in Nigeria, especially in its new dimension since 1999. While clarifying some of the key concepts, we also attempt to answer the question posed.

The Problematic

The political elite and ethnic groups each has a firm idea of what it wants from the country. Soon after Abacha's death, calls for secession and/or greater autonomy by the Southwest and the oil-producing Delta were made, and the word 'Biafra' is no longer an uncomfortable word in secret. In fact, the Igbo youths openly talk of revisiting Biafra (Asia, 2001:154).

The transition from authoritarian to democratic governance

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has reopened the issue of ethnic relations in Nigeria. The agitations by formerly suppressed groups were not restricted to the south of the country as the above quotations suggests but have been even more pronounced in the northern part.

These ethnic agitations sometimes assume violent dimensions such as have not been seen before, going by the ferocity and level of destructiveness they carry. For instance, between 1999 and 2003, there were about 50 identifiable outbreaks of ethno-religious violence, in which more than 100,000 people were believed to have died (Ebo, 2003:7), while many more were displaced (Ginifer /Ismail 2005:16). The initial government response was to contain the incipient crisis with the hope that it would fade away with time; but the passage of time has seen these ethno-nationalist acts of violence assume more frightening dimensions that seem to threaten the continued unity of the country (Badmus, 2006:196).

The root of ethnic consciousness, as had been noted in several studies, was grounded in Nigeria's colonial experience. The British colonial style of administration in Nigeria emphasized the cultural distinctions of the disparate kinship groupings as the centre of political organization, thus providing a limited space for inter-ethnic interaction before the country's independence in 1960.

For instance, the doctrine of indirect rule restricted administrative action within each locality and made inter-ethnic political interactions difficult (Ekeh, 1996:35-36). Thus, ethnic groups emerged from the colonial experience as the most stable unit of political action in Nigeria, as its intensive development was encouraged rather than an evolution of nationwide political tradition. This was what reflected in the politics of decolonization in Nigeria, which was turned into a theatre of war by the dominant ethnic groups to control the nation's soul and replace the colonialists. The quest for dominance and hegemonic control

of the state has been the hallmark of Nigeria's politics; each group struggling to gain prominence and by it determine the allocation and distribution of resources.

This development has been linked to the Nigerian 'national question', which Jimoh (2001:4) noted, revolves around how a state made up of diverse nations, ethnic groups or peoples, should order relations among its constituent parts. Adejumbi (2002:156) argues that the crisis of the Nigerian state and the consequent problem of peaceful co-existence lie in this question which is two-dimensional. The first dimension, he identified as inter-group relations, that is, the tension and contradictions that arise from inter-group relations on issues of marginalization, domination, inequality, fairness and justice among ethnic groups, and is reinforced by the second dimension, the exacerbation of class inequalities and antagonism in society dichotomized as rich and poor, the affluent and the underclass. As such, the main issue on the national question revolves around how to structure the Nigerian federation in order to accommodate groups in a way that can guarantee access to power and equitable distribution of resources (Osaghae, 1995). This is because the perceived domination of some ethnic groups by others is rooted the structural nature of the Nigerian federation and the heavy lopsidedness in centre-state relations (Adejumbi, 2002).

To mitigate and minimize this destructive inter-ethnic rivalry, the ruling coalition in Nigeria has resorted to multiplying centres of political competition through state and local government creation. However, these political divisions have not doused tensions and agitations; rather, the process seems to compound the issue, as these new divisions expose the hidden heterogeneity that replicates ethnic politics at that level, making the situation uncontrollable. The insincerity in the application of the principle of federal character and quota system, meant to

give accommodation and sense of belonging to the various ethnic groups, has not helped matters. The result is that Nigeria has been played by multiple crises.

Apart from the civil war (1967-1970), the fierce political competition among the Nigerian groups has resulted into violent cleavages, communal crises, such as the Kafanchan uprising that spread to other parts of Kaduna State in 1987; the conflict in Wukari and Takum in Taraba State between the Tiv and Jukun which began in 1990 and the mass killing in Tafawa Belewa local government area of Bauchi State between the Semayi and Hausa communities. Others include the 1992 Zango-Kataf clashes between the indigenous Katab and the Hausa-Fulani migrant community, the Andoni-Ogoni bloodshed of 1993. as well as the Aguleri-Umuleri feud and the Ife-Modakeke clashes that were rather intra-ethnic.

