CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA

Oladoyin, Anthony Mayowa (Ph.D.)

Abstract
Conflict in local government administration has become not only visible in recent times but volatile. This is not unconnected with the lucrativeness of local government system in Nigeria. This is why this paper explores the various forms of conflict with particular reference to conflicts localised within the local government system. As a descriptive study, the paper highlighted the elite conflict and inter/intra-departmental conflicts as the most virulent of the conflicts in the Nigerian local government system. The measures for resolving these conflicts could either be formal or informal. However, the blend of the two approaches is recommended. This study concluded that though conflict is inalienable in human interaction, its mitigation is requisite for stable governance and regime longevity. As such, the study considered it necessary that local government should be made a functional unit of practical governance devoid of corruption-driven elements that go into local government as gold diggers.

Introduction
Conflict is "an unavoidable aspect of human interaction and an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions...The problem, then is not to court the frustrations of seeking to remove an inevitability but of trying to keep conflicts in bound" (Zartman, 1991:209). In short, conflict is not an anathema; it is the whole essence of governance. It thus follows that any responsive government has the responsibility of responding to conflicts arising from the operations and activities of the political agents and the political subjects within the political system. In fact, how a government succeeds in this process of conflict management eventually determines the longevity of the regime, and as well determines the intensity and brevity of any social conflict arising within the system.

The political and economic cost of managing a conflict at its formative stage is less expensive than when it is allowed to escalate, for the latter leads to a lot of debilitating outcomes, blockage of the governing process, a widening gap in the state-society relations, outbreak of violence and finally, state collapse. Strictly speaking then, violence is the escalation of conflict. In other words, violence occurs when conflicts are allowed to escalate.

The challenge facing Nigeria and indeed most developing countries under undemocratic governments is that the use of force as an article of faith for managing conflicts has led to the further intensification of conflicts. Apart from competing demands serving as the basis for conflicts, there are other important economic, religious and social factors. In this direction, Mkandawire (1992:6) has argued that "...the economic conjectures have fuelled a whole range of goals including those that arc not limited to human rights and ethnic identity". In the present day Nigeria, conflicts have become a celebrated concept in view of its manifestation in virtually all aspects of human life. It exists very strongly in people's mind even when it is not physically manifesting (Ekwe-Ekwe, 1990:5-10).

In this paper, the strong notion of conflict will be used instead of the weak. The view that conflict is universal, since every human relation is so characterised constitutes the weak notion of conflict. However, the actual incidents of conflict which do not only exist in the mind but in physical display and manifestations, whereby there are physical exchanges of assaults; expression of contradictory opinion on issues of policies; serious disagreement between two or more agents; and instances of strained relationships well as calculated attempts by some agents to frustrate the efforts of others in an implicit or explicit manner, altogether constitute the strong notion of conflict used in this paper.

Moreover, the notion of local governance that is employed in this piece coincides with that of Pierre Landell-Mills (1991) in his writing for the World Bank on a special project bordering on governance. According to him, governance entails:

...The use of political authority and exercise of control over a society and
the management of its resource for socio-economic development.

He further contends that the concept:

...Encompasses the nature of functioning of a state's institutional and structural arrangements, decision making processes, policy formulation, implementation capacity, information flow, effectiveness of leadership and the nature of the relationship between rulers and ruled (Pierre Landell-Mills and Ismail Sarageldin, 1991: 3).

The application of the above concept to operations and activities in the local government -setting tantamount to local governance. In other words, local governance is governance at the local level.

**General Forms of Conflicts**

The Nigerian political scene parades five major forms of conflicts, namely communal/sectarian, elite, factional conflicts, mass conflicts, and administrative conflict.

Communal conflicts usually arise between two or more communities over historical, economic, political and religious disputes. Gboyega identifies religion and the increasing economic deterioration of the country as the actual bane of communal conflicts (Gboyega, 1995:191). Instances of this form of conflict within the past five years are the communal uprising in Sagamu, Kano and Ibadan, between the Hausa and the Yoruba over religious and economic issues. This type of conflict is very common in Nigeria. Particular examples include Kafanchan crisis(1999), Junkuns and Tiv communal crisis (1998), Zango-Kataf uprising(1996), Iju Ita-Ogbolu feud(1997), Bauchi Christians and Muslim clash(1997), Ife-Modakeke crisis (1981; 1983; 1997 and 1998), Sagamu and Kano ethnic violence(1999), Ijaw-Itshekiri(1997 to date), Ilorin chieftaincy conflict (1995 to date) to mention a few. Notable about these conflicts is that the intervention of the local government is usually required irrespective of the magnitude or the significance of the conflicts. This is so for the fact that each time there is a communal conflict, it takes place within a local government. Where this type of conflict takes place too often, it has the tendency of challenging state's territorial integrity and may possibly destabilise the initial network of power distribution in the affected society. This is why communal conflicts at their apogee manifest in the form of civil wars and violent uprisings (Decalo, 1980:28-56; 1989:491-509).

