Ethnic Sentiments, Political Instability and Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Ethnicity is functional. Ethnic sentiments are the oil that lubricates them. In a multi-ethnic country such as Nigeria, with over 250 ethnic groups, the tendency to use ethnic sentiments to the advantage of the group and the disadvantage of the nation is very tempting. The position of this paper is that over the past decades, from colonial days to postcolonial and contemporary Nigeria, ethnic sentiments have been variously deployed by Nigerians to the detriment of the nation. The more these sentiments are used, the more disaffection they cause in the country and the more politically unstable we are as a nation. This cumulatively impedes development. The theoretical framework applied in this paper is group theory. The methodology is content analysis. The paper recommends that one major way to end political instability is for a re-orientation of the general populace to re-awaken national consciousness through the use of effective and autonomous agency and the teaching of orientation courses in our schools.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Political Instability, Sentiment, National Development, National Consciousness.

Introduction

The quest for social cohesion has been the yearning of countries throughout the world. The quest is hinged on the premise that cohesion paves the way for peace, and peace gives way for development. It is also a fact that most countries in the world are made up of multi-ethnic groups. These groups are a product of their historical, socio-economic, political, and various other contents (Garson, 1978). In Africa, the Rwanda-Burundi conflicts were ethnically generated. In Sudan, the political problems were also caused by ethnic factors, and in Ethiopia, there are currently ethnic and regional problems setting the country apart. In the face of these ethnic problems, development becomes difficult to attain. One major factor that generates this ethnic conflict is the sentiments expressed at one point or another to the advantage of one group and the disadvantage of another. This is so because ethnicity is the most basic and politically salient identity of people (Canci and Odukoya, 2013), and in Nigeria, people express themselves in terms of ethnic affinities as opposed to other identities (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). This paper therefore attempts to examine ethnic sentiments, political instability, and their contingent effects on national development in Nigeria.

Clarification of Concepts

a. Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a social phenomenon that reveals itself in interactions between people of different ethnic groups under a political system that emphasises language and culture. According to Erickson (1996), ethnicity is natural in all societies made up of more than one ethnic group. As these groups interact within the political system, ethnic identities are generated that result in the emergence of in-group and out-group sentiments, which come to be guarded jealously over time. Azeez (2004) describes ethnicity as a sense of additional feeling based on a shared recollection of previous experiences and a shared hope and desire for the future. For Osaghae (1995), ethnicity is a readymade weapon for actualizing group desires within a nation-state." Skier (1963) and Anugwom (2000) all agree that ethnicity is a consciousness that is exploited by the elite for their own interests and privileges. Anugwom noted that group consciousness is the hallmark of ethnicity, whereby one group sees itself as superior to the other.

b. Political instability

According to Odum and Joseph (2020), political instability is a situation in which there is a depreciation in the political value and structure of a given society, leading to a sudden fall in the standard of governance. Also, Egwu (2013), cited in Odum and Joseph (2020), conceptualised political instability as arising from the inability of the government of the day to adequately address the grievances of the population or a particular section of the populace resulting from diversity in ethnic, religious, or cultural composition.

c. Ethnic Sentiments

Ethnic sentiments are views and opinions expressed about a person or ethnic group. These views could be exaggerated. They could be self-reliant feelings of nostalgia. Ethnic sentiments are also complex combinations of feelings and opinions that serve as the basis for action or judgement. It is the feelings and opinions people have about something. It is an in-group and out-group expression. Ethnic sentiments are diverse instruments applied by ethnic groups, consciously or unconsciously, that engender disunity in the political system.

Theoretical Framework

The framework of analysis in this paper is group theory. The group theory was first propounded by Bentley in his work "The Process of Government (1908). The theory includes the elitist perception and pluralist conception of society, according to Adeniji (2015). Bentley (1908), cited in Adeniji (2015), argues that there is no effective individual interest, that each group has its own interest, that their interest always results in group action, and that there is no single group interest that includes everyone in society.

Bentley (1908), cited in Adeniji (2015), also noted that all things involving government are determined by conflicting group pressures, and these group pressures are the determinants of the course of government policy. The activity of people fighting to attain their personal goals takes place not individually but through a group domain in which they are united by a common interest.

The existence of the group theory is the acknowledgement that the state is composed of actors both institutional and non-institutional (such as ethnic groups), and these actors are a product of their historical, socio-economic, political, and various other contexts. What this means is that while the groups have competing interests, the state acts as a control mechanism.

