

Review

The politics of ethnic balancing in Nigeria

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Nigeria as a heterogeneous society has continually faced the problem of ethnicity in her national life. Ethnicity remains a major factor in the politics of the country and this has been a major problem not only among the ruling elites but the citizenry who are constantly manipulated for political purposes. The elites on their part have always seen ethnicity as a fall back mechanism in settling scores whenever there is a disagreement amongst them. This issue is a fundamental factor in the continued existence of Nigeria as a country in the sense that, the failure of the elite to forge cohesion and bring about a form of ethnic balancing has continued to engender various forms of conflict and crisis within the polity. Using Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the paper interrogates the politics of ethnic balancing in Nigeria with a view to proffering solutions for ethnic harmony which has either been misunderstood or ignored by the elites.

Key words: Elites, ethnicity, heterogeneity, politics, hegemony.

INTRODUCTION

The quest for imperial hegemony inspired the cartographic demarcation of ethnic boundaries (Ukiwo, 2005). What then is ethnicity? Ethnicity simply defined is a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups (Nnoli, 1980). Jinadu (2004) viewed ethnicity as a social construct which mobilization for competitive purposes includes political parties, public intellectuals, and university students, the military, public bureaucracies, trade unions etc. For him, the political salience of ethnicity is situated within the structure of social relations of production in the country. Ethnic groups as a social concept are social formations differentiated by communal boundaries. In Nigeria, colonialism introduced the concept of ethnicity, first through its policy of segregation which engendered mutual distrust and acrimony. For instance in Northern Nigeria, it was the official British policy to separate the Hausa- Fulani from their Southern brothers and sisters (Attoh, 2009). Initially, the migrants and natives lived in harmony in the native city. But this negated the official view that only conflict characterized contacts among African tribes. Hence, the migrants were forced to live in Sabon- Gari while the natives lived in Tudun- Wada. However, in cities such as Katsina, and Gwandu where the Emirs resisted this policy of Sabon- Gari, the natives

and migrants have continued to live in peace.

The socialization of Nigerians into this colonialists world view has resulted in the internalization of this form of discrimination. The relevant communal factor could be language, culture or both. For Nigeria, language has been a most fundamental variable as people tended to relate more with those they share a common language with (Kparapo). Ethnicity as a phenomenon is behavioural in form and conflictual in content in the sense that people from different ethnic groups see each competitor in the quest for resources rather than compatriots. It can only exist within a plural political state such as Nigeria with over three hundred and fifty language groups. It is the relations between the diverse ethnic groups within the political state that produces ethnicity. In the case of Nigeria, its conflictual nature stems from inter-ethnic competition for scarce resources. It is often characterized by inter-ethnic discrimination in jobs, housing, admissions into tertiary institutions, scholarships, marriages, distribution of welfare services, etc. This is often accompanied by nepotism and corruption. Merit is quite often sacrificed on the altar of ethnicity thus, engendering conflict especially in the competition for scarce resources. In the course of this paper, we will answer the following questions: (a) what was the role of the Colonial/Post-Colonial State in triggering ethnicity? (b) how did the civil war affect the ethnic situation? (c) what is the effect of ethnicity on power struggle? (d) how do the elites manipulate ethnicity

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in their quest for power? and (e) Can ethnicity be emancipatory?

THE COLONIAL/POST-COLONIAL STATE AS A TRIGGER FOR ETHNICITY

In Nigeria, the colonial urban context constitutes the context for ethnicity. It was within the colonial urban context that ethnic groups acquired a common consciousness. Ethnicity is therefore a product of the colonial and post-colonial state. The proliferation of communal associations which attracted a large proportion of urban dwellers triggered intra-class and inter-individual socioeconomic competition especially among the various town unions. Nnoli (1980) opines that, the pervasive scarcity and inequality of the peripheral capitalist state challenged and stretched the resources of the unions. The failure of the state to provide employment and other services to the citizenry boosted the importance of the unions. They became the only institutions through which the individuals could find a meaning to their lives. This resulted in greater cohesion within the unions and greater dependence by the individuals on the unions. As the bond between the individual and the union became stronger, his loyalty was transferred from the state to the union which gave meaning to his social existence.

This transfer of loyalty was rewarded materially and emotionally, thus, further alienating him from the state. Any wonder that both the individual and the unions joined forces to fight the state for resources. This joining of forces heightened inter-ethnic competition which often times resulted in conflicts. These conflicts increased the social distance between the various ethnic groups. With increased social distance, each group tended to corner the resources of the state for its own members while excluding other groups. Nnoli (1980) posits that the various activities embarked upon by the unions outside their ethnic enclave reflect integrative endeavours. Thus, a combination of group loyalty with in-group cohesion enabled the unions to successfully challenge any super-ethnic institution. As the ethnic groups grew stronger and cohesive, it periled the development of a nationalistic consciousness in the individual. This truncated the development of a national selfhood.

