PAN-NIGERIAN DIALOGUE AS AN OPTION FOR PACIFYING ETHNIC MILITIAS AND
PROMOTING ETHNIC CO-EXISTENCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The rise of different ethnic militias across the country today is causing apprehension leading to uproar in the land and may undermine our fragile democracy as well as re-echoing the 1966 civil war experience. This paper examines the factors that account for the emergence of militia groups starting by explaining the concept ethnicity, the genesis of ethnicity in Nigeria and why the ethnic militias have chosen lethal alternative of arms and ammunitions, while the security implication of the proscription placed on the militia groups were examined. Methods of promoting ethnic co-existence in Nigeria through the convocation of a pan-Nigeria dialogue were suggested.

Introduction

Nigeria is a conglomeration of ethnic, tribal, linguistic and cultural groups. In recent years, these diversities and heterogeneity have constituted a serious problem to this nation-state. There are intense ethnic/regional sentiments, claims and anxieties in the land. Mutual communal suspicion and distrust are also growing. Some ethnic nationalities say they are suffering discrimination, marginalization or exclusion. Others voice out feelings of oppression and injustice in the federation.

Particularly disturbing is the emergence of various ethnic militias that have taken up arms against the government and its agencies. Many innocent lives have already been lost while valuable property were rampaged or destroyed. Elsewhere, many people have seen it as a threat to our nascent democracy.

Initially, people did not pay attention to these agitations. They saw it as a spill over effect of many years of military dictatorship or the release of bottled up emotions which would eventually die down as soon as the new democratic experiment firms up. Another school of thought compared the situation to a passing phase in Plato's *Utopia*, when plutocracy as a system of government, was supplanted by democracy. As explain by Connford (1977) that:

The turning point is reached when the rich and the poor found themselves in a contest under plutocracy, for which the poor win, the result is democracy.

Thus, at first, many people believed the turmoil in some parts of the country was simply a phase, or the euphoria of freedom from the grips of many years of military rule, which would soon be over as the new democratic government establishes its legitimacy. But two years into the new government, the crises have not abated. Instead, they have continued to escalate. Form Warri to Ilaje, Modakeke/Ife, Odi to Choba, from Ajegunle to Shagamu, Ketu to Kano, Aguleri and Umuleri, Ogota and Minna etc. almost everywhere is boiling. All these as a result of ethnic loyalty gave birth to different ethnic militias under different names. In the Southwest for example we have, the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) holding sway particularly in Lagos agitating that non-Yorubas resident in Lagos should leave the area. In the North, the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) has risen as an antithesis against the activities of the OPC. In the East, the Igbos are mobilising under the banner of Egbesu (Niger delta) MASSOB, Bakassi Boys, Igbo Peoples Congress (IPC) etc.

Some see these communal/ethnic grievances, disturbances and hostilities as a pointer to reemergence of old animosities of the 1960s in Nigeria which involved intolerance of differences and recourse to negative primordial attachments associated with the fissiparous tendencies of ethnicism and tribalism of the ‘60s. This was a period when upheavals such as the minority ferments, the Tiv revolt, the Izon insurrection, “the Operation Wetin”, the January 15, 1966 coup d’état and the counter-coup of July 27 of the same year and the civil war of 1967 - 1970 claimed more than a million lives.

From the foregoing, it is admissible that since Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the polity has been more often marred by eruptions of hatred and violence stemming from dissatisfaction from her diverse socio-political segments.

What is the genesis of ethnicity in Nigeria? The rise of ethnic militias and why they have chosen to take to violence or armed struggle? And what are the security implications of the proscription of these militias groups? And what solutions do we have to the problem of ethnic violence and hostilities in Nigeria? These questions shall guide our discussion in this paper.

The word “ethnicity” is derived from ethnic which has its root in the Latin word *ethnicus* meaning pertaining to a people, especially those groups sharing a common language, distinctive cultural patterns and retain a kind of consciousness, based on such factors as language, legends, customs and religion even when members of such ethnic group may be essentially separated. Ethnicity therefore is a social phenomenon that is associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. While ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. The critical factor according to Kalusi (2000:112) may be language or culture or both.

In a similar dimension, Gbadegesin in Olutunji (2000:91) explains that ethnicity refers to the condition of belonging to an ethnic group (those who are related biologically or linguistically). He sees it as a moral condition that is neither good or bad because the ethnic group into which an individual is born is not within his power to dictate. It is however within the power of the individual to make use of this non-moral condition positively or negatively, thereby making it morally good or bad. It is in this respect that one can talk of ethnicism which is the politisation of ethnicity. Thus, in Africa as in many polyethnic societies of the world, language has clearly been the most crucial variable. Nnoli (1978:49) explains also that minor linguistic and cultural differences often exist within the group, forming the basis for delineation of sub-ethnic systems.