An ethnic group is a group of people whose members identify with each other through a collective heritage comprising of a common culture, including a shared language or dialect. Ethnic loyalty exists when a nation-state is characterised by multi-ethnic groups, which results in inclusive or exclusive group attitudes. This culminates in the display of sentiments, discrimination, outright hostility, and obligation to tribes as opposed to loyalty to the national constitution (Nebeife and Fidelis, 2020).

The Rise of Ethnicity (in Nigeria)

The term ethnicity derives from the Greek word ethnos, with the associated adjective ethnique. The adjective appears in modern English as ethnic. In ancient Greek, while genos was commonly used by Greeks (of Greek) themselves in a restricted kinship sense, ethnos was the term for the "others".

In Nigeria, ethnicity and ethnic tendencies arose in the days of colonialism. During the colonial days, the colonial authority planted the seed of ethnic sentiments because the traditional institutions they met on arrival were incorporated into the governance of the territories. But as time passed, the natives found that their interests were not adequately represented, and so began the agitation for independence and self-determination. Hence the formation of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, the Igbo state union, the Middle Belt union, etc. Adeniji (1999) had observed that colonial masters relied on and made use of force as an instrument of subduing and subjecting the colonial people to further their own parochial interests. This threatened the indigenous people, who were compelled to seek assistance and survival in the traditional solidarity groups, such as ethnic groups, thus marking the beginning of ethnic identity and affiliation; ethnic consciousness gradually grew into political consciousness.

In furtherance of this new identification and affiliation, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa ethnic group aligned with the Action Group. The Egbe society had over 160 branches, and each branch had a minimum of 40 members (Sklar 1963). Chief Akintola was reputed to have said in December 1956 that "the aims and objectives of Egbe and the Action Group were as inseparable as wine and water". To this end, Dr. Akinola Maja admonished members of the Egbe to vote solidly as a body in the 1959 federal election.

According to Sklar, the Egbe was non-partisan and its relationship to the Action Group was wholly unofficial, but in practise, its services to the Action Group were beyond compare. The two associations were virtually inseparable in rural areas of Yoruba land. To that extent, Egbe m Oduduwa functioned as a crucial link between the Action Group, the Chiefs, and others to facilitate the implementation of party policies.

Ethnic Sentiment in Nigeria

Ethnic sentiments in Nigeria have grown to be part of the social actions in the country. In 1980, Nnoli noted that the intemperate utterances of some Nigerian aspirants to leadership positions contribute to the growth of inter-ethnic conflict and hostility in Nigeria. He said that Nnamdi Azikiwe's early political activities generated many virulent, chauvinistic, and ethnically loaded remarks. Nnamdi Azikwe called his Yoruba and Hausa political opponents "misleaders" and their leadership "Uncle Tom Misleadership". His critics, on the other hand, charged him with ethnic chauvinism and the glorification of the Igbo and their achievements. Nnoli (1980) further noted that between July and September 1948, Igbo-Yoruba hostility assumed such a high proportion that extremists on both sides bought up matchets in the Lagos market in anticipation of ethnic violence. Though violence did not occur, he said, it led to growth in ethnic prejudice, ethnic identification, and sentiments beyond a tolerable threshold.

The increase in ethnic tension was reinforced by the introduction of ethnic bias into the labour movement. On November 29, 1947, the General Council of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) voted to maintain its affiliation with the NCNC, contrary to the wishes of the Yoruba-dominated NYM. The Daily Service Newspaper blamed the decision on the Igbo in the TUC. These attacks and counterattacks escalated after June 17, 1948, when Charles Onyeama, an Igbo lawyer and member of the legislative council, predicted that the Igbo domination of Nigeria was only a matter of time. This struggle for hegemony contributed to the growth of ethnicity, and the sentiment expressed by Nnamdi Azikiwe to that effect did not help matters either. Zik remarked that "it would appear that the God of Africa has specially created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of the ages..." Nnoli (1980).

There were similar sentiments expressed in relation to the North and South. The southern press ridiculed and made disparaging remarks about northern rulers. Similarly, Abubakar Imam's view that the common people of the North put more confidence in the white man than their black southern brothers Also, Abubakar Tafawa Belewa's observation in 1948 that Northerners looked upon the southerners living in the North as invaders who did not mix with the Northern people In his speech at the Nigeria legislative council on March 24, 1947, Belewa was said to have quoted "I should like to make it clear to you that if the British quit Nigeria now at this stage, the Northern people would continue their interrupted conquest to the sea". In addition to this speech, it was also often expressed by Northerners that southern clerks in the North discriminated against Northerners in government offices, railroad ticket offices, and so on. Such sentiments pervaded the entire North and were a

regular feature in the weekly newspaper Gaskiya Ta fi kwabo, contributing to the growth of ethnicity and leading to a greater identification with and exclusiveness of other ethnic groups.

