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Ethnic Politics and National Development: Understanding the Paradox of Nigerian States

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Abstract. This study examines ethnic politics and national development with the intent of understanding the peculiarities of Nigerian state. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic state with cultural diversity and complex political terrain. These diverse ethnic groups actively and passively participate in politics with the focus of achieving ethnic centralization of power which has led to sectional development. Ethnic diversity has led to increased civil dissonance which cannot be detached from the evil and forceful uniting mission of the colonialist while pretending to bond the various ethnic groups under a political enclave called Nigeria. This forceful uniting mission has created an unending atmosphere for conflict and eventual underdevelopment. As a guild to answering the questions on ethnic politics and nation building, it is apt to examine the link between ethnic politics and national development. Hence, this study examines the effects of ethnic politics on state development in Nigeria. The study relies on secondary data and employs both descriptive and analytical mode of analysis.

Keywords: Ethnic Politics, Ethnicity, National Development, Nigeria, Underdevelopment

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation of multi-ethnic nationalities. An ethnic group comprises of people of different language, religion, culture and social structure which compete not only for power and resources within the political landscape but also for the assertion of their various identities. Prior to the amalgamation of the country by Lord Lugard, ethnic identity have defined the scope of social and political relationship among various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria such as Yoruba, Igbo, Ikala, Ibira, Hausa-Fulani, Jukun, Tiv, Nupe, Irobo, Edo, Itshekiri etc. which were independent of one another but dependent socio-economic wise, thereby creating a chain of inter-relationships based on mutual respect for one and other among the people living in Nigeria (Osimen, Balogun & Adenegan, 2013, p. 79).

However, the amalgamation of these ethnic nationalities with distinct language, religion, culture, orientation and system of government by Lord Lugard in 1914, created a clog in the wheel of socio-political development of Nigeria. The implication of this amalgamation by Lord Lugard was the creation of a nation polarized by ethnic divide and suspicion with one ethnic trying to outdo and outplay another in politics, commerce and relevancy. The forceful joining of these entities without their consent brought about the phenomenon of identity politics that have always depleted Nigerians and hindered their collective desires for unity and development (Osadola & Oludemi, 2021).

Hence, ethnic identity politics has been considered to be the cause of series of military coup and counter coup in Nigeria culminating in the collapse of the first and second republics, the Civil War in 1967-1970, manipulation of census figures, rigged elections, militancy and youths' restiveness, terrorism and armed banditry.

Ethnic Group and Ethnicity: A Conceptual Overview

Salawu and Hassan (2011) defined ethnic group as an informal group based on members' interest with a distinct features ranging from language, religion and ethnic derivation (Salawu & Hassan, 2011, p. 28). This opinion was buttressed by Nnoli's perception that ethnic groups

are also social formations which are distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries (Nnoli, 1978). These views maintained that language and culture are the most crucial variables in identifying ethnic groups in Africa.

Ethnicity has been defined by Nnoli, as a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups; it is behavioural in form and conflictual in content (Nnoli, 1978). Omu, further gave a working definition in the context of the Nigeria colonial experience. He opined that the concept of ethnicity applies to the consciousness of belonging to, identifying with, and being loyal to a social group distinguished by shared cultural traditions, a common language, in-groups sentiment and self identity (Omu, 1998).

From the above definitions, it can be deduced that ethnic groups have to come into contact before the phenomenon of ethnicity occurs. Ethnicity in Nigeria has been traced to colonial rule. It was during colonial rule that ethnic groups first acquired a common consciousness (Omu, 1998). But for colonial rule in Nigeria, It seems the various groups which constitute the present day Nigeria should have developed at their own pace. Thus the ethnic conflicts and squabble between and within the various groups in Nigeria and its attendant consequences for politics in the Nigeria political life should have been prevented. This view is supported by P.C. Lloyd (1970) who says;

> Nigeria problems do derive in large measure from the tensions which have arisen between the larger ethnic groups and that the hostility derives.., not from the ethnic differences, but from competition between peoples for wealth and power (Lloyd, 1970).

Historical Origin of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria

Historically, the administrative structures in Nigeria before amalgamation were really diverse and varied in scale and complexity depending on their geographical environment, available military technology, economic, spiritual and moral force. There were various kingdoms and empires such as the Oyo empire, the Benin kingdom, the Sokoto caliphate, the Igbo traditional system, etc. (Nduibisi, 2003, p. 150). However, following the bombardment and conquest of Lagos in 1861 by the British and the subsequent amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Nigeria by Fredrick Lugard, these kingdoms, empires and emirates were all brought together under the British colonial rule. The amalgamation was largely for financial reason and was influenced by Lugards previous experience in the Northern part of Nigeria. He introduced the indirect rule system which was one of the causative factors of ethnic politics in Nigeria. The British colonial powers controlled the people of Nigeria using their existing political and traditional institutions. Lord Lugard made no serious effort to bring Northern and Southern Nigeria under a uniform and central administration. For most of the time, he governed the colonial territory from the North in an administrative system that was evidently incongruous (Osaghae, 2002).

The British colonial government introduced ethnic politics into Nigeria through its divide and rule system of administration that mobilized and manipulated ethnic consciousness which has been one of the fundamental causes of the political instability in the country. The divide and rule policy was ethnically regional and sectionalized the country partly to curb the growing trend of nationalism in the southern part of the country so as to maintain their colonial power. For example in 1910, the colonial government promulgated the land and native rights ordinance. The implication of this law is that all land in the north belong the native authority and to be controlled and administered by the colonial master. The colonialist in an attempt to hinder the integration of the enlightened and well educated people of the south in the North made a law to limit the number of people migrating from south to the north. The British also feared that the southerners were capable of destroying the alliance between them and the Fulani oligarchy ruling class (Nnoli, 1978, pp. 2-3). Thus there was a policy isolating southerners

from Northerners by creating a special place known as '*Sabongari'* for them to settle. This policy led to the emergence of a strange term known as 'native foreigner' and laid the foundation of identity politics based on the local government of origin instead of the place of residence in Nigeria politics. In Zaria for example, the British colonial policy led to several different settlements. For example the wall city, where the indigenous people live, *Tudun wada*, this houses non indigenous northerners and *Sabon Garri*. This division is still visible up to today in Zaria and Kaduna and had been the root cause of violence and killings in the areas.

It should be noted that, despite the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914, Lord Lugard never rule Nigeria as a single nation. He made no serious efforts to bring northern and southern Nigeria under a uniform and central administration. For most of the time he governed the colonial territory from the north. More significantly, the division of the country into Northern, Western and Eastern regions purposefully for easy administration by the Richards constitution of 1946 amplified the trend of ethnicity in Nigeria (Nnoli, 1978). In spite of its lofty provisions the constitution was not without its defects. Some of its defects included non-consultation with Nigerians before it was drafted and the insincerity of its implementation which became the major source of regional loyalty, suspicion and hostility in Nigerian politics. Moreover, the special treatment given to the Northern region at the expense of the two southern regions increased the degree of inter-ethnic rivalry and hostility among the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria (Alao, 2008, p. 13). Consequently, by 1953, the major political parties in Nigeria were formed along ethnic and regional lines. For example, the *Jamiy'yar Mutanen Arewa*, a Hausa socio-cultural organization which metamorphosed in 1951 into the Northern People's Congress (NPC) was formed by the northern educated elite. The National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) that was formed in 1944 was dominated by Igbo elements of the defunct Igbo Peoples Union. In a similar manner, the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*, a Yoruba socio-cultural group quickly metamorphosed into a political party by name Action Group (A.G) in 1951 and was dominated by the Yoruba people (Alao, 2008, p. 15). The Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello led the NPC of the North; Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe led the NCNC of the East, while Chief Obafemi Awolowo held the ace for the Yorubas A.G in the West, each representing their ethnic/regional divides. It is clear from the circumstances leading to the establishment of this political parties that not only were they regionally based but were also formed to further the interests of the political and ethnic elites instead of the overall interest of the country. This further worsen the animosity already existing between the different ethnic groups, eventually leading to the Igbo attempt to secede as a separate independent nation in 1967 (Azeez, 2009, p. 3). Thus, after the independence, ethnic politics still dominated the political scenario of Nigeria. The political parties remained regionally based and when the then leader of the Action Group (AG) Chief Obafemi Awolowo attempted to expand the horizon and reach of the party to a national level, he received opposition from his very own deputy Chief S. L. Akintola who believed that the party should continue to maintain their regional symbol and sustain their grip on the ethnic factor and sentiments. This conflict of ideology eventually led to the breakup of the party and the formation of the United People's Party (UPP) by Chief S. L. Akintola which later aligned with the NCNC and became the regional premier. The entry of the military after the military coup of 15 Jan. 1966 which brought Major General Aguiyi Ironsi as the new Head of States was believed to be ethnically inspired. The July 1966 coup was perceives as ethnocide against the Igbo residents in the Northern region. The two coups apparently led to the civil war in 1967 (Adeniji & Ofiwe, 2015, p. 76). The second republic was not free from ethnicity, though military doused ethnic tensions, but it failed to suppress ethnic consciousness among the populace. The military failed to stem the tide of ethnic consciousness partly because of its blockage to democracy. Contrarily due to the coercive nature of military rule and its arbitrary power people were generally alienated from the state and cleave to traditional solidarities and this was also transferred into the second republic.

Another major event which portrayed ethnicity in Nigeria was the annulment of the 1993 general elections by General Babangida which was widely believed to have been won by Chief Abiola. This annulment was widely interpreted as a calculated attempt to sideline the Southerners from the corridor of power in Nigeria by the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group. This was greeted by a widespread rage and civil unrest in the Southeast and led to the transfer of power to the interim government of Chief Ernest Shonekan a Yoruba (Adeniji & Ofiwe, 2015).

Nexus between Ethnic Politics and National Development

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 (Aderemi, 2016)

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 (Osadola, 2012). 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 (Osadola, 2012). 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 (Aderemi, 2016). 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 (Osadola, 2012).

From the above explanation, it is clear that the pace of Nigeria's development has been affected by the various political crises which were all product of ethnicity and ethnic politics.

Governmental issues of identity politics has made it hard for Nigeria to have the correct political leaders in its political space and time, with the exception of a few leaders who have exhibited great obligation and commitment to the country's turn of events. Ethnic politics has been a stop up in the wheel of political headway of the country to such an extent that, there has never been a leader with public standpoint that has arisen in Nigeria. The appointment of applicants up until now, has been founded on 'where the competitors came from as opposed to the visions and quality of the individual (Umezinwa, 2012).

The above however have enormous consequences on national development. For instance, 'political dealers' rather than 'leaders' have been emerging in the nation's political space. These so called leaders are without the interest of the nation at heart, they are rather emotionally attached to their political parties as well as ethnic derivations. Their emergence to political positions is often through ethnic sentiments, hence, affecting their performance at the long run (Adegbami & Uche, 2015).

Umezinwa further opine that ethnic politics and rivalry can also lead to the emergence of incompetent leaders. According to him, Nigeria adopted the rotational presidency (zoning) among the six geopolitical zones in order to defuse ethnic tension, which however means that the political parties in Nigeria do not acknowledge merit but rather where the aspirant comes from (Umezinwa, 2012). Furthermore, when a politician is being probe by the central government for corruption and related offences, the ethnic group which he or she belongs to will tag it as a 'witch-hunt' (Osadola, 2012).

Effects of Ethnic Politics on State Development in Nigeria

Ethnic politics is responsible for one of the causes of socio-economic, religious and political crisis in Nigeria; it is generally believed to be the major obstacle to the overall socio-political development of the country (Osadola, 2012). Thus right from the colonial period, rather than the political party being based on ideological divide, parties are divided majorly across ethnic line and are still dominated by the forces of ethnicity in the allocation of positions within the party. The same could also be said in the governance of Nigeria since independence, appointment to critical positions in the country is not based on competency but rather it is influenced by ethnicity. Moreover, ethnic politics brought about the zoning system in the allocation of positions within the various political parties. This has led to the introduction of ethnic nepotism into the Nigerian polity as leaders are sometimes accused by rival ethnic groups of placing their ethnic brothers in strategic position of government at the expense of other ethnic group within the nation (Azeez, 2009, p. 3). Ethnic politicization has also brought about a situation whereby people of different groups engage themselves in the struggle for power and economic hegemony.

Also, the establishment of a developmental project, industries and educational institutions in a particular location in the country is largely influenced by ethnic politics. Nnoli opined that intense ethnicity holds sway in the sharing of basic infrastructures in Nigeria. This, as a matter of fact, hinders national development in general and affects the citizens in particular. As it leads to the tendency to want to exclude outsiders in the sharing of scarce resources, the amenities that can improve the well-being of people and which can generally make a difference in the standard of living are denied people because they do not belong to the mainstream of the society or the power that be. In a circumstance like this, it is difficult to plan for an effective economic development that will really or possibly touch the lives of all Nigerians regardless of where they live or their ethnic affiliation (Nnoli, 1978).

Furthermore, ethnic politics has brought about disunity among the various ethnic groups in the country and this has led to religious violence and communal conflicts in Nigeria. For example, when Chief Anthony Enahoro of the Action Group (A.G) in 1953 moved the motion for self-government for Nigeria by 1956 at the Federal House of Representative, the Northern

People's Congress (NPC) opposed the motion and came up with an amendment to replace the 1956 date with the phrase "as soon as practicable". This development brought about extreme ethnic rivalry among the major political parties in Nigeria. The NPC was of the view that the North was not as educated as the south and was so far behind the south socio-economically. It feared that the north would be a junior partner in an independent Nigeria. Again, the AG and NCNC had by this time negotiated an alliance to press the issue of self-government in 1956. They, therefore, rejected the northern amendment and violently attacked their leaders, accusing them of colluding with the British to perpetuate colonial rule. In response the northerners were equally angry and tempestuous. They accused the southerners of being motivated merely by a partisan desire to outdo each other rather than by any genuine intention for the good of the country. The bitterness and acrimony continued outside the House (Osadola & Oludemi, 2021). The supporters of the NCNC and AG in Lagos hauled insults and abuses at the northern delegates. The Lagos newspapers subjected them to vitriolic criticism and ridicule. The northerners were so angered by these attacks that they adopted an eight-point programme and if implemented would have led to northern secession (Nnoli, 2003, pp. 2-3). This action, in turn, led to severe criticism by the NCNC and AG. The leaders of the NPC were accused of being stooges of the colonial master who had no mind of their own and who were unrepresentative of their people. In order to prove this unrepresentative character they embarked on campaign tours of the North to mobilize the people behind an early independence date. However, the northerners see this campaign tour embarked upon by the southern leaders as an insult on their leaders whom had earlier been disgraced and humiliated in Lagos because of their opposition to the Enahoro's motion for self-rule. Thus, in the course of the AG tour led by S.L Akintola, riot started, involving attacks by the Hausa on the Igbo. Among the southern groups the Igbo, who supported the NCNC, were more numerous than the Yoruba who supported the AG. However, over the years the Igbo had become the traditional victims of Hausa hostility because they were the major socioeconomic competitors of the Hausa. The rioting, which lasted for four days, 16-19 May 1953, claimed 36 dead, 15 northerners and 21 southerners and not less than 241 persons were wounded. Fallout from this Kano riot and its political antecedents was the northernization policy of the northern regional government. It was designed to punish the southern politicians for their insulting remarks about northern leaders and for their "daring raid" into the northern political space in 1953. The Kano riot led to a greater mutual distrust between northerners and southerners (Nnoli, 2003, p. 3).

The 1962/63 census crisis also heightened the ethnic hostility and suspicion in the country. While the 1962 figures were totally rejected, the 1963 recount figures were more than being controversial. It gave the North a population of 29,777,986 out of the total population of 55, 653,821. East, West, Mid West and Lagos had 12,388,646; 10,278,500; 2,533,337; 675,352 respectively (National Census Board, 1964). And because the figures would be used in the allocation of parliamentary seats at the federal House of Representatives, there were wild reactions to these abnormal figures which gave the North a continuous domineering status over other regions. Again, the figures would also determine regional revenue allocation from the Central Distributable Account. In spite of the reactions and rejections of the figures by the southern regional leaders, political parties, labour and trade unions and other concerned groups, the NPC leaders and government who knew the importance of the figures in their political domination of the country kept to the figures. Thus the census crisis of 1962/63, the 1964 federal election crisis and the 1965 Western Nigeria election crisis were a major factor in the fall of the First Republic (Alao, 2009, pp. 17-19). Ethnic politics has caused so much damage to the political sector of Nigeria and caused disunity among its people. The crave to dominate or fear of being dominated by other ethnic groups reigns supreme. This often leads to outright declaration of hostilities resulting inexorably in loss of lives and property. Nigeria was engulfed in 30 months civil war as result of the politicization of the army along ethnic and religion lines.

The Biafra war left a deep scarce in the relationship among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria and also brought about suspicions and hatred among them (Alao, 2008, p. 20).

Ethnic politics has led to the corrupt and inept leadership in the country. This has always made it difficult if not impossible for the country to produce the right leaders who live above boards. Leaders were elected or appointed based on ethnic or tribe affiliation not minding their characters and competence. This is partly the reason why there is lack of accountability and transparency in governance as leaders continue to play the ethnic card to cover up their inefficiency in governance. Ethnic politics has institutionalized corruption in public offices in Nigeria. This has led to the reduction of morals and common values among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria (Osadola, 2012). This has robbed the Nigeria of the much needed political will to combat the corruption endemic that has put Nigeria's name on the list of the world's most corrupt countries. It is due to the deep rooted culture of ethnicity that successive governments have not been able to effectively fight corruption in Nigeria as leaders most times protect their fellow ethnic kinsmen from prosecution and in a situation where a leader is probing someone from another ethnic, his action would be seen as an attempt to victimize other ethnic group (Aderemi, 2016, p. 96).

It is equally responsible for upspring of ethnic militias and terrorist groups that have become a recurring decimal in Nigeria, for example, the *Oodua* People's Congress (OPC) in the South West, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South East, the Niger Delta Avengers, *Bakassi* Boys and the likes in the Niger Delta area, *Boko Haram* and Fulani herdsmen in the North. As a result of the activities of these various ethnic militias, the Nigerian state has experienced wastage of enormous human and material resources, constant threat to security of lives and property, disinvestment of local and foreign components, with continuous capital flight and loss of confidence in the Nigerian economy. It has also led to electoral irregularities, as ruling ethnic groups continue to perpetual themselves in power not minding the eventuality of their actions (Ojo & Osadola, 2017).

Conclusion

The issue of ethnicity has plagued the Nigerian political scene with its setting occasioned by the arbitrary amalgamation of groups with different social, cultural and historical background being lumped into a geopolitical entity via British fiat and its focus on unity in diversity. Its effect created crises on the political system in pre-independent and post independent Nigeria. Thus ethnicity was politicized with each of the dominant ethnic groups competing for wealth and power within the Nigeria state.

The fight for independent also was moulded along ethnic lines the goal of each was the emergence of a Nigeria moulded after its image, controlled by it or at least the control of which it was not excluded from there was therefore division, hatred, unhealthy rivalry and pronounced disparity in development. At independence, ethnic consciousness increased and manifested itself in the political scene of the country. Ethnic disparity also led to the avalanche of political crisis which crissed- crossed the country between 1960 and 1966. These events culminated in the coup and counter coup of 1966 which led to the thirty months bloody civil war in 1967. The war was not without ethnic consciousness; the lbos in the various regions supported the course and the war effort which emphasis on disintegration as a result of marginalization and claimed unfair treatment. The 1979 constitution although introduced the federal character and extended it to political parties, ethnic disparity still influence Nigeria scene. The politics of pre-independent and post independent Nigeria which was padded by ethnic connotations affected the continued relationship among the Nigerian states up till date. This sentiment has continued to impact negatively on the developmental plans of every democratic government and policies as each state in the federation gives more allegiance to their ethnic derivation rather than the central government.

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