THE DILEMMA OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Any attempt to understand the development of the nation state in Africa cannot escape a study of leadership, ethnicity, and religion as some of the main challenges to the development of democracy and nation-building. The legitimacy of the state is linked to the capacity of the political leadership to present itself as a provider of necessary public goods and, more important, a neutral arbiter that guarantees the rights, interests, and security of all sections of society. However, in Nigeria, the state, through its leadership, is generally perceived as serving the particular interest of one group, thus losing its legitimacy and indeed its authority. As state capacity declines, therefore, the fear of 'the other' rises and citizens resort to other levels of solidarity – ethnic and religious, in search of security. Thus, the paper utilized secondary (including historical) sources of data to show that ethno-religious pluralism and attendant conflicts have become a major theme in Nigeria's political development over the past five decades to the detriment of nation-building. It also shows that Nigeria has witnessed a surge in ethnic chauvinism as well as Christian and Islamic religious revivalism. Rather than ethnic accommodation and secularization, there has emerged a puritanical tendency emerging in both the ethnic and religious space that has constituted a management dilemma for the political leadership. It concludes on the note that both the colonial powers and the elites that succeeded them have used ethnicity and religion for their own ends. Thus, concerted efforts to remedy the ethno-religious extremities that confront Nigeria must target poverty reduction on a massive scale among the poor on a non-ethnic basis, shift emphasis from the 'sharing' of the national cake to its production, promote a single form of citizenship based solely on residency requirements and re-calibrate secularism not to be the withdrawal of the state from religious affairs but as a guarantee of religious freedom to all religious groups.

Keywords: Democracy, Ethnicity, Religion, Political Leadership, Nation-Building.

INTRODUCTION

The reality that Nigeria is a multi-faith and multi-ethnic country goes a long way in explaining the complexity and diversity of the unresolved National Question. Nigeria, in the last decade, has been characterized by challenges emanating from the poor management of ethnic and religious pluralism. The nature of the Nigerian state seems to be not only responsible for the regrettably deepening ethnoreligious crisis that has become endemic, pervasive, and unfortunate, but the political leadership also is increasingly proving incapable of evolving credible and competent strategies that could address this ugly trend.

Both the colonial powers and the political cum military elites that have succeeded them have been unable to overcome the challenge of using ethnicity and religion for their own ends. Unfortunately, the poor economic situation of Nigeria and its attendant growing poverty have further sharpened ethnic and religious pluralism. There are about 374 ethnic groups in Nigeria, and the major dilemma the political leadership has faced even before the flag independence of 1960 up until now is that of how to integrate the various ethnic groups for national unity and the development of a management strategy that can engender inter-ethnic harmony. Similarly, on the religious front, secularism has become problematic. Many citizens have lost their confidence in the secular principle due to the fact that the public's respect for political and social institutions has reduced due to the conduct of the political leadership.

Indeed, since independence, Nigeria has initiated several policy attempts aimed largely at addressing ethnic and religious relations. While reforms like state creation and secularism have transformed the Nigerian state on the one hand, they have not been able to fundamentally address the problem of ethnic mobilization and religious differences. The inability of successive administrations to demonstrate the capacity to effectively contain ethnic intolerance and religious insecurity has worsened the relationships between the various ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria.

The opposite questions which this paper seeks to answer, therefore, are: Has deep-rooted ethnic hatred not been engineered more by the wrong attitudes of the political leadership towards ethnicity than by ethnicity itself? To what extent have successive political leaders in Nigeria operationalize secularism to mean a guarantee of religious freedom to all groups rather than the ostensible conception of it as state withdrawal from religious affairs? And lastly, how has ethnic and religious pluralism impacted on the sustenance of nation-building in Nigeria? This paper adopts the instrumentalist model as an analytical tool for explaining the dilemmas of political leadership vis-a-vis the management of ethnic pluralism in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Leadership

