

## ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATION ON TRUE FEDERALISM

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### **Abstract**

*Nigeria is a country of extraordinary diversities and complexities. These complexities are reflections of avalanche of the ethno-cultural and religious groups co-habiting together and intricacies of Interaction among these various ethnic groups continue to engender conflict. Nigeria's ethnic composition is estimated to be between 250 and over 400 since independence. However, the type of federalism the country is operating has given rise to the various endemic ethnic crises which are inimical to the attainment of true federalism. Therefore, this paper intends to investigate the implication of ethnic violence on the attainment of true federalism in Nigeria.*

**Key Words:** *Ethnic groups, Ethnic Violence, Federalism, Independence.*

### **Introduction**

Nigeria's ethnic composition is estimated to be between 250 and over 400 (Adelegan, 2009). Abia (2006), argued that Nigeria has since independence been marked by varied ethnic crisis. Abia (2006) posited further that, in a federal system of government, certain forms of crises are frequent; these include 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 between states and federal interests, or between the federal interests and aspirations of different ethnic groups in the country. Suberu (2001), opined that, 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. 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 analysts

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 (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 separate 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 (Muhammad 2007)

The giant step was taken by the British to provide panacea to the problems of ethnic violence which had been having negative effect on the true federalism in Nigeria before the country gain independence from the colonial masters. This position paper therefore focused on the issues of ethnic conflicts and its implication on true federalism in Nigeria.

### **Theories of Violence Management**

One of the theories or approach used by the political experts and writers in Nigeria ethnicity

violence and crisis management is power-sharing approach. This is because distributional issues are at the root of ethnic conflicts in any country. According to (Sisk 1996), power-sharing is a set of principles that provide every group or segment in a society with the opportunity of recognition and identity. These principles ensure a balance of power among competing ethnic groups by specifying not only how the groups are to share power within the polity but also by allocating power in such a way as to make it exceedingly difficult for any group to dominate the others (Nordlinger 1972, Lijphart 1977)

Hartzell & Hoddie (2003) opined that power-sharing can occur at three dimensions depending on whether the intention of the political elites is to share power along the political, territorial or economic dimension. The political dimension stipulates the distribution of political and bureaucratic offices among ethnic groups. The territorial dimension defines the exercise of autonomy by the various levels of government on the basis of federalism or regional autonomy arrangements. In the past three decades, a greater number of scholars have acknowledged the efficacy of power-sharing as a positive instrument of ethnic conflict management (Hudson 1997, Akinyele 2000, Daftary 2001, Bogaards 2002, Binningsbo 2005).

According to Jinadu (2004), the rot of power-sharing in Nigeria lies in the administrative federalism, this means the gradual division of the country into two administrative units – the Northern and Southern protectorates, between 1900 and 1914, by the British colonial administration. The administrative system in the Northern and Southern Nigeria, together with the increasing intensity of nationalist agitation for independence, created a dynamic logic in Nigerian politics, in the form of ethno regional federal structure.

The emergent of federal system based on ethnic diversity, with its initial tri-polar constituent units – East, North and West coinciding with the three dominant ethnic group (namely the Igbo in the East, Hausa Fulani in

the North and the Yoruba in the West), provides the basis for the minority ethnic groups being dominated by these three major groups, to mobilize and advocate for home-rule within the regions of Nigeria federation.

### **Ethnicity and Ethnic Consciousness**

There have been numerous efforts in defining what ethnicity is all about. Azeez (2004) opined that ethnicity involves the employment and or mobilization of ethnic identity or differences to gain an advantage in situations of competition, conflict or cooperation. Similarly, Egbefo (2010), argues that ethnicity arises when relations between groups are competitive rather than co-operative. It is characterized by cultural prejudice and political discrimination. The above definition connotes that ethnicity is neither natural nor accidental, but it is the product of a conscious effort by social actors. It is also evident that ethnicity is not only manifest in conflictive or competitive relations, but also in the contexts of cooperation.

Eteng (2004) sees ethnicity as arising from the desire of individuals to organize themselves in ways to enhance their competitive efficiency a situation where they perceive each other as competing for resources and positions. Thus, political offices and appointments are seen as battlefields among the various ethnic groups, where the battles are fought with all available weaponry a group can muster.

Ethnic consciousness can be viewed as the basis for unifying the members to achieve the group's goals and attained self-respect within the dominant population (Egbafo 2010). It thus, set against each other people whose values are in conflict, who want different thing, and who do not understand each other. Suberu (2002) argues further that an abiding threat to the stability of the Nigeria federation is the growing division and polarization of the country along ethnic, state and religious lines.

According to Akinyide (2008), another plausible explanation for the travails persistent crises is due to the multinational or multi-ethnic nature of the country. It is generally believed that rather than ameliorating Nigeria's multi-ethnic problems, federalism aggravated them.

However, Ogban-Iyan (1998) does not agree with the view totally. According to him, there are many other multi-ethnic and multi-national countries which are doing much better than Nigeria in coping with their multi-ethnic and multi-national problem. Many of such countries are federations while some of them are not, so Nigeria case should not be an exception.

Given the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria and diverse interests, it certainly has appeared certain that the decision of our early nationalist to operate federalism as a form of government was a right step in the right direction. Adelegan (2009), argues that the Nigerian federation has failed to record the desired meaningful effects over more than fifty years of Nationhood. Thus, the inability of the Nigerian federation to sustain an enduring democratic system is a major source of concern and tension in the Nigerian federal structure. For example, the conflict in the federal house of representative as a result of the defection of the speaker Aminu Tanbuwa is a threat to Nigeria democratic system.

It is cristal clear that profound conflict exists among the component units of the Nigeria federation. However, in the structural and political context, the country federalism is synonymous to a biological cell capable of dividing and reproducing itself (Dent, 1995). This has been the situation of the country since independence, 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 example, in 1954 it began as a federation of three regions but by 1964, it became four with the creation of the midwestern region from the then western region. By 1967, the federal structure became subdivided into 12 states; it was further splited into 19 states. By 1989, it became a federation of 21 states, it increases to 30 by 1990 and 1996 to a federation of 36 states respectively. The continue structural division of the country has not produced a satisfactory outcome for the component unit; this is so for the component unit; this is so because every attempt at state creation is usually followed by increased agitation for more (Muhammad 2007). The recent just concluded 2014 national conference also recommended the creation of the additional

state in all the six geopolitical zones of the country.

### **Travails of Federalism in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a Cliff-hanger 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 distributive federalism. According to Awofeso (2000), with abrogation decree 34 of 1966 that transformed Nigeria federal system to unitary government by Gowon administration which return 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.

Ejimofor (1987) argued that Lord Lugard's 1914 amalgamation gave birth to a more or less unitary form of government in Nigeria. Adelegan (2009) asserts that the origin of federal structure in Nigeria created certain permanent problems such as the division of the South into two, the division of Nigeria into three regions and the granting of the north 50% of the total seat of the central legislature in 1950 which made the north a near-absolute decider of the 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. According to Punch newspaper of (August 20<sup>th</sup> 2014) the chairman of (INEC) Prof. Atairu Jega proposed more polling unit out of which ..... the number was allocated to the north. This action of the independent electoral commission generated a lot of criticism from Nigerians which led to the conciliation of the proposal. This situation according to Saliu (1999), is creating the problem of federal instability in the century

Another major source of tension in the Nigeria federalism is the issue of federal character and its application. Suberu (2002) asserts that 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 but its politics due to lack of definite to be responsible for political instability in the country.

### Conclusion

For the foregoing, it can be concluded that ‘ethnoreligious’ violence retards the practice of federalism in Nigeria, contaminates social relations and undermines the economy of the state. Ethno religious bigotry in Nigeria has become a fulcrum of various forms of Nationalism ranging from assertion language, cultural autonomy and self-determination. The realities of ethnic and religious conflict in Nigeria are alarming and require very urgent, apt and continued attention. The use of ethnicity, religion and politics should rather unite us as Nigerians in order to promote peace, harmonious peaceful co-existence and unity. The reverse of this has consequences for Nigeria as there were ‘ethno-religious’ conflicts that claimed so many lives and property. Put simply, the spate of ‘ethno-religious’ conflict in Nigeria since independence has produced a catalogue that resulted in an estimated loss of over three million live and unquantifiable psychological and material damages.

In spite of the widespread of ‘ethno-religious’ conflicts in Nigeria and their long history, the Nigerian governments (past and present) have failed to tackle this problem through articulate policy actions. The country in conflict management has been poor as the government continues to rely on coercive method and always resorts to the use of white-paper emanating from them are often not implemented

### Recommendations

The paper therefore recommended among others that the country should give ultimate attention to the ethnics violence in the country. Articulate policy action that should be put to place which will reduce or put total stoppage to the ethnic violence threatening Nigeria federalism. Our diverse ethnics and other unique attributes of the country should unite us rather than continue to divide us. The policy of

federal character entrenched in Nigeria constitution should be taken serious so as to ensure equitable distribution of the country’s natural and human resources.

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