In the same vein, Ejiogu (1997:86) declares that although language may be a critical factor of ethnicity, it is not an all important maker of it. This is why, perhaps those who speak the same language, for example, the “Hausanized” group in Northern Nigeria, organise themselves as different ethnic groups when competing for the limited national political and economic resources. The type of segregation can also manifest at the micro level of sub-ethnicity as exists in, for example, the Mbaise Igbos; the Ngwa Igbos; the Ijebu Yorubas; the Ijesa Yorubas; the Ekiti Yorubas; the Okpes and other sub-ethnic groups of (Jrhobo among others.

With the foregoing, we could see that ethnicity or ethnic group consciousness is as Ejiogu points out, a pervasive phenomenon. It is complex and dynamic. In moments of crises, for example in a wartime or in national elections, ethnicity is subsumed under class, gender, age and religion. At such a moment, it becomes a mobilising tool for the people. Ethnicity is therefore used to violate all human rights, it is an unfriendly, parochial, resentful or hostile attitude towards or harm done to someone else because he/she is of another ethnic group. Harm here includes discrimination which carries a disadvantage. Thus, ethnicity is not used only to cover up corruption it is also used to promote nepotism, mediocrity, authoritarianism and office seeking and other forms of opportunism.

However, “Ethnocentrism” is a term commonly confused with ethnicity. Although both are related, they are quite different phenomena. According to Nnoli in Kalusi (2000:1 12) ethnocentrism is attitudinal in form and perceptual in content. It represents the subjective dimension of ethnic behaviour. Members within a group are ethnocentric when they are proud of it and hence are inward-looking. Their attachment to and pride in the group reflect their ethnocentrism. It features include beliefs, group identity, parochial orientation and group pride.

The Beginning Of Ethnicity In Nigeria

The genesis of ethnicity in Nigeria is linked with the colonial period. It was during this era that ethnic groups first acquired a common consciousness, created through both the colonial and postcolonial order. For example, it was only after colonization that the term Yorubaland began to be seen/used to refer to the domains of Oduduwa, instead of the kingdom of Oyo to which it had previously been referred. This ethnicity tendency manifested during the inter tribal wars among the Yorubas, the Ibadan people for
example were opposed to the alliance of the Egbas, Ijebus, Ekitis, Ijeshas and Ilorin over the control of trade in the area.

Similarly, the Igbos were organised into separate and autonomous political societies coterminous with the villages. Occasionally conflicts ensued and wars had to be fought to settle disputes among villages. The colonial and urban origin of ethnicity becomes glaring when it is realised that the phenomenon cannot exist unless individuals from different ethnic groups are in contact. Ethnicity therefore, is a social and not a biological phenomenon, while social contact is the prerequisite for the emergence of ethnicity.

In any social system therefore, whether primitive or civilized, an organic link unites the pattern of inter human relations and symbols with the technology and physical environment. What is important is that the link is organic. However, with the advent of colonialism, the colonialists had to establish a new set of social relations, and introduced a new system whereby there is high dominant foreign ownership of the means of production relations which unjustly exploited the labour of the majority of the population.

In an attempt to firmly establish its influence and government on Nigeria, the British colonial administration encouraged communal sentiments among Nigerians and used all available opportunity to spread the myth and propaganda that they were separated from one another by great distances, differences in history, tradition, racial, tribal, political, social, ethnological and religious barriers. For instance in 1920, Sir Hugh Clifford, the colonial Governor of the country at that time, made it abundantly clear that his administration would seek to pursue “to each separate people the right to maintain its identity, individual and nationality, chosen form of government and peculiar political and social instructions which have been evolved for it by the wisdom and the accumulated experiences of generations of its fore bears”. (Kalusi, 2000:113).

The intention of the colonialist manifested in the administrative patterns of indirect rule. However, this goal was achieved with the establishment of legislature in each of the three regions; the North, East and West with the basic aim of encouraging regional thinking. In the same manner, the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 not only preserved the regions but increased their powers.

Ethnicity as indirectly introduced into Nigeria political administration by the colonial masters also manifested in the activities and formation of political parties. The first political parties and associations such as the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC), Action Group (AG) and Northern People Congress (NPC) were formed on ethnic platforms. For instance, the activities of Awoowo and his Yoruba-dominated Action Group Party were meant to frustrate an NCNC government led by Azikwe, from winning election in the Western Region. The Action Group however, became the first party in Nigeria to be inspired by, founded on and nourished by ethnic chauvinism and regional parochialism. Thus, ethnic thinking began to dominate the outlooks of the nationalist leaders as can be deduced form their speeches, writings and activities.

