

Secessionists Agitation, Identity Politics and Social Justice in Nigeria

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Abstract

One of the prominent characteristics of contemporary politics in Nigeria has been a growing recognition of the significance of cultural differences, which often portrayed as “conflict identities” “identity politics or “politics of differences”. The aim of this study is assess the impact of the identity politics and secessionists’ quest for social justice on the current democratic dispensation. Moreover, data for this study were mainly collected from secondary sources such as textbooks, newspapers, magazines, journals and internet materials among others. The data collected were content analysed. This study is situated within the context of the National Self-Determination Theory. This study argues that many of these conflicts in Nigeria’s fourth republic are rooted in age -long dissatisfaction and discontents against successive government policies and actions by the masses across the country. This has remained unabated as there are pockets of resistance and criticism against the structural imbalance of Nigeria’s federalism since independence, controversial revenue sharing formula, ethnicity and ethnic politics, religious intolerance and violence, human rights abuse. All these have resulted to agitation for resource control, complaints of political marginalization, demand for power shift and rotational presidency, etc. Many of these agitations remained unresolved till today.

Keywords: *Fourth Republic, Identity Politics, Secession, Social Justice, Nigeria,*

Introduction

The end of the cold war brought about the end to the East-West ideological conflict between the United States and its allies and the former Soviet Union and its allies. Yet, the first decade after the cold war did not bring the desired end to conflict between nationalist or ethnic groups across the globe, as witnessed by the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Rwanda, East Timor, Sri Lanka and host of other countries in the world. Besides, such conflicts often revolve around issues of identity, territorial control and access to policy making. Also, these conflicts are caused as a result of unequal access to economic, political and social resources.

One of the prominent characteristics of contemporary politics has been a growing recognition of the significance of cultural differences within states, which often portrayed as “conflict identities” “identity politics or “politics of differences”. Though, there is nothing new about the recognition of differences within state. Besides, growing number of countries have come to accept as an irreversible fact that their population have a multi-ethnic, multi-religious or multi-cultural character, as various attempts have been made to reconcile cultural diversity and identity-related difference with civic and political cohesion (Heywood, 2007:212).

Moreover, a number of countries have faced the crisis of identity. For instance, the United States of America which is an immigrant society, has long been a multi-cultural society, the cause of conflict of identity was not taken up until the rise of the black consciousness movement in the 1960’s and the advent of the reverse of discrimination which accords preferential treatment to the blacks on the basis of their past discrimination. Also, Australia has been officially committed to resolving conflict identity since the early 1970’s, in recognition of its increasing “Asianization”.

Similarly, New Zealand is linked to its recognition of the role of Maori culture in forging a distinctive national identity. In Canada, the country has demonstrated its greatest official commitment to resolving conflict identity as it attempt to achieve reconciliation between French-speaking Quebec and the English-speaking majority population, and acknowledging the rights of the indigenous Inuit. In the United Kingdom, multiculturalism recognizes the existence of significant Black and Asian communities and abandons the demand that they assimilate into white society. In Germany, this applies to Turkish groups (Heywood, 2007:212).

However, the Nigerian state is often seen as a deeply divided state in which major political issues are vigorously violent which is often contested along ethnic, religious, and regional divisions in the country (Smyth and Robinson 2001). The issues that generate the fiercest contestation include those that are considered fundamental to the existence and legitimacy of the state, over which competing groups tend to adopt exclusionary, winner-take-all strategies. These include the control of state power, resource allocation, and citizenship.

Over the years, these conflicts have posed a challenge to scholars and policy makers in Nigeria searching for practical solutions to “identity difference”. Thus, the question arises: how can conflict especially those that revolve around identity issues especially within and between states with various nationalist/ethnic groups be ameliorated, so that inequality in wealth and power can be overcome and peace achieved. It is against this background that this study seeks to assess the impact of the identity politics and secessionists’ quest for social justice on the current democratic dispensation.

Conceptual Discourse: Identity Politics, Secession and Social Justice

The term secession is many times used in the context of self-determination and dissolution (Mavric, 2012:17; Ojibara, 2016). Though these words are interconnected but they are by no means synonymous. Secession maybe defined as follows: Secession is the process by which a group seeks to separate itself from the state to which it belongs, and to create a new state on part of the territory of that state. It is not a consensual process and thus needs to be distinguished from the process by which a state confers independence on a particular territory by legislative or other means, a process which may be referred to as devolution or grant of independence. Secession is essentially a unilateral process (Crawford, 1997).

The concept of justice has been assigned different meanings by different scholars at different times and places. Thus, what is termed as justice in the past may be injustice in the present day and vice versa; it is possible that justice of today becomes injustice of tomorrow and vice versa (Johari, 2005:338). Johari, (2005) asserts that the concept of justice has some implications. First, it requires a just state of affairs. This implies that, it is not possible to assess the justice of actions without an initial identification of just state of affairs (Miller, 1976:17-18). Second, justice is aligned with a condition of morality. For example, a fair society is one in which a person who wins morally deserves to win but one in which there is no cheating, nobody jumps the gun or has an unfair advantage via the use of undue advantage (Barry, 1965). Third, justice means that it is first and foremost concerned with the way rewards and punishments are distributed in any society. Fourth, justice usually prevails in congenial environments that are allowed by democratic rules, but it may also survive in an undemocratic set up in exceptional cases (Johari, 2005).

