

## **Minority Agitation for the Creation of State in Nigeria** **By**

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### **Abstract**

It is an incontrovertible truth that the British Colonial administration took steps to reorganize Nigeria for administrative convenience in 1954 as the nation became a full fledged federation. The nation had only three large regions with one of the regions larger and more populous than the rest of the federation put together. Each of the regions were occupied by a dominant ethnic group instead of being a political unit. The minorities of Ogoni and the Niger Delta were a peripheral and a mere appendage attached to each dominant ethnic group. This continuous imbalance in the administrative structure of the country has been responsible for political crisis and often than not prompted the minorities in the country to agitate for their own state. In the contemporary era, minority agitations evolved as a consequence of unjust laws, unfair and unequal distribution of economic resources to the state where the products of oil are extracted. The call for state creation is fundamentally for the sub-national units to gain balance and re-structural redefined the state to make it more accountable and responsive. This paper interrogates the forces which are inherent in the nation-state that endangers crisis and the demand for state by the minority. In our concluding remarks, we submit that the dominant

majority should adopt the principle of fairness, equality and justice in the distribution of resources to sub-national units.

**Keywords: Domination, Exclusion, Alienation, Peripheral and Homogeneous,**

### **Introduction**

The controversy and the challenges of national cohesion had been a major concern in the Post-independent period in Nigeria. The fear of ethnic domination had been expressed continuously by the minority even during the era of the departing colonial administration. The Sir Willink Commission of inquiry was set up in the Eastern Region. The commission failed to address the core of minority crisis before independence in 1960. It is apt to note that the emerging elites, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1937 advocated for a federal form of government for the emerging Country Nigeria and also proposed the division of the nation into Eight constituent units based on geographical configuration. This idea was documented in his book *"The political blueprint"*. In the same vein, Awolowo proposed the redivision of Nigeria into Ten (10) federating units with Ethnic Linguistics and cultural affinity as the criteria for its division. This idea was documented in his book *"PATH TO NIGERIA FREEDOM"* several factors accelerated the quest for creation of state in post independent period. The declaration of state of emergency in the former Western region and the resentment of the inter-regional arrangement where the minorities form a cluster in a majority with an uneven character of economic infrastructure, corruption in the civil service, unequal educational and political development. The minority question has been a cardinal issue inhibiting national development and nation-building process in Nigeria.

### **Minority Agitation for the Creation of State in Nigeria**

It is an incontrovertible truth that Nigeria is a British creation. The colonial administration took steps to reorganize the country for administrative convenience in 1954 as the nation became a full fledged Federation. The nation had only three large regions with one of the regions larger and more populous than the rest of the Federation put together. Each of the regions were occupied by a dominant ethnic group instead of being a homogeneous political unit. The Yoruba occupied the West, the Ibo in the East, and the Hausa-Fulani in the North. The minorities were a peripheral and a mere appendage attached to each dominant

ethnic group. This continuous imbalance in the administrative structure of the country has been responsible for political crisis and often than not prompted the minorities in the country to agitate for their own State.

Indeed, the House of Representatives Committee on State creation in 1980 identified three major Era in the history of Movement for the creation of States in Nigeria.

**The Precolonial Era:** The precolonial period dates back to 1937 when Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe advocated for a federal form of government for the emerging country – Nigeria. He proposed the division of the country into eight (8) constituent units based on geographical configuration. This idea was documented in his book “The political blueprint of Nigeria”. Similarly, Chief Obafemi Awolowo equally proposed a re-division of Nigeria into ten (10) federating units with ethnic linguistic and cultural affinity as the basis of its division. He documented this idea in his book “PATH TO NIGERIA FREEDOM.” He modified his stand in 1966 with a view to remodeling the country into eighteen States. Thus he posits that nine states in the North, and nine in the South based on linguistic cultural affinity and economic viability of the States. It is also evident that the increase agitation by the various ethnic minority groups for their own State that will guarantee them a sense of safety from the domineering instinct of the majority ethnic group prompted the British government to set up the minorities commission of inquiry, in 1957 with Sir, Henry Willink as Chairman.

The commissions responsibilities were:

- a) To ascertain facts about minorities in Nigeria and propose means of allaying the fears.
- b) Advice on what safe guards could be provided in the constitution.
- c) Recommend, though as a last resort the creation of State specifying the following:
  - a. Area to be included in such States.
  - b. Evaluating their economic viability and administrative viability.
  - c. Document clearly what effect the creation of new State will have on the existing state and on the Federation.

- d. Consider the question of revising the boundaries of existing region (House of Representatives Committee Report, 1980)

Although, the Henry Willink Commission of inquiry admitted that the minority fears were a political and social reality, they argued that state creation will not alleviate minority problems hence they recommended the following:

- i. The entrenchment of the fundamental human right in the constitution.
- ii. The establishment of special development authorities in categorically defined location.
- iii. To foster a greater participatory democracy.
- iv. According to the House Committee Report of 1980, the colonial government accepted the commission recommendation but did not consent to the demand for State by the minorities.

**The Post-Independence Era:** This period focused on the Western Region crisis which took place in 1962. In 1963, the pressure for creation of State was evident following the declaration of a state of emergency in the former western region (now. The mid-west region was created out of the then Western Nigeria. This action led to the demand for more state in other regions of the country.

**The Military Era:** The emerging nation-Nigeria in the post-independence period witness ethnic political tension from the minorities. The minorities resented the inter-regional arrangement where they cluster in a majority with an uneven character of economic infrastructure, unequal educational and political development with widespread corruption nepotism and mal-administration witnessed in the public service.

This event dragged the military into the political arena in January 1966 with the eventual collapse of the First Republic and the enthronement of the Military Junta. The military took steps to reconstruct the political system in May, 1967 by creating twelve states and latter 19 states in 1976. The state were created as a response to series of demand for creation of state in the country. Eventually, there were several request for further state creation from numerous ethnic groups. Consequent upon the demand for State, the President Shehu Shagari led administration convene a conference of all political party leaders to deliberate on the challenges of state

creation with huge request presented to National Assembly in 1982 (Committee Report, 1982). The Vice President, Dr. Alex Ekweme was appointed the Chairman of the Committee to represent the Executive arm of government. Other nominations were party representatives, and seventeen (17) members of National Assembly as members of the committee.

### **Findings of the Committee:**

The committee took a tour of the various states and equally compiled data of the ethnic groups with a view to report an accurate findings. First, the identifying criteria was on political consideration. They sought to maintain a federal system of government to reduce suppression and discord and to promote peace and political stability in the nation. They perceived that state creation was necessary and if left untreated and unattended to peace and stability cannot be guaranteed. Again, they observed that the continuous agitation for State was attributed to bad government, bad leadership and discriminatory practices and policies of the various state government. We need to state at this point that the agitation for state is as acute as it was in the past due to the above problem of discriminatory practices. Since most agitations emanates from neglect, discrimination and fears of domination, it follows that the preferred solution should be right leadership, even development, social justice to the minority equitable distribution of resources and amenities.

In the main, further reports show that most political elites were merely interested in attracting more revenue, political appointments and head of parastatals to acquire the largesse accruing to the juicy positions. They clamoured for a political structure that will disallow an ethnic group to hold a position that gave the group impetus to dominate all the other groups in the political entity to which they all belong (House Committee Report, 1982). The House Committee for state creation and the presentation of request for creation of Port Harcourt State.

The findings and recommendation on the various request for state creation especially the new states was referred to the committee by the House of Representatives through a resolution by votes during proceedings of 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1980.

The House of Representative set up a selected committee on state creation and members are as follows:

1.	Hon. Alhaji Abubakar Tuggar	-	Chairman
2.	Dr. O.O. Oreh	-	Member
3.	Sule Ibrahim	-	Member
4.	T.M. Zuokumor	-	Member
5.	S.I. Idakwo	-	Member
6.	Yunusa Folorunsho	-	Member
7.	T. Sekibo	-	Member
8.	Umaru Ahmed Shuni	-	Member
9.	Mrs. Abiola Babatope	-	Member
10.	T.O. Akinbode	-	Member
11.	T. Ogunsiji	-	Member
12.	S.A. Odetoyinbo	-	Member
13.	Chief M. Nwoseh	-	Member
14.	E. Ononopkono	-	Member
15.	S.U. Wanganga	-	Member
16.	G.B. Wodi	-	Member
17.	J.Y. Mallo	-	Member
18.	Idi Mustapha	-	Member
19.	Tukum Fagam	-	Member
20.	Badamasi Yamma	-	Member
21.	Dr. Gordon Idang	-	Member
22.	David Gbaondo	-	Member

The committee as constituted were made up of representatives of political parties as follows: National Party of Nigeria (NPN) nine, Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) seven, Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) four, Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) three, and Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP) two members. The above committee was to take a critical look at the request for state creation and make recommendations on which request satisfied the provisions of the constitution for the purpose of state creation on section 8 of the 1979 Constitution. The elites and founding fathers of the movement for the creation of Port Harcourt state referred their request to the Committee by resolution H/R6 of 18/7/80.

It states thus: the component units of the proposed Port Harcourt comprises the following local government areas listed in the first schedule to section three of the 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria namely: Port Harcourt City, Obigbo District of the Okrika/Obigbo/Tai/Elemé/Bori local government area excluding (Oduál community and Ikwerre/Etche and Ahoada of present Rivers State.

Furthermore, it stated that the proposed Port Harcourt state had nine members representing them in National Assembly and nineteen members in Rivers State House of Assembly including ninety six councilors in all the local government areas. It is obvious that the demand for a state Port Harcourt state met the constitutional requirements as stipulated by the committee on state creation. It is worthy of note that in spite of the above, the committee which admitted that the agitations meet all the provision for the creation of the state but added that for the sake of peace and stability in Rivers State and Nigeria recommended that Port Harcourt municipality be part of the new state and much less be its capital.

The excuse and controversy was the choice of a new capital. Truly, assert 1980, there were a total request of 21 proposals on state creation before the National Assembly including Port Harcourt State. According to the House Committee Report of 1980, the former northern region had 11 new state proposal as follows:

1. Zamfara
2. Jigawa
3. Lautal
4. Ghari
5. Katagum
6. Gombe
7. Gujba
8. Kogi
9. Nasarawa
10. Katsina
11. Taraba

The former Eastern region had 5 new states as follows:

1. New Anambra
2. Ebonyi
3. Abia
4. Port Harcourt
5. New Cross River

The former Western Region had 5 new states requested

1. New Oyo
2. New Ondo
3. Oshun
4. Anioma
5. Delta

We need to note from the above recommendation that in each of the regions, state has been created as follows: in the northern region, seven (7) state recommended by the committee has already been created. In the former Eastern Region, only two states has been created and in the western region, we had three states created. The committee recommended all the states created in the various zones by referendum, but that of oil Rivers and Port Harcourt which produces the resources and revenue that fund these states was left unattended to.

The table below shows the data and the request from Rivers State to the National Assembly.

Request	State Involved	Data Referred	No. of LGA
Port Harcourt	Rivers	19/6/81	5
Oil Rivers	Rivers	3/2/81	4

**Source:** Report of House Committee on State Creation, 1981.

Naanen (1995) has opined that the issues facing Nigeria is the so-called "National question" which remains a code name for all controversies doubts and experimentation that surrounds Nigeria search for stability. He stated that a critical aspect of it is the issue of ethnic domination. Here, the researcher consent to the above opinion and position of Naanen that if this critical question is left



unresolved, it will obviously endanger the cohesion of the Nigerian State. In this sense, the agitation for state may be endless without solving the ethnic issues.

Conversely, Naanen has suggested an approach of solving the ethnic issue which should consider the vast horizontal devolution of power to strengthen the state and converting it from what Davidson call "a curse" to a positive institution to aggregate and synthesis multiple identities. A major contribution to the Ogoni ethnic nationalism is what Naanen termed "internal colonialism". In the main, internal colonialism developed through political penetration deriving from political control aided strongly by numerical preponderance. It follows that through this power structure the weaker groups resources are often transferred to developed the dominant areas thereby creating an economically advantaged and powerful, core and an impoverished and weak periphery (Naanen, 1995). We shall consider how internal colonialism of the vast majority of the Ijaw speaking ethnic group in Rivers State arouses the Ogoni and Ikwerre Elites to agitate for the creation of Port Harcourt State in 1981.

### **Ogoni Minority and the Agitation for the Creation of Rivers State**

The minority of the Niger Delta and Ogoni continue to express fears of marginalization, exploitation and domination by the Igbo majority as the prospect for self-government was made clear by the colonial regimes. In 1957, the constitutional conference appointed Sir Henry Willink to head a commission of inquiry thus was borne the Willink commission of inquiry with the responsibility of investigating the fears of the minority in the Eastern Region (Okonta, 2008).

As the commission make preparation for sitting at Enugu in 1958, Ogoni division send a representative to speak for the people with other minority groups in Rivers State – Ikwerre, Asa, Diobu, Ndoki among others. To be specific, Nwika a member of the House of Representative under the NCNC in the Eastern Region presented the case of the Ogoni Division and made clear their demands as follows:

- a. That the Eastern Regional government did not consider the Ogoni in the distribution of social amenities and other infrastructural programmes.
- b. That in terms of industry, Ogoni was not allocated any one out of the 187 oil mills in the region.
- c. There were no telegraph or postal services in the division.

- d. He emphasize inadequate representation in both House of Representatives and House of Assembly in the region.
- e. That the people were not considered for any Ministerial appointment or Board appointment.

Indeed, the position of the Rivers Chief and Peoples Conference under the leadership of Harold Dappa Biriye were the same with others – the demand for a Rivers State that will be Independent of the Eastern Region controlled by the Igbos. The Igbos had regarded the complaints of these minority with ill and mix feelings. Perhaps, there motive to clobbered together the Ogoni, Ikwerre, Ndoki, Opobo and Western Ijaw was to control the economic power house of the minority through the ports of Port Harcourt and Calabar. The Igbo state union move to dissuade the people of Ahoada division and Ikwerre in the Rivers province to back down on the quest for a Rivers State did not yield result.

Although the Willink Commission decline on the issue of creation of state for the divisions of Ogoni, Degema and Brass, it recognize the fact that the various areas of the Niger Delta were special territories which should be given attention for development. It recommended that the area should be administer by a Federal Board while according it a full status as a Federal Territory similar to Lagos (MOSOP, 1992). The competition for the control of governance intensifies during the 1959 election and attempts were made in the Eastern Region to neutralize or absorb opposition parties in the minority areas. The NCNC struggle to contain the UNIP of Eyo Ita and the Niger Delta Congress (NDC) of Harold Biriye ushering crisis in some minority areas to undermine the actualization of the demand for state by the minorities. At independence, the leaders of the minority groups in the region were dissatisfied with the domineering instinct of the Igbo majority leading to the formation of a guerilla force by Isaac Adaka Boro in 1966 to create a Niger Delta Republic. To advert this tension in the polity, Gen. Gowon proposed an adhoc constitutional conference to deliberate on the prospect and stability of the nation. The Rivers leaders of thought comprising of politicians, businessmen and intellectuals emerged under the leadership of Harold Dappa-Biriye and convene a meeting in Port Harcourt to work out modalities of lobbying the Federal Military government to create Rivers State by decree (Etekpe, 2003). They appointed Dikibo, a lawyer as the Chairman while Ken Saro Wiwa, an intellectual was the

secretary of the sub-committee. They were given responsibility to draw a memorandum making a case for the proposed Rivers State. Indeed, this was accomplished and a memorandum was published on the 14<sup>th</sup> September, 1966 calling on Gen. Gowon to create Rivers State by a decree. By this, the territory of Rivers State was no longer under Regional Authority while such regional law were to be repeal by the administrator-in-council. The signatories to the memorandum were drawn from six major divisions in Rivers province including: Degema, Ahoada, Port Harcourt, Ogoni, Brass and Opobo division. The Ogoni division signatory was the Late Edward Kobani who was a school teacher.

The Federal Government under Gen. Gowon admitted and recognize the long history of minority demand for statein a broadcast on the 27<sup>th</sup> May, 1967. He thus promulgated decreeNo.8 which divide the country into twelve (12) states with Rivers State comprising of Degema, Brass, Ogoni, Ahoada and Port Harcourt. This earned the new state the acronym of PABOD representing the five larger divisions in Rivers State. The creation of states by the federal government was to enhance stability and the ethnic minority for a balance federation. However, the exploitative tendencies of the Igbo majority who had dominated the politics of Eastern Region did not welcome the idea of state creation. This assertion was reveal in subsequent event as the Igbos turn from Nigerian Nationalists to Biafran secessionist ideals.

### **Ogoni and the Movement for the Creation of Port Harcourt State**

It is an incontrovertible truth that the creation of Rivers State would have ordinarily given the Ogoni minority and other ethnic groups in the Rivers Province some respite. However, the post war period and the state created continued to experience distrust and unharmonious relationship among the diverse ethnic groups that make up Rivers State. It seems marginalization, cheating, and injustice are inbuilt in the human element. The ethnic minority of Ogoni perceived of themselves as victims of some powerful forces of the majority in the state created in 1967. The build up to further agitations for state creation in the country was due to the centre skewed and asymmetrical policy framework of the Federal Government led by General Yakubu Gowon.

Okonta (2008) alluded to the fact that the Gowon Regime engaged the services of administrative experts and bureaucrats in the person of Allison Ayida and Philip Asiodu who were expected to work out a policy framework to transform the nation economic fortune and make itself-reliant and a productive economy. The economy of the emerging nation fail to achieve its purpose and basically relied on oil revenue to service its programmes, administrative and fiscal. This transform the country into a centralize state with its resources centrally managed for distribution and allocation of proceeds of oil to competing interest groups in the country. Thus the nation depended heavily on sharing the “National Cake”

The result was that the political elites and entrepreneurs engage themselves in a cut throat competition to gain access and control of the central state in order to secure their peoples share of the cake. It created a new dimension of unbridled request for state creation in the country. By clamouring for state creation the Elites wishes to transform their various units from minority to majority by acquisition of the oil revenue. Another major justification for state was to assure the emerging elites get a fare share of the national cake inform of monthly allocation from the Federal Government. The ground for easy access to the excess resource was through political power hence the rush for the demand for State.

However, to the Ogoni political elites, the demand for the creation of a Port Harcourt State was just due to their feelings of exclusion orchestrated by the dominant and erudite majority group within River State (Okonta, 2008). In the words of Kemte Giadom, the Ijo ethnic group gain contracts, with resources to match, juicy portfolios in the civil service and political office. To the Ogoni elites, it seems there was no end to the trajectory of marginalization even within the State they fought for. In view of this trend, the Ogoni and majorly the Ikwerre elite galvanize themselves to end this injustice of nepotism in the State managed by the Ijaw Ethnic majority.

### **Conclusion**

We shall conclude by saying that minority political mobilization for state creation is a predominant issue in the federation. It stems from the unfair, unjust unequal and injustice of the dominant majority ethnic groups against the minority. The nation building project had continue to suffer setbacks due to unfair practices in

the nation-state. The state has to be restructured in a way that will guarantee political autonomy and equal resource allocation for the economic prosperity of the minority ethnic group in Nigeria.

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