New forms of intra-ethnic manifestation include the intermittent Warri crisis among the dominant tribes – Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Urhobo; the clashes between the Hausa and Yoruba in Sagamu, Lagos, Ilorin and Ibadan; the ethno-religious riots in Kano and Kaduna states stemming from the sharia legal controversy; the Nasarawa crisis involving the Tiv and other ethnic groups in the state; the Yelwa-Shendam and Jos clashes in Plateau State, among many others.

A direct challenge to state legitimacy is the recent confrontation in the Niger-Delta region where desperate militia groups now carry arms in their struggle against the state and multinational corporations operating in the area. Government response, as before, deployment of maximum force, leading to the destruction of Odi in 2000. The employment of arms is not restricted to the groups in the Niger Delta, the crisis in Benue State has also witnessed the use of sophisticated arms. In Zaki-Biam Benue State, it led to the killing of several soldiers, compelling the government to repeat the Odi reprisal attack in that place. The Oodua

People's Congress (OPC), constituting itself into an alternate security force, has continued to engage in running battle with the police in the Southwest. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), boldly advocating a separatist agenda for the former Biafra, is in constant confrontation with security agencies in the southwest.

These activities have raised concerns about the urgent need to stem the tide of intra-ethnic and group insurgency in the country. But what can be done? A strident call for a Sovereign National Conference was partly yielded by the government with the National Political Conference in 2002 which was highly criticized for failure to properly address national question. But where can government's recalcitrance lead? Wouldn't the government change its perception and adopt a new attitude to the ethnic question?

The Concept of Ethnicity and Nationalism

Ethnicity is the cultural characteristics that connect a particular group or groups of people to each other. The concept is rooted in the idea of societal groups, marked especially by shared nationality, tribal affiliation and religious faith; shared language or cultural and traditional origin and background. Max Weber defines ethnic groups as "human groups (other than kinship groups), which cherish a belief in their common origins of such a kind that it provides a basis for the creation of a community." (cited in Mbaku, 2001:61). Here, emphasis is placed on a set of beliefs, not biological traits (race) or objective group characteristics (religion, language). However, ethnicity can be seen as referring to differences in language, religion, colour, ancestry and culture to which social meanings are attributed and around which identity and group formation occur (Nagel, 1995:443). Ethnicity can result from choice or ascription. An individual chooses to be identified with a recognized ethnic

group, or membership in a certain ethnic group can be imposed on an individual by the greater society (Barth, 1969). This implies that, while individuals can choose their ethnicity, the choice must be acceptable to society. Ethnicity is a combination of individual choice and social imposition (Mbaku, 2001:61). Furthermore, ethnicity is not a permanent trait, but a changing group characteristic; which means that the boundary of an ethnic group as a social category can change (Barth, 1969:17).

Nationalism, on the other hand, is an ideology that creates and sustains a nation as a concept of a common identity for groups of humans. Stern (2000), quoting Benedict Anderson in his book "imagined Communities," argues that the 'nation' is imagined since its members will never know most of their fellow members. It is a community because it is conceived as a fellowship of the like-minded, and limited because it has finite boundaries beyond which lie other conceived ideas of nations. He posits that five major factors encourage the rise of nations:

- (i) The growth of separate national or state churches after the collapse of Medieval Christendom;
- (ii) The invention of the printing press, which made possible the wide dissemination of novel ideas;
- (iii) The increasing use, in official communications, of indigenous local languages; and
- (iv) The gradual weakening of dynasticism and monarchy in the eighteenth century.

Before nations were "invented," there were, and there still are social groups such as extended families, clans and tribes as well as societies with some sense of common ethnic, cultural or religious identity (Stern, 2000: 108).

According to Ottaway, "nations or ethnic groups are human beings' belonging to natural groups which share common

ancestry, and which provide their members with a sense of common identity. These natural groups are not political entities, but they often are and many believe should be the basis of the formation of the state. In nineteenth century Europe, the natural groups, called the "nation," were expected to become the basis for the formation of the political nation-state. The nation-state then came to be regarded as the model of the modern state in any meaningful sense of the word (Ottaway, 1999:300).

