

Review

Ethnic politics and its implications for the survival of democracy in Nigeria

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Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with cultural differences between its component ethnic groups. From the north to the coast, the range in types of social system, dress, diet and languages far exceeds that to be found elsewhere in the world. This diversity has resulted into two major problems namely: problems arising between the larger ethnic groups and the hostility that derives from competition between peoples for wealth and power. This paper examines the political implication of this diversity and the problems created by it for the survival of democracy in Nigeria.

Key words: Ethnic group, ethnicism, politics, democracy.

INTRODUCTION

It is a commonplace fact that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation state with socio-cultural differences between its component ethnic groups all of which have resulted into cultural dissimilarity. This cultural dissimilarity has been manifested by, for instance, the differences in language, diet, dress and types of social system. Shrewd observers have noticed that the recent event such as globalisation have not significantly diminished these differences. This static situation has been due to a number of reasons: (1) The indigenous languages, which help to identify the various ethnic groups, are still spoken by almost the entire population of Nigeria. (2) The style of life has not, for the majority people, changed to such a degree as to produce appreciably greater uniformity. Against this diverse background, many ethnic problems abound in Nigeria, which arise principally from the hostility that derives from competition between ethnically different peoples for wealth and power.

About five decades after Nigeria gained independence, the Nigerian diverse social structure in terms of her heterogeneity has not changed significantly. The diversity nature of the society has made identification with the 'nation' a difficult task. Today, identification is easier at both family and ethnic levels. A consequence of this is that many of the citizens may never develop a proper concept of nation. This kind of ethnic group relations signifies a negative dimension and which may mean

much for the Nigerian political system. Therefore, a discussion of the effects of ethnic politics on the survival of democracy is or seems to be highly desirable. It even becomes necessary given the cry of political marginalisation coming from various ethnic groups in the new democracy. In all political activities in Nigeria, the factor of ethnicity is reflected. It is particularly obvious in areas like voting, distribution of political offices, employment and government general patronage of the citizens. It is against this background that this paper discusses the effect of ethnic politics on democratic governance in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Like any other terminology employed by social scientists, the concept of ethnicism is a term that does not lend itself to easy definition. To fully understand this, some related concepts like 'ethnic group' and 'ethnicity' need to be defined. Ethnic group is 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 linguistics ties (Cohen, 1974). This means that ethnic groups are social formations, which are distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries (Nnoli, 1978). In an explanation of the idea above, Nnoli emphasized that the most important or crucial variable in ethnic identity is language. This then means that an ethnic group consists of those who are themselves alike by virtue of their common ancestry,

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language and culture, and who are so regarded by others. Ethnicity is another related word, which needs to be conceptualised in this paper. By definition it means the interactions among members of many diverse groups (Nnoli, 1978). On the other hand, the term ethnicism denotes ethnic loyalty. This is a feeling of attachment to one's ethnic group (Pepple, 1985). The concept of loyalty in the above definition carries with it the willingness to support and act on behalf of the ethnic group. Thus, ethnic loyalty or ethnicism usually involves a degree of obligation and is often accompanied by a rejective attitude towards those regarded as outsiders (that is, members of other ethnic group).

From the conceptualisation of these two related concepts, it can be seen that ethnicity is a phenomenon, which involves interaction among various ethnic groups and which by itself does not pose any serious threat to either development or democracy. On the contrary, it is the phenomenon of negative ethnicism (a hangover of ethnicity), which is the rejective attitude towards those regarded as outsiders that threatens development process. It is important to note that it was the phenomenon of ethnicity that was found among Nigerians before the coming of the Europeans, while the second phenomenon (ethnicism) is a product of competition for both economic and political resources.

The problematic nature of ethnicism as conceptualised above can be explained in the context of some theoretical positions. In the first instance, one can examine the negative aspect of ethnicism by linking it to the theoretical framework of Talcott Parsons' pattern variables. To understand this, it is important to make reference to (1960), who argued that while developed countries are characterised by the pattern variables of universalism, achievement orientation and functional specificity, the under-developed ones are characterized by the opposites, namely particularism, ascription and functional diffuseness. For the under-developed countries to develop, they must adopt the pattern variables that are characteristic of the developed societies. Whatever the criticism against this position, it is important to note that ethnicism breeds the pattern variables that are characteristic of under-development, particularly those of particularism, ascription and functional diffuseness.

