Inter- Ethnic Violence in Nigeria: A Call for Paradigm Shift

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Abstract

Inter-ethnic violence is a deep-rooted cankerworm ravaging the fabric of peace and tranquillity in the society. Conflict can never be avoided in any society, but violence can be avoided. This paper highlights the causes of inter-ethnic violence which includes but not restricted to; land ownership, ethno-religious disagreements, creation and location of local government headquarters, kingship and chieftaincy title, prestige and jealousy. The paper also captured possible solutions to the problem of inter-ethnic violence in Nigeria which included but not limited to political decentralization, good governance, security reform, genuine federal character and a call for a paradigm shift from the current situation. This paper captured recommendations on the way forward on problems of inter-ethnic violence in Nigeria.

Keywords: inter-ethnic, violence, crisis, ethnicity, paradigm shift.

Introduction

Most societies that are diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion are prone to violence to a large extent. Nigeria is a major stakeholder in terms of ethnic diversity which often leads to increased civil dissonance.

inter-ethnic violence has been recognised as one of the severe threats to institutional stability and political order in the third world countries characterised by multi-ethnicity. There are divergent explanations and interpretations of inter-ethnic and religious violence. inter-ethnic violence has been attributed severally to the emotional power of " primordial givens" or cultural ties, the struggle for relative group worth, mass-based competition for resources, electoral mobilisation, elite manipulation, false consciousness and defective political institutions and glaring inequitable state policies and programmes. Diamond, 1987: Doorknobs, 1991 in Suberu R. T 1996: 4) worthy of note is that ethnicity is now being used to manipulate the masses at the detriment of the generality of the populace to the advantage of a few conflict merchants.

> …ethnicity became prominent in the political history of the country on the eve of independence when in the contest for power, the elite saw it as a weapon to gain ascendency. This explains first, the emergence of the various cultural groups like *Egbe omo Oduduwa,* Ibo state union and the *Jamiyyar mutanen Arewa* and later, their transformation into regional political parties. (Olayemi Akinwumi, 2009: 30)

Ethnic identity, cleavages and overlapping affiliations of religion is grossly undermining prospects for economic, political and social development in multi-ethnic societies.

Conceptual clarifications

It is imperative to clarify some major terms such as inter-ethnic violence, conflict, crisis, violence and ethnicity to dispel misconception due to the interchangeability in the usage of some of the concepts used.

Inter-ethnic violence

Inter-ethnic violence connotes strife as a result of discord between ethnic groups. This leads to killings, destruction of peoples' valuables possibly as a result of competition, misunderstanding or rivalry between different ethnic groups.

Conflict

According to Otite (1999: ix), "conflict is perceived in most parts of the world as something abnormal, dysfunctional and therefore detestable". Also, Coser (1968, cited in Otite, 1992:) views conflict thus:

> A struggle overvalues or claims to status, power and scarce resources, in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals.

Conflict simply means disagreement, strife or misunderstanding between two or more parties which could be violent or non-violent.

Crisis

Ola Abegunde (2006: 171) sees crisis as a precarious situation that is capable of causing hardship and conflict among individuals or groups of people in a particular society.

According to *dictionary.com*, "crisis is a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or for worse, is

determined; turning point". A crisis can also be seen as a state of dramatic, emotional or circumstantial upheaval in one's life.

Violence

Violence is an "act of physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm" (britanica.com)

Violence is a behavioural attitude of a person or people out of anger which is intended to hurt, destroy property, maim or even kill people. When conflict degenerates to killing, maiming, burning etc it then becomes violence.

Ethnicity

According to Ibeanu and Onu (2001: 13), ethnicity expresses the existence of ethnic groups as social forces in a struggle with other social forces, which may or may not be ethnic groups. Ethnicity is social identity formation based on culture, symbols and customs, with the primary focus of members of groups and loyalties of individual members of such group. Ethnicity is expressed in every plural society, consciously or unconsciously.

Ethnicity is "a large group of people who have the same national, racial, or cultural origins of the state of belonging to such a group" *Cambridge dictionary.*

To Jenkins (2007) ethnicity is a concept that refers to "social entities sharing real or putative ascriptive features like a common origin or cultural-linguistic legacy which assumedly command special collective commitment, as well as their retention and transmission" in the society.

Causes of ethnic violence

Contest among individuals, groups of people within the sub-ethnic group or even among different ethnic groups within the society for available resources is often the cause of various intra and inter-ethnic violence.

The following are the major causes of Inter-ethnic violence in Nigeria:

Land ownership

Claims of land ownership between neighbouring communities and ethnic groups triggered a handful of the Inter-ethnic crisis in Nigeria.

Ola Abegunde (2006: 174) buttressed that land ownership is the major source of ethnic violence in any predominantly agrarian society because land ownership for agricultural activities is synonymous with access to wealth. The Inter-ethnic violence between Tiv and Jukun, Kuteb and Jukun in Benue and Taraba states of Nigeria respectively are as a result of land ownership tussles.

The tussle between landowners and mostly Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria has caused the death of many people including pregnant women and infant children. Most herders encroach into people's farmlands and destroy their crops in favour of their animals. Some farmers too to safeguard their farmlands and crops sometimes apply poison on their bushes which leads to the death of their animals. This ugly trend is hugely devastating and a threat to peoples' lives in agrarian communities.

Ethno-religious disagreements

According to Ibrahim, 1989, cited in Suberu (1996: 52),

> The Kafanchan crisis of March 1987 started as a theological disagreement between Christian and Muslim students of the Kafanchan Teacher's College, Kafanchan, in Kaduna State of Nigeria.

The disagreements in the College rapidly degenerated into violence in Kafanchan and ignited serious tensions between the ethnic groups in the town. The violence spilt over, and its fiercest phase played out in such areas as Kaduna city, Katsina and Funtua where Muslim mobs attacked

Christians and/or southern Nigerian migrant communities and their properties.

Kano state has been a hotbed of religious violence; Muslim extremists in Kano have always rioted against visiting Christian leaders. Back in 1982 when the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury visited to lay the foundation for a new building at the premises of St. Gregory church at Fagge in Kano. Some Muslim fanatics rioted and burned down more than half a dozen churches throughout the city with many Christians killed. In 1991, the famous German preacher Rev. Reinhard Bonnke was billed to preach in Kano. On Oct; 11, 1991 riots broke out in Kano and Rev. Bonnke narrowly escaped, presumably with the help of the German embassy, from being killed. Jonathan Ishaku (2009: 66)

Creation and location of local government headquarters

The creation and location of local government headquarters have severally caused a crisis which metamorphosed to violence between contending ethnic groups because of the economic advantages to be derived from having a local government in an ethnic homeland.

The prolonged intra-ethnic conflicts between Ife and Modakeke in Osun state and inter-ethnic conflicts between Ijaw and Itsekiri in Delta state and Ijaw and Ilaje in Ondo state, in Nigeria, are examples of the violence generated as a result of the creation and location of local government headquarters. Ola Abegunde (2006: 175)

"In the same vein, ethnic claims over new headquarters and new markets are a source of conflict, for example, Zangon Kataf and Tafawa Balewa town in Tafawa Balewa town in Bauchi state respectively". (Otite1999: 20-21) most ethnic groups prefer the citing of government institutions in their domains at the detriment of other ethnic groups. It is not a factual error that there are a good number of ethnic groups that influence the location of

multiple government establishments or institutions while other communities are lacking a single one. This prompts the marginalized communities to feel aggrieved and may lead to violence.

Kingship and chieftaincy title

The positions of traditional rulers in society cannot be overemphasized due to their status. The appointment and dethronement of chiefs often cause a crisis.

The Olubadan of Ibadan, Saliu Adetunji, sued Governor Abiola Ajimobi of Oyo state for crowning 21 kings in Ibadan land. The Governor was sued alongside 23 others at the High court of justice of Oyo state on 19th September 2017 (www.premiumtimesng.com September 21, 2017) this caused disaffection due to the action of the governor and the Olubadan feels his sphere of influence will be reduced.

The economic and social benefits accruing to Obas, Emirs and some chiefs have made the traditional positions of authority too attractive. Traditionally, in most of the ethnic groups in Nigeria, titles are often related between two or more ruling lineages. But owing to the benefits of such positions, the contest for them has become a source of conflict, and in most cases, has degenerated into violence. The conflict over Obaship (EWI) of Ado-Ekiti in Ekiti State, Nigeria, since 1993 between the Adelabu and Adegoke families has since then set the Adegoke family against the other ruling lineages in the ancient city. (Akinteye 1999: 126)

The consequences of inter-ethnic violence lead to killing and maiming of people, destruction of economic activities, the militarization of the youths etc.

Prestige and Jealousy

In virtually every society, some people always want to be recognized as either rich, intelligent beautiful or handsome, and those who are not may likely become jealous. In academia, for example, a good number of people who studied outside the country are to some extent, regarded than those who studied in Nigeria. This tendency may lead to pride from some who studied abroad and jealousy from those who studied in Nigeria alone.

Worthy of note is that it is a common phenomenon that prestige of one individual or group is often followed with the loss of prestige of one other individual or group. In the same vein, individual or group that has a great reputation is often a victim of jealousy. This is because other persons or groups need not be prestigious, honourable, powerful or feared as rivals in the same society. The backlash of this is that, either they must be condemned, destroyed, or made useless not minding how good and important they are.

Dzurgba (2006) posits that these jealous and selfish tendencies give rise to conflict between two or more prominent persons in a given community. In this conflict, the society is torn apart each time an important office or position is vacated in a given traditional institution, social institution or political constituency. It is in this context that prestige and jealousy are major sources of conflict in the society which if not checked, can lead to violence.

Possible solutions to the problem of inter-ethnic violence and the need for a paradigm shift.

Virtually all problems have solutions and inter-ethnic violence is not an exception. The following measures if properly taken will help in solving the problems:

Political decentralisation

Our current centralised political structure needs to be properly restructured. There is a need for a comprehensive decentralisation of the federal system to endow the nation's constituent segments with the opportunities and resources needed for self-governance. Such decentralisation does not imply an endorsement of ethno-confederal, secessionist or other destructive and divisive centrifugal formulas. As many of the ethnic minority communities themselves acknowledged, considering their small size and extreme heterogeneity, the minorities may have little to gain from ethno-confederal or secessionist arrangements, which tend to favour only homogeneous wide or large ethno regional groups.

Moreover, because " ethnic identities are multiple and fluid, shifting up or down in scale depending on the political context, the problem of ethnic conflict in developing countries are rarely solved by changing the composition of the nation" (Diamond, 1987 as cited by Suberu, 1996: 52.) Decentralising the political structure will help in mitigating the marginalisation and inter-ethnic violence.

Good governance

Good governance is cardinal in mitigating inter-ethnic crises and violence. A responsible government should create ways where her populace can be positively engaged via jobs or self-reliance. Good economic policies should be properly designed and implemented to strengthen the nation's economy. With good governance and purposeful leadership, ethnic jingoism will surely give way for national cohesion.

Our communities are largely underdeveloped with poor road networks, poor medical facilities, dilapidated schools, poorly structured markets and the almost non-existence of social amenities. Only good governance can pave way for genuine development. The rural areas must be made attractive to mitigate rural-urban drift.

Security reform

The security architecture in Nigeria needs to be properly restructured or reformed to pave way for optimum performance in terms of securing lives and property.

The security institutions need to be reorganized in such a way that it will not just be reacting or responding to conflicts after they have generated to violence. However, what appears prevalent is that the security system is often taken by surprise and does not seem to have the capacity for alertness to nip crises in the bud (WRAPA 2001:10)

It's bizarre to see security checkpoints across the country where a good number of the personnel demand/receive money from drivers and allow them to pass such checkpoints unchecked. This is a strong blow to us as a nation. The welfare of the security personnel should be properly taken care of. One cannot perform well in a battlefield with an empty stomach and old fashioned and ineffective firearms that are far inferior to the ones used by non-state actors.

Genuine federal character

The principle of federal character as enshrined in chapter II, section 14, and sub-section 3 of the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria as amended 2011 states thus:

> The composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national 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. (p. 31)

Sadly, the content of the constitutional provision is not what is reflected today in Nigeria. The current administration of President Buhari has demonstrated disregard of the federal character principle. As at 10th March 2020, the following key offices are occupied by northerners:

The Group Managing Director of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) Mr. Mele Kyari; the Chairman of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Prof. Mahmood Yakubu; the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Lt. General Tukur Yusuf Buratai; the Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Sadique Baba Abubakar; the Director General of the Directorate of State Security Service (DSS) Alhaji Yusuf Bichi Magaji; the Inspector General of Police (IGP) Mohammed Adamu; the National Security Adviser(NSA) Major General Babagana Monguno (rtd); the Comptroller General of Nigeria Customs Service, Col. Hameed Ali (rtd); the Comptroller General of Nigeria Immigration Service, Muhammed Babandede; the Commandant General of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corp, Abdullahi Gana; the Comptroller General of Nigerian Correctional Service (formerly Nigerian Prison Service) Ja'afaru Ahmed; the Chief Justice of the Federation (CJN) Justice Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad; Secretary to the Government of the Federation, Mr. Boss Mustapha; the Chairman of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) Ibrahim Magu; the Minister of Finance, Zainab Shamsuna Ahmed; the Minister of Defence, Mansur Dan Ali; Chief of Staff to the President, Abba Kyari and several others.

According to Asaju (2015: 131)

> about 90% of JAMB employees are from both Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba tribes; 80% of employees in ICPC and EFCC are Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba combined; 95% of the Professors and workers in National University Commission are from Hausa- Fulani and Yoruba tribes combined; 80% of all the

> employees in Federal Secretariat are from Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba tribes combined; 80% of those given oil wells presently in the Niger Delta region are from Hausa Fulani; 90% of all the Registrars and Bursars of Federal Universities, Federal Colleges of Education and from both Hausa- Fulani and Yoruba tribes combined. This was also the same trend in the Nigerian Railway Corporation: out of a total of 431 names on the current staff list of the Corporation, 270 are Igbos, and 161 belong to other tribes. The main reason for this could be because the Chairman was an Igbo man and not because the employment was merit-based.

This is unacceptable and must be corrected to give other minority ethnic groups a sense of belonging in the country. The overbearing dominance of the majority ethnic groups in Nigeria is alarming and should be addressed.

Recommendations

1. Naming and location and of local government secretariats should be done with the consent of the relevant stakeholders of the area devoid of any external interest and influence.
2. Inter-cultural interaction and synergy should be included in the curriculum and should be taught both in the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. This will go a long way in creating bonds among different ethnic groups and reduce inter-ethnic strife.
3. The need for community police with a proper grasp of the immediate environment cannot be overemphasized.
4. Chieftaincy titles should be given to persons that are duly qualified taking into cognisance the rotational arrangement of the ruling houses/clans.
5. The current skewed federal character composition should be properly restructured to accommodate ethnic minorities. When positions are zoned or given to either, north, west, south or east, the

majority ethnic groups in such regions often occupy the positions without adequately considering other minority ethnic groups. The federal character principle is constitutional and should not be violated.

6. Land disputes should be properly resolved by embarking on clear boundary demarcation to avoid unnecessary encroaching into peoples' lands at will.
7. Security personnel should be more proactive than being reactive. Security is not only about guns and teargas. Intelligence gathering, sharing and usage is a smart way to nip the crisis in the bud, not waiting for violence to escalate before deploying security operatives to affected communities.
8. Religion is a personal conviction and should not be disrespected. The incessant religious misunderstanding and violence, especially between Christians and Muslims must stop. No religion should be given special preference at the detriment of others. The secularity of Nigeria must not be altered to gain undue advantage over others.

Conclusion

There is a serious need for a paradigm shift from bad ways of doing things or a departure from the normalisation of the unacceptable. The implementation of the principle of Federal Character in the Nigeria Public Service tends to encourage unethical behaviour among officials and circumscribe merit in the area of employment, promotions and appointments. Skewed or lopsided appointments in favour of a few ethnic groups at the detriment of others are counter-productive.

In stressing the factors that will make for our unity, pertinent issues that will promote inter-group relations in Nigeria should be addressed. One of these is the issue of federalism. We need true federalism. This pseudo federal system will continue to create ethnic and religious suspicion among the various ethnic and religious groups in the country. As long as there is a

concentration of power at the centre, the different ethnic and religious groups will continue to demand a power shift. Olawoye Akinwumi (2009: 40)

For us to see ourselves as a united country, the issue of indigene-non indigene crisis in Nigeria must be condemned. We shall continue to drift apart until the issue of indigeneship is resolved in favour of residency instead of parental birthplace. Why should a Nigerian reside in a place for years fulfilling all constitutional obligations and still be referred to as a settler in his country? We must rise beyond ethnic chauvinism and enthrone national consciousness, if not, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda will be child's play compared to the disaster that will befall us as a nation.

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