The Austrian Political Science Association (AuPSA) aptly explained leadership based on political context to mean "the volition and ability of an individual or group to sustainably shape social processes, in adherence to human rights, common good before self-interest and inclusion of all participants." Catt and Miller (1985) (in Maxwell 2001) define leadership as the ability to influence the activities of others through the process of communication towards the attainment of a goal. Furthermore, Ebukelo (2010) explains the concept as "the ability to counsel, to manage conflicts, to inspire loyalty and to make subordinates remain on their jobs". Concretely, leadership implies "a purposeful direction of the affairs of the led" (Fafowora *et al.*, 1995). Political leadership in this paper is therefore conceived to mean any person holding an office or who is in possession of power for a period of time for a continent, country, state, local authority, district, group, political party, and so on.

Secularism

According to Kosmin and Hartford (2007) secularism "is the principle of the separation of government institutions and persons mandated to represent the state from religious institution and religious dignitaries". One manifestation of secularism is asserting the right to be free from religious rule and teachings or in a state declared to be neutral on matters of belief, from the imposition by the government of religion or religious practices upon its people. Another manifestation of secularism is the view that public activities and decisions, especially political ones, should be uninfluenced by religious beliefs or practices.

For this paper, it is opined that since Nigerians are very religious, secularity should not just be conceived as the withdrawal of the state from religious affairs but as a guarantee of religious freedom to all religious groups.

Ethnicity

Scholars have argued that 'a cursory look at the social composition and organization of nearly all extant nation-states suggest that they are rarely modern societies that are culturally homogenous' (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1992). This perhaps made Osaghae (1992), to posit that ethnicity refers to a social formation resting upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology. It denotes a group of individuals who consider themselves, or are considered by others, to share common characteristics which differentiate them from other collectivities within a society.

In their contribution to the concept of ethnicity, Fawole and Bello (2011) opined that ethnicity can be seen as an interaction or relationship that exists among people of different ethnic groups who decide to base their relationship on the difference, which normally brings about competition on issues like power and wealth'. The point here remains that ethnicity has indeed nursed rivalry through competition, and so there is no way to separate ethnicity from ethnic dispute, and this does not preclude a good image for such society as it reflects in the political leadership configuration of Nigeria. As averred by Nnoli (1998), ethnicity and ethnic conflicts have acquired a bad reputation of the potential inherent in ethnic conflict to split society into different states. The need to preserve the territorial integrity of the state against secession and irredentism inevitably involves the state in a war. The attendant loss of lives, destruction of property, and dislocation of populations and development projects are usually unacceptable to local and international opinion.

An ethnic group is regarded generally as a social collectivity whose members not only share such objective characteristics as language, core-territory, ancestral myths, culture, religion, and/or political organization but also have some subjective consciousness or perception of common descent or identity. This subjective sense of common identity is, however, almost always developed only in contexts involving relationships among two or more ethnic groups. In other words, ethnic identity results from contact rather than isolation. Ethnic pluralism, therefore, refers to the existence of two or more ethnic groups within a territorial society or political community, usually a nation-state.

This paper viewed ethnicity as a bad omen for political leadership in Nigeria as it affects the overall development and nation-building. This is very evident in the leadership recruitment that is based on ethnic considerations whether such a person is competent enough to bring about meaningful idea for national development or not, but since such a person has a religious affinity, then all becomes a story.

Theoretical discourse

The theory adopted for this work is instrumentalism. The theory was propounded by Ralph Miliband (1924-1994), a British sociologist. He is one of the best-known academic Marxists of his generation. The instrumentalist theory is concerned with the strategy of action, with "how" and "when" of political actions. This theory depicts that the actions and inaction of government can be traceable to the background of the political leadership, either religion, ethnic affinity, business or what have you.

The instrumental or elite model is a theory that is of the view that policymakers in government and positions of power tend to share a common business or class background and that their decisions invariably showcase their business or class interests. Using ethnic/religious identity and solidaristic ties as weapons of political bargaining, the elite cadre of the various ethnic/religious groups continues to plunge into constant struggles for amassing and controlling state power, and when elected into office instead of striking a balance between ethnic/religious stance, they perpetuate the same act by ensuring the dominance of their own ethnic groups in the civil service and other employment sectors. The ethnic/religious brouhaha usually does not augur well for the peace and tranquility of the polity because this creates strife and unhealthy rivalry amongst these groups. Arthur Nwanko (1991) lends credence to this when he avers that Nigerian elite formation....is torn by internal cleavages dictated by professional inclinations, religious aftermaths, and ethnic considerations ....It is these intra-elitist cleavages, their essence and dialectic, that determine the general trend and tendency exhibited by the ruling power formation. If religious factor dominates, the ruling elite uses religious indices for transacting with the entire elite spectrum of society. Where the ethnic factor is ascendant or combines with the religious index, the ruling elite relies on the congruities of speech and custom for establishing criteria for political participation.

In the words of Ebegbulem (n.d), in Africa, where poverty and deprivation are becoming endemic, mostly as a result of distributive injustice, ethnicity/religion becomes the prominent and effective weapon of survival and mobilization. Moynihan (1975) and Anderson (1991) surmised, respectively, that ethnic groups that spring up for economic reasons usually disband after achieving their objectives and that ethnicity is a 'construct' rather than a 'constant'. It means, therefore, that the situation determines the construction and usefulness of ethnicity.

The adoption of this theory becomes relevant as it espoused that the Nigerian polity has suffered the ill luck of transformational leadership. Nigerian leadership use the instrument of ethnic/religious pluralism as a purveyor of gaining power and the continual sustenance of the same. This is related to the theory of Two Publics by Peter Ekeh (1975), when he provided a demarcation between the primordial public and the civil public. The thesis therefore observed that in Nigeria, people gained entrance to political leadership through the civil public but thereafter services their primordial public.

POLITICAL DIMENSION OF ETHNIC/RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES IN NIGERIA

There is no gain saying that an average Nigerian is very religious, as pointed out by different scholars (Oluduro 2010; Ekundayo 2013) as cited in Cansi and Odukoya (n.d).This makes the incidence of religious differences in Nigeria to have a very long history. Eyeruroma and Allison (n.d.) aptly observed that there are three religious groups in Nigeria- Islam, Christianity, and ATRs. Statistic put the population of the religious groups at 50% Islam, 40% Christianity, and 10% ATRs. However, northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, although with many Christians in the cities and in minority communities throughout the region. Throughout much of the "Middle belt", Christians and Muslim communities are equivalent and are often contentious. The South East areas of the country are overwhelming Christian, whereas the Yoruba in the South West are religiously plural; marriage and conversion between different faiths is a common occurrence. This has made Nigerian society to be overwhelmed with ethno-religious conflicts because managing the differences is quite contentious. Religious fanaticism, extremism, bigotry, and fundamentalism have become the mainstay of the polity. According to Okafor(1997), political crises and instability in Nigeria are deeply enmeshed in the conflating values and predilections that are

ethno-religious in nature. The political dimension of religious in Nigeria is even somewhat complex as it reveals the denominational tendencies in even the most pronounced religions in the country. The politics of proliferations of religious gathering (houses of worship) as well as the aftermath implications on the leadership color of Nigeria, demands a serious investigation. Quite alarming is the religious leaders' interest in political activities of Nigeria whereby they have become pressure groups whose positions continue to dictate tune in the political parties' candidatures. In fact, the political happening has brought to the limelight the volatility of Nigeria and so, the political leadership evolvement has become a product of religious pedigree.

Corroborating the upsurge of ethnoreligious issues and the threat it poses to good governance in Nigeria, Nwigbo (2003) noted that;

> The present democratic governance in Nigeria is witnessing a conflict of religious freedom. In actual fact, it is the question of tension between the different religions in the country. The religious tension between the different religions in Nigeria posed a major obstacle to the nascent democracy. At the moment, the problems of religious freedom are becoming more acute and more crucial in Nigerian society.

The Nigerian electoral outcomes preclude a rotational tendency at the presidential level and even in states with diverse religious beliefs and faiths. It can be observed that Nigerian politicians do capitalize on religion and ethnicity after every tenure in the country, and failure to adhere to the rules of religion do spell doom for the party involved. This was well captured in the 2015 General Elections by the All Progressive Congress (APC), the Muslim/Christian ticket that produced President Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim, and Vice President Prof Yemi Osinbajo a Christian (populated denomination). Though, this arrangement is not yet enshrined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Historically, the ongoing political arrangement is not new to the Nigeria case. On different occasions, ethnic marginalization and oppression have become major ingredients of the nation's politics. Ethnicity assumes a symbolic appeal by urban political elites for mobilizing people from their rural origins for political support and personal interests. This is relevant to what played out in the case of Nnamdi Azikiwe when he was disqualified from the presidential contest of 1979 for tax defaults, he rode on ethnic sentiments and alleged that he was disqualified as result of his Igbo origin, then, he was eventually allowed to contest based on ethnic appeal (Ajayi, 2006). The point here is that Nigeria political activity is rooted in ethnic bigotry. Political elites have turned ethnicity and religion into instruments of the electoral process, which, in most cases, although reduces any form of domination, its attendant effects on competent hands winning election have grave consequences.

The Onerous lackadaisical stand of political elites against acts of injustice melted on citizens at large also fuels ethnic hostilities especially when culprits are ethnically or religiously associated with them. Turning a blind eye to unhealthy rivalries, corruption, unemployment and the yearnings of the citizenry propels the feeling of marginalization instead of instilling a sense of belongingness in the hearts of the people. The resultant effect of the failure to address this adequately by Nigerian leaders usually give birth to taking laws into their hands.

Noteworthy, is also the corrupt nature of political elites which has further aggravated ethnic/religious insurrections. Lending credence to the aforementioned, Jacob (2002) as cited in Kalejaiye and Alliyu (2013) by stating that official corruption which is at its climax in Nigeria also heightens this, because each group tends to shield its members who were involved in the acts of corruption from been arrested and properly prosecuted and any means of apprehending and uncovering culprits usually culminates into ethnic/religious strife. In fact, borrowing from Professor Lumumba's words, that in Africa the fight against corruption is suffering setback because even when a corrupt politician is fingered in corruption saga, his ethnic cliques tend to protect them and claimed the obvious that even if he/she is a thief, he/she is their own. The problem confronting anti-corruption can never be nipped in the bud, if the seeds of ethnicity and religion is not uprooted.

In another development, the recent open letter to the presidency under the President Muhammadu Buhari by popular elder-statesman of Ijaw nationalities, Chief (Dr) E. K. Clark (2020) alleged the presidency of lopsidedness in appointment to key and 'juicy' agencies of government against the South-South Nigeria. For instance, the replacement of Acting Director General of the Securties and Exchange Commission (SEC), Mrs Mary Uduk from Akwa Ibom state by a Northerner, Mr Lamido Yuguda considering her tract record and competences, she was unceremoniously ousted out of office; this is also applicable to the CAC leadership even while the same scenario happened in Nigeria Port Authority (NPA), the Managing Director Hadiza Bala Usman was reappointed for another 4 years after the expiration of her first tenure but Dakuku Peterside from Rivers state was replaced with a northerner in the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) under the Federal Ministry of Transportation. In the petroleum industry even when the oil resource is located in the South-South, the Managing Director of NAPIMS, one of the strategic subsidiaries of NNPC, Mr Roland O. Ewubare was replaced with a northerner.

The last straw that broke the camel's back is the political arrangement of federal character principle that was enshrined for the first time in the Nigerian Constitution in 1979 and carried over to the present 1999 Nigerian constitution as amended in 2011. With this development, it is obvious that managing the religiosity and ethnicity using the instrumentality of federal character seems problematic because the principle only specified the consideration of ethnic differences with no provision for religiosity. Although, constitutionally, Nigeria was described as a secular state. The fact remains that religiosity continues to be a determinant factor in governance.

OSTENSIVE EFFORTS AT MANAGING NIGERIA'S ETHNO-RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: A CRITIQUE

The constitution
As an integrative measure, the federal government abolished the regional constitutions and evolved a single document for the whole country. Equally, several provisions were enshrined in all the constitutions adopted thereafter, including the current 1999 Constitution, such as articles that are expected to promote national integration.

Federalism
Federalism is a system in which government powers that exist in a state are shared constitutionally between the central authority and that of the component or federating units. Through this, the concept of national integration is given expression. As opined by Obafemi Awolowo, "if a country is bilingual or multilingual, the constitution must be federal, and the constituent states must be organized on the linguistic basis". He goes further to stress that "only a truly federal constitution can unite Nigeria and generate harmony amongst its diverse racial and linguistic groups (Fagbamigbe, 1981:4-5). Basically, the amalgamation of the North and South in 1914 laid the historical foundation for federalism in Nigeria, and the outcomes of constitutional conferences agreed on the use of federalism as an ideal system for the country.

National anthem
A national anthem is intended to evoke a feeling of patriotism and make people of that country work for the progress, unity, and growth of the country. Usually, it contains the ideals and traits which the country intends to impart to its citizens. The National Pledge is regarded as an oath of citizenship with promises to the country. It is intended to help citizens to grow to love and serve their country and reminds them of other responsibilities to the country.

Revenue allocation
To further strengthen national integration, revenues which are generated are pooled into a common fund and shared thereafter to all

tiers of government using agreed parameters (see Section 162(2) of the 1999 Constitution).

Establishment of political parties

Ethnically based political parties were known to be harbinger of distrust and violence. To avoid this and encourage national integration section 222 (b) of the 1999 Constitution states: "The members of the association are open to every citizen of Nigeria irrespective of his place of origin, circumstance of birth, sex, religion or ethnic group." Furthermore section 223 (2b) of the said constitution states: "The members of the executive committee or other governing body of the political party shall be deemed to reflect the federal character of Nigeria."

Federal character principle

This is a strategy adopted by the government at all levels to ensure equal distribution of scarce resources to all diverse groups that make up Nigeria so that no group dominates and controls the resources to the detriment of the others. Consequently, appointments, siting of industries, schools, and provision of social amenities, etc., are made in a way to allow every group to participate in the system. The central philosophy is to diffuse primordial sentiments, create an enabling environment for peaceful co-existence, and engineer the process of national integration (Okibe, 2000, p.194). As expressed in the moribund 1979 Constitution, the federal character principle states:

The composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies be carried out in such manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and also to command loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or any of its agencies (section 14(3) of the 1979 Constitution). Equally, the 1979 Constitution (and the 1999 Constitution) enjoins that the affairs of the central, state, local government areas, government parastatals, etc., shall be carried out in such manner as to recognize the diversity of the peoples within its area of authority with the over-riding intention to unite and integrate them.

State creation

Decree No. 14 of 1967 introduced by the Gen. Yakubu Gowon's regime created 12 states in Nigeria on May 27, 1967: six in the north and six in the south. This move was made to satisfy the yearnings of Nigerians for state creation since colonial times. The government equally felt that such decision will help strengthen national unity. Along this trend, by 2009, the number of states have risen to thirty-six-with the tendency of increasing further.

Rotational presidency and rotation of power

In its strong and determined desire to further strengthen the spirit of national unity, the still-born Gen. Sani Abacha's 1995 Constitution in section 229 (4), made provision for rotational presidency and rotation of power between the six geopolitical zones, as in:
1. North-Central: Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau and FCT.
2. North-Eastern: Adamawa, Bauch, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe.
3. North-Western: Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara.
4. South-Eastern: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo.
5. South-South: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River Delta, Edo and Rivers.
6. South-Western: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo.

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC)

The national Youth Service Corps (NYSC) is one of the proactive instrument of curbing ethnic issues. The General Yakubu Gowon-led administration established the scheme in 1973. Under the scheme, young graduates of tertiary institutions are mandatorily required to serve the nation for a year in other states than theirs. The program which aimed at promoting a sense of belongingness, loyalty, interethnic tolerance amongst Nigerian youths and thereby engendering overall national unity.

Despite the above mediums to remedy ethno-religious crisis in the Nigerian political space, the Nigerian government has been deficient of good governance, which has continued to fan the embers of crisis across ethnic and religious climes due to leakages of policies centered on the political, religious, and ethnic lines rather than the economic emancipation of its people. Regardless of any ostensive measures put in place by Nigerian political leadership, it shall continue to be an exercise in futility if they continue to use the instrument of ethnic and religious sentiments to gain and sustain power. Ethnic/religious loyalties among political elites instead of loyalty first to the state will continue to have a deleterious impact, stifle initiative, and the attendant under-development of the state as a whole.

Corroborating this fact Adegbami and Uche (2015) state that the incursion of which political "dealers" instead of "leaders" emerge in the Nigerian political arena has a dire consequence. These leaders lack the interest of the nation at heart because they gained political office through ethnic sentiments, even end up disappointing the so-called ethnic group they rode on to get into office at times. Ethnic/religious bigotry will continue to submerge the polity in a quagmire of hostilities if not addressed adequately as earmarked by Babangida (2002) as cited in Adegbami and Uche (2015)

Wastage of enormous human and mental resources in ethnically inspired violence, encounters, clashes, and even battles, heightening of fragility of the economy and political process, threat to security of life and property, and disinvestments of local and foreign components with continuous capital flight and loss pod confidence in the economy, and increasing gaps in social relations among ethnic nationalities including structural suspicions and hate for one another. Ethnic nationalism is equally responsible for upspring of ethnic militias across the country; the Odua People's Congress of the Southwest, Arewa People's Congress in the North, and Egbesu in the east among others (Babangida 2002 cited in Adegbami and Uche 2015).

CONCLUSION

For 60 years, one question has concomitantly eluded the Nigerian political space. Why has the country not been able to unite its citizens devoid of religion and ethnic diversity? Despite the various means to erode pluralist pressures, it has failed to proffer a sense of belongingness in its citizens by adopting policies aimed at invigorating national cooperation. Nigeria still stands as a house divided against itself by the incubus of ethnic mistrust, religious fanatism, and tribal loyalties, which have remained stronger than national loyalty. The irony of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria is that the Nigerian leadership is the very disease they are trying to cure. Although hypocritically measures have been put in place by different regimes to cure this menace, they are the culprits empowering it the more with their policies which usually falls on ethno/religious climes that favor them and their ethnic/religious groups which in turn has not only fueled hostilities amongst the Nigerian populace, it has successfully caused the destruction of both lives and properties and on the larger scale has plundered development of the Nigerian polity. In lieu of this ugly situation, there is the need for the Nigerian political leadership to see to it that its social responsibilities are performed to the people as the abysmal failure of leaders to do so has consequential effects that can aggravate ethno/religious brouhaha either directly or otherwise. Employment opportunities should be created for its citizens as the percentage of unemployed keeps skyrocketing on the daily basis. The high rate of unemployment also serve as a medium which catalyzes ethnic hostilities in the country as the popular aphorism says "an idle hand is the devil's workshop." Hence, the need for job creation that can accommodate the numbers of graduates shunning-out by Nigerian institutions yearly. Some can be empowered through different social schemes among others. It is also high time for the National Orientation Agency (NOA) to wake from its slumbering by performing the exact purpose of its establishment. Nigerian political leadership should also lead by example by taking clue from happenings around the world particularly United States of

America. Policies should be put in place that unites not vice-versa. Equal privileges should be enjoyed by citizens of Nigeria as a whole not based on ethno/religious affinities. When centrifugal tendencies are being eroded on the basis of national unity and good leadership, Nigeria will overcome all its attendant crises hitch free.

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