However, the concept of social justice is a very wide concept that covers everything that relate to the norm of “general interest” ranging from the protection of the interests of the minorities to the eradication of poverty and illiteracy. Johari, (2005) states that social justice is not merely related to the observance of the principles of equality before the law and independence of the judiciary as we find in developed societies. He added that social justice also relate to the eradication of gigantic social evils such as pauperism, disease, unemployment and starvation which have their interests that obstruct the achievement of common good and have their stigmatic expression on the face of the people.

The affirmation of the idea of social justice is well articulated in the interpretation of social justice by Dean Roscoe Pound who presented a six fold illustration of social interest and set the pace for that identified

eight jural postulations that will ensure social justice in any society. Thus, the ideas of social justice envisage promoting the welfare of the people by securing and developing a just social order (Johari, 2005).

On the whole, the concept of social justice has had different implications by the “negative liberals” who sees the concept of social justice as antithetical to the principles of equality of opportunities. The idea of social justice clashes with the idea of equality in respect of equal opportunities in the views of the negative liberals. For instance, A.M. Maclead posits that the word “opportunity” must necessarily mean opportunity to do something, or become something or obtain something else. Thus, the phrase “equality of opportunity” is empty without such specification (Garry, 1966).

Theoretical Framework

A number of theories have been developed by Scholars to study the dimensions of social justice in any society. The theories of secession can be group into two broad categories. The first is primary right theories which view secession as a right of group of people to vote to secede. The two theories under this category are that of national self-determination theory and choice or plebiscitary theory. The second is derivative right theories which view secession as a measure to justified consequence of past mistreatment of the group by the state mass and permanent violation of basic human right unlawful incorporation into the state, violation of intra-state autonomy agreement, and violation of public realization of equality of democratic state.

a. National Self-Determination Theory

The theory opined that different nations within a state have the right to secede. J.S Mill believes that in multi-national states; there can be no feeling of commonality and sympathy can only be achieved among same nationality (Mill, 1991). He argues that among people who spoke different languages, there can be no common public opinion and ergo no working of representative government and because of lack of common feeling even in armies of multi ethnic state cannot be strong , since the soldier would own obedience and alliance only to the flag but their heart would not be beating for a “foreign” country, because of all these Mill concludes that the boundaries of a state should be in line with the boundaries of a nation (Mill, 1991).

b. Choice or Plebiscitary Theory

A plebiscitary right of secession grants a right to a majority in any portion of the territory of a state to form its own independent state if it so chooses, even if the majority of the state as a whole opposes their bid for independence (Buchanan 1998:15). The plebiscitary theory simply believes in the expression by a group to secede from a state through voting i.e. secession is a matter of majority rule (Mancini, 2008:553-584). The plebiscitary theory seems to be very permissive and the conditions for secession can easily be met by a majority approval in a referendum. Secession according to the theory is made lucrative and can as well lead to fragmentation of states in international system. Since the only requirement for secession is for majority to affirm the withdrawal of such group.

c. The Remedial Right Only Theory

The prominent proponents of the theory are Anthony Birch and Allen Buchanan (Birch 1984). For Buchanan, secession is the last option for groups whose basic human rights are permanently violated, territory that have been illegally annexed to the state, and groups whose intra-state autonomy agreement have been violated. When the last resort for stopping the preserved injustice is secession, then it is morally permissible for them to secede (Buchanan 2004). On the whole, this study is situated within the context of the National Self-Determination Theory as it provides us with a better explanation of the nature of the Biafran agitators quest for a sovereign state.

Secessionists Agitation, Identity Politics and Social Justice in Nigeria

By virtue of the Nigerian state complex web of politically salient identities and history of chronic and seemingly intractable conflicts and instability, Nigeria have been described as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa. From its inception as a colonial state, Nigeria has faced a perennial crisis of territorial or state legitimacy, which has often challenged its efforts at national cohesion, democratization, stability and economic transformation. The high point of the crisis seems to have been the civil war in the late 1960s, which ensued shortly after independence in 1960. However, rather than abate, conflicts have become more or less pervasive and intense in the post-civil war period, and disintegration continues to be contemplated by aggrieved segments of society as one of the possible ways of resolving the 'National Question'. This means that the consequences of Nigeria's diversity in an unstable political context remain as dire as ever (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Since Nigeria return to democratic rule on May 29, 1999, Nigeria has witnessed an upsurge of violent and non-violent separatist groups seeking for self-determination and autonomous entity of their own. For instance, in the South-Eastern Nigeria alone the MASSOB claimed to be peaceful and non-violent in its approach, the IPOB have the tendency of using violent approach. The BZF was actually violent, especially when the group invaded the Enugu State Broadcasting Station (ESBC) and attempted to gain entrance into Enugu State House for the purpose of hoisting their flag on 5th June, 2014 (Awofeso, 2017).

