

Ethnic Separatist Agitations: Implications For Political Stability In Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper focused on the litany of ethnic separatist agitations that had dotted the Nigerian political landscape since colonial era till date. The quick resort to extreme strategy of secessionist threat or attempt at the slightest ethnic group provocation has made the “national question” in Nigeria unanswered. These primordial underpinnings manifest lack of collective faith in the Nigerian nation building project. The paper identified through thematic and chronological processes of analysis, that there is a positive relationship between the ethnic separatist agitations that have traumatically engulfed Nigerian state and the unstable character of Nigerian polity. It is argued that Nigerian government and politics fell short of the bench-mark for a stable polity because it has witnessed monumental structural and institutional basic changes, illegitimacy of all its regimes, lack of rule of law and outright disregard to the principles of equity, fairness and justice in its internal politics. The paper recommends that conscious efforts should be made by the present Nigerian leadership to address all forms of discriminations on the basis of race, sex and other social-cultural imperatives and that the task of “nigerializing” all Nigerians should be pursued with vigour.

Introduction

Nigerian nation is made up of about 250 ethnic groups that are dissimilar in terms of languages, attitudes, perceptions, religions and other social-cultural imperatives. Yet these dissimilar groupings, amorphous in all ramifications, were artificially brought together as one nation state. The conscious efforts of Nigerian leadership to instill nationalistic and patriotic values into the ethnic groups have failed. As a result, Nigeria is witnessing unabated and continued manifestations of lack of collective faith and commitment in the Nigerian project. This has caused Nigerian political scene to be dotted with ethnic separatist agitations of varying proportions and intensities from colonial period through the post independence era to the contemporary Nigeria.

This paper examines the relationship between the ethnic separatist agitations and political stability in Nigeria. The first section conceptualizes ethnic agitation and political stability. The second section discusses the situations, contexts and instances of ethnic separatist agitations from the colonial era through independence to the contemporary Nigeria. Finally the implications of ethnic separatist agitations for Nigeria’s political stability are analyzed.

The Concept of Ethnic Agitation:

For comprehension of the concept of ethnic separatist agitation, it is imperative to break the general concept into ethnic and separatist agitation. Ogban (2004:24) defines ethnic in a number of senses to refer:

A social group within a cultural and social system that claims or accorded special status on the basis of complex, often variable traits including religious, linguistic, ancestral, or physical characteristics (2) a religion, racial, national or cultural group (3) a people not Christians or Jewish, threaten pagans (4) an informal sense that means “a member of an ethnic group”

In the same manner, Nnoli (1978:5) states that:

Ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by communal character of their boundaries. The relevant common factor may be languages or culture or both. In Africa, language has clearly been the most crucial variable... Minor linguistic or cultural differences often exist within the group, forming the basis for delineation of sub-ethnic systems... more important is still the possibility of occupation and class differentiation.

From the above definitions and clarifications of ethnic, we can infer that ethnic separatist agitation refers to a condition where an ethnic group demonstrates an attempt or a threat to achieve a separation from an existing state.

In order to achieve an effective discussion of ethnic separatist agitations in Nigeria, seeing the ethnic groups in separatist agitations as bodies in struggle for secession, it is imperative to examine the conditions for a successful secession. Pearson (1977) formulated an analytical framework for assessing the chances of the success of a separatist struggle based on the concept of resource. According to him, this concept embraces consideration of the costs and risk of separation. Its elements are: social mature or mobilized population through mass literacy communication, industrialization and urbanization, empowerment of counter-elite and international support including that of the emigrant Diaspora and the support of the great powers; location within a declining host state, which expresses its declining strength; and war. The above analytical framework explains the inherent difficulty of successfully seceding from an established state. The failures of secessionist wars in Asia, the Caribbean, and the Middle East, are attributed to this difficulty. (Gurr, 1995:294-295). The Eastern Europe broke this record through the successes achieved by Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Slovenia and Macedonia in Yugoslavia because of loss of mixture of political and economic control and absence of dominant groups.

