



Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)
Issue: Vol. 1; No. 4; April 2020 pp. 154-160
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)
Website: www.jlahnet.com
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com

Political Elitism And Ethnic Violence In Nigeria Since Independence

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Executive Summary

This study aims at examining the phenomenon of ethnic violence in relation to political elitism in Nigeria since independence. Its objective is to explain how political elitism has contributed to the cases of ethnic violence in Nigeria since 1960. With the instrumentalist theory of ethnic conflict, this study explains in clear terms how politicization of primordial ethnic identities by the elites has led to a spate of ethnic violence in Nigeria. The methodology used in this work is mainly the analysis of secondary data from documents, journals and books from the library. It observes in its findings that despite manipulations of the masses by the political elites, the individual has a determinant role to play in the escalation of ethnic violence in Nigeria. Hence, it recommends that a more integrative approach must be taken in tackling the causes of ethnic violence than looking at it from a specific perspective. Also, politicians should be more selfless in their service while every individual should learn to detest violence no matter the incentives, and rather seek more legitimate channels of addressing any perceived injustice towards a particular ethnic group.

Keywords: Violence, Ethnicity, Political elitism, Independence, Instrumentalism

1. Introduction

The existence of divisions through different marks of identity has been evident in the history of humanity. One of such identities is that of the ethnic divide. Until recently ethnic differences seemed not to be much of a problem in Africa. However, the recent ethnic conflict in Rwanda and Burundi and other parts of Africa brought the possibility of ethnic violence to limelight in the African continent.

Since the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria, there has been ethnic tensions among the various identities lumped together by the colonial masters. Geographically, Nigeria spans about 920, 000km square with a population of about 170 million people, the highest in the whole of Africa with different, cultures, languages, religion and orientation. Hence, there is no gainsaying that the entity called Nigeria is an ethnic mosaic. In response to this, Sen (2010) observes that a greater part of the colonial history of Nigeria between 1914 to 1960 was a social and political engineering to promote the interests of the colonial masters.

Nigeria as a political entity was created in 1914 but gained independence from the colonial masters in 1960. Before the advent of the British explorers, there existed empires and kingdoms, subtle but benign social systems that never had a common interest for they had very little in common, though they often interacted with one another. Nigeria was created within a territory that once had great kingdoms and city-states like the Kanem–Borno empire, the Sokoto Caliphate, Ife, Benin, the Oyo Empire, city states of the Niger Delta and civilizations like those of Aro or the Igbo Ukwu and Nok (Falola et. al.,1999). Thomson (2000) therefore observes that what is referred to ethnic groups today never existed as primordial societies prior to colonization but are rather a social construction for the arbitrary contraption of more than 200 different groups by the colonial masters. According to Nnoli (1978), colonial administration is the cradle of ethnicity and ethnic consciousness in Nigeria because of its forceful amalgamation of the once separate but benign socio-cultural groups. This shallow foundation on which the giant of Africa was built has been further shaken by the post independent political elites who see ethnicity as an advantage to exploit for their selfish political interests.

Political elitism sadly comes to play within the Nigerian polity as a paradox of the seemingly federal nationalist ideology that was believed to be motivated by a sense and quest for unity. Since independence, the progress of Nigeria as a unified nation has been weighed down by ethnic politics whereby the elites from different ethnic divisions aim at attracting federal resources only to their regions while neglecting the others (Ebegbulem, 2011). These suspicions, conflicts, fear, distrust, nepotism, selfishness and their likes among different ethnic groups and their political elites have led to much violence along ethnic lines since the independence of Nigeria. This study therefore attempts an investigation of the role of political elitism in the build up and perpetuation of ethnic violence in Nigeria since 1960.

2. Conceptual Clarification

Political Elitism

There is no consensus definition of the term “elitism”. Higley and Pakulski (2012), explain it as a practice of rule by a few, selected number of persons or group who possess or control socio-economic and political powers. According to Albert (2005) in Okeke (2017), political elitism is characterized by hierarchy and inequality, the later being a direct consequence of the former since by social stratification the elites occupy positions superior to those of the majority. Political elitism projects the interest of the few at the expense of the majority. Motivated by greed and pejorative tendencies, the elites are skillful at persuading, cajoling, coercing, mobilizing and attracting huge amount of followership.