Another explanation for why ethnicism has become a problem to contend with is possible in the context of conflict theory. Social conflict can be defined as a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain desirable values but also to neutralize, injure and/or eliminate their rivals. This is why Nnoli, (1978) has described conflict as an important aspect of ethnicism. The implication of this is that conflict is inevitable under conditions of inter-ethnic competition for scarce valuable resources. There is no doubt that this type of ethnic conflict will strengthen the in-group and out-group feelings of the members of ethnic groups

involved in the conflicts. The fact remains that such conflicts will have negative impacts on certain institutions of the society including the political institutions.

A conclusion that can be drawn from our discussion so far is that it has led us to belief that ethnicism leads to primordial sentiments in multi-ethnic society. This position is supported by the theory of ethnocentrism. On a general note, the theory of ethnocentrism simply denotes differentiation according to origin. This is to say that it is a kind of behaviour where a group of people look down on others and discriminate against them. Thus, one can see ethnocentrism as a belief in the unique value and rightness of one's own group. This human attitude manifests in form of prejudice and tribalism (ethnic communalism and conflict). The aspect of prejudice that is relevant to our discussion here is the one that has to do with group solidarity. Peil (1977) claims that group solidarity provides security in situation of potential conflict and informal support when official agencies cannot or will not help. Prejudice can be turned to discrimination. If this happens, there will be strong pressure to exclude outsiders in the sharing of scarce resources such as political power.

At this point, it is necessary to give a brief insight into the concept of democracy. Democracy, just like ethnicism, is a concept that is not amenable to definitional unanimity, more so as there exist several versions of it. Common among the versions are the Athenian classical democracy, Liberal democracy,

Marxist-Leninist democracy and lately, Radical democratic conception to mention a few. Democratic discussion is often embroiled in controversies, over which ideally is true democracy, given scholars' divergence of views on the concept and practice of democracy. For the sake of this paper however, we are concerned with liberal democracy otherwise known as representative democracy and how it is aided or impeded by ethnic politics in Nigeria. Democracy, in the liberal perspective, is government by popular representation; a form of government in which the supreme power is retained by the people, but is indirectly exercised through a system of representation and delegated authority periodically renewed; a constitutional representative government. Among the major features of democracy is equality of individuals before the law; freedom, liberty and universal suffrage enjoyed by the people. The paper examines how competition for wealth and power among various ethnic groups in Nigeria affects institutionalisation of democracy in the country.

From our discussion so far, it is logical to argue as Nnoli (1978) did that the Nigerian politics have presented an image of struggle among various ethnic groups for the sharing of national resources. Thus, as observed by Crawford (1993) social competition in Nigeria first for place and preferment, political competition in Nigeria arena subsequently placed ethnicity in the centre of public cognition of political struggle. It is in this context

that this paper examines ethnicism and its resultant ethnic politics as an important factor that contributes to political instability and which subsequently has always threatened democratic rule in Nigeria.

ETHNIC ISSUES IN THE NIGERIA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL HISTORY: A REVIEW

Nigeria is undoubtedly a plural society with different ethnic groups, religions, languages, cultures and institutional arrangements. As a heterogeneous society, 374 ethnic groups have been identified each interacting with one another in competition for power and wealth. This has resulted into ethnic conflict. A major contributor to ethnic conflict in Nigeria is what some observers have described as constitutional factor. The focus of this line of argument is that constitutional developments in Nigeria, particularly the colonial constitutions, tended to engender ethnicism and hinder national integration of particular interest is Arthur Richard Constitution of 1946. This constitution established the first regional governments in Nigeria. Although the constitution achieved the integration of North and South in a common legislative council, it actually brought to force the concept of regionalism. Many political observers and commentators have observed that the 1946 constitution formed the beginning of the process of fragmentation along ethnic line in Nigeria. The Nigerian constitutional changes all along the colonial rule encouraged factionalism, which later resulted into ethnic nationalism. By definition, ethnic nationalism is seen in this paper as the tendency to see one's self as a member of an ethnic group rather than as a member of a nation. This tendency is shown in the allegiance individuals in this country pay to their ethnic groups. Consequently, many still prefer to identify primarily with their ethnic groups rather than with the state. This manifestation of strong allegiance to ethnic group encourages primordial sentiments among Nigerian people. Thus, the individuals are concerned with socio-economic and political development of their own group and not the nation as a whole.