The military struck for the first time in Nigeria on January 15, 1966. Due to the composition of the coup plotters and the making of Major General Aguyi Ironsi, the coup was given ethnic coloration. The sentiment persisted and permeated the North, and the Northern officers in the military staged a counter-coup in July 1966 and killed Aguyi Ironsi. General Yakubu Gowon thereafter became the Head of State. According to Adeniji (1999), the two coups resulted in civil war and consequently retarded development.

Again, the botched third republic, in which the election of Chief M.K.O. Abiola was annulled by General Ibrahim Babangida in 1993, was another case. The sentiment expressed was that the annulment was a calculated attempt to sideline the South from being president (by the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group).

The current democratic administration of President Muhammadu Buhari has witnessed many accusations that border on ethnic projection. His appointment of his Fulani kin into power to the detriment of other groups His appointment of military chiefs and eventual appointment of an acting Inspector General of Police The sentiment was that his failure to appoint an Igbo to any of the positions was an indication of his hatred for the Igbos. This sentiment was expressed by the former President-General of Oha Na Eze Ndigbo, Nnia Nwodo. Many groups, including some even in the North known as the Northern Elders Forum, were vocal about this fact.

The ethnic sentiment generated by President Buhari's concentration of critical and strategic appointments of his Muslim and Fulani North put together raised a lot of credibility questions about the administration and saw the administration as only protecting the interests of the Fulanis to the exclusion of others.

Ethnic Sentiments as Instruments of Political Instability

We have conceptualised political instability as a situation in which there is a depreciation in the political value and structure of a given society, leading to a sudden fall in the standard of governance. It also arises from the inability of the government of the day to effectively and adequately address the grievances of the population or a particular section of the population resulting from diversity in ethnic composition or religious and cultural make-ups. The obfuscating impact of the colonial exploitation of farmers and workers of all Nigerian communal groups created an attitude of permanent and mutual exclusiveness among individuals along communal lines. Nnoli, note that, as communal factors became increasingly important in social life, it magnified ethnic consciousness. For instance, the Northerners refused to participate in the 1945 general strike essentially on communal (ethnic) grounds. Also, soon after the 1964 strike, workers voted along ethnic lines in the federal elections of that year and took active part in the inter-communal disturbances of 1966 (Nnoli 1978).

Adegbani and Uche (2015) have contended that political calculations and permutations of who gets what, when, and how have continued to threaten the political stability and advancement of Nigeria as a nation. They note that the incessant struggle for power always heats up the polity, thereby polarising the country along ethnic lines.

Party formations have always been based on ethnic scheming and gang-ups to control political power, as revealed by the lamentation of the former chairman of the National Electoral Commission, Professor Humphrey Nwosu, who said, inter alia, that our party system from its inception in the 1940s and early 1950s reflected the injection of ethnicity into the political system. Political leaders by and large exploited ethnic ties and symbols to promote their selfish interests. The failure of our pioneer political class was their inability to rise above ethnic questions."

Adegbani and Uche rightly said that the politics of ethnicity had made it difficult for Nigeria to have the right leaders. They note that ethnic politics has been a cog in the wheels of the political advancement of the nation, such that there has not been a leader with a national outlook that has emerged in Nigeria. The leaders emerge into the political limelight through ethnic sentiments but end up disappointing their ethnic group. Having come to power via ethnic sympathy, one would have expected them to do much for their people, but to no avail. A lot of them stay and live in Abuja, abandoning their people on the way back home. Ethnic politics in Nigeria created an arena where corrupt leaders received support from their ethnic group. And corruption has devastated Nigeria's quest for development, both politically and economically.

Implications for Development

Nigerianization was introduced in 1945 due to the actions of the colonial government in filling public service jobs with foreigners. By 1954, the process of Nigerianization had politicised ethnicity. The process led to an interethnic struggle for national wealth. Ethnic forces were mobilised on behalf of those seeking posts and promotions in the colonial bureaucracy (Nnoli, 1978).

While the Nigerianization process was being accelerated, the Northern Region was apprehensive that Nigerianization would mean the southernization of the posts in the North. Similar misgivings were expressed by the western region while freezing the expatriate allowance.

As Nnoli (1974) put it, it became clear that with the politicisation of ethnicity, a national programme of Nigerianization was doomed. The gains the Nigerianization programme would have generated for national coherence, unity, and development were dissipated on the altar of ethnic sentiment.

Salau and Hassan (2011) have also noted that between 1960 and 1965, the ethnicity-loaded political arrangement threatened the continual existence of Nigeria as a nation. In order to grab political power, politicians degenerated into political riots, arsons, and killings, and all these culminated in the first military coup that terminated the first republic in 1966 and, as such, terminated the political, social, and economic development of Nigeria.

Since independence, Umezinwa (2012), cited in Adeleke and Uche (2015), said that ethnic sentiments had been a cog in the wheel of political and economic advancement in Nigeria; they note that elections so far in Nigeria have been about "where the candidate came from" rather than "what the candidate can offer". The consequence of this is a lack of lustre, which is what Nigeria is currently witnessing. Because of ethnic sentiment, Muhammadu Buhari was voted into power as President of Nigeria. Ever since his election, Buhari has proven to be very incompetent. He promised to fight corruption, but under his presidency, there have been cases of corruption in his administration. His Minister of Information, Mr. Lai Mohammed, was quoted as saying, "If you steal public funds and defect to the APC (All Progressive Congress), you are declared free and innocent. This is true to the extent that former Governor of Akwa Ibom Godspower Akpabio defected to the APC to avoid investigation and conviction. Former Governor of Abia State, Orji Uzor Kalu, did a similar thing. In terms of security, it is woeful in performance, and the human and material losses Nigeria has suffered are unquantifiable. Economically, this administration has witnessed recession twice, and the economy is not growing at a significant pace. It is very difficult for any country to make progress in all spheres of national life with an incompetent president thrown up and sustained by ethnic sentiments.

Ethnic sentiments have also created an avenue where corrupt leaders are supported by their ethnic groups. For instance, former President Goodluck Jonathan could not bring his former Minister of Petroleum, Deziam Allison-Madueke, to book because she was his fellow Ijaw (person), and so he shielded her while she engaged in massive corruption in the Ministry. Corruption undermines development, so Nigeria's development is impeded in virtually all sectors due to corrupt leaders who are protected by their ethnic group's support. Ethnic sentiments have steadily led to backwardness in Nigeria's quest for rapid advancement in politics and economy. A case in point was the annulment of the 1993 presidential election in Nigeria, in which the late MKO Abiola was elected, but because he defeated a Fulani, Alhaji Tofa, who was the choice of the military, the election was cancelled.

General Babangida (2002), cited in Adegbami and Uche (2015), notes the evils of ethnic sentiments when he writes that "wastage of human and material resources in ethnically inspired violence and clashes... heightening of fragility of the economy and political process, threat to security of life and property, disinvestments of local and foreign components with continued capital flight and loss of confidence in the economy, increasing gap in social relations among ethnic nationalities, including structural suspicion and hate for one another..." are consequences of ethnic sentiments.

Mr. Bala Mohammed, Governor of Bauchi State in Nigeria, expressed extremely dangerous ethnic sentiments about his Fulani group in a television interview in February 2021.He was credited with saying that "the Fulani is a global citizen, blind to boundaries between countries and states." Secondly, Fulani have a penchant for vengeance and an unforgiving spirit. Thirdly, settling Fulani in Nigeria implies settling Fulani around the world. He concluded by saying that the Fulani have the constitutional right to use forests in the

country to graze their cattle, saying "No person owns any forest; the forest is owned by Nigeria". These are volatile ethnic expressions strong enough to keep a nation further divided. No nation would make much progress in an atmosphere of ever-growing ethnic prevalence and suspicion.

Conclusion

Ethnic sentiment in Nigeria has been part of the reason why Nigeria has not developed. From the colonial period to post-colonial times, ethnic sentiments have been expressed on various occasions and in various situations. And each time, it widens the unity gap and creates separatist thought in the nation. The in-group and out-group sentiment that emerges makes national development difficult to achieve. From conception of public policy to implementation, all are jaundiced as a result of ethnic coloration.

Recommendation

The paper recommends that to build a united Nigeria where ethnicity shall not prevail over national matters, there would be a need to build a new Nigeria by attempting the following:

- Review the primary school civics subject curriculum to reflect modules on nation-building.
- Carry out a massive orientation on a continuous basis; this would change the psychology of our nation.
- Reflect the true character of our federal structure and be equitable in the distribution of political and bureaucratic leadership positions in the country.
- De-emphasize the three main ethnic groups (i.e., Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba) in order to give other numerous groups, the opportunity for growth and participation in governing Nigeria.

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