The Nigerian State and Ethnic Relations

The problem of inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria has been in existence even prior to the country's independence, but the ruling elite in post-colonial Nigeria has failed to address the issues that border on the unity of the disparate ethnic groups. The tendency has been a resort to repression of genuine grievances and agitations, suffocating the space for expression of group identity, which is a clear manifestation of a weak state system (Ikelegbe, 2004: 5). This tendency of repression is typical of the post-colonial African states, characterized as weak, collapsing and in decline. Underpinning this characterization are: perception of weak state structures and capacity, poor performance and legitimacy, corruption and partiality, inability to establish control over the monopoly of violence and maintain security, law and order (ibid).

It is a weak state that throws up politics which makes violence a prime means of political action (Allen, 1999:374). Its proneness to excessive coercion, repression, and abusive violence, construct a vicious terrain of violent challenges (Ikelegbe, 2004:5). It is this character of the Nigerian state that makes violence key to its existence and the reproduction has elicited counter-violence from some ethnic-based groups operating as militias (Adejumobi, 2002).

This resort to militancy emerged because ethnic conflicts are inevitable, given the emotional power of "primordial given" or cultural ties linked with the struggle for relative group worth, mass-based resource competition, electoral mobilization, false consciousness and defective political institutions and inequitable state policies (Diamond, 1987, Doornbos, 1965). In Nigeria, this inevitable manifestation is rooted in the historical development of the social formations and the relationship carried from the colonial state. As argued by Ake (1996:25-27), the antagonistic competition among ethnic groups in Nigeria is associated with the framing of politics in the mould of ethnic coalitions that see their claim as largely exclusive. The core of the problem is that ethnic consciousness became politicized and grew into political coalitions making exclusive political claims.

Ake contends that ethnic consciousness in Nigeria is a natured development, and that this is not necessarily bad because Nigerian industrialization is rudimentary; the overwhelming majority of Nigerians live in the rural area and on farming. It is this, he argues, that makes ethnicity the natural basis of identification of this mode of existence. The colonial legacy in Nigeria made ethnicity highly useful, because the British masters hardly took interest in social welfare, which ethnic associations stepped in to remedy (*ibid*). Ethnic groups provided an organizational basis for interest articulation in a political system, which offered no such facility under colonial rule. They are highly functional and have deservedly elicited the loyalty and support of many Nigerians.

This is not surprising, as Huntington (1993) notes that one of the most striking aspects of modernization is "the increased consciousness, coherence, organization, and action which existed on a much lower level of conscious identity and organization in traditional society." In fact, the concept of Yoruba and Igbo are notions that have acquired significant

meaning and content only recently (Lijphart, 1977:172, Nnoli 1980:6).

The structure of the Nigerian state engenders a fierce competition for control and raises the quest for power into a zero-sum game. The only avenue of support mobilization available to the elite is ethnicity, which has been maximally employed. In this case, ethnicity is a system of boundaries between groups whose power and relevance are determined primarily by the nature and scope of contact and competition for scarce resources.

In a society like Nigeria, individuals must compete for resources; and Nigeria being a multi-ethnic state with high ethnic identification, this competition takes place along ethnic lines. The ethnic group, when it becomes the basic organizational structure for competing for scarce resources, would have a significant impact on ethnic groups in particular and ethnicity in general (Mbaku, 2001: 60). Resource competition in a society in which the ethnic group is an important organizational structure for competing for scarce resources can affect (i) ethnic identification, (ii) prejudice (iii) inter-ethnic conflict and (iv) ethnic mobilization (Nagel, 1995:443).

Nagel argues that the extent of ethnic self-awareness and the level of external ascription can vary a great deal over time, with ethnic differences quite prominent at some point in history and relatively unimportant at other times showing that despite the significant level of ethnic and linguistic diversity in Africa, there does not appear to have been much inter-ethnic conflict until the post-independence era of state formation.

Decolonization and independence appear to have significantly increased ethnic competition in Nigeria and the continent, and have been fully entrenched with no concrete

mechanism to mitigate its destructive attributes. Mbaku (2001) observes that the process of decolonization witnessed competition along ethno-regional lines for the capture of evacuated structures of colonial hegemony. Hitherto, the level of African participation in governance and economy was severely constrained, but the impending departure of the Europeans opened a window for greater levels of political and economic participation that significantly changed the nature of inter-ethnic conflict.

The dominant groups that captured power ensured that its security and perpetuation because of the entrenched advantages, while the others have constantly resisted this dominance. In Nigeria, the common response to grievances is tokenist redistributive or reorganizational policy measures. These often come through revision of revenue sharing formula or creation of more states, local government areas, or chiefdoms. But this has fallen short of addressing the grievances that give rise to conflicts in Nigeria.