Considering all the secessionist wars fought between 1960 and 1995 in Africa, only Eritrea in Ethiopia achieved a sovereign statehood. Katanga (Zaire) now Democratic Republic of Congo and the Igbo of the Eastern Nigeria failed. The southern Sudan, Darfur crisis is facing the same difficulty. Katanga rebellion had favourable factors like distance from the centre, richness in mineral resources, possession of a coast, and a weak centre, hated by the just departed Belgian colonial power but it failed because of the prevailing negative attitude of the international

community especially from the United Nations Organization (UNO), to the disintegration of existing states (Mazuri and Tidy, 1984:200). On the side of Biafra from 1967-1970, the story was not different. The factors identified for the failure were superior fire power of the federal government, Biafra's financial difficulties, lack of adequate international support, federal governments' currency policies such as sudden change in currency and trade embargo and opposition of minorities within and without Biafra to secession, concentration of powers in the person of ruler and crises of confidence within the Biafra government and some foreign supporters (Griffiths, 1995, Mazrui and Tiddy 1984, Machiebo, 1980, Muhammadu Adunni Haruna, 1979, Nwankwo 1974).

The point being made and summarized above is to establish the difficulty of achieving successful secession and the strategic errors in the ethnic separatist agitations. The literature point out the fact, that a resort to extreme strategy as a response to disaffections in an established state by an ethnic group has a very high price. It is argued that ethnic separatist agitations have impacted negatively on the political stability of Nigeria.

The Concept of Political Stability

Change represents the obverse of stability while evolutionary change represents stability. Stability and change may not necessarily mean opposites (Allan & Gury, 2000:290). For instance, even though the America political system has since 1789 witnessed a Civil War and a few dozen amendments to its constitution; it has remained an extremely stable one because of the absence of basic changes. The contemporary political system that emerged from their necessary reforms remains stably anchored on the foundation laid by the American founding fathers. In the same vein, Governments of Italy since the end of the Second World War have been extremely unstable in terms of tenure, with a new government on average of every six months (Allan & Gury, 2000:291). Despite these frequent changes, the Italian political system actually has been very stable. This is so because the same political elites have continued to rule without basic changes. It entails that regime stability is not the same as government stability.

Political systems are stable polities if they poses these common characteristics: the political institutions and processes must be legitimate; the main decisions of government must be based on rule of law; equity, fairness and justice must be entrenched in its internal politics; the wishes of the people as expressed through the ballot box must be respected; and all forms of discriminations on the basis of race, sex and other social-cultural imperatives must be avoided. We shall use these common criteria as raised above to asses the degree of the political stability of Nigeria.

Situations, Contexts and Instances of Separatist Agitations in Colonial Nigeria (1914-1960)

Nigerian nation state like some other African countries is a product of British colonial enterprise. The anomalous construction of Nigerian state through the 1914 amalgamation where the southern and Northern protectorates were brought together as a single administrative unit whereas the two protectorates had hitherto existed as distinct political entities is a background factor to this section of the study (Onuoha and Okpoko: 2004:1). Prior to this act of unification, Barr Safera Williams

took British Colonial Government to court that the Yoruba should not be part of the Amalgamation of Nigeria (Bamidele; 2009:24).