Sensing the dangers of these parochial associations, Eyo Ita in 1945 warned Nigerians to “seek coordination among the ethnic unions in a way that will help build a strong national consciousness”. This conflict of economic interest set the stage for the events that propelled the country into the politicization of ethnicity. The logical deduction is that ethnic politics was born from the failure of some factions of the elites to achieve their economic interests. This is why politics during the period of the struggle for independence was dominated by conflicts arising from the assertion of interests of the various factions of the elite.

Nnoli (1980) argued that the “class character and interests of the nationalist parties were reflected in their activities when Nigerians assumed political positions of authority”. They embarked on the use of political machinery to pursue their narrow political interests of amassing wealth to the detriment of the majority. The politicians and bureaucrats became the new men of wealth in the country. “Thus, the search for petty bourgeois and comprador bourgeois fortunes dominated the struggle for power. Its inevitable consequences were the regionalization of politics and the politicization of ethnicity” (Nnoli, 1980: 148). The petty bourgeois and comprador bourgeoisie of each region perceived their needs and interests as unconnected with those of their counterparts from other regions.

As argued in the introductory part, the politicization of ethnicity was encouraged by the colonialists. For instance, the Richard’s Constitution of 1946 led to a political and budgetary regionalization of the country. The constitution was designed to preserve the indirect rule system; it established a legislature in each of the three regions of North, East and West. The regional legislatures sent representatives to the central legislature. “The Constitution was premised on the assumption that regional political integration was a necessary first step toward national political integration (Bourdillion, 1946). The colonial administration reinforced regional politics through its policy of “Sabon-Gari” in the North to ensure that the North had no closer interaction with its Southern brothers and sisters (Soyombo and Attoh, 2009).

In addition, the discovery of oil as a state resource in 1956 introduced a new factor in inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria. Oluode (1999) posited that, oil has affected the outlook of the different people of Nigeria. It has enabled the various groups to come in contact with people from several spheres of life and to be in competition for the allocation of the revenue that accrues from the sale of crude oil. He argued that, as a result of this competition, new forms of conflict are set in motion. Ethnic rivalry has heightened and the fear of domination has not been assuaged by the measures crafted to overcome such fears. The politics of oil gave birth to new groupings especially in the Niger Delta region with its attendant militancy to coerce the ruling elites to peek into the grievances of the minority in that region.

POST-CIVIL WAR AND ETHNICITY

Despite the pre-independence ethnic rivalry the various elites papered their differences in order to wrest power from the colonial masters. However, the differences deepened after independence. The various ethnic elites began to promote the exclusive success of their members to the detriment of others (Salamone, 1997). This undue rivalry culminated in the various conflicts that led to the abortion of the First Republic and consequently,

the military coup of 1966 which was termed an Igbo coup by a section of the military. The result was the counter coup of July, 1966 which was a reprisal coup against Igbo military officers and the subsequent assassination of the then Head of State General Aguiyi Ironsi. The events of that period led to the mass killing of Igbos in the North and an exodus of Igbos from the North to the East. Lt. Col. Chukwu Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Military Governor of the then Eastern Region made a move to secede by declaring a sovereign state of Biafra. To break the ranks of Easterners and ensure that Nigeria remained an indivisible country, the then Head of State General Yakubu Gowon created more states from the original three regions, splitting the country into a twelve-state structure. The creation of states proved to be an ingenious decision by General Gowon. As soon as the states were created the minorities in the former Eastern Region joined forces with the Nigerian Army to defeat Biafra.

At the end of the civil war in 1970, the government of General Gowon proceeded to reconcile the whole country by declaring that there was "no victor, no vanquished". Despite this declaration the Igbos still harbour the feelings of marginalization as no Igbo person has made it to the presidency, forty years after the civil war. Rather than engender cohesion, the creation of states had further deepened the suspicions between the ethnic groups as the country had experienced more states creation. First into 19 states and later into 36 states and there are still agitations for more state creation. The implication is that rather than strengthen the various groups, the war has further weakened the social fabric that binds the various ethnic groups.

ETHNICITY AND POWER STRUGGLE IN NIGERIA

The result of ethnic competition was the emergence of political parties along ethnic lines. By 1953, the three major political parties in the country namely the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons, Action Group and Northern Peoples Congress had become associated with the three major ethnic groups :- the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, respectively. This reflected an attempt by the regional elites to carve out economic spheres for themselves. The regional elites succeeded in creating the false impression that the political parties were the champions of the interests of the various ethnic groups. They openly used emotive ethnic symbols and played on alleged ethnic conflicts to canvass for votes. Their struggles for power and positions generated antagonism and hostility along ethnic divide.

Nnoli (1980) was of the view that, their propaganda emphasized alleged conflict of interests among the various groups with each party claiming to be protecting and advancing the interests of the ethnic nationalities. However, the covert reasons for deploying ethnic

propaganda to canvass for votes had always been the diversion of national resources to the elites in each region, and to increase its spheres of influence while weakening those of its opponents. A good example is the declaration of a state of emergency by the National Council of Nigerian Citizens/Northern Peoples Congress (NCNC/NPC) coalition in the AG controlled Western region in 1962 whereas the violent crisis in the same Western Region in 1965 did not culminate in the declaration of a state of emergency because the party in power was in coalition with the NPC controlled Federal Government.

Even with states creation, consideration of national unity assumed secondary interest. The various ethnic elites gave vent to their personal interests to enable them increase their economic and political spheres. The elites succeed in this respect because most Nigerians believe that unless their own men are in government they would not secure socioeconomic benefits. Hence, government decisions about siting of industries, construction of roads, award of scholarships and appointments into public service are usually viewed through ethnic prism. For instance, it is the norm that the President and Vice President should come from different sections of the country and from different religious persuasions. It is this distrust among the various ethnic groups that brought about the enshrinement of the Federal Character clause in the constitution and the establishment of the Federal Character Commission to ensure that all ethnic nationalities are duly represented in appointments into public service.

The "ethnic watchers" constantly put government on its toes by assessing the differential benefits of the various ethnic groups. For a fact, most ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria were as a result of the distrust and perceived wrongs by those involved in such conflicts. For instance, the recent ethno-religious conflagration in Jos the capital of Plateau State was because the indigenous population felt that the Hausa-Fulani was trying to exercise hegemony over them. The Tiv/ Jukun conflict was also as a result of perceived marginalization by one of the parties to the conflict.

ELITE MANIPULATION OF ETHNICITY

Sumner (1959) notes the tendency for inter-human tension to be aroused by the competition for scarce resources. This tension is further reinforced by ethnic intellectuals and ideologues who fan the embers of interethnic prejudice and hostility through the promotion of ethnic ideas and beliefs. This struggle for socioeconomic ascendancy often results in nepotism and its antisocial consequences. Sumner's thesis is in tandem with Anthonio Gramsci's thesis on hegemony. Gramsci argued against economic determinism as the basis for control. Despite the importance of the economic

infrastructure as a background against which events took place, he believed that, ideas and beliefs were equally important. He viewed the super structure of society as comprising two parts- the political society and the civil society.

The political society is the State which controls the instruments of coercion while the civil society comprises of institutions such as the church, trade unions, the mass media and the political parties. He saw the state not as an institution but rather in terms of the activities of the dominant class. He averred that, if the ruling class gains the approval and consent of members of the society that it has achieved hegemony. Hegemony is achieved by persuading the population to accept the political and moral values of the ruling class. He stressed that effective ruling class control was achieved to the extent that it could retain command of the beliefs of the population through the civil society. This is akin to Marx's views on false consciousness. Hegemony is therefore possible where there exist some sort of alliance between a fraction of the ruling class and the subject class. Gramsci called such an alliance a historic block but what usually obtains is a compromise between the groups involved. Another reason why complete hegemony was impossible was because the state always makes concessions to the subject class; this is a form of balancing to maintain stability. He concluded that power derived only in part from economic control, that it equally originates from control over people's ideas and beliefs.

To this end, the ruling class can never act as a monolith as they canvass different ideas and beliefs. This inability to form a monolith through the use of a common ideology has caused ethnic jingoists to fan the embers of ethnic prejudices and hostility. This has been the genesis of ethnic movements in Nigeria and their quest for greater autonomy promoted by the elites from the various ethnic groups. The tendency has been for the ethnic elites to promote their ethno ideas and beliefs such as language and religion in order to gain control of the subject class in its quest to corner the resources of the State. Contrary to Grasci's belief that political parties form part of the civil society, in Nigeria political parties are formed along ethnic divide with the elites manipulating the subject class along such divide to garner their votes. And in situations of conflict, the tendency is to fan the embers of ethnic tension by accusing the others of marginalization.

For instance the non- consummation of the June 12th 1993 Presidential election believed to have been won by Chief M. K. O. Abiola and the events that followed it galvanized both the Yoruba intelligentsia and ordinary folks to support the Dr. Fredrick Fasehun led Oodua People's Congress (OPC). The OPC and the civil society organizations provided the platform through which many citizens gave vent to their frustrations. The June 12th phenomenon was viewed as an ethnic injustice and brazen arrogance of the military elites by the citizenry. The reluctance of the military elites to compromise on the

issue was viewed as evidence of ethno nationalism given that the top hierarchy of the military came from a section of the country.

However, the decision to hand over power to former President Olusegun Obasanjo a Yoruba from late Chief Abiola's home town by the same military elite could be viewed as not only a compromise but a balancing act to ensure political stability. The thrust of the argurement is that, despite the manipulative efforts of ethnic elites, the same elites find it politically expedient to seek a compromise when the stability of the polity is threatened and such compromises are needed and should be canvassed to build a virile state.

Equally interesting is the recent political crisis which culminated in the presidency of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan. Recall that at the beginning, a fraction of the ruling elite was not favourably disposed to Dr. Jonathan becoming the President because they felt that power should reside with the North for two terms irrespective of the dictates of the constitution. But the moment the Niger Delta militants issued the threat to make the country ungovernable, they saw the need to invoke what was termed the doctrine of necessity by making Dr. Jonathan the Acting President thus ensuring a form of balancing which in turn helped to stabilize the polity.

The establishment of the Federal Character Commission, as well as the invocation of the federal character principle, the zoning formula adopted by the People's Democratic Party and other such acts is all geared towards ethnic balancing to ensure that no section of the country harbours the feeling of marginalization.

EMANCIPATORY ETHNICITY AS A FORM OF ETHNIC BALANCING

The tendency is to often view ethnicity as negative, disruptive and conflictual. However, ethnicity could also be cooperative, non-conflictual and positive. Osaghae (2003) is of the view that ethnicity has been helpful in the mobilization of resources and community based developments. This is typified by the activities of urban based town unions, social clubs and ethnic women organizations which through levies and contributions construct feeder roads, build maternities, schools, water projects, etc in the villages. The importance of such self-help development projects has increased due to the dwindling resources of the state. Ethnicity equally helps new urbanites adjust to their new environment and have a sense of belonging. Osaghae (2003) argued that ethnicity is not altogether negative because it offers the weak and oppressed groups a platform to articulate their grievances and seek redress. It is in such forms that ethnicity is viewed as emancipatory.

For instance, the Ogonis were able to articulate the neglect and degradation of their environment by the State

and oil companies through the activities of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) which articulated their grievances and brought them to both national and global attention. Of recent, the movement for the emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) has also played emancipatory roles in its quest to project the marginalization and degradation of the Niger Delta Region. The fundamental issue is that ethnic mobilization of disruptive trajectory is an indication that the system is sick and requires urgent remedy. In Nigeria, the fact that ethnic nationalities have become violent has helped to stabilize the present democracy by making the ruling elites to seek urgent solutions to perceived wrongs and grievances and to seek alliances and compromise. We could aver that the emancipatory roles played by these groups in the Niger Delta earned the region a Vice President in 2007 who incidentally is the current substantive President following the death of the former President. This has given the region a sense of belonging and has since reduced the various acts of violence in that region.

Equally, worthy of note is the emancipatory role played by the OPC by consistently bringing to national and global attention the perceived injustice meted to the Yoruba by the annulment of the June 12th, 1993 election which was won by late Chief Abiola. Through its actions, the right to contest the 1999 presidential election was conceded to the Yoruba. Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba, who won the election, was the president for two terms. This was a way of assuaging the anger of that section of the country and invariably stabilizing the polity. Such emancipatory roles should be viewed positively because they enable other ethnic groups to have a peek into the feelings and aspirations of their fellow citizens and thus help to engender harmony.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The thrust of the argument is that ethnicity was born as a result of the quest for imperial hegemony. It was fueled by the colonial belief that certain ethnic groups were more intelligent, progressive and worthy of respect than the others (Zolberg) cited in (Nnoli, 1980). Some scholars averred that the undue attachment to ethnic groups hamper the development of a modern virile state.

However, the authors posit that it is not in all situations that the deployment of ethnicity becomes a negative factor in governance. That ethnicity can indeed become emancipatory in situations where it provides a platform for the weak and oppressed to articulate their grievances and seek redress. The logic is that in plural states such as Nigeria, the ruling elites should take cognizance of the fears and grievances of weak ethnic groups in its quest to ensure equity and justice in governance. The act of assuaging the fears and weaknesses of weak and oppressed groups by the ruling elites is indeed ethnic balancing and thus a panacea to ethnic disharmony.

In the light of the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

- i. To build a virile state the ruling elites should encourage national discourse to enable the various groups' air their grievances and fears.
- ii. Ethnicity as earlier discussed could be emancipatory especially in development and should be encouraged by developing states to enhance development.
- iii. The Nigerian State could use the Federal Character principle as a platform for excellence by encouraging the various groups to put forward their best for national positions and assignments.

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