Administrative conflict ranks next to communal conflict in relation to the way it affects local government administration. In the case of communal conflicts, the entire community does not experience peace and stability, while administrative conflicts affect the smooth running of the local government administration. This form of conflicts manifests in dis-harmony among top principal local government officials and functionaries such as the chairman, vice chairman, secretary, directors of finance, directors of administration, director of works, the primary health co-ordinator, the supervisory councillors and the councillors. The administrative conflicts in the local government always assume these three major forms, which are:

1. Conflicts between political officers and the career officers.
2. Conflicts between the chairman and the vice chairman.
3. Conflicts between the chairman and the councillors.
4. Conflicts between Directors and their Deputies.
5. Conflicts between Directors of Personnel Management and Finance on one hand and other Directors.

Starting with the conflict between the politicians and the careerists, the conflict is one of the formations of alliances by the career officers led by the secretary (or the Director of Administration as the case may be) on one hand, and the political officers led by the elected chairman or Administrator on the other hand. Often, the conflicts usually centre on pecuniary issues as well as power tussle. The second major conflict, which occurs between the Chairman and his vice is predominant when the two fall into different political camps. In this case it is often alleged that the former is marginalizing the latter in the administration of the local council. However, the reality of the conflict centres on unequal access to the resources of the local government in form of claims, allowances and other benefits that are directly attached to the office of
the chairman. In essence, the unequal status of the two offices and the unbalanced benefit accruing to each
give room for natural envy and suspicion, a situation, which is capable of breeding conflict.

The last major conflict usually occurs between the chairman, who is the chief executive officer
and the councillors who constitute the legislature of the local government. The interface is such that the
councillors, in the quest for relevance and struggle for extra pecuniary benefits beside their statutory monthly
emolument, have to encounter the chairman either individually, or collectively in the House through normal
legislative proceedings. Either way, the councillors require the favour of the chairman while the latter also
requires their support to have a smooth policy formulation process.

The third type of conflict is Elite conflict and it has the tendency of degenerating into factional
conflicts, which is the fourth type of conflict to be discussed in this essay. As the word 'elite' suggests, elite
conflicts are organised by the elites but it also has a way of extending to other social groups as well as to
the grassroots, both in its process and consequences. The elites’ mobilisation strategies are basically
aimed at gaining access to the centre. Moreover, it is to increase the faction participation or even to gain the
control of the government and to influence the political scene in the society. In the final analysis, the conflict
is to affect specific policy decisions of the government.

This conflict manifests in the local government administration in a peculiar way. It must be noted
that the successful politicians came to office through some political camps, which are controlled by different
elites. When the local government machinery is properly on the ground, the elites are always of the ploy to
provide a sort of remote control mechanism on the chairman, secretary, supervisory councillors and the
councillors. In most instances, they even dictate how contracts should be awarded and to whom within their
camp. Conflicts now ensue when they are unable to have their ways. For the political officers in the local
government to succeed, they need to disengage themselves from the apron string of these elites and their
often-selfish advice and instructions.

Factional conflict is a variant of the elite conflict but in extreme cases, may lead to secession moves or
reactionary groupings. Where this type of conflict is allowed to thrive, the local administration may be
paralysed.

The last form of conflict is mass conflict. This type of conflict is usually tagged "revolutionary
conflict" and it is always radical in approach, the objective of which is to permanently alter the power
structure of a country. In other words, it is a resort, which involves despondent citizens who seem to have
no other options other than violent protest against a repressive and an autocratic government. Although this
type of conflict is not common at the local level, nonetheless, when it exists, it has the tendency of
terminating the local administration in place.

Peculiar Conflicts in Local Government System

Two dominant conflicts feature in every LGC in Nigeria namely, Elites’ conflict and
Inter-Departmental/Intra Departmental Conflict in LGCs, which is a variant of Administrative Conflicts.
The Elite conflict in the LG is a latent form of conflict that is not readily visible even though it is about
the most cogent defining force underpinning virtually every other form of conflict in the LG system. This form of
conflict manifests in the background manipulations and maneuvers orchestrated by the power elites in the
political society whereby the LG Chairman is remotely controlled and influenced to do recruitment, award
of contracts and execution of projects in the line of interests of the power elites. An attempt by the Chairman
of the Council to pursue an autonomous line of interest inevitably leads to conflict.

Intra departmental conflict is another major form of conflict in the local government system. This is
common between very senior technical staff who are on say, GL 10 - 12 and who have risen along the line to
that status; and young professional staff with university degrees. These senior technical staff do find it
difficult to co-operate with their younger professional superiors and this is a major form of conflict in the local
government system. Another form of this conflict is visible in the works department where technical and
professional staff conflict on superiority and seniority. While the technicians lay claim to long years of
experience in the service, the professional staff lays claim to professional qualification. This is also visible
among director of finance and vote controllers using the same argument as above.
In general department, conflicts do ensue sequel to envy from other departments in the local government council. Other departments for example, see the general department headed by the Director of Personnel Management (DPM) as a cog in the wheel of progress of other departments. At this juncture however, the truth of the matter is that some Heads of Department are themselves not in line with the day-to-day administrative system of the local government. They do not attend departmental meetings where and when they are expected to present cases in respect of their departments' staff. Staff requests such as conversion, maternity leave or even application for annual leave are deliberately held up in their offices and yet the buck-passing is always on the administration and general department.