It pertinent to note however, that these agitations are not limited to one or two sections of the country as the case in the past. Virtually every section or geo-political units in the country has witnessed such agitation from one or more separatist groups. Today, Nigeria is faced with several yet-to-be-resolved crises, including those of the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East of Nigeria since 2009; intermittent religious clashes between Muslims and Christians which have claimed many lives, especially in Kaduna State since 2016; incessant conflict between farmers and herdsmen which was somewhat limited to the north initially, but now a nightmare in several communities in South-East and South-West; the resumption of ethnic militancy through the activities of the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) in the South-South, which has almost crippled the nation's economy; and of course, the continuous agitation for the creation of the state of Biafra separate from the Nigerian State by emerging groups like the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in South-East (Awofeso, 2017).

Many of these crises are highly rooted in age -long dissatisfaction and discontents against successive government policies and actions by the masses across the country. For instance, there were pockets of resistance and criticism against the structural imbalance of Nigeria's federalism since independence, controversial revenue sharing formula, ethnicity and ethnic politics, religious intolerance and violence, human rights abuse during the first and second republics. The passage of time equally witnessed mind provoking issues like agitation for resource control, complaints of political marginalization, demand for power shift and rotational presidency, etc. Many of these agitations remained unresolved till today.

As a consequence, deeply divided states tend to be fragile and unstable because almost by definition, there are fewer points of convergence and consensus among the constituent groups than are required to effectively mitigate or contain the centrifugal forces that tear the society apart. Thus, disintegration, secession, civil strife, civil war, minority agitation, and violent conflicts, all of which would normally be considered aberrant to 'normal' state formation, are quite common threats or actual occurrences in divided states. It is not surprising therefore that divided states have devised some of the most innovative and delicate systems of government (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Most states practice some variant of the federal solution, with the emphasis on political accommodation and inter-segmental balance. This emphasis has made it necessary and expedient to adopt instrumentalities that mitigate the effects of majoritarianism, as well as promote inclusion, equity, and distributive justice between the different salient groups. Yet, and despite the precautions taken, divided states remain perennially unstable and many survive on the brink of collapse and disintegration (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972, Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

But, contrary to what some Scholars overly simplistic analyses of the implications of diversity in Nigeria and other countries suggest, diversity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict. In other words, the very fact that a country has different ethnic, communal, religious, and racial groups does not make division and conflicts inevitable. Besides, empirical evidence shows that division and conflict are not dependent on the degree of diversity, as some of the most diverse countries like Switzerland, Belgium, Malaysia and Tanzania enjoy relative peace and stability, while some of the least diverse are the most unstable or violent like Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and, perhaps, Sri Lanka. The implication of all this is that there is a set of intervening variables between diversity and conflicts that needs to be interrogated: to unravel the nature of the connection between them and, in particular, to discern the linkages between how identities get mobilized and politicized and how this relates to the level of conflict (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Furthermore, conflict identities in Nigeria mainly manifest in terms of ethnic, regional and religious, these being largely territorial identities within which the non-territorial identities of class, gender and youth tend to be encapsulated. These identities have been enormously shaped by the colonial experience, which created a culturally artificial and divided Nigerian state but did very little to nurture a unified Nigerian nation. Instead, the colonial regionalist federal legacy fuelled big-tribe hegemonic ethnocentrism, ethnic minority insecurity, democratic instability, ethno-military infighting and secessionist warfare.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country that is heterogenous in nature with 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory to make up the nation. It is a country with diverse religious and cultural beliefs. Some are of the opinion that the diversity we share is a contributing factor to the menace faced by the country. However, the diversity, the state is overwhelmed with a series of violence and conflicts with some due to secessionist agitations. As observed by the study, these agitations generate the fiercest contestation which threatens the fundamental existence and legitimacy of Nigerian state. On the other hand, the supremacy of ethnic, religious or cultural identity have further ignited crisis in the Nigerian. Despite the above plethora of issues, social injustice in the Nigerian state is topical issue that needs to be addressed urgently.

From the forgoing findings, the paper recommends that

- a. The present government under President Muhammad Buhari should ensure inclusive governance. Since, it has been the inability of past governments to ensure inclusive governance that necessitates this agitation for succession. When this fails, we can opt for the second recommendation
- b. There is no sincerity in the recent calls for restructuring the country. This is evidence by the proposal made by the 2014 confab for additional 18 states, while the existing 36 states have failed to propel national economic development.
- c. The National Assembly should endeavour to amend the constitution to provide for the use of referendum to answer national questions since the various national conferences have failed due largely to non-implementable recommendations.
- d. The recommendations from the 2014 National Dialogue have not been implemented. Perhaps, this is the right time to examine this report and come up with proactive and peaceful ideas on how to achieve national reconciliation and unity without forgetting to address issues about injustice.

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