Inter-ethnic conflicts have continued to manifest in complicated and complex manners, and this discourse takes the position that even though conflicts and ethnic rancour seem negative, its manifestation which is natural phenomenon for a defective state structure like Nigeria, is bound to gradually but incrementally lead to a fundamental solution to the national question. As such, ethno-national assertiveness in an entity like Nigeria can be seen as progressive.

The New Ethno-nationalism

Ethno-nationalism is a concept coined from the twin concept of ethnicity and nationalism. It is the form of nationalism in which the state derives political legitimacy from historical, cultural or hereditary grouping. Gurr (2000) sees ethno-nationalists as relatively large regionally concentrated peoples who historically were autonomous and who have pursued separatist objectives at some time during the last

half-century. He cites Quebecois in Canada, the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey and Iran, as well as Bretons and Corsicans of Spain and/or France as examples.

Many of the Nigerian groups fit into this definition. However, the idea of nationalism and ethnicity differ in some respects. Young argues that nationalism stipulates the nation as a terminal community. Loyalty is given to it with transcendental moral sanction, while authority is also invested on it. Hanging on the premise of independence, the terminal community can only be independent if it frees itself of all constraints upon its autonomy (1979:71-72). Nationalism is one dimension of cultural pluralism; ethnicity, which is another dimension, differs from it in its lack of ideological elaboration to the total autonomy required of nationalism. Ethnicity only exists within a political society consisting of diverse group; it is behavioural in form and conflictual in content (Nnoli, 1980:6). However, ethnicity can be politicized, mobilized and ideologized to the point where it crosses the threshold of nationalism (Young 1979:72).

We can therefore refer to ethno-nationalism as the form of ethnicity that is close to the threshold of nationalism. Ethno-nationalism in Nigeria today has assumed a dimension that has never been seen before. The level of ethnic consciousness has escalated from where it was at independence. More and more groups are asking questions and are demanding answers. Ethnic consciousness is deeply permeative and has given rise to ethnic organizations that is directly challenging the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. Such organizations like the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force, Egbesu Boys of Africa, Oodua People's Congress, and Bakassi Boys are militia groups that are now emboldened to carry guns in pursuit of their ethnic agendas.

We have seen the rise of groups spearheaded by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of

emerged to counter the OPC and defend the entrenched interests of the north in Nigeria.

In the Niger-Delta area, the emergence of militant groups calling for an end to injustice, environmental degradation and deprivation emerged from the same pattern of state repression. The non-violent campaign led by Ken Saro-Wiwa and his Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni Peoples (MOSOP) in the early 1990s took violent dimensions with the formation of a militant youth wing, the National Youth Council of Ogoni People (NYCOP), the hanging of Saro-Wiwa and his comrades, and the militarization of the area with the deployment of a joint police/military task force, all of which could not stop their activism.

The Ogoni Bill of Rights document remains the anchor of their struggle. This, according to Suberu (1996), has informed the insistence on greater ethno-political autonomy in order to give to the Ogoni the "right to control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development". Aspects of the Bill of Rights include a radical reordering of the formula for sharing oil revenues (beyond benefiting individual Ogonis); and the Ogoni should be a party to contracts with oil companies for future oil exploitation in the area. Minimally, it sought the full right of the Ogoni to use at least fifty per cent of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni's economic development. MOSOP also insisted on a clean-up of Ogoniland before the major operator in the area, Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), which was driven out in 1993 through militant activities of MOSOP, could be allowed to resume.

However, in that region of the country, it is the militias associated with the Ijaw ethnic group that appear more daring in their challenge of the authority and legitimacy of the Nigerian state. Ever since the declaration at Kaiama, which spelt out their demands on the Nigerian state over

management of resources buried in their land and creeks, many groups have emerged and often taken the expression of their grievances to the extreme.