**Conflict of Interest**

It has been discovered that in the local government administration the issue that always generates problem is the conflict of interest whereby some higher civil servants develop special interest in some departments while other departments are neglected.

**Team Work**

To have this problem of conflict solved, administration in the local government must be seen as a team work; and to a certain level, the interest of the whole departments constituting the local government council should be appropriately addressed as such.

All local government workers should develop interest in the LGC as an indivisible entity from where every staff including departmental heads derives his/her livelihood. There should be "esprit de corps". This is because failure in a department is a failure of that local government.

**Strategies for Conflict Resolution**

Different procedural strategies abound for the resolution of conflicts. These strategies could either be formal or informal. Among these myriad of strategies, a few stand out for consideration. Borrowing Zartman's six-fold typology (Zartman, 1997, p. 12) with modifications it will be discussed in what immediately follows, eight strategies for resolving conflicts. The first strategy is Reconciling and it involves the bringing together of disputing parties around a table by a neutral party in order for the feuding parties to bury their hatchets. In the parlance of labour relations, this strategy is otherwise called bargaining or negotiating. In either way, parties in dispute are called together to clarify the points of conflict and reach a peaceful compromise. In the case of local administration, this is a very invaluable strategy and it is hereby recommended.

The second is Allocating, and it is often adopted by the government when Reconciling does not prove very effective in conflict resolution. Here, the government intervenes directly and determines what each of the disputing parties gets as share or payoff.

Institutionalisation is the third strategy and it refers to the totality of institutional procedures both at the administrative and legislative levels in resolving conflicts. In other words, it is the application of rules or institutional procedures for the purpose of resolving conflicts. Moreover, the judicial decision is also part of the institutional procedure. It implies that, the feuding parties can seek redress in the law courts.

The other strategy is referred to as submerging. It "refers to government initiatives that overcome the conflict by putting forth new program, higher goals, overarching concerns, or reframe perceptions" (Zartman, 1997 p. 2). This strategy is found very suitable in local government administration. In instances of knotty conflicts, the local government authority can put in place new programmes, or set superseding goals and policies. In this way, the local government authority would have tactically submerged the conflict. It is equivalent to 'shifting the goal posts during the match'.

The fifth strategy of conflict resolution in Zartman's six-fold typology is Adjudication. Here the government boldly comes out with a clear policy statement regarding who is right and who is wrong in a particular conflict situation. This is an important strategy, which most governments usually shy away from adopting. Even in clear cases of justice, government finds it difficult to adjudicate without fear or favour. After properly constituting panels of inquiry, the white paper, or even the reports of those panels may not be allowed to see the light of the day. Notable in this respect are the cases of the report of Royal Committee (the committee was constituted by the Osun State Government in 1998) on Ife-Modakeke crisis, and the report of Ekundayo Panel of Inquiry into the chieftaincy conflicts in Ilorin in 1986. The reports of these panels were never officially released and consequently, no white paper was released. This scenario is common in Nigeria and it shows the trauma of justice. Furthermore, it has the tendency of creating a disintegrative
tension in the current fragile polity of Nigeria. In this connection therefore, the local government system across the country should adopt this strategy more often in local governance and it will mark the beginning of transparent local governance in the country.

The sixth strategy, which is Repression, is peculiar to authoritarian government where popular participation is discouraged or not allowed. It is the deliberate practice of stamping out conflicting agents or groups through intimidating means, which may include arrest, detention, assassination, tactful elimination or banishment. This strategy is not a democratic one but can only be used to suppress a revolutionary on subversive movement.

The seventh and the last strategy, which is considered equally important for discussion is Opting on!. This is not contained in Xartman's typology but it is equally important in that it is a unilateral action whereby the aggrieved party voluntarily withdraws without entering into negotiation with the other party. The strategy only requires that a dissatisfied member opts out without taking up arms against the other party. In this type of strategy, the two parties only disagree on mutual policies but could survive virtually independently of each other. The dissatisfied feels the best option is simply to opt out. Applying this to local governance, it is also possible that feuding parties may opt out when dissatisfied without designing devastating ploys to destabilise the local government administration.

**Conclusion**

Since conflict is a natural concomitant of all human interactions, and the essence of governance is conflict management every local government functionary should build the appropriate strategies of conflict resolution and management into his administration system. This should be coupled with high display of knowledge of human relations. In addition, local government functionaries should shun exclusive pursuit for selfish desires, hypocrisy and vainglory but should be firm in policy implementation and conflict-adjudication.

The principle of good governance such as transparency, accountability, equality, un-gagged information flow, popular participation in policy process, and leadership by example should constitute the framework upon which local governance must operate.

**References**