Ethnic Conflict/Violence

The word “ethnic” comes from the Latin “ethno” meaning nation or race. An ethnic group is made up of people who believe in a common identity and fate based on origin, kinship, family ties, traditions, culture, a shared history and language. An ethnic group is believed to be defined more by sentiments of culture, language and sometimes colour and religion rather than territorial boundaries. (Thomson, 2000). For Toland (1993), it is a group of people who share a sense of belonging based on a common culture and history.

Ethnic conflict occurs when the aims of at least one of the parties to a conflict are defined in ethnic terms or the causes and possible solutions to the conflict are ethnic-related or perceived to possess ethnic influence. Ethnic conflict is often not caused by ethnic differences themselves but by interests which may be political, economic, social, cultural or territorial (Reuter, 2017)

According to Onuoha (2008), Conflict becomes a violent when there is no superior force to prevent the situation from becoming more intense, when conflicting parties use physical force and when the aim is to kill or eliminate the opponent in order to secure the object under contention (Onuoha, 2008). Joshua, (2013) adds that conflict becomes violent when it is accompanied with threat and actual destruction be it of lives or property.

Ethnicity

Is defined on the basis of shared identity, origin or background such as race, nationality, religion, tribe, language, culture, et ce tera. Ethnicity is often perceived as a political factor. In this sense, Peterson, Novak and Gleason (1982) observes that ethnicity is not just a quest for distinctiveness or identity, but has a functionality in the State structure by serving as a drive to organize in order to gain from the State while preventing others from gaining. For Kruger (1993), independently, ethnic differences do not promote ethnic conflicts or violence, they are products of personal conflicts within the elites circle or between the elites and an authority.

In relating political elitism to ethnic conflict, scholars have argued that ethnicity is a political construction by elites who in attempt to gain political, social and economic favours present other cultures or groups in bad light, distort their image and make promises to the groups wish to represent (Kruger 1993 in Solomon and Leith, 2000). Ethnicity or ethnic identity is based on intangible factors such as what people perceive or are made to believe, to create a sense of solidarity among members of a particular ethnic group and to exclude others (Reuter, 2017).

3. Theoretical Perspectives

This study uses the instrumentalist theory of ethnic conflict (Cohen, 1969; Barth, 1998) to unpack the causes of ethnic violence in relation to political elitism in Nigeria since independence.

According to Barth (1998) in Adlparvar and Tadros, (2016), instrumentalism is a subjectivist view of ethnicity where individuals selectively emphasize those forms of cultural distinctions that are important to them. These distinctive features are basically selected, relational, interactional and situational, hence they are not fixed.

In studying Cohen's (1969) work, the 'Manchester School' found out that that the major function of ethnicity was to create an informal political organization where the political elites exploit primordial identities to gain allegiance of the masses, agitate ethnic tensions, and sometimes provoke ethnic violence in order to seize power and also gain protection against other groups (Fearon and Laitin 2000; Kaufmann 2005).

The instrumentalist theory of ethnic conflict assumes that ethnicity is a construct rather than a constant because it only acts as a means to survival or mobilization to achieve economic or political ends and possibly disband after the attainment of such goals. (Moynihan, 1975, Anderson, 1991 in Ebegbulem, 2011). This means that ethnic conflict does not arise directly from differences in ethnic identity it is politicized or manipulated for economic, social or political advantage (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Ruane and Todd 2004).

Within this instrumentalist approach, Reuter (2017) explains ethnicity as a device used by the elite class or groups to unify, organize and mobilize populations to achieve specific goals which are basically political. For him, it is more or less an ideological belief in character hence could be considered a political affiliation.

Apart from political interests, instrumentalists claim that ethnicity is independent of every ethnic marker be it culture, biological traits, languages and so on. Instrumentalists understand the causes of conflict from the standpoint of ethnic groups competing for the same goal which necessarily has political undertones namely power, access to resources, or territory (Reuter, 2017). Hence, for ethnic conflict to take place, ethnic identity interacts with other factors such as security needs, inequality, greed and generally grievances or frustration (Posen, 1993; Gurr, 1994; Collier and Hoeffler 2004 in Che, 2016).

