Minorities and National Unity in Nigeria

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Abstract

Since her independence in 1960, one of Nigeria's challenges has been to promote national unity among its differing ethnic groups. One strategy has been to give various minority groups preference in work, education and even sports.   This paper is a survey of the current situation of minority ethnic groups in Nigeria as it examines in greater details the concept of minority in the intense religious, socio-political and ethnic turmoil of contemporary Nigeria. It also examines how the minorities shaped the course of Nigerian history through agitations for states creation and resource control; their dominant hold on the military institution; the alliance of opposites that characterised the ethnic politics of the century and how they re-interpreted or invented history in their bid to create an elbow room for themselves in the Nigerian Federation. The paper finally analyses problems and importance of minorities for national unity, the prospects for mutually agreeable responses to the question of minorities and national unity which has remained a critical impediment to Nigeria's effort at building a virile, cohesive and progressive polity.

Key Concepts : Ethnicity, minorities, conflicts, national unity, settlers.

Introduction

In regard to minorities and the adequate treatment of persons belonging to minorities, a quintessence for national unity and development is unarguable and crucial for the fact that the system of minorities protection forms a natural part of human rights protection both on the universal level and regional level as well as in the domestic legal orders of many states.[1] There are international legally binding documents that provide the ethnic and national minorities with specific rights in order to protect the cultural, language and religious uniqueness of the minorities. Nigeria has since independence in 1960, been engaged in the enterprise of nation-building, however, this effort has scarcely yielded the desired dividend as Nigeria is still characterised by frequent intra/interethnic conflict, insecurity, religious disharmony, rising unemployment, weak and dependent economy, growing youth restiveness, proliferation of ethnic militias, and so on. All these are various components of the national question which has not found a mutually agreeable solution.[2] There is, in a sense, the failure of Nigeria's federal project to promote national cohesion, unity, stability and progress. It is a common experience in Nigeria that, Minority members often face such phenomena as acculturation, bilingualism, alienation, cultural determinism, ethnocentrism, ethno-phobia, culture shock, etc. This is because minority groups are perceived as "others" in society and also because of the lack of necessary degree of tolerance for one another, and all the above-mentioned phenomena are typical of the perception of the "other" in terms of intercultural communication. The paper analyses problems and importance of minorities for national unity, the prospects

for mutually agreeable responses to the question of minorities and national unity which has remained a critical impediment to Nigeria's effort at building a virile, cohesive and progressive polity.

Conceptual Framework

So far no commonly accepted definition has been given to the concept of minority. It seems to be agreed, however, that "the minority is a subgroup within a larger society and that its members are subject to disabilities in the form of prejudices, discrimination, segregation, or persecution at the hands of another kind of subgroup, usually called a majority."[3] Simply, it is a group thought to be different from the larger group of which it is part. Louis Wirth, an American sociologist, in *Morale and Minority Groups* refers to the concept of minorities as,

> those who because of social or physical and cultural differences receive differential treatment and who regard themselves as a people apart. Such groups characteristically are held in lower esteem, are debarred from certain opportunities, or are excluded from full participation in the national life. [4]

Certain groups within our society occupy not merely a disadvantageous position but also tend to develop a conception of themselves as inferiors, as aliens, and as persecuted groups. The existence of such groups in our midst calls attention to the fact that the society has not been fully knit together into a single, integrated, national unit.

Defining an ethnic group in Nigeria is usually a combination of a number of factors: a shared language or related dialects, myth of common origin, shared cultural traits, a core territory, and often, a shared religious or spiritual universe. But despite these 'objective' criteria, subjective factors are also important. Firstly, group boundaries are constantly changing, depending on context. Sub-group identities, which might be unimportant at the national level, remain extremely salient at the local level. Secondly, assimilation or affiliation to groups is influenced by changing political and economic factors. Finally, group identities are sometimes subsumed under imposed broader identities with the result of 'masking' group self-identification. For example, the numerous ethnic minorities in northern Nigeria, such as Kanuri, Alago, Agas, are often seen in the south as 'Hausa.'[5]

Historical Development

The history of the minority question or minority agitations date back to the period of our Colonial history when these agitations were carried out at regional bases as a result of the regionalisation policy of the then colonial government. A good example is, in Northern Nigeria, minority grievances were centred around the imposition of Hausa-Fulani rulers on the indigenous ethnic populations.[6] This meant the exclusion of the indigenes from political and economic opportunities including the control of markets.

 The quest for independence in the 1950's further strengthened the fears of the minorities as to their future when the colonial government left the country. These complaints of oppression and exploitation were not exclusively experienced by the minorities in the North but were also experienced by their counterparts from other parts of the country and therefore based their agitations or demands to pressurising the authorities to put in place measures to guarantee the autonomy of the ethnic minorities.[7] The Willink Commission

of 1957 was established to look into the authenticity of these fears and agitations and to find means of allaying their fears. To their disappointment, their demands were dismissed as frivolous and unfounded. It was the opinion of the commission that the creation of states would not answer the fear of the minorities, but would rather lead to an endless breakup of the country.

The problems of the minorities and their agitations still remained pronounced even after independence till date and the attempts or devices by the successive regimes in the country to permanently ameliorate these problems have not been entirely successful. These attempts or devices include, the defunct Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) which only seemed to exist in form and appearance but not in substance and therefore not able to achieve anything meaningful. Furthermore, the Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF) was also another device but it was accused of being selective in carrying out its projects and now the Niger Delta Development Cooperation (NDDC) which was recently established by the present regime in the country, although, its still early to judge the impact. It is worthy to note, that these bodies were established as a result of agitations of the minorities in the Niger Delta Region. There have also been calls by some Governors within the Middle- Belt Region to set up a similar Cooperation to assist in developing areas in the Middle-Belt Region that have suffered from the exploration of solid minerals, but these calls or agitations appear not to have succeeded probably because they were done half-heartedly.

The most notable devices or attempts to solve the minority question include, the Federal Character. Put simply, Federal Character is a euphemism for ethnic balancing. It is an instrumentality for ensuring unity in diversity by balancing official appointments between groups and within the officer corps of the armed forces. It was first provided for by the 1979 and now the 1999 Constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, to guide the allocation of development projects and provision of amenities, as well as appointment into key political offices.

However, these provisions have a major shortcoming as they remain non-justifiable rights, therefore, if these provisions are not followed in the making of appointments or the citing of projects, as usually the case, aggrieved parties can do nothing to enforce these rights.

The creation of states, by successive regimes in the country,[8] was also as a result of minority agitations and has brought the number of states in Nigeria to 36. It has to some extent temporarily solved the problem as it has to some extent allayed the fears of some of these small ethnic groups, but it has brought about states that are too small to function economically, therefore, without the statutory allocations from the central government, these states would hardly be able to exist.

One notable feature of the creation of states is that a new minority question or agitation of an entirely different perspective has arisen. That is, the larger ethnic minorities pitched tot4gether with the smaller groups are accused of the same crimes of domination and marginalization that are usually committed by the ethnic majorities. Thus, "the minorities within minority" question. A classical example of this is found in Benue state of Nigeria, where the Tiv ethnic group who constitute the majority over the Idoma's are accused by the Idoma of using their numerical strength to dominate and relegate the Idoma's to the background in terms of political appointments, civil service jobs and the lack of development of their areas i.e. light, water, roads, schools and government projects.

These agitations reached its climax in 1995 when they sought a state of their own alongside the Alago ethnic minority of neighbouring Nasarawa state who share the same ancestry with the Idoma's, but this request was turned down by the then Federal Military Government.

Minority situations in fact, are not exclusive to Benue state but exist in other states with certain dissimilarities, they exist in some Middle- Belt states, like Taraba, Nasarawa, Plateau, Kogi states and states within the Niger - Delta Region of the country. Unlike the case of Benue state, these other agitations have resulted in serious ethnic conflicts that can be likened to the sad "ethnic cleansing" incidents that occurred in Rwanda and Bosnia at a point in time.

It is therefore instructive to observe that irrespective of the fact that a group may be majority or minority, these groups all have tendencies of manipulating smaller groups. This is why one finds ethnic groups that fall within the larger national definition of ethnic majorities but now pitched with ethnic minorities accuse the minorities of discrimination. For instance, the Hausa settlers in Plateau state accuse the indigenes of discriminatory practices; the indigenes on the other hand justify their actions by accusing the Hausa of trying to impose their aristocratic practices of the colonial days. The Yoruba in Kwara state has made similar accusations against the ruling Fulani dynasty.

Problem of Ethnic Minorities for National Unity

As noted above, the problem of ethnic minorities finds its origin in the colonial system. Formerly independent from one another on the level of social organization, the ethnic groups were forcibly brought together to build up a new human community united under the State by the British colonial rule. This gathering policy gave birth to new dynamics of social relationships between ethnic groups with some of them having dominion over others.

According to Mezieobi, from 1947, the multiethnic composition of Nigeria continued to be a bane to Nigeria's national unity and development.

Mezieobi claimed that, whatever is done or anticipated in Nigeria, particularly at government's quarters had ethnic undertone especially favouring the ethnic majorities. In employment, admissions into schools, distribution of social amenities and in social relationships, ethnic affiliations and attachments are very strong and conspicuously manifest.[9]

Attachment of a Nigerian first to his ethnic group before the nation is a bane to Nigeria's national unity, national consciousness and socio-political integration.[10]

There have been cases of multi-ethnic vices such as allegiance to ethnic-group, intra-cultural and inter-ethnic antagonism, hostility, aggression, bitterness, hatred, mistrust in the country which have not augured well for the building of a virile Nigerian nation. Rather than harnessing our diversities towards viable nation building, we have become slaves to our ethnic origin to which our allegiance is largely focused at the detriment of nation building.

Interfaced with religion, statism and class, ethnicity is a potent reality in the Nigerian federal equation. Almost invariably, minority group problems and other related to them in Nigeria are assumed to have their roots, in. The collapse of nation building experience in a majority of cases in Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular,

has resulted from rugged ethnic particularisms of given constituent units of this nations.[11]

Even within the context of an open and competitive political system, and explicit constitutional provisions, the ethnic minorities suffered from different degrees of discrimination and neglect, largely because of the majoritarian tendencies of a political and social system with scarce economic and political resources. Jobs, scholarships, political appointments, government infrastructure and contracts, and social amenities all became the focus of intense competition, often structured around competing ethnic and regional demands. As a consequence of this political dynamic, a series of cleavages developed, particularly between the three majority ethnic groups; between Ibo, Yoruba, Hausa groups on the one hand, and the rest of the minorities groups on the other; and between the north and south.[12]

The competition between the three dominant ethno-regional blocs, and the attendant suppression of minority rights, according to Suberu, in *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria*, created an increasingly unstable political climate which culminated in the series of military coups in 1966 and the Civil War between 1967 and 1970.[13]

Another reason why ethnic minorities continue to suffer disadvantages is the issue of 'indigeneity' which arose as a consequence of the adoption of the federal character principle. Nigeria is a country of high human spatial mobility. Even by the 1950s, 5 million of the 55 million population of the country were living in areas other than the ones to which they ethnically belonged.[14] In pre-colonial Nigeria, those involved in such movements might ultimately be absorbed into their host communities as full members; but in the colonial and post-colonial periods, boundaries of community membership became more tightly drawn, and such resident 'strangers' were often denied full community membership. Even the British colonial administration encouraged this attitude through its concept of the 'native foreigner.'[15]

Giving the massive scale of population mobility and the effective division into 'citizens and strangers', it became important to specify who was to benefit from the share of resources allocated to a state or local government area. The decision reached was that such resources should go to 'true indigenes' determined by blood ties and ethnicity, and not just to anybody living there, no matter how long they may have been resident there. As a consequence, a citizen at the local government and state level has been defined in the 1979 Constitution (Section 329.1), the 1989 Constitution (Section 329.1), and the 1999 Constitution (Section 318.1) as '… a person either of whose parents or any of whose grandparents was a member of a community indigenous to that State.' Ideally, this constitutional provision should strengthen the access of ethnic minorities to resources allocated to their states or local government areas; in reality, it has only fuelled conflict and violence in many ethnic minority areas in the North West (southern Kaduna State), North Central (Nassarawa and Taraba States, and North East (Adamawa State). The National Language Policy is also an area of latent discrimination against all ethnic minorities in Nigeria.

Importance of Ethnic Minorities for National Unity

Today there still remain minority related issues that need to be tackled and dealt with, and these issues are not new-they have simply been overlooked by us. Despite anything, minority members should be fully integrated into society, participate in and actively

contribute to all areas of life. But the fact is that the reality is different-the reality is that the overwhelming majority of them face discrimination, exclusion, isolation, even abuse. Many face a range of marginalizing factors.[16] The discrimination they face is widespread, cutting across geographical boundaries and affecting people in all spheres of life and all sectors of society.

So, efforts should be made to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and opportunities and to promote respect for the dignity of minority members otherwise all those Conventions will prove useless and ineffective. Media too can play a key role in this and have a say: by illuminating their problems, disseminating information, spreading positive propaganda in order to effect a change in people's attitudes and call for action.[17] The European Union's motto should be adopted by us today as a universal motto which says "Unity in Diversity". One of the main topics of the globalizing world is how to protect cultural uniqueness and cultural identity. So, when we explore ethnic minorities we contribute to the global agenda where the issues of ethnic tolerance and ethnic integration are very sensitive ones today.

Indeed, failure to encourage genuine power sharing has triggered dangerous rivalries between the central government and the thirty six states governments over revenue from the country's oil and other natural resources. The defective federal structure has also promoted bitter struggles between interests groups to capture the state and its attendant wealth; and facilitated the emergence of violent ethnic militias, while politicians exploit and exacerbate inter-communal tensions for selfish reasons. Thus, communities throughout the country increasingly feel marginalized and alienated from the Nigerian state. This writer contends that the deeply flawed federal system in Nigeria constitutes a grave threat to national integration, stability and development; and that unless the government properly engages the underlying issues of resource control, power sharing, equal rights and accountability, the country will face an internal crisis of increasing and dangerous proportions.

Current State of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples
Beginning in colonial times, there have been varying attempts to manage or exploit Nigeria's ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity through various forms of federalism. Since 1996, the country has been divided into 36 states and 774 Local Government Areas. The concept of 'indigeneity' took root in Nigeria's 1979 constitution and lives on in the current 1999 constitution. This system categorizes all Nigerians as indigenes or non-indigenes (the latter also labelled 'settlers') to a region based on where their parents or grandparents were born.[18] The mechanism's intent was to ensure ethnic parity in education and employment, as well as to protect traditional cultures. But in 2006 Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group separately reported that the principle has instead systematically marginalized millions of Nigerians and encouraged ethno-linguistic identity politics that have fanned the flames of inter-communal violence.[19]

The mere definition of which groups are indigenous to a region creates many controversies; disputed historical migration patterns and intermarriage often make clear delineations impossible. The policy has become a tool for indigenes across the country to exclude competing 'settlers' from scarce educational and employment opportunities, even if these are life-long residents of the community. Not surprisingly, this has led to fierce resentment among the excluded.

For instance, in diverse Plateau State indigeneity has been used by Christian politicians to maintain dominance through exclusion of Muslim Hausa and Fulani 'settlers'. The Jarawa ethnic group is also classified as 'non-indigene', although it also fails to qualify for indigenous status anywhere in Nigeria. Between 1999 and 2004 in Plateau State, inter-communal fighting arising from disputes over indigeneity, land and religion resulted in 250,000 internally displaced persons.[20] April 2006 fighting between members of the Pan and Gomai ethnic groups over issues of indigeneity resulted in over 100 killed and 8,000 displaced persons.[21]

Conclusion

In recent times, most Nigerian ethnic groups, both the majority and the minority groups, have expressed serious reservations about aspects of the Nigerian state. Many have demanded the de-concentration of the enormous fiscal and political powers concentrated at the centre. But how do we achieve this objective without doing damage to the body-politic? This is the real challenge facing both ethnic minorities and ethnic majorities in Nigeria. Unfortunately, these issues must be tackled against the background of heightened ethnic and religious tensions in the country, and without the benefit of significant consensus. Fundamentally, both majority and minority ethnic groups face the same problem of fine-tuning a defective federal system which has so far enforced national unity, but without guaranteeing the local autonomy of its constitutive communities. The resolution of this problem will not only ensure improved local identification with governmental structures, it will also make these institutions more responsive to the needs of their constituencies.

In our socio-political and economic intercourse, all groups (big or small) must be allowed free-play and equitable access to our country's resources and strategic political command posts, including particularly the presidency. Sustained imbalance in sharing responsibilities and the 'national cake' could conceivably induce in those units aggrieved a rethink of the value to them of our much vaunted national unity.

The long prescribed national unity tenet - unity in diversity - of our country, aptly coined in 1957 by Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of blessed memory, a leader nationally acclaimed for his rare gentility and wisdom, and the political stability of our nation are best guaranteed via an equity-oriented constitutional structure and political practice that create and sustain a secure sense of belonging for all Nigerians. I would like to conclude by suggesting that the focus of the minority agitations should be centred on stronger constitutional provisions that will protect the rights of minorities, it's a better option than the creation of more states, as it will just bring about economically unviable states.

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