

THE IMPACT OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE ON IDENTITY CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE BELT REGION OF NIGERIA.

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Abstract

The article examines the impact of democratic governance on violent identity conflicts in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria. The central thesis of this paper is that, the absence of profound democratic institutions provide ground for political mobilisation along ethnic and religious fault lines, therefore, stimulates violent identity conflicts in this region. The article employs midrange democratic theory to establish the nexus between democratic governance and prevalence of violent identity conflicts particularly in the Middle Belt. Midrange democratic theory admits that, midrange democracies are mere institutionalised elections, therefore undermining horizontal accountability and adherence to formal rules. The methodology employed in this paper is qualitative analysis, which relies solely on written sources, and it encompasses documents, monographs, manuscripts, journals articles as well as government reports. Democratic governance is essentially about profound institutions building which transcends mere institutionalisation of elections, thus, the absence of adherence to formal rules serves as a major cause of violent identity conflicts. This is because central to identity conflicts and violence is the absence of profound democratic. The paper recommended that, eradicating identity conflicts in Nigeria should transcend the symptoms of Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversities to focus on

addressing the institutionalised marginalisation and inequalities that precipitate not only violent conflict in the Middle Belt but Nigeria in general.

Key Words: Democratic Governance, Identity, Ethno-Religious, Violent Conflict, Middle Belt

Introduction

Barely after Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, there were expectations that democratic governance would offer a better framework for management of identity conflicts, and address the recurrent phenomena of identity conflicts that were often experienced during military era. Instead, the country however found itself in the throes of unprecedented violent identity conflicts, mostly expressed in ethno-religious character. Since transition to democratic rule in 1999, the resort to ethnic and religious identities has suffused Nigeria's political landscape, with severe consequences for political stability. "Etched in the consciousness of many Nigerians, ethno-religious identities have proved far more resilient than national interests" (Agbiboa, 2013, p.4).

Ukiwo (1999) noted that "the rising incidences of violent ethno-religious conflicts is being traced to the return to civil rule in Nigeria" (p.1). Violence and insecurity have reached levels considerably higher than those experienced under previous military regimes, a problem that is

clearly hazardous for Nigeria's fledgling democracy (Lewis, 2007, p.1). Between 1999 and 2007, more than five hundred cases of identity violence have erupted throughout the country, in which at least 11,000 people have lost their lives (Lewis, 2007). Also, between 1999 and 2010, over 10, 000 individuals lost their lives as a result of violent ethno-religious conflict (Agbibo and Okem, 2011).

Violent ethnic and religious conflicts have been a frequent phenomenon in the Middle Belt. With democratic renaissance, the area has witnessed unprecedented level of violent ethno-religious conflicts resulting in wanton destruction of lives and property. For instance, within a decade, multiple violent ethno-religious conflicts have taken place in Plateau State. During the May 2011 violent ethno-religious conflicts more than two-hundred people were killed (Kwaja, 2011). However, this has shown that, democracy has enlarged the culture of lawlessness and become trigger of identity conflicts (Uhunmwangho and Epelle, 2011). "Democratic governance with the underlying emphasis on the activation of the citizenry to realize the 'common good' has not taken root in the popular consciousness of Nigerians" (Uhunmwangho and Epelle, 2011, p.109). Therefore, "a major contributory factor to ethnic conflicts is the undemocratic nature of governance" (Kazah-Toure, 1999, p.110).