Primordialists criticize Instrumentalism on grounds that, it only explains the elite manipulation of ethnicity as the basic source of grievances which induce ethnic conflicts but fails to explain why people easily mobilize or respond cooperatively and effectively to manipulation on the basis of ethnic identity (Che, 2016). On the other hand, while most scholars see instrumentalism in bad light, that is, as being a tool for selfish politicians to satisfy their personal aspirations; the appraisal of Glazer and Moynihan (1975) in Adlparvar and Tadros (2016) consider it a useful strategy in making claims upon the government where the officials legitimately mobilize the masses who as part of their constitutional commitments seek for collective rights.

4. Selected Case Study Of Ethnic Violence In Nigeria Since Independence.

The population of Nigeria at independence never constituted a nationality; for instance, the Hausa-Fulani had no reason to identify with or feel any relationship with the Christian South except that they were under the same colonial umbrella (Holsti, 1997). With this heterogeneous and incompatible cohabitation, ethnic conflict was never unlikely to occur. In support of this proposition, Ellingson (1996) contends that societies with many distinct groups fragmented along religious lines and language have a higher risk of violence than homogenous ones. Hence, characterizing the legacy of the colonial masters was the exacerbation of class, ethnic, religious, language and other divisions by introducing the divide-and-rule system and also vesting particular groups with the right to rule while excluding others; hence the Northern Nigerians were made to feel that the majority and more sensitive posts were their prerogative. The Nigerian Civil war that lasted for thirty months was a consequence of this colonial legacy. Shortly before and soon after the independence, the three identifiable regions in the country turned into three political entities thereby reducing the struggle for independence to that of ethnic nationality and dominance. This period was characterized by politicized ethnicity, competition for resources, corruption, nepotism and tribalism (Ebegbulem, 2011).

The Nigerian civil war which started in 1967 was an ethno-political violence caused by the attempted secession of the Eastern region of Nigeria due to perceived inequality and injustice by the Nigerian government led by Northerners Falola, 1999, Holsti , 1997).

Explaining the politics of the civil war, Osaghae(2002), Ayah(1999), cited in Ebegbulem, 2011) narrates that the war was presented as a genocide perpetrated by the Northern Muslims, due to the actual fact that the Igbos were killed in large numbers in the North, before and after the war, coupled with the strategies of economic blockade and starvation during the war. Gowon further politicized the whole struggle by creating more states in order to gain the minority ethnic groups on the side of the Nigerian government. These creation of states practically weakened the solidarity of the Southerners in their Biafran struggle. The Yoruba elite on their part mobilized the region and aligned with the federal government, a situation which left an enduring bitterness between the Igbos and the Yorubas as seen in the Igbos inability to support the Yoruba struggle to actualize the revalidation of the June 12, 1993 election won by a prominent Yoruba man, Chief M. K. O. Abiola (Ebegbulem, 2011).

The Nigerian civil war was identifiably perpetrated and sustained by the political elites of the day who aimed at pulling resources to their regions, seizing power and doing injustice to other regions. The manipulation of the struggle of ethnic minorities by political parties of the major ethnic groups and the militarization of ethnicity prepared the ground for the Nigerian civil war. For instance, as a way of politicizing or rather ethnocizing the army, political elites encouraged members of their respective ethnic groups to join the army. Mention is made of an emir encouraged all his male subjects in the who has reached a certain required age to join the army irrespective of their physical ability (Gutteridge, 1969). Soon after there was another threat of secession by the Yoruba ethnic group. This led to the Yoruba boycott of the constitution conference of 1994 which was aimed at resolving issues bothering on ethnicity, was a form of grievance against a government by the Hausa-Fulani hegemonic military.

After the civil war, other ethnic violence continued to be orchestrated at different times. The activities of the political elites have been either the causes of drivers of some of this conflicts. For instance, what could be ethno-religious conflicts such as those of Kano, Kaduna, Jos and Zamfara became highly politicized. The politicization of the Niger Delta struggle for resource control is of no mean impact to the spread of militancy in the Niger Delta. The Annulment of the June 12 election by the Northern military leader was a clear display of ethnic differences. The continued militarization of the South especially the Niger delta by Northerners in power has led to a spate of violence in the region.