In the same vein, the second republic’s political parties of National Party of Nigeria (N.P.N.), Unity Party of Nigeria (U.P.N.), Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP), Great Nigerian People’s Party (GNPP), Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) were formed on ethnicism. This was evident from the way the 1979 elections were won. Voting was dictated not by the manifestoes of the parties but the Ethnic group from where the leaders came. Even in 1993 when only two parties were involved in the June 12 election, ethnicism featured prominently in terms of the number of votes the candidates obtained in their ethnic areas.

One could therefore observe that the chauvinistic provocative, threatening speeches, remarks, utterances, writings, activities and personal political ambition of our Nationalist leaders must have enhanced the growth of ethnicity in various ways, while such speeches, writings and activities generated some phobia and ethnic clashes. And such extreme cases degenerated into inter-ethnic hostilities among Nigerian masses which resulted the ethnic massacre of 1966 and the consequent civil war that followed. These are clear manifestations of ethnicity in Nigeria. Although ethnicity in Nigeria is essentially connected with politics, it cannot be independent of social as well as economic structures and opportunities.
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Emergence Of Ethnic Militias In Nigeria

Militias struggle is a universal phenomenon and cuts across all social systems. For example, the Soviet Militia was created on November 10, 1917 as the organ responsible for maintaining law and order, it came under the authority of (1) Soviet Working Peoples and Soldier’s Deputies and (2) the People’s Commissariat for the Interior. Thus, on basis of these dual responsibility, the militia was able to operate with uniform law enforcement principles while at the same time taking local considerations into account. That is, the dual accountability “guarantees the unity of the militia’s practical activity in accordance with the law... it enables the local authority to guide the work of the militia, to supervise its activities and to strengthen its authority and links with the public”, (Karpets, 1977:34). Thus, we could see that ethnic militia or militia struggle has been there across the globe right from ages.

As earlier explained however, ethnic hostilities, grievances and dissatisfaction as a result of ethnic loyalty gave birth to different ethnic militias in Nigeria today. Though historically, only religious riots in the Northern Nigeria have always claimed several innocent lives and properties. These were mostly perpetrated by religious fundamentalists and extremists who always felt their religious rights of worship tinkered with by those they usually referred to as infidels. These riots subside at times and later re-echo in some areas later, but was only religious and not political. Though, many attributed the reoccurrence to long years of military rule, who were believed to have used or sponsored most of these riots so as to derail the transition programme and perpetuate themselves in government.

However, the advent of democracy on May 29, 1999 for Nigerians brought the hope that the country was going to hold for the people, since the Falcon can now hear the Falconer and things cease to fall apart. Hardly had the new administration recovered from the ecstasy of its inauguration than the crises erupted in major cities through the emergence of different ethnic militias.

Before the advent of ethnic militias in Nigeria, “Area boys” have been the only miscreants we know since the second republic, and they were known and used particularly in the street of Lagos as political thugs serving as bodyguards to politicians and intimidators of political opponents. Even till the end of the third republic they were still very popular in Lagos, causing street violence, breaking public peace, harassing and intimidating political Opponents of their political fathers or leaders. Though the then Lagos Island Local Government Chairman, Prince Ademola Adeniji Adele attempted to rehabilitate them by turning them into “good boys”, he used the machinery of the state to refurbish them by providing a space for them in the civil service. Thus, their militancy subsided and they started enjoying “better life” until recently that they resurfaced across the country in the name of ethnic militias fighting for one dissatisfaction or the other.

The Abacha draconian and tyrannical rule lasted almost five years between 1993 and 1998 specifically gave rise to a number of ethnic groups with militancy on their watchword and liberation of their people as the standard. The Ogoni and Andoni people of River State led by late Ken Saro-Wiwa were the first to emerge and demand for autonomy and liberation from the central government of Nigeria. The result of this agitation led to the formation of an armed wing of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP) which blew the wind of change and the fever caught on. Today, many other groups have since emerged under different names demanding for different things for their ethnic groups. Today, we now have Egbesu boys, the Membutues, the Oodua Peoples Congress (POC) Urhobo Youths, Bakassi Boys, llaje Peoples Congress, Ijaw National Congress, Ijaw Movement Forum, Ilaie Professional Organisation, Igbo Peoples Congress, Eket Youths, Arewa Peoples Congress, MASSOB among others.

Why Lethal Alternative Of Arms And Ammunition?

The social impact of structural adjustment, coupled with the effect of bad leadership and governance in the past two decades, have deepened the instinct of recourse to violence. Though another school of thought believed that the violent struggle of the various ethnic militias in Nigeria could be likened to an orgy reminiscent of the ethnic cleansing recently witnessed in Bosnia - Herezegovina, Burundi and Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Somalia and East Timor, which many believed may soon be over. Similarly, another school of thought viewed the violent act of ethnic militias.


in Nigeria partly as an extension of the tendency of the long years of military rule in which government deployed covert and overt state violence as a ready tool of political discourse and crises management.

Arguably, the unfortunate resort to a culture of violence by the youth is a direct result of the example of sadism and cynicism that have characterized the comportment of state at the highest levels in almost two decades. Young men and women, who have grown up under an atmosphere of state-sponsored violence as a ready tool of political discourse and crisis management. The decline in the quality, effectiveness and impact of Nigeria’s police culture and profession, no doubt, widens the space for the use of violence to thrive in our society. This decline of policing has again partly been induced by prolonged military rule.

The emergence of these ethnic militias therefore could be seen as the fallout of the failure of government apparatus to maintain security and justice. And since the government and its apparatus has failed in discharging these responsibilities, the ordinary people now rely on the ethnic militias for justice and protection. In another word, since the government and its apparatus (especially the police) had lost the initiative to protect lives and property of its citizens, people now look unto these dare-devil youths - armed militias scattered all over the land, protecting interest of the nationalities, who are either protecting one thing or the other in the nation called Nigeria or asking for equitable distribution of power and resources among the more than 250 ethnic groups making up the country.

From the foregoing, we could see that the violent struggle of these armed militias is said to be based on fight for justice, equity and fair play for all. This could be seen in different attempts across the country to inject sanity to our society through attempts to wipe out fraud, crime, corruption and all kinds of injustice and vices. In Osun State for example, the OPC members in Ilesa have been descending in indigenes whom they suspect as 419 operators, fraudsters and gun runners in the town. Their grouse is that these sudden millionaires have been snatching their girl friends by luring them with money! In fact, two chiefs of the town who were so alleged had to commit suicide because they could no longer stomach the ignominy associated with the ridicule and punishment the irate youths had visited on them.

The militia groups do not only usurp the duties of the police, they usurp those of the judiciary as well. They apprehend suspected criminals and hand out instant judgements in form of lynching, matcheting and burning of their houses and property. This resort to jungle justice is justified by its proponents on the ground that criminal suspects handed over to the police by the public are released by them without investigations and certainly without prosecution. Such suspects are believed to bribe the police to secure their release. Members of these militia groups argued that it is suicidal to hand over apprehended criminals to the police as such suspects, when they regain their freedom, turn on their captors with vengence.

Speaking in support of this militias groups Falana (2000) argued that:

Most of the boys on the streets, who are now called OPC boys in Lagos were known as “Area Boys”. These are elements who have been dislocated within the social matrix, who are now driven into frustration.

Thus, because they have no stake in the system, they are prepared to unleash violence on the system that has dehumanized them. For instance, if a man completed his degree programme in the university five or six years ago and he hasn’t got a job, and there is a violent demonstration in Lagos, why shouldn't he join? Besides, Falana (2000) also highlighted other causes of ethnic tension that might have been the reasons behind the rise of these armed militia groups. These include: resources sharing; power in its many forms; economic interest as in oil bearing areas and farmlands; religious intolerance; class and ethnic domination; cross - cultural conflicts; intrusion of external interest for economic and political reasons; charges of unredressed wrong; marginalization; perversion of justice against the voiceless and the deprived/underprivileged.

Thus, we could see that government and its apparatus are partly responsible for the rise of these militia groups.
Security Implications Of The Ban On The Militia Groups

Given the reduction in the rate of crime before the proscription of the ethnic militias. The OPC, Egbesu boys, Bakassi boys, APC etc. have come to represent the new hope of the millennium for the oppressed people of these nationalities. Thus, rather than ban them outrightly, or ask the police to “(lush them out” there is urgent need to regulate the activities of these groups to legally permissible limits which is to assist the police in the apprehension of suspects and hand them over to the police for investigation and prosecution, taken into account the fundamental rights of such suspects to fair hearing and dignity of the human person.

It may be argued that it is lawful for citizens to organise themselves into civil defence groups to protect their communities against the activities of criminals, thus complementing the functions of the law enforcement agencies. This can best be done however, where there are clear operational guidelines, regulating the conduct of such groups.