The Kaiama declaration observed that the continued damage to the environment was due to uncontrolled exploration and exploitation of crude oil and natural gas. It contended that these activities were responsible for the oil spillage, uncontrolled gas flaring, and the opening up of the forest for loggers, indiscriminate canalization, flooding, land subsistence, coastal erosion, and earth tremors, among others. Highlighting the experience of Oloibiri, a town that was despoiled without any plan for ecological rehabilitation, it avers that since oil and gas are exhaustible resources a signal of impending doom looms large for the Ijaw people (Onduku, 2001). As such, the declaration, among other things, called for immediate withdrawal from Ijawland of all military forces of occupation and repression by the Nigerian state. It warns oil companies not to engage the armed forces in suppressing their operations otherwise they will be viewed as an enemy of the Ijaw people. The declaration, which called on all Ijaw youths in every Ijaw community to commence the implementation of the resolution by December 1998 as a step towards reclaiming the control of their lives, also issued an ultimatum to all oil companies operating in Ijawland to stop further exploration activities by the same date (*ibid*).

It was this declaration that drew the line for confrontation and the immediate response of the government was to clamp down on the arrowheads of the group and to further militarize the area using a joint police-military task force operation called "Operation Restore Hope" (Ransome-Kuti, 1999). The Ijaw fired up by that declaration, broke into several splinter ethnic militia groups, prominent among which are the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Even though the Nigerian government was able to arm-twist Asari Dokubo, seen

as a symbol of unity among the groups into surrendering into their hands, MEND, an amorphous organization that emerged from this repressive approach, seems to have adopted the strategy of "formlessness" in its activities of asserting claims on the Nigerian state.

Emmanuel (2006) posits that this was necessary because the group realized that since Asari Dokubo, the arrowhead of NDPVF, was identified, it was easy to immobilize him and hence his group. He contends that the federal security operatives are still trying to understand the formation of the group and how to deal with it. The incarceration of Asari Dokubo, however witnessed the intensification of the struggle as represented by the activities of MEND, now transformed from a mere militant posture to insurgency (Jason, 2006). Its activities, which include frequent clashes with security operatives, kidnap of oil workers, bunkering, and sabotaging of oil installations have already reduced oil industry output by 25 per cent (Africa Report, 2006). Its recent strategy is the targeting of state monuments and public officials as epitomized in the attacks on INEC office in Port Harcourt before the 2007 general elections, the kidnapping of the mother of Rivers State Governor shortly after his election, and the razing of the residence of the then Bayelsa State Governor and Vice President-elect Dr. Goodluck Jonathan. These attacks, according to Amaize (2007) served to indicate that the appointment of an Ijaw, perceived as pre-establishment was no solution to the Niger Delta question.

In the southeast, the activities of MASSOB are purely confrontational as their demands and activities are a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. Apart from the rallies which it has organized since inception in 1999, the group has resorted to the use of the former Biafran police uniform, hoisting of the Biafra flag, and circulating maps showing the boundaries of Biafra (Bach, 2004:5). They had also been able to organize successful sit-at-home orders in

the region (Obi, 2004:10), and reintroduced the former Biafran currency as legal tender. The group claims that its objective for the actualization of Biafra is hinged on the marginalization of the Igbo in the power equation in Nigeria and their non acceptance in the Nigerian society (Adejumobi, 2002; Badmus 2006; Duruji, 2007). Even though the group professes non-violence in its campaign, the history of its activities had been characterized by clashes with security operatives leading to loss of lives.

While MASSOB has been able to portray itself as a victim of state repression, there have been some situations where its activities were clearly violent and challenge state authority. An instance was during the 2006 National Census exercise when it was reported that the group attacked a police station in Nnewi, Anambra State as well as census officials, proclaiming that the Igbo should not be included in the exercise because they were Biafran (Africa Report, 2006:5). Also, their attempt to remove from the motor parks and markets in Onitsha, a parasitic group called the National Association of Road Transport Owners (NARTO), which was allegedly extorting money, snowballed into a crisis that prompted the deployment of a joint police-military outfit in the town.

Ethnic groups that have not attained the organizational sophistry as depicted above, manifest this tendency through the nature of violence unleashed mercilessly after a slight provocation. Sophisticated weapons were employed in most of the recent inter-ethnic conflicts. A study carried out by Ginifer and Ismail in 2005 reveals that the use of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has increased the scale of lethality, the degree of intensity, casualties and the extent of livelihood destruction and developmental impacts (2005:5). They identified the weapons now in use in Nigeria to include AK-47 assault rifles, automatic pump action shotguns, bazookas, Bretta pistols, Browning pistol, carine riffles, double-barrelled shotguns, G3 rifles, general purpose

machine guns and sub-machine guns, along with the traditional weapons such as machetes, spears, cutlasses and knives (*ibid*). All these are deployed in ethno-religious conflicts of post-democratic transition Nigeria.