It is imperative to establish the nexus between democratic governance and identity conflicts particularly in the Middle Belt area. The mobilisation of ethno-religious identity is often the part of the prevailing norm of struggle and contestation over state power, and a strategy for access to state resources (Akintola and Peter, 2019). It has also become the attribute of the state in Nigeria's post-colonial society, as access to state power has become the only viable avenue for primitive accumulation of wealth (Peter, 2020; Peter and Ocheni, 2015). The linchpin of this article is that, democratic renaissance in Nigeria opened up space for struggle and contestation over power and

access to resources among ethnic and religious groups. Due to absence of profound institutions, democratic governance precipitate unrestrained struggle and contestation over state power and resources by the elites, which resulted in violent conflicts, especially between ethnic and religious groups in the Middle Belt. It is in light of the above that the paper raised a serious question on interface between democratic governance and prevalent of identity conflicts in the Middle Belt Region. The objective is to ascertain whether democratic governance in Nigeria has provided grounds for violent identity conflict in the Middle Belt Region. Furthermore, the increasing level of identity conflicts in the post military period engenders proposition that link identity conflicts to democratic governance.

Conceptual and Theoretical Exposition

The term identity is an elusive concept; this is due to the fact that, concepts in social sciences defy any attempt at universally acceptable definition. Osaghae and Suberu (2005) define identity as "any group attribute that provides recognition or definition, reference, affinity, coherence and meaning for individual members of the group, acting individually or collectively" (p.5). Blanco-Mancilla (2002) as cited in Agbibo, (2013) defines identity as "an ensemble of subject positions,' e.g., 'Muslim Hausa,' 'Christian Female,' 'northern Nigerian;' each representing the individual's identification with a particular group, such as ethnicity, religion, gender" (p.19). "This definition captures the way people view themselves in Nigeria, where identity is defined by affiliation with religious and ethnic groups rather than the Nigerian state" (Agbibo, 2013, p.19).

Conflict is an inherent feature of politics. Conflict in a general sense denotes a scenario whereby individuals, groups, communities, and nations with divergent aspirations who pursue incompatible goals for which disagreement is eminent and if not properly manage may erupt into violent and

destructive nature (Dunmoye, 2012). “Conflict is a type of interaction that is characterised by antagonistic encounters or collision of interests, ideas, policies, programmes and persons or their entities” (Dunmoye, 2012, p.16). “Conflict may be defined as a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to neutralised, injure or eliminate their rivals. Such conflict may take place between individuals, between collectives, or between individuals and collectives” (Coser, 1956).

“Ethno- religious conflict is a form of conflict supposedly generated on the basis of real or imagined “difference” rooted in ethnic and religious identities” (Egwu, 2011, p.49). “The notion of ethno- religious identity derives from the congruence and the mutually reinforcing relationships between ethnic and religious identities in the social and political process” (Egwu, 2011, p.49). “Sometimes, religious identity becomes part of an ethnic group’s identity or vice versa, (Salomone, 1991 as cited in Egwu, 2011, p.49). The multiple number of factors that often precipitate violent ethno- religious conflicts are the state of skewed ethnic relations and struggle over access to state power and scarce resources, discriminatory practices linked to citizenship, as well as elites’ manipulation (Egwu, 2003). Hostilities between Hausa/Fulani and minority ethno-religious groups are referred to as ethno-religious. On the other hand, increased politicisation of religion by the state, and subsequent introduction of sharia penal code by many states in the north, has given popularity to phenomenon of ethno-religious conflicts all over the country (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005, p.8).

Different analytical explanations have been offered with regard to identity politics in Africa. The modernisation theory states that, identity is a natural condition of individual and groups, therefore is basically established, for instance, tribe, kinship, and ethnicity among others (Kasfir, 1979; Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). While, the

Marxist view state that identity is not a natural condition but an ideology (Kasfir, 1979). However, the situational thesis denotes that, only identity that is readily available for political demand, mobilisation and action may be regarded as important and applicable to a given situation (Kasfir, 1979). That ethnic identity is not fixed and steady. Therefore, one out of multiple identities can offer motivation for political action. That is, it is the political situation that determines actors’ choice of prefer particular social identity. The individual’s choice may be primarily ethnic, class, religious, or a combination of these identities. This choice may be constant or it may change from one situation to another (Kasfir, 1979). However, all these theoretical propositions do not offer holistic explanations on why proliferation of violent identity conflicts upon Nigeria’s return to democratic rule in 1999.