It is important to note here that ethnic politics has manifested itself in many ways in Nigeria. Particularly interesting is the one that is related to party formation. The whole process of party formation began in the capital of Lagos with the formation of the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) in 1923. The first two parties, namely: Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) and the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) might be understood for not been national in structure. This was because the elective principle introduced by the Clifford Constitution in 1922 was a limited one that restricted elective representation to only Lagos and Calabar. The NNDP, which was basically a Lagos affair, was founded by Herbert Macaulay in response to the introduction of the elective principle. The constitution gave Lagos three

elective unofficial seats in the legislative council. The NYM came later in 1934 only as a challenge to NNDP domination of Lagos politics. The first political party that began with a national outlook was the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (later renamed National Convention of Nigeria Citizens – NCNC). Although the NCNC started with a national orientation and nationalist commitment, an ethnic perception of it emerged mainly as a result of what Crawford, (1993) called the flamboyant and controversial personality of the NCNC leader, Nnamdi Azikwe. In response to the perceived threat of Ibo domination, the Yoruba group founded a political party named the Action Group. Although it was originally conceived to be a national party, it could not escape from its 'Yoruba genesis'. The Action Group soon disclosed its ethnic identity because of the close association between its birth and establishment of a pan-Yoruba cultural association, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa. For the same fear of ethnic domination, the Hausa-Fulani emirates of the North floated the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC). According to Crawford (1993), the NPC was built upon a triple cultural support, which includes: the fear shared by all classes of Southern (and especially Ibo) dominations, the linked role of religious notables and emirs as defenders of faith, and the social discipline enforceable through the authoritative hierarchy of the emirates. Consequently, the fear shown by all the three ethnic groups produced the three parties, which were mainly ethnic in their origin, composition and the interest they served.

Another interesting manifestation of ethnic politics in Nigeria is the administrative division of the country into three regions. Each of these regions is dominated by one of the three ethnic groupings thereby reinforcing the popular philosophy of three-player of ethnic game. Many things have been affected by this tri-polar pattern. Particularly interesting was the move for self government, which if attained would usher in a democratic government in Nigeria. The north was unwilling to see a self-rule at the centre. The position taken by the north on this issue was indeed another expression of fear of domination. The north then felt that the enlightened south could use their advantage position to marginalize its people. The fear continues till today, almost five decades after independence.

CAUSES OF ETHNIC PROBLEM IN NIGERIA

Nigeria at the age 49 is still searching for a new political order. The full realisation of this objective has been made impossible because of the dominance of the factor of ethnicism, a factor which has affected the survival of democratic rule in Nigeria. One of the main causes of ethnic problem is ethnic nationalism. By definition, this means a tendency to see one's self, first and foremost as a member of an ethnic group rather than as a member of

a nation. This tendency has been shown in some ways and particularly in the allegiance people pay to their ethnic group. In Nigerian society today, many prefer identification with their ethnic group rather than with the nation or even state. The above shows that Nigerians still exhibit a strong allegiance to ethnic group and which has consequently encouraged primordial sentiments among Nigerian people.

The origin of ethnicism in Nigeria is traceable to the nation's colonial experience, particularly the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914. According to Osadolor (1998), the act of amalgamation was not a federal idea. Lugard did not conceive of a federal state for Nigeria. In the statement of the colonial office when Lugard submitted his proposals on 9 May, 1913, it was stated that 'Sir Lugard's proposals contemplate a state which is impossible to classify' (Osadolor, 1998). Lugard had neither a unitary nor a federal or confederal agenda for the country. Rather, the two regions were brought together for administrative convenience and reduction in administrative cost. This explains why the successive constitutions developed for governing the country between 1914 and 1951 can hardly be categorised either as unitary, federal or confederal. It was the turbulent political climate, which brought the 1951 Macpherson constitution to a premature end, which led to the production of the first federal-like constitution for Nigeria in 1954. The colonial Secretary, Oliver Lyttleton, convened a constitutional conference in London from July 30 to August 22 1953 to revise the 1951 constitution, which was originally expected to last for five years. At the conference, a federal constitution was accepted by the leaders of the main political parties. The solution was not reached easily, but it was the only feasible answer to the problem of national integration (Osadolor, 1998). The political restructuring produced the 1954 constitution that established a federal framework for Nigeria. The federal framework notwithstanding, the seed of mutual suspicion and fear of domination has germinated and was fast growing among the major ethnic groups in the country such that the workings of the new constitution became difficult. The point being made here is that federalism in Nigeria was not a deliberate design of the founding fathers but an accidental adoption, having found themselves in a tight situation with no better alternative available. The implication of this was that Nigerian federalism lacked the requisite foundation for a formidable federal system, the resultant effect of which is loyalty to ethnic groups rather than loyalty to the nation. In a circumstance of mutual suspicion and fear of domination, competition for power among ethnic groups becomes unavoidable. And it is on the basis of this fear of domination that formation of political parties in Nigeria always reflects a strong dose of ethnicism.

Colonialism left behind for Nigeria a non-hegemonic state that further aggravated the crisis of ethnicism in the

country. This is succinctly captured by Osaghae (2001) when he writes that:

...the pervasiveness of ethnic politics in the country is taken to be symptomatic of aggravated crisis of legitimacy that has engulfed the state, and is explained in terms of the proven efficacy of the ethnic strategy, the weakness of alternative identities and political units, the prevailing milieu of lawlessness that has enveloped the country's political landscape, and the inability of the state to act as an effective agency of distributive justice.

In a similar work, Aluko (2003) identifies the Legacy of Colonialism and monopoly of power by the major ethnic groups and their consequent marginalisation of the minority groups as major factors promoting ethnic nationalism in Nigeria. Other causes of ethnicism identified include poverty of leadership in terms of forging national integration among the multiple ethnic nationalities in the country (Babangida, 2002). Babangida argues further that mass poverty and unemployment creates alienation and insecurity, which in turn encourage Nigerians to experience and prefer accommodation within the social insurance system of ethnic nationalities.

Further identified causes of ethnic problems in Nigeria have to do with competition for employment and political exploitation. The former has been caused by the ever-increasing number of school leavers who now troop to the urban centre in search of jobs, which many a time are not found. And where such jobs are found they are given according to ethnic affiliation. The latter has to do with politicians who manipulate ethnic loyalties in order to increase their winning chance at the polls. This aspect of ethnicism in the Nigerian situation has set one ethnic group against another with immeasurable consequences.

MANIFESTATION OF ETHNIC POLITICS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SURVIVAL OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

The effort made so far in this paper has been to show that the inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria has been one of conflict largely caused by ethnic chauvinism, which manifests in form of ethnic nationalism. There is no doubt that this has implications for the survival of democracy in Nigeria. The question to answer here is how does ethnicism and the resultant ethnic politics affect democracy in an institution? It is common knowledge that the mode of governance in which Nigeria achieved her self-rule, was civil democracy. Since independence, (1960 to date), Nigeria has experimented with three distinct republican governments at times punctuated by long spells of military rule and now on fourth experiment. The constant military incursions have made the development of democratic political culture a difficult task in Nigeria. A survey of the political scenario in Nigeria

since independence will show the extent to which ethnic loyalty has affected the nation's dream to have democratic governance. The discussion here starts with an assessment of the political scenario in the First Republic. When Nigeria attained independence in 1960, she had a federal structure that was made up of three regions namely: the North, East and the West. Soon after Nigeria became an independent nation, the differences among the three regions became clear and amplified by the emergence of three regionally-based and tribally/ethnically sustained political parties. They were the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the National Convention of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) and the Action Group (AG) led by late Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto from the North, Dr. Azikwe from the East and Chief Obafemi Awolowo from the West respectively.

It was against this seemingly simple background that the problem of Nigeria's first attempt at democracy started. Between 1960 and 1965 the ethnically loaded political arrangement described above coupled with other factors threatened the continual existence of Nigeria as a nation. In the bid to win the most political power by these ethnic leaders, the situation degenerated into political riots, arsons, killings and other acts of vandalism especially in the west. Subsequently, there was a bloody military coup, which terminated the First Republic in 1966.

After 13 years of military rule, the Second Republic was born on October 1, 1979. The politics in this Republic was not better than what was obtained in the first one. As in the First Republic, parties were formed along ethnic line. The political scene and actors were almost the same. The Second Republic was little or no improvement upon the experience of the First Republic in terms of ethnicism. The Second Republic political parties were but reincarnations of the ethnically aligned parties of the First Republic. Both their formation and leadership conspicuously reflected ethnic affiliation. This does not mean that the parties of the Second Republic absolutely did not enjoy membership from other ethnic groups outside their domain, but where they did, such memberships were weak and insignificant. The problem of ethnic politics, particularly the reckless struggle by the ethnically inclined political leaders to gain control at the centre, and controversies that surrounded the general elections of 1979 and 1983 contributed largely to the demise of the Second Republic.

Ethnic politics was downplayed significantly in the aborted Third Republic owing to two factors: (1) the process of formation of the two political parties, namely Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC), did not give room to ethnic influence because the parties were military creation and the two-party system prevented ethnic dominance of any political party. (2) the emergence of M.K.O. Abiola, who was considered to be truly a national figure with little or no

passion for ethnicity, as the Presidential candidate of the SDP. However, annulment of the June 12 presidential election that was believed to have been won by M.K.O. Abiola eventually led to the truncation of the Third Republic and rejuvenation of ethnicism in Nigeria. The experience of the aborted Third Republic was an indication of existence of an inverse relationship between ethnicism and good governance. This is so because, it was the hope of good governance that Nigerians expected from M.K.O. Abiola that made them voted for him across the nation irrespective of ethnic and religious affiliations.

In the present 4th Republic, ethnic politics has less prominence than it had in the first and Second Republics. This may not be unconnected with the informal rotation arrangement of principal political offices of the federation among the six geo-political zones in the country. This could be seen from the arrangement that compensated the South - West in the 1999 Presidential Election in which the two presidential candidates filled were from the region in compensation for annulment of June 12 1993 presidential election, which was believed to have been won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola from the South-West. The rotation arrangement returned the presidency to the North after two terms of stay in the South. Other national elective offices involved in the rotation arrangement include: Vice President, Senate President and Deputy Senate President, Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives. Each of the offices is held by an elected person from one of the six geo-political zones in the country and none of the regions simultaneously enjoy two of the offices. The rotation and zoning system will however only be a short-term therapy for the problem of ethnicism in the absence of good governance.

Ethnic nationalism has had a lot of negative consequences for the nation's movement towards democratisation to the extent that it remains an enduring threat to institutionalisation of democracy in Nigeria. Among its resultant negative consequences as observed by Babangida (2002), are wastage of enormous human and material resources in ethnically inspired violence, encounters, clashes and even battles, heightening of fragility of the economy and political process, threat to security of life and property and disinvestments of local and foreign components with continuous capital flight and loss of confidence in the economy; and increasing gaps in social relations among ethnic nationalities including structural suspicions and hate for one another. Ethnic nationalism is equally responsible for upspring of ethnic militias across the country; the Oodua Peoples Congress of the southwest, Arewa Peoples Congress in the north and Egbesu in the east among others.

CONCLUSION

From what has been discussed so far, it can be seen that as a nation, Nigeria has failed to properly manage her

political relations in a manner that is characteristic of the civilized societies of the world. Nigeria has performed poorly on the political plane as a result of which the country's economic performance has been predictably affected. All the efforts that should have been directed to establishing a sound economic order for economic self-reliance had been unintelligently expended on political power struggle, political anarchy and political thuggery, all of which are compounded by the factor of ethnicism.

Osadolor (1998) identifies the structural imbalance of Nigeria's federal framework, as the most potent source of fear of domination among various groups. This fear promotes competitive federalism, which intensified the politics of "winner takes all". Unless this fear is removed, ethnicism will continue to be a bane of democratisation in Nigeria. The Federal Character principle is enshrined in the constitution to ensure social justice and equity particularly in distribution of federal positions. The principle needs to be properly reviewed to enable it perform integrative function without compromising merit. As rightly suggested by Babangida (2002), the quality, content, profile and temper of political leadership can go a long way either in undermining multiple ethnic nationalisms or in promoting national integration in Nigeria. More space should be provided for Nigerians to participate in the affairs of the country as well as those of their various communities. This will go a long way reducing alienation, which oftentimes is a major promoter of ethnic nationalism.

For institutionalisation of lasting democracy in Nigeria, her ethnic plurality notwithstanding, the wrongs of ethnicism must be righted. This can best be done by good governance. The nation needs a purposeful leadership that has a vision of how to place its citizens at the centre of political project without recourse to ethnic

chauvinism and sees acquisition of political power as not an end in itself but a means for serving the collective welfare of its people regardless of their ethnic origin. A leadership that recognizes and respects the many peoples that make up this nation, and treats all communities as its constituency thereby allaying the fear of ethnic domination

With the suggestions above, the Nigerian society will be able to reduce the incidence of ethnicism in the country's body polity. This will transform particular loyalties to loyalty to the nation. It will reduce the common syndrome of ethnic loyalty, which has always resulted into unhealthy political struggle and which has manifested in various types of political protests and instabilities.

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