The conflicts in the Northern and Middle Belt regions that have witnessed the use of such lethal weapons include the ethnic clash in Riyon district of Jos between Fulani herdsmen and ethnic Beron; the Mambila militia group versus herdsmen in Mambila region of Taraba State which resulted in 98 deaths and the displacement of 53,791 people (Reuters, 22-2-2002); and the anti-Miss World religious riots of 2002, all of which can only be described as mini-wars.

This recent manifestation of ethnic conflicts and agitations is what can be referred to as new ethno-nationalism. It is scary and dangerous, and has lent credence to the argument that the Nigerian state is failing. Asia buttresses this point by arguing that the mounting ethnic tension between the Yoruba and the Hausa in Lagos, the Ijaw and the Ilaje in Ondo, the vigilante groups and the menacing activities of the autonomy-minded OPC in the southwest, the rampaging youths in the Delta areas, as well as the Sharia issue, all clearly pose a dangerous threat to national security (Asia, 2001:155). Some argue that this intensification of divisive and destructive centrifugal fissures and pressures are a result of the recent liberalization and democratization movements in Nigeria (Suberu, 1996).

The conditions contributory to ethnic grievances remain the pattern of state building, political power configuration and inequitable economic development that have channeled communal energies into either protest or rebellion (Gurr & Harff, 1994). Ethnicity has proved irrepressible; it flourishes in Nigeria, but the response of the Nigerian state to ethno nationalism and group resentment has always been reactive.

Most of the time, the government's style of managing ethnic agitations and inter-ethnic conflicts is a resort to suppressing it with all the might of state, in the hope that such agitation shall not rear its ugly head again. This approach, which has manifested in Odi, Zaki-Biam, Umuechem, and Warri, etc, however, has been ineffectual. It shows the failure of state (Agbese, 2001:147). The government has not shown any determined effort to identify, at the earliest possible stage, situations that could produce conflicts and take corrective policy measures to remove the source of rancour (Imobighe, 2003). The penchant to react to crisis rather than anticipate it and take appropriate preventive action needs to be re-examined; at best, government resorts to judicial commissions, tribunals and other coercive responses rather than problem-solving techniques that would ensure permanent solutions to such conflicts. What this means is that the institutional mechanism for fostering nation building in Nigeria is insufficient. It stretches the capacity of the state and impedes development.

The government needs a clear departure from this approach to a more pragmatic style. The conflicts and agitations in Nigeria will not abate but will intensify because the loci of the problem lie within the very structure of the polity and require radical measures for an enduring solution. It is the intensification of this ethno-nationalist assertiveness that will compel actions along this line.

Examining the New Context

Ethnic tension in Nigeria has been high from the beginning. The government's response to neutralize the political impact of ethnicity has met with limited success. Repeated increases in the number of states did make the situation somewhat less explosive and might even have been more effective if oil revenue had not concentrated all financial power at the centre (Ottaway, 1999:315). But the ethnic factor has

continued to lurk as a central issue in Nigerian politics, despite provisions seeking to minimize it. Perhaps a political system that overtly recognizes the country's deep division and rivalries and seeks to regulate them through open bargaining and power sharing, rather than through underhanded manipulation, might succeed in bringing about a viable system of government.

As Diamond (1987) rightly observes, a political system that projects desperation in competition for the quest for power, as is the case of Nigeria, inevitably inflames the fissures inherent in its plural character, thereby not only jeopardizing democracy but also the survival of the state. He therefore suggest that along with institutions explicitly directed at managing its ethnic diversity, that a critical goal of constitutional design in Nigeria can go far to check, balance and decentralize political power as extensively as possible and hence reduce both the stakes in any electoral contest and scope of behavioural abuse.

Therefore, the adoption of a system that accommodates the numerous ethnic groups in Nigeria based on a process fashioned through popular participation and consultation, may be an appropriate panacea to the surge in ethno-nationalism. Consociationalism proposed by Lijphart (1977) may be a good model for Nigeria. Consociationalism entails a power-sharing agreement within government brokered between clearly defined segments of society joined by citizenship but divided by ethnicity, religion or language.

Consociationalism seems appropriate because it can be distilled into four basic elements that have to be present, viz:

- (i) Executive power sharing among the representatives of all significant groups;
- (ii) A high degree of internal autonomy for groups that wish to have it;

- (iii) Proportional representation and proportional allocation of civil service position and public fund; and
- (iv) A system that accommodates minority veto on most vital issues.

These four basic elements ensure that the government becomes an inclusive multi-ethnic coalition. According to Riker (1962), they are not just desirable in plural societies but are a most rational product of bargaining. This bargaining should not be an elite pact but must significantly involve the masses.

The anchor of this paper is that the core of Nigeria's ethnicity in Nigeria is structural and deep, and has given rise to a new ethno-nationalism. Ethnicity is a reality to reckon with. Human beings are born as individuals in a context that involves families extending into lineages, kinships and clans. Beyond the clan, human beings live in communities that can be broadened into villages and ultimately what some call ethnicity (Deng, 2002). To say that this has no relevance at all and should fade away as Nigerian governments have wished, is to deny the very existence of the human being, born in context, certainly not as an individual belonging to nowhere. The conscious sense on the part of an individual that he belongs to a given collective is the building block of ethnicity.

The structure of the Nigerian state makes ethnicity inevitable. The government appears unable to come to grips with the reality of these new ethnic tensions in the country. It lacks the effective tool for managing ethnic relations. Piecemeal, ad hoc and half-hearted measures, which have been the hallmark of successive governments' response to ethnic assertiveness, have failed to deal with the crisis and are unlikely to work as a strategy for dealing with the issues raised by the country's ethnic plurality in the new forms it is manifesting (Agbese, 2001:147).

In effect, what we are trying to bring out is that the institutional structures that have been put in place in nation building, in the real sense of the word, are not sufficient to foster a pan-Nigerian unity. There must be a radical departure from the current approach, if the peoples of what constitute Nigeria are to make any headway in the advancement of the human race domiciled within its frontiers. The change is not going to come easy, but this new ethno-nationalism shall compel it.

For now, the manifestations of ethno-nationalism will intensify; the Nigerian state is incapable of containing it through the old approach of suppressing agitations. Ethnicity is a reality and it is unlikely that any government can succeed in manipulating identities or suppressing the expression of it. Achebe (1984) argues that it is idle to seek a resolution of the national question while doing nothing to stop the marginalization of a group or groups within the country. History is replete with the lessons that the marginalization of peoples, in the final analysis, is unsustainable. The transatlantic trade in slaves could not endure beyond a certain point; the vast colonial empires of the European powers have had to be liquidated. The problem of the minorities in the United States is eventually being addressed through "affirmative action;" Ian Smith's Rhodesia yielded to present-day Zimbabwe; apartheid, finally unable to cope with the reaction it elicited, has had to be terminated (Ikpeze, 2000:106). Marginalization and the suppression of ethnic assertiveness or expression, if allowed to fester, is bound to resolve itself autonomously in the fullness of time, but not without unleashing explosive and cataclysmic reactions.

Conclusion

The power holders in Nigeria today will be deceiving themselves to believe that the structure of Nigeria as it is

today will be durable. The ferments of ethno-nationalism currently brewing and challenging the status quo will lead eventually to a fundamental restructuring, satisfying enough to douse the surge of ethno-nationalism. The conflicts and ethnic tensions in themselves that constitute this new ethno-nationalism may be viewed as a retrogression; but the final outcome will be the emergence of a system that is more equitable and stable and thus progressive.

As pointed out earlier, the nationalist movements in Europe in the seventeenth century, culminating in the peace of Westphalia, were the prop that spurred Europe into industrialization and modernization. As Ottaway (1990) notes, Nigeria will have to admit at some point that no amount of constitutional engineering or manipulation can neutralize the ethnic factor. A clear African example is Ethiopia, multi-ethnic and conflictual like Nigeria, which finally decided that ethnicity cannot be eliminated from politics, but that it must in fact become the organizational principle around which the political system is built. Today, Ethiopia is free from destructive inter-ethnic conflicts and squabbles that impeded its development and is reckoned as one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa.

Multi-ethnic state would remain the rule, not the exception in Africa for a long time. The most effective way to minimize destructive ethnic conflicts is not to prevent ethnic identification but to establish institutional arrangements that provide fair and predictable rules for competition. There should be a structure for peaceful resolution of conflict and enhanced ability of groups to co-exist peacefully under institutional arrangements of economic freedom that are constitutionally guaranteed. It should be a system that constrains the use of state structures by public servants as instruments of plunder to benefit one group at the expense of the other.

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