The Nigerian army have at various points been ethnocized by the political elites. Apart from the part that politicization the military played in the civil war, its effect could also be seen in their role in Tiv-Jukun crisis of 2001 which instead of quelling the situation rather exacerbated it. The persistent ethnic violence between the Tivs and the Jukuns of Benue and Taraba States, a conflict that has lasted for more than two decades, though infrequently interrupted by relative peace, causes occasional loss of lives and displacements. (Egwu, 1992; Best, 1999).

Violent conflict also took place between Zango and Kataf in 1992 because of the migration of the Hausas into Kataf Community. The government's role in its escalation is remarkable as they were unable to take swift action to scuttle it, but rather there was a sympathy fight by the Hausa majority in Kaduna and Zaria leading to great devastation; loss of thousands of lives and property (Egwu, 1993). In Toto of Nassarawa State, political tussle about who is native and who deserves loyalty between the Bassa and Igbira ethnic groups to an outbreak of violent conflict between these two communities. Having continued for more than a decade, this conflict gained ascendancy into violence living thousands of people dead and the entire Bassa community displaced (Alli, 2002).

Nigerian politicians have become more desperate in the pursuit of power, more intolerant of opposition and criticism coupled with a great amount of ruthlessness aiming at removing all oppositions (Alemika, 2011). This is why Election in Nigeria has recently become a warfare, a battle between one ethnic group and the other. Not less than 100 people died in the 2003 elections; more than 300 people in the 2007 elections, and more than 800 people were killed during election and post election violence in 2011 presidential elections alone in the North, leaving not less than 65,000 displaced (Human Right Watch, 2011).

The continued tension between these ethnic groups has led to the formation of ethnic militias in different zone in the country including Oodua People's Congress (OPC), the IPOB, Egbesu boys, the MOSSOP and Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria. The political elites therefore readily manipulate their presence each time they have the need, and these eventually leads to ethnic violence.

Adagba, et al, (2012), Ogbonaya et al, (2012) cited in Joshua, (2013) notes that the interaction of ethno-religious conflicts and politics in Nigeria is as a result of perceived or real loss of power by an elite stratum and those who either want to return to power, retain it or take over it. These politicians are noted to often play the ethnic cards just for their selfish political gains by inciting their own ethnic groups against an opponent's. For instance, it is contended (Abdulahi, 2013), that the violence that took place after the 2011 presidential election in Nigeria particularly in the North, the home of the presidential candidate who lost out, General Muhammadu Buhari was a manipulated grievance against the Southerner that won. The activities of the Boko Haram sect which was almost at its peak during this time showed that they were agitating for a Northern Muslim president.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be argued that instrumentalism cannot sufficiently explain ethnic violence independently. Findings has shown that it interacts more with primordialism to explain ethnic conflict than with any other theory (Williams , 2015) . For instance, the politicization of ethnicity reawakens and shapes primordial ethnic differences when the grievances are aired and it only becomes a shared sentiment of frustration based on this shared ethnic identity thereby leading to hatred, fear, mistrust, and the danger of ethnic violence (Che, 2016).

This study has found out how enormous the consequences of ethnic violence are ranging from destabilization of political processes, governments, states, regions and nations, often accompanied by gross human rights violations and by economic decline , environmental degradation and massive displacements which may lead to humanitarian emergency.

- Positive steps must be taken to protect ethnic minorities
- In cases of ethnic tensions, care should be taken to resolve it in a less belligerent means because the high handedness of security forces that further politicize the tension or deepen divisions thereby feeding violence.
- Ethnic violence is a collective act perpetrated by a group of individuals. In order to avoid such occurrences, the individual agency is a critical variable in explaining this phenomenon. Hence, everyone must cross-examine any attempt by the elites to lure them by any form of manipulation into violence. Individually, people must detest every form of violence.
- There should be more integrative approach in tackling the issue of ethnic violence in Nigeria rather than blaming it on specific factors, like the politicians without conscientizing those who practically carry out the violence, by forming thug groups and militias.
- Efforts must be made to tackle grievances, balance competing interests, address perceived inequalities and meet the needs of ethnic groups whenever there is a warning sign of tension.

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