Taking a cue from this first separatist expression, Nigeria state was later to be dotted with separatists agitations. In 1947, Tafewa Belewa, who later became the Prime Minister made a call that they (Northerners) did not want their Southern neighbours to interfere in the development of the North, The North guided jealously the lead opinion of Tafewa Belewa in their interactions with other ethnic groups in the country. During the Ibadan General Conference of 1950, the Emirs of Zaira and Kastina insisted that the North would ask for a separation from the rest of Nigeria on the arrangement existing before 1914 if the North were not allotted fifty percent of the seats in the central legislature (Forsyth, 1977:21). The North made good their threat and it was granted. The motion for self rule of 21st March 1953 for Nigeria in 1956 by Anthony Enahoro and the counter motion by Sarduna of Sokoto, Alhaji Ahmed Bello, resulted in insults to the Northern Representatives. A follow up proposed trip to the Northern region by some Southern political class, sparked off the Kano riots of 1953. the Northern Representatives prepared eight point programme of secession (Obiajulu & Obi 2003:105)

On the side of South, one of the decisions reached during the London Conference of 1953, was that Lagos would become a Federal Capital Territory and be made a “no man’s Land” and separated from the Western Region. The Western delegate led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo threatened that the region would opt-out of the federation if Lagos is eventually separated from the region. The protest was rather clamped down with threat of matching force with force should the West attempt to secede from the Federation (Obiagulu & Obi 2003:108). The Ibibio State Union at its seventh Annual Conference, on 24th August, 1954 had passed a stunning resolution, part of which read as follows:

Be it resolved and it is hereby solemnly resolved that the British Government of Nigeria be requested to grant a separate state for the Ibibio people and their kith and kin of Calabar province in association with the peoples of Ogoja and Rivers provinces before 1956, failing which the people shall declare themselves a Sovereign State by 1956 when Nigeria attains independence (Udoma: 1987:351; Ekpo2000:9, Ikporukpo:2002).

This six ethnic separatist agitations that predated Nigeria’s statehood meant that the country gained independence on a fragile balance.

Situations, contexts and instances of Ethnic Separatist Agitations in the Immediate Post Independence Nigeria (1960-1967)

Notwithstanding this litany of separatist feelings, Nigerians heaved a sigh of relief when Nigeria gained independence from the British colonists on October 1, 1960; and everyone had high expectation in the post independence period. The most daunting task was how to achieve an all inclusive Nigeria. This goal has remained a mirage. This unfortunate failure is attributed to Nigeria’s colonial heritage defined in its multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-colonial heritage defined in its multi ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultural characteristics-diversity.

Therefore, the task of uniting the over 250 ethno-linguistic groups has been enormous (Onuoha and Okpoko, 2004:1).

The revolt led by Isaac Adaka Boro in which he declared the Southern parts of the country of the present Rivers, Bayselsa and Delta states “the Niger Delta peoples Republic on 23 February, 1966 was the first expression of the disaffection of the peoples of the Niger Delta about the control of the oil resources of the region. The revolt was quelled within twelve (12) days (Boro: 1982).

The joy of statehood was cut short by some intractable crises of varying proportions because of the failure of Nigerian leadership to chart acceptable and viable ideological and practical institutional frameworks to manage the multifarious cultural societies that compose Nigeria. The political elites chose the path of divisiveness. Lamenting on this wrong choice, Onuoha and Okpoko (2004:103), argue that “undue fissures in ethnic elite solidarity coincided with the emergence of political organizations founded and led by competing petty bourgeoisie elements”. Thus, the Action Group (AG) for the Yoruba and Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) for the Hausa-Fulani were formed as alternatives to the Igbo dominated National Council of Nigerian citizens (NCNC), during the first Republic. The linkage between competitive politics and politicization of ethnic identities in Nigeria suggests, among other things, that political ethnicity is primarily an instrumental phenomenon, its primordial underpinnings notwithstanding (Obiajulu and Obi, 2003: 95). The Nigerian State has convulsed from a number of fatalistic ethnic oriented political disasters such as; the fierce struggle by the three dominant ethnic nationalities to control the centre in 1959 general elections, 1962/63 census controversies, the Western Nigeria political crises, the farcical elections of 1964 and the Western Nigeria elections of 1965 (Obiajulu and Obi, 2003:133-146).

The political setting as described above gave birth in the early hours of January 1966 to the first Nigerian military coup d'état. Many Nigerians who felt that the politicians had let the nation down received the news of the coup with joy, but the pattern of the killings, in a few days, received doubts in people's minds especially in the North and provided differing views about the genuineness of the revolutionary intents of the coup plotters (Kieh quoted in Eghosae et al: 2002:10). At last, it was tabled Igbo coup, used by the Igbo leaders to weaken other parts of the country and perpetuate the domination of the nation's politics.

The political naivety and insensitivity of Major General Aguiyi Ironsi who emerged as the Head of state after the abrupt demise of the First Republic supported the fears of Nigerians who resented the coup of 15 January, 1966. This made some analysts to draw some conclusions that Ironsi was privy to the coup (Ikime: 2002:61) Even though another account of the events of January, 1966 suggests that he was not (Madiebo, 1980:25-26).

It is assessed that Ironsi came to power in circumstances of acute tension that gripped over nationalities especially the dominant ethnic groups. With these circumstances of deep distrust among Nigerians' constituent nationalities, it is argued that Ironsi, seeing himself in this light, would have confronted the challenge of reducing inter nationality tension and distrust by the affairs of government as impartially as possible.

The actions of Ironsi triggered off a counter coup which toppled Ironsi regime on 19 July, 1966 to both avenge the killings of their compatriots and secede from, the country. Ironsi and his host military governor of Western region, Colonel Adekule Fajuyi were killed in this counter coup. Ten other military officers, seven of them, Igbos and three other Easterners were killed. The counter coup was code named operation Arabia (Arabia means secession in Hausa). The code name indicated that those who planned the operation thought in terms of the North seceding from Nigeria. It is believed that the thought of secession and handing over rulership in the North to the civilians, made it that there was no valid decision reached before the counter coup about who was to replace Ironsi (Ikme:2002:63). The July revenge coup was also accompanied by renewed and heightened genocidal killings of the Igbos and other Easterners in the Northern region, thereby deepening the existing crises and weakening the avenues for reconciliation. Again when it was Colonel Gowon who eventually emerged as a Head of State, it changed the command structure of the Army, as Brigadier Ogundipe, a Yoruba, and other officers such as colonels David EJOR and Emeka O. Ojukwu were his seniors. The Northern officers who successfully executed the coup would not accept a Head of State who was not a Northerner having dropped the secession option. The emergence of Colonel Gowon as a Head of state was rejected by Ojukwu, the Military Governor of the Eastern region. This refusal also deepened the National crises. (Ikime: 2002:62).

In September 1966, Gowon set up an ad hoc constitutional conference, made up of the representatives from all the four regions, the outcomes would be used to chart the future existence of the country Gowon informed the conference to rule out the possible breakup of the country and a unitary state. It was deliberated upon whether Nigeria was to be;

1. a federation with a strong centre,
2. a federation with a weak centre,
3. a confederation, or
4. a new political arrangement peculiar to Nigeria (Osaghe, 1998:62).

That the state of the nation was comatose and stood on the brink of disintegration was dearly demonstrated by the proposals from the North, East and West. The North and East accepted a confederal state in which each region would have its own army, air-force, navy and police while the West advanced two proposals. First, a true federation & eighteen states with each state having its armed forces. Second, if a true federation was not accepted, then Nigeria should become a "Common Wealth" composed of four regions that would be autonomous in most matters except a few that would be delegated to the centre. It was only Mid West that demanded a federation based on the creation of more states and in which no state would be allowed to secede. The position of the three major ethnic nationalities demonstrated separatist feelings amongst themselves except the Mid West. (Osaghe, 1998:62).

Surprisingly, while the conference was on, killings of Igbos and other Easterners continued in the North. By the end of September,

1966, Ojukwu directed the Easterners outside the region to return and ordered non-Easterners in the East to leave. Revenge killings of Northerners in Enugu, Port Harcourt and other towns in the East began (Ikime, 2002:65). By October, 1966, Ojukwu's assessment of the plights of the Easterners coupled with the fact that he had never accepted Gowon authority, was considering secession. Some leading Igbo personalities shared his views and put pressure on him to secede. As from October, 1966, Ojukwu made it clear that neither he nor any one from the East would attend any meeting outside his region. Based on this, the Supreme Military Council met in Aburi in early January,

1967. Even though Aburi produced a working agreement, conflicting interpretations of the Aburi agreement widened the differences between the Federal government and the government of Eastern' region.

On 27th May, 1967, the Consultative Assembly of the Eastern Region announced its decision to establish an independent state to be called the "Republic of Biafra". Gowon responded to the announcement by creating twelve states. In the East, the Rivers and South Eastern states were created, leaving one state for the Igbos as East central state. The state creation was a strategy that would free the minorities in the East from Igbo domination

Situations, Contexts and Instances of Separatist Agitations in the Post Civil War Nigeria (1970-date).

The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign state of Biafra was said to have been flagged off by Chief Ralf Uwazuruike on 27, May, 2000 at Aba, Abia state (Mbaugwu, 2004:209). Since the Movement was flagged off, it has generated controversies and scholars' concerns.

One of the dominant views is that it is a movement with the primary focus of addressing the issues raised at Ahiara declaration in 1967, by Dim Chukwuemeka Ojukwu which bothered on injustice, control of fair share of natural resources, a reaction against the massacre of the Igbos in the North from May to September, 1966, the killing of Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, the then Head of state in July 1966 counter coup, and the oppression of the Igbo race in particular and the people of the former Eastern region in general (Mbaugwu, 2004:210). The pertinent question that arises from the above view is why did this section of the Igbo wait till 2000 before attempting to address the ills of the past 30 years and what is its suitability as a platform for successful secession of the Igbos as well as other Easterners from the contemporary Nigeria federation?.

In Uwazuruke's discourses especially in his interview before hoisting his "Biafran flag at Aba, (Daily Champion, May 18,2000) he espoused the principle of non-violence, the principle of dialogue and hoisted a flag without sovereignty. One thing that is seemingly difficult in the Movement for the Actualization of Biafra is the inability of the founder to present a definite vision which is the desired state of the movement and a clear statement of mission which enlists the strategy for the realization of the project (Uwalaka, 2003:117).

In a petition to Mr. President, dated 23rd January, 2001 by Biafra Actualization Forum-BAF, an offshoot of MASSOB, the following grievances and demands were enumerated below. Continuing

cyclical killings, pogrom and genocide committed against the Igbos by Northern nation(s) for over a century; Inability or unwillingness of the federal government of Nigeria to protect the lives and property of its citizens who happen to be Igbo nation and who happen to live in other parts of Nigeria; Malignant and malicious neglect of a segment of Nigeria corresponding exactly to Igbo land by deliberate denial and withholding of federal infrastructural institution; Huge inequities in the allocation of federal resources including personnel positions, in civil, military police services to the disadvantages of the Igbos

Inability or willingness of the federal government to stop a parochial penal code from being applied to non-adherents of the religious; Over zealotry by federal security apparatuses operating in Igbo land against the Igbo; no reason to believe that these injustice, inequities and atrocities will be rectified in the future. This, in spite of the continuing sacrifices, perseverance and tenacity of the Igbos, they still believe in one Nigeria; no guarantee that Nigeria is safe and secured from military coups, (BAF, 2001).

Another analyst, (Opata, 2002:219) stated that the reason for the formation of MASSOB could be divided into two; the remote and immediate. The remote causes have their roots during the colonial days and those of the post colonial day up to 1998 while immediate cause is traceable in the outcome of the presidential nomination of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in which an Igbo was unjustly edged out. According to him the birth of MASSOB was a direct response to the negativities associated with that nomination.

The Implications of Ethnic Separatist Agitation for the Political Stability of Nigeria State.

We had earlier discussed the criteria for assessing whether a polity is stable or unstable, Having examined the situations, context and instances of ethnic separatist agitations that dotted Nigerian political scene from colonial, through immediate post independence to the contemporary Nigeria, it is proper to analyze the extent these ethnic separatist agitations impacted on the political stability of the state. We shall adopt the criteria earlier discussed thus:-

Basic Changes:

First, since the Nigeria's statehood in 1960, all attempts at attaining a united, virile and progressive political system had been a futile exercise in all respects (Nwobashi, 2001:84). The political system had moved from the Westminster democracy model from 1960-1966 and crashed into the hands of the military junta with an attempt to change the federal system to a unitary system in 1966. It adopted the presidential system following the return to civil rule in 1979. Secondly, since then, Nigeria has rewritten its constitution five times, namely; the Independence constitution of 1960, the republic constitution of 1963, the 1979 constitution, the 1989 constitution and the 1999 constitution. Futile efforts both material and human were wasted between 2000 and 2006 to rewrite the 1999 constitution. The same efforts are being wasted in national Assembly to rewrite 1999 constitution. Thirdly, the country has witnessed the following military coup d'états; Nzeogwu coup of Jan, 15, 1966, Gowon revenge coup of 29th July, 1966, Murtala coup of 1975, Dimka coup of 1976, Buhari coup of 1983, Babangida coup of 1985, Mamman Vasta coup of 1988, Orkar coup of 1990 and Abacha coup of 1993. The country also experienced failed transition projects of the regimes of

Gowon, Murtala, Babangida and Abacha (Obiajulu & Obi, 2003: 180-219). Fourthly, there was a sharp departure from intense regionalism of a federation with three regions to four regions that predated the Nigerian civil war to the existence of apparently very strong centre, having atomized 36 states, a federal capital territory and 774 Local Government Areas. Lastly, the civil society and other mediating institutions like labour unions, political parties, and judiciary have remained too weak and reduced to institutions without life.

Legitimacy:

All elections from 1964 general elections, 1965 Western Region elections, 1979 general elections, 1992 annulled presidential elections, 1998 general elections, 2003 general elections and 2007 general elections were flawed facial elections that were not free, fair and credible. The regimes produced by these elections lacked legitimacy and therefore could not take valid decisions; on behalf of the Nigerian people because they had not the mandate of the people.

Rule of Law

Within this period under review, the masses bottled up their anger because what pervaded the polity was lack of freedom and absence of the rule of law. They witnessed unprecedented escalation of acrimony, antagonism and mutual suspicions that always resulted to loss of lives and property. There has been lack or absence of harmonious co-existence among Nigerian ethno-linguistic groups. Tribal, ethnic or communal clashes have been common. Political wrangling, tinkering and bickering are rife as some political elites continue to use the illiterate and ignorant majority as tools to achieve their selfish interests.

Equity, fairness and justice

In a stable democracy, equity, fairness and justice are its ingredients. In Nigeria, all forms of discriminations and marginalization on the basis of race, sex and other social- culture imperatives pervade the political life of the country. Every ethnic group in the country is claiming discriminated and marginalized against by an omni-bus Nigerian state. (HRIVC, 2001) At the end, it is the Nigerian masses that remained the poor lot, the ditched lot, the deceived lot and the unhappy lot.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined the ethnic separatist agitations in Nigeria from colonial era through immediate post independence to the contemporary Nigeria. The article adopted the thematic and chronological processes of analysis. It is found out that there is a positive relationship between the studied ethnic separatist agitations and the extremely unstable nature of Nigerian politics. The paper recommends that all appropriate institutional frameworks and arrangements should be put in place to achieve legitimate governments at all levels. These legitimate governments when achieved should be guided in their decisions and actions by the principles of rule of law and equity, fairness and justice. Conscious efforts should be made address all forms of discriminations that pervade the political life of Nigerian State.

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