However, the general feeling across the country today is of fear and insecurity. Armed robbers and assailants are having are having a field day because of the clampdown on OPC and other militias. We now hear daily news of fatal armed robbery, assassination, extortion and fraudulent activities, all because the federal government ordered “a shoot on sight” threat on the militia groups. Thus making them to stop their street parades and vigilance work. A fallout of this withdrawal is the recent gruesome killing of a frontline architect and politician; Chief Layi Balogun on Dec. 7, 2000 and different attacks on bullion vans and banks on the streets of Lagos by armed robbers. Though the threat of “shoot at sight” did not deter some of these ethnic militia groups in some parts of the country because of the support they enjoy by some state governments and ethnic political associations like the Ohanaeze-Ndigbo and Afenifere having seen the ethnic militias as the only hope for the common man in a society where the people have lost confidence in the government and its apparatus.

Ending Ethnic Hostility Through Pan-Nigerian Dialogue

As earlier discussed, the long years of military rule had no doubt left the psyche of the average Nigerian youth touched. All they can think of now is the lethal alternative of arms. The carnage which have been metamorphosed into the ethic militias we have today, if not checked, may spell the doom for our nascent democracy”; while peace which has taken flight from our country may not return unless concerted efforts are made to address the grievance of the militia groups.

In this own view, Osifisan maintains that members of the militia groups can be controlled and refined so that we would not descend into what was witnessed in Congo-Brazzaville when militias of Pascal Lissomba and Gen. Dennis Sassou Nguesso had to come out in defense of their respective “Falconers” and things almost fell apart.

That the clashes of the ethnic militias may not recur in their violent dimension, the federal government through the National Assembly, or any other organ appropriate should convene a National/Sovereign National conference under any name to formulate and coordinate speedy response to ethnic agitation. This requires taking a reconciliatory measure through the convocation of the conference where all nationalities and interests will have a say in the structure of the country.

However, this conference is expected to resolve and offer permanent solution to major national questions such as political restructuring of the country, revenue sharing formula and the future of the minorities. The idea in some quarters that the conference would break Nigeria should be allayed. The convocation of this conference would give all the opportunity to go to the conference with an open mind and primary aim of discussing the many intractable problems, contradiction and contentious issues in Nigeria. We believe that the process of talking will inevitably yield some positive results that would solve lots of structural imbalances in the country. For instance, we have 774 local government out of which 450 are in the North, the Yoruba have 154 while the Igbo do not have up to 140 not to talk of minority which have a mere 60. This can only be addressed at a round table conference comprising all nationalities.

Though some people had also questioned the necessity for a conference when we have elected legislators, in truth, what is contemplated are discussions that transcend mere legislation, discussion that would touch the root of our existence and determine What sort of laws we will be governed by in the
future. Thus, for the conference to have credibility, it should be composed of both elected and unelected representatives, including various professional and interest groups. Therefore, the fear that the conference will undermine the current democratic system could be allayed because the conference is not the first of its kind. Under British colonialism for example, Nigerians went through several constitutional confabs whilst government business progressed. Similarly, the 1994/95 constitutional conference took place side by side with the military administration under late Gen. Abacha. The Republic of South Africa also conducted its CODESA successfully when the apartheid government of F. W. de Klerk was in office. Nigeria can achieve the same without denying legitimacy to the existing order. Thus we could see that the real threat to Nigeria may not be the conference but the sovereign/national conference is not taken seriously now, the problem of the ethnic militias and other ethnic or communal clashes in the country may be swept under the carpet for a while but would definitely resurface one day and it may plunge the nation into another civil war and as established by indigenous wisdom of Yoruba, “were sun, were sun, bi were ko ba ri bi sun mo yio bu eniyan je” meaning “if an insane person is ask repeatedly to shift from one place to another and getting to a stage that he lost his patience, he would definitely bite or fight back.”

Conclusion
This nascent democracy provides Nigerian another opportunity to rebuild the country, on the basis of justice, equity and fair play. What we are asking for is not for a particular ethnic group. The country has to be restructured because the longer we delay this conference, the longer our problems persist. The foregoing makes it clear therefore that the need for a Pan-Nigeria frank dialogue for the purpose of peacefully negotiating the restructuring of the country remains necessary and as urgent as ever. The present grudnorm is unhelpful in the overriding task of ensuring inter and intra-communal harmony and peaceful relations. Basic grievances and conflicting sectional aspirations remain unaddressed. It is time to heed the strident demand by many citizens and groups for such a dialogue.

References