“A culture of democracy is fundamentally a culture of peace” (Boutros-Ghali as cited in Diamond, 1997, p.3). Institutionalised democracy inhabits within itself norm that foster peaceful conflict resolution within the society (Diamond, 1997). The settlement of ethnopolitical disputes in institutionalised democracies hinges essentially on the enforcement of global standard of equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, and recognition of ethno-religious diversities, and group expectations for different community status (Gurr, 1993, as cited in Diamond, 1997). In democracies, especially those with firmly established representative systems, smaller units have the political constituency to rally and influence response inside the democratic process, and they forgo patronage and endorsement when they resort to violence and insurgency (Diamond, 1997). The policies and traditions that resolve ethnopolitical disputes and amicably manage differences encompass maximum political and civil rights for ethnic minorities, policies that alleviate their poverty, and safeguard their languages and cultures, regional autonomy with purposeful

devolution of power, and formular for sharing power, building multiethnic alliances, providing extensive access to power at the center (Diamond, 1997).

In contradistinction, the middle-level democracy clearly expressed fundamental civil freedoms of expression and association, it however, provides for narrow citizenship rights and a weak, vulnerable rule of law (Diamond, 1997). A typical instance of the midrange democracy is, that political system that provides for freedom of political choices through the employment of basic freedoms of association, for the purpose of free competition between the elite through peaceful channels, and without excluding any position of national decision-making from that competition (Linz 1996, as cited in Diamond, 1997). Albeit, this definition includes the right to demand for competitiveness, but it allows democracy as enshrined in the constitution, to a highly narrow civil liberties and minority rights inconsistent with the principle of liberal democracy (Diamond, 1997).

Another proponent of the theory is Guillermo O'Donnell in his latest theoretical reflection on democracy. The central point of his thesis is that, "many democracies of the third wave are mere institutionalised elections, undermining horizontal accountability and adherence to formal rules" (Diamond, 1997, p.16). Individuals "must be able to exercise their rights of citizenship not only in elections but in obtaining the fair access to public agencies and courts that is often denied in midrange democracies (Diamond, 1997, p.16). Midrange democracy is characterised by prevalence of political violence and conflicts. Owing to the fact that individuals and groups have in the slightest, some rights to convey their grievances against government (Ukiwo, 2003). In midrange democracies, conflicting groups may lay their claims, but the regime lacks the capacity to meet their demand because democratic process and political culture are not deeply institutionalised. That is to say the presence of democracy does not generate

conflict, but lack of institutionalised formal rules does (Mousseau as cited in Ukiwo, 2003).

It is in the light of middle-level theory that the prevalence of violent identity conflicts in Nigeria in relation to democratic renaissance can be explained. The middle-level democratic theory established clearly, the interface between democratic governance and identity conflicts, which is traceable to the absence of effective citizenship and profound institutionalised formal rules. In this case democracy does not go beyond institutionalised elections, therefore, the marginalised groups who feel alienated and frustrated are likely to mobilise and exploit primordial identity.

Impact of Democratic Governance on Identity Conflict in Middle Belt Region

Democratic transitions are a sequence of deep institutional transformation. Established democratic governance requires not only rule by constitution, but essential rearrangement of the rule of engagement (Mozaffar as cited in Ukiwo, 2003). As Gurr cited in (Ukiwo, 2003) observes "the process of transition creates threatening uncertainties for groups and opens up a range of transitory political opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs" (p.177). Thus Ake (2000) asserts that, "the interface between democratisation and ethnicity entails that, democratisation is inherently conflictual because it entails a radical redistribution of power as well as the acceptance of a political culture of equality" (as cite in Ukiwo, 2003, p.117). In a situation characterised by the absence of redistribution of power or equal access to political offices, which is typical of some African countries, the defects of democratic transition can cause violent conflicts due to dissatisfaction by the public whose expectation of democratic governance were not met (Ukiwo, 2003). Since democratisation provides conditions necessary for groups to compete for power, render it liable to conflicts, particularly where so much importance is attached to

political power, couple with the absence of institutionalised mechanism for political competition, making political actors prefer exception rather than the norm (Ukiwo, 2003). The issues that ignite violent competition, in which competing groups move to adopt zero-sum game, include the control of state power, resource allocation, and citizenship (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005).

The often-expressed fear is that, transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes in Africa will trigger violent identity conflict between and among different ethnic and religious groups, (Diamond, 1997; Ukiwo, 2003,). It is observed that, “the process of transition creates threatening uncertainties for groups and opens up a range of transitory political opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs” (Gurr as cited in Ukiwo, 2003, p.117). By and large, before the trend of democratisation where legitimate political unit that are necessary for democratic transition is missing, politicians create conditions suitable for identity manipulation. In the same vein, during and after democratisation, politicians manipulate frontiers and identities to create backyard of influence for their respective political interests (Schmitter as cited in Ukiwo, 2003). Egwu argued that, “ethno-religious conflict is driven by the wider issues of democracy, and governance that is found in the underlying economic, political, and social dynamics (Egwu, 2011, p.53). Also, “in environments marked by scarcity and poverty, ethnic and religious identities tend to become political resource deployed by the elites and groups in the competition for power and material advantages” (Egwu, 2011, p.54).

The Middle-Belt is the “cultural borderline states of the Muslim north, where Muslim Hausa-Fulani groups have been pitted against non-Muslim ethnic groups” (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005, p.19). Geographically, Middle Belt stretches from the east to west across the central area of Nigeria. The minority ethnic groups in states such as Plateau, Nasarawa, Taraba, Benue, Kogi and the various ethnic minorities of

Southern Kaduna, Bauchi and Niger states, are predominantly Christian, with significant number of Muslims also (Danfulani and Danfulani, 2018).

The significant presence of Hausa/Fulani communities and the competition for power and resources has heightened tension and conflict (Egwu, 2011, p.55). The colonial intervention, however, transformed the character of inter-group relations and transformed the relationships that hitherto existed between the “Hausa/Fulani” communities and the northern ethnic minorities. (Egwu, 2011, p.56). Another cause of conflict is that, the ethnicisation of state policies creates and maintains a stratified system of citizenship that has inflamed violent conflicts throughout the country (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). Aside from the ethno-religious conflict that often occurs between the ethnic minorities and Hausa/Fulani community, there is also the reality of inter-ethnic tension and violence among the ethnic minorities (Egwu, 2011, p.57).

The Middle Belt has remained the epicentre of ethno-religious violence, which seems to have intensified with transition to democratic rule in Nigeria. The Kaduna violent ethno-religious crisis of 2000; the Bassa/Ebira violence in Nasarawa state; the Jos sectarian violence of 2001; and the long running violent between Tiv and Jukun in Wukari as well as the Chamba and Kuteb conflict in Taraba state (Egwu, 2011). Another example of violent ethno-religious conflicts is Tafawa Balewa clash in 2000 (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005).

“The Southern Kaduna zone has occupied a volatile position in the twentieth century history of inter-group conflicts and tensions in Northern Nigeria. It has experienced complex conflicts, occasionally violent, and mostly assuming an ethnic form. Linked with these have been questions of social equality, citizenship, community rights, and democracy” (Kazah-Toure, 1999, p.111). The violent ethno-religious conflict that erupted in Kaduna in February 2000 following attempts by the government of

Kaduna state to introduce Sharia provides useful instance of the interface between democratic governance and ethno-religious conflict. “The violence that engulfed the northern city of Kaduna in March 2000 is a logical consequence of the protracted ethno-religious conflicts that had plagued Kaduna State from the late 1980s and the early 1990s” (Egwu, 2011, p.66). The Kaduna state Police Command reported a total of 609 deaths, 1,944 houses were destroyed including business premises and hotels, 746 vehicles were burnt, and about 123 Churches and 55 Mosques in various locations in the metropolis including Kachia, Birnin Gwari, Zaria Local Government Areas were destroyed. It was also established that properties worth of N4,929,306,603.00 and N1,445,881,151.00 were destroyed (Kaduna State Government, 2000).

Election has remained one of the triggers of violent conflict in Nigeria. Hundreds of lives have been lost in every national election since the beginning of Fourth Republic. A typical example of election violence was the 2011 post-presidential election riot which led to death of more than 1000 individuals (Angerbrandt, 2018). The 2011 post-presidential election resulted into another violent conflict between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna state (Tonwe, and Eke, 2015). The violence that erupted in Kaduna metropolis spread into other areas of the state, Zonkwa has been adjudged to be one of worst affected areas. More than 300 Muslims were killed; mosques, shops and properties were razed. (HRW, 2011). This attests to fact that, the likelihood of electoral violence is connected to the issue of weak institutions (Angerbrandt, 2018).

The polarisation of citizen along ethno-religious line also made allocation of public good such as employment and resource allocation skewed from 1999-2012. Which further entrenched and etched ethnic and religious consciousness and polarisation among the citizens (Danmaraya, 2017). The lack of capacity by the present democratic

governance to get rid of military tendencies and evolve a truly democratic structure, which accommodate and allay the fears of the marginalised group, is a principal cause of conflict. The absence of true democratic governance is manifested in multiple security threats in some parts of Kaduna state, where there are frequent attacks on innocent citizens of the state by unknown gunmen (Danmaraya, 2017).

Plateau State is one of the areas well-known for the prevalence of ethno-religious violence in the Middle Belt. Multiple attacks in January 2010 resulted in the death of almost 500 people, and displaced 18,000. An attack in March led to death of 300 to 500 people (Kwaja, 2011). The conflict in Jos always assumed ethno-religious character, mainly between Christian-dominated ethnic group on one hand and Muslim Hausa and Fulani on the other hand (Kwaja, 2011).

In September 2001, the city of Jos was engulfed in a violent ethno-religious conflict, which claimed over 1,000 lives, and displaced thousands of the individuals (Egwu, 2011). Contestation over citizenship rights appears to be one of the underlying causes of conflict, the most prominent seems to be claims and counter claims over the ownership of Jos (Egwu, 2011). The 2001 violent conflict in Jos, which claimed more than 1,000 lives has been connected to the opposition to the appointment of a Muslim as head of the lucrative post of coordinator of the federal government’s Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP). Hence the opposition of the Christians and indigenous groups to the appointment led to the resignation of the appointee, a situation which alienated the Hausa/Fulani (Egwu, 2003; Egwu, 2011). Another instance is the appointment of a Christian as a local council chairman in Jos in September 2001 which triggered violence that led to the death of about 160 people (Agbibo, 2013). The prolonged violence being experienced in Jos town and other areas of Plateau State is linked to the politics of Local Government creation, districts and chiefdoms for the Hausa-Fulani community, who feel

marginalised in Plateau State politics. This brings to the fore the perception that, the defunct Jos North Local Government Council was created only for the Hausa-Fulani (Danfulani and Danfulani, 2018.)

While most of the conflicts in the Middle Belt since 1999 have been between the indigenous ethnic groups and the Hausa/Fulani, conflicts have also erupted between the indigenous ethnic groups over claim and counter claim for political and economic power. In Nasarawa State, there were violent conflicts between the Azare and Tiv over issue of political domination in June 2000. The Tiv were also engaged in conflicts with the Jukun in October 2001 over politics and control of land. The bloody clashes that ensued led to the destruction of whole communities. Conflicts in both Nasarawa and Taraba states were triggered by fears over alleged Tiv domination (Alubo 2002).

Inter-ethnