

## FEDERALISM AND ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: PAST AND PRESENT ISSUES

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### Abstract

*The paper examines ethnic violence in Nigeria: current problems and future prospects. It observes that the Nigerian federation being a pluralistic and extensively heterogeneous one is prone to violence. The paper highlights the nexus between federalism and ethnic violence. It argues that although there are some faulty lines in the practice of federalism in Nigeria and a wrong appreciation of the values inherent in it, ethnic violence should be addressed by government and the government should re-examine how best to constitute the Nigerian federation so as to endow it with justice, fair play, equity, objectivity, neutrality and mutual co-existence among the various ethnic groups in the country. In doing these, the paper believes that the Nigerian federation will attain lofty heights and brighter prospects.*

**Keywords:** Federalism, ethnic, violence, Nigeria

### Introduction

One of the numerous reasons for the adoption of a federal system of government by countries is to provide an enabling platform for extraordinary diversities and the multi ethnic groups that exist in such federations. Nigeria is a country of extraordinary diversities and complexities. This complexity is a reflection of avalanche of ethno-cultural and religious groups co-habiting the territories and intricacies of interaction among these various ethnic groups. Nigeria's ethnic composition is estimated to be between 250 and over 400. Nigeria has since independence been marked by varied ethnic crisis. Ethnic and cultural pluralism has become the hallmark of the country's federalism. (Muhammad, 2007: 1) However, the type of federalism the country is operating has given rise to the various endemic ethnic crises in Nigeria. Violence in whatever form is inimical to the attainment of goals of federalism. In federal system of government, certain forms of crises are frequent; this includes political and constitutional crises that

bother on the exact division of power and responsibility between the federal and state governments. Another common form of conflict is thatt between states and federal interests, or between the interests and aspirations of different ethnic groups in the country. In some federations, the entire jurisdiction is relatively homogeneous and each constituent state resembles a miniature version of the whole. This is known as' Congruent Federalism: On the other hand, incongruent federalism exists where there are distinct ethnic groups like Nigeria. In all the crises inherent in a federal system of government, ethnic violence is a serious problem because it hinders sustainable national development. It is also divisive and hinders unanimity of purpose and goal attainment.

The controversy over the type of federalism the Nigerian state is operating has been vociferous. The discourses are predicated on a number of issues that some scholars and political activists refer to as the national

question of what is "true" federalism?. The country's federalism has been distorted since independence in 1960, first by the political class and second by the military. Federalism is a "system of government in which power is divided by a written constitution between a central government and regional or sub-divisional governments. Both governments act directly upon the people through their officials and laws. Both are supreme within their proper sphere of authority" (Suberu, 2002)

Ethnic pluralism in Nigeria can be traced to the time of British colonial rule in the country. The Nigerian state in 1914 witnessed the amalgamation of disparate territories and people who had nothing in common. The British adopted a somewhat federal structure in the country because they were desirous of a system of government that would neutralize the potential threats and put a system in place that will accommodate the divergent interests of the various ethno-cultural groups that existed in the country. This desire by British colonial masters eventually found expression in the federal system of government. ( Muhammad, 2007)

#### **Ethnic violence: historical perspective.**

Nigeria has over four hundred ethnic and many sub ethnic- groups' that formally existed independent of each other before the advent of colonial power in the country. Colonialism led to the creation of artificial boundaries with attendant coercion which eventually led to the development of ethnic consciousness, thus ethnicism became part of the country's federal arrangement. The colonial administration through the constitution, bequeathed on the country ignited ethnicism and tribalism, since then, the different governments that ruled the country either civilian or military had not only grappled with this problem, but had indirectly exacerbated it through their resolution efforts. (Asaju, 2006) During colonial era, the British

adopted political and administrative policies of divide and rule that mobilized and manipulated the ethnic consciousness that eventually emerged from the violence of the colonial state. The British policy of divide and rule, initially adopted ethnicity and sectionalism to confront the nationalists and to maintain colonial authority and power in the British enclave. The British colonialists also did everything to further disunite the Nigerian people. They spread the propaganda that Nigerians did not have a common distinct identity attributes with respect to political independence, (Nnoli, 2003)

The British colonial policy in Nigeria was to secure the rights of each ethnic group to maintain its identity, individuality and ethnic nationality. According to Nnoli, (2003), the colonial state in 1910 promulgated the Land and Native Rights Ordinance which proclaimed all lands in the North, as native lands to be controlled and administered by the colonial governor who eventually manipulated the law to limit the number of southerners migrating to the north. The colonialists believed that the southerners were capable of undermining the alliance between them and the Fulani ruling class that they deemed crucial to colonial enterprise in Nigeria. In 1945, ethnic violence erupted in Jos between the Igbo community and Hausa. In the conflict, the colonialists manipulated Igbo-Hausa animosity to the colonial advantage. In 1949, the British colonialist also fanned the embers of ethnic hostility by manipulating elections in favour of some sections of the country and against another. (Nnoli, 2003). The colonialists favoured the Native Authority administration in the North, protected it from radical nationalist influence from Southerners.

The creation of the country called Nigeria by Britain in 1914 has led this nation to over fifty years of conflict, violence and massive bloodshed. In fact, since political

independence in 1960, the Nigerian federation has been torn apart by wars conflict and bloody ethnic violence. The most famous of these disputes was the thirty-six months old civil war. (1967-1970), the cause of the war was an attempted secession bid from Nigeria by the three Eastern states. In fact the domination of the sizeable North and dissatisfaction of the Igbo's of Eastern region culminated in the civil war. (Hughes, 2008).

In addition, the prolonged military rule in the country brought the use of brute force to suppress ethnic agitation and violence. The military also used repressive and coercive measures in form of obnoxious decrees, arbitrary arrest and detention without trial and killing of ethnic leaders under false pretext. Despite all the repressive actions, ethnic violence kept on reoccurring in the Nigerian federation. This violence created political chaos and instability and brought the country on the verge of political collapse.

### **Travails of federalism in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a cliffhanger federation, anchored on precarious grudging multi-ethnic accommodation, thriving on unabated certainty and tense expectation. The dilemma of the Nigeria state lies in a pretentious and faulty federal system. Suberu (2001) argues that at the heart of Nigeria predicament is the development of an intensely dysfunctional system of centralized ethno-distributive federalism. Federalism has not been a particularly workable option in Nigeria. This is not as a result of federalism as an integrative mechanism, but because of its acts that are antithetical to federal principles. The call for political restructuring of Nigerian federalism is not new. It is highly rooted in the past military dictatorships. Decree No. 34 1966 transformed Nigerian federal system to a unitary government oversight under Ironsi regime. Even with the abrogation of the Decree by the Gowon administration which

returns the country back to a federal state, the appellation "Federal Republic of Nigeria" only remained on paper as virtually all military regimes ruled the country as if it was a unitary state (Awofeso, 2000).

Ethnic problems in the Nigerian federation are numerous. The most basic of these problems is ethnic violence among various ethnic groups. Federalism has come under severe criticisms by some scholars and concerned citizens who see it as the potential source of the various problems facing the country today. Such problems as ethnicity, political, and even economic instability, possibility and threat of secession, among others are closely associated with the political system. The political system that Britain bequeathed to Nigeria at her independence in 1960 was full of too many pitfalls and contradictions to be able to stand the test of time; (Ejimofor, 1987) argued that Lord Lugard's 1914 amalgamation gave birth to a more or less unitary form of government in Nigeria. The Clifford Constitution of 1923 set the tone for elective representation in the country, although Nigeria's first experiment with a unitary constitution did not come until 1946, with the operation of the Richards constitution. ( Adelegan, 2009}. The origin of the federal structure in Nigeria created certain problems of permanent dimensions. First, the division of the south into two turned Nigeria into an asymmetric territorial association in which one part was equal to the sum of the other two parts. The division of Nigeria into three regions and the granting of the north 50% of the total seats of the central legislature in 1950 made the north a near absolute decider of joint deliberations. This arrangement violated the principle of equality of states in a federation, such that the north became the pillar around which the other regions revolved. (Saliu, 1999:60). This situation according to him proved the validity of Mill's law of Federal Instability, which asserts that no federation can be stable when one part of

the federation constitutes a permanent majority in joint deliberations.

Another major source of tension in the Nigerian federalism is the issue of federal character and its application. The 1979 Constitution formally recognized the application of the principle of federal character in section 14. It describes the purpose of federal character rather than the substance when it states that it refers to the distinctive desire of the people. This is a controversial and retrogressive clause in the constitution. (Saliu, 1999)

The federal character principle does not seem to take care of the struggle amongst various ethnic groups to have a share of the said "National Cake". In the real sense of it, the federal character intends to be a unifying factor with the aim of promoting national unity yet, its politics due to lack of definitive accepted guidelines, have been extremely divisive in state and ethnic terms (Suberu, 2002). One of the major objectives of federalism is to take care of the problem of pluralism by establishing a union between several states or state-like bodies which was one of the reasons for its introduction in Nigeria. An abiding threat to the stability of the Nigeria federation is the growing division and polarization of the country along ethnic, states and religious lines. It seems obvious that the federal arrangement in Nigeria has operated to legitimize and strengthened inherent divisions in the country, even as it is directly threatened by this division. (Suberu, 1990). Another plausible explanation for the travails of federalism in Nigeria is the persistent crises due to the multinational or multi-ethnic nature of the country. It is generally believed that rather ameliorate Nigeria's multi-ethnic problems, federalism aggravated them. However, Ogban-Iyam (1998) does not agree with the view totally. According to him, there are many other multi-

ethnic and multinational countries which are doing much better than Nigeria in coping with their multi-ethnic and multinational problems. Many of such countries are federations while some of them are no, so Nigeria's case should not be an exception.

Any nation made up of diverse people, such as is the case in Nigeria, would do its best to adopt federalism, many people believe that Nigeria is not practicing "true federalism". However, some people believe that there is no such thing as true federalism anywhere in the world. According to Chief Richard Akinjide (2008: 67), what we are practicing is meaningless. In one way it is a unitary system masquerading a federal system. Fear, occasioned by mistrust is one of the elements that has strongly been against practice of federalism in Nigeria. This atmosphere of deep mutual distrust and fear that exists among the various ethnic nationalities in the country, both real or imagined, reasonable and not so reasonable, are still very much with us after more than fifty years of political independence (Adelegan, 2009). Given the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria and diverse interests, it certainly has appeared that the decision of our early nationalists to operate federalism as a form of government was a right step in the right direction. It is obvious that the complexities of Nigeria can only be addressed by the practice of federalism. However, the Nigerian federation has failed to record the desired meaningful effects over fifty years of Nationhood.

The inability of the Nigerian federation to sustain an enduring democratic system is another major source of concern and tension in the Nigerian federal structure. Democracy is an important feature of a federation, the democratizing qualities of federalism disperses power, thus it increases social penetration of government and may therefore increase stability and reduce or eliminate minority

problem as this will increase political integration. The political history of Nigeria has however been widely dominated by military rule. The inability of a country to fully democratize her political system is anti-federal in nature (Adelegan, 2009)

There is no doubt that the practice of federalism in the country has been punctured by the various ethnic conflicts and political instability which manifests in the serious threat to the corporate existence of the country. This included a thirty-six months civil war and; a number of ethno-regional induced coups such as January and July 1966 as well as the failed coup attempt of Late Major Gideon Orkar in 1990; communal clashes between Ife and Modakeke in Osun State, Aguleri and Umuleri in Anambra state, the Ijaws and Itsekiris in Delta state, the various conflicts from Jos in and the militia groups in the Niger Delta. All the above trends has shown no sign of abating, thereby casting a shadow of doubt over the adaptive capability of federalism in guaranteeing socio-economic, cultural and political stability in Nigeria (Saliu, 1998).

There is no doubt that profound conflict exists among the component units of the Nigerian federation. However, in the structural and political context, the country Federalism may liken to a biological cell capable of dividing and reproducing itself. (Dent, 1995) This situation is so for long and as a result of this the country has continued to witness continuous splitting of units in the name of state and local government creation. For instance in, 1954, it began as a federation of three regions but by 1964, it became four with the creation of the mid western region from the then western region. By 1967, the federal structure became subdivided into 12 states; it was further split into 19 states. By 1989, it became a federation of 21 states increasing to 30 by 1990 and 1996 to a federation of 36 states respectively. The continued structural

division of the country has not produced a satisfactory outcome for the component unit; this is so because every attempt at state creation is usually followed by increase agitation for more. (Muhammad, 2007)

### **Ethnic chauvinism and the Nigerian federalism**

Ethnic chauvinism has become a logical factor in Nigeria's federal structure. It is used as basis for political solidarity or agitation in fact; it has become an instrument for violence. In the Nigeria federation there seems to be no end to divisive tendencies confronting the nation.. Within communities or a conglomeration of communities that form an ethnic identity there are sub-ethnic sentiments, for instance Anambra and the Imo Igbos may not agree on a particular decision, just as the Ekiti and Egba may compete for the same "Yoruba cake". Ethnic logic has become the bane of the country's federation. It has also become a basis for political leadership at all levels of creed, ethnic grouping or political party grouping. In the past the country had experienced ethnic and sectional violence that threatened the very corporate existence of the country, (Asaju, 2006)

Armed brigandage and ethnic militias have emerged and become a recurring decimal in the country's federation, an example is what is obtainable in the Niger Delta, the South-South Nigeria and other ethnic militias in the country; such as the Oodua People's Congress and the Bakassi Boys. As a result of the activities of the various ethnic militias in the country, the nation has experienced wastage of enormous human and material resources. In the country's federal structure, the increasing gaps in social relations among ethnic nationalities including structural suspicions and hate for one another have become a normal tradition. . Their activities has led to threat to security of lives and property in the

Nigeria and this has led to disinvestment of local and foreign components, with continuous capital flight and loss of confidence in the economy. Ethnic violence has also led to the heightening of fragility of the economy and political process. The exacerbation of violence and more violence together with the erosion of legitimacy and also disinvestments in political process has become the order of the day. There are lots of reasons for the eruption of ethnic violence in a country.

Ethnic violence had erupted due to incidence of religious desecration, for instance the killing of Gideon Akakula who was accused by the Hausa/Fulani of having desecrated a leaflet of the Quran and he had to pay with his life. In the Akakula situation, crisis was averted due to prompt government intervention. Another incident that could arise from such incident is when one group threatens the cultural traits of another group. Such an act could consequently be interpreted as an act committed by the individual on behalf of their group. Punishment would consequently be meted out on the individual who committed such acts. The situation in Jos is another disturbing trend in ethnic violence in Nigeria.

The situation in Jos, the North central state capital of Plateau is a typical example of ethnic violence that erupted due to the incidence of religious disputes. In the early morning of March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010, five hundred people were killed; many of these people were from the Dogo-Nahawa and Zot villages of Berom community of Plateau State. The attacks were reprisal killing for violence in January, 2010, when an inter-communal clash between the Hausa Fulani settlers. (Muslim nomadic herders), this attack claimed at least 326 lives and most of the victims were Hausa speaking Muslims. (Hughes, 2008) Again, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, 2010, which was Christmas, about 80 people were killed in a multiple bomb blast in Jos, an Islamic

fundamental group, Jama'atu Ahlus-SunnahLidda claimed responsibility for the multiple bombing in Jos, Plateau State. North-Central Nigeria. (Hughes, 2008)

### **Concluding remarks**

Nigeria's current travail is not unconnected with her extreme pluralism as a deeply divided society coupled with the manifest mismanagement of her federalism. The structure of the country's federalism from the outset as observed by Gana (2003:79) vitiated a primary requirement of functional federalism. It is obvious that the complexities of Nigeria can only be addressed by the practice of true federalism. True federalism means devolution of powers and retention of very high percentages of revenue coming from the different states. The issue of national integration and nation-building should be given paramount consideration by government. There is the need to evolve a coherent policy and ideology of national integration and nation-building instead of the ad-hoc solutions to the problems confronting the Nigerian federation. Nigeria has not been able to abide strictly by the constitutional provisions guiding the true practice of federalism as a result of the drift from one crisis to the other since independence. Also the constituent parts of Nigeria have not strictly adhered to the intrinsic principles of federalism in the relationship of the various tiers of government. The search for political stability has been long and tortuous and the country is yet to find the map road to stability. The unrests and widespread disturbances in many parts of the federation are attributable to issues of fiscal federalism, ethno-religious matters and related issues which must be thoroughly and critically examined within the context of federalism. (Adelegan, 2009)

Nigeria should aim at fashioning out a political culture that will downplay, if not totally eliminate feelings of mistrust, deep-seated

animosity that exists among the various ethnic groups in the country and also examine the issue of perceived domination of some sections by others. One of the many ways of doing the above is to operate a political culture that will promote equal opportunities for all Nigerians. If the country must progress, Nigerians must cultivate progressive habits and take steps that would ensure sustainable socio-political and economic development of the country. There must be political will on the part of the citizenry, who must resolve to build a stable political environment. There is the need for political dialogue which should be made one of the greatest strength of the Nigerian federation. The citizens must promote and respect the mechanisms that enhances national consensus.

In other to overcome dismal performance of the Nigerian federation which has led to the persistent crises due to the multi-ethnic nature of the country is to drop the idea of federalism for a possible better confederacy. Though, the call for confederacy may be criticized in some quarters and if it is difficult to attain confederacy because of the gains of federalism which is enormous, it should continue with serious reforms.

There is the urgent need of restructuring the country into a federation that will guarantee justice, fair play and equity for all. Only federalism practiced in a true form could ensure that the above qualities are attained. It is only the true practice of federalism that will move the country along the envisaged path of progress. (Adelegan, 2009)

The idea of state and local government creation should be discouraged and put on hold for now, the creation of states and local government has led to ethnic violence in the past and exacerbated lingering ones. This is not condemning state and local government creation but it must be pointed out that states

and local government creation failed to solve the problems they are meant to solve. Ethnic violence also arises out of political situation. The races to occupy public offices become do or die affair. Today, we still ethnic, sectional or zonal backing of political aspirant from a particular sections of the country. This sort of backing are needed by these sectional or ethnic groups to push home the demands and in cases like this, ethnic violence could not be avoided. There is the need for the country to encourage alignments based on national and collective interests' rather ethnic or sectional consideration

The government must realize the fact that the use of soldiers to quell violent ethnic or sectional crises is no longer fashionable in a democratic setting. There is the need for government and the people to come together and chart the way forward for country. The use of military personnel could only be tolerated in a comlex, more sophisticated and violent clashes. In a democratic setting, the sole responsibility of preventing and quelling violent clashes rests on the police. People accused the police of lapses in handling crises, this is due to the fact that the fact that majority of the policemen in the state were mainly indigenes and they naturally took sides with their kits and kins. (Asaju 2006).

The government should bring to justice those who perpetuate violence in whatever name and for whatever reasons. If the government fails to punish those responsible for the inter-communal, religious and ethnic violence in the Nigerian federation, they should realize that they are only paving way for further bloodshed in the country.

Finally, this paper recommends that ethnic violence should be addressed headlong by government in order to able to consolidate the gains of federalism, It is therefore vital for government to re-examine how best to

constitute the Nigeria federation so as to endow it with justice, fair play, equal opportunities, objectivity and neutrality in the treating of vital issues relating to all the ethnic groups in the country. In doing this, the paper believes that the country will attain greater heights and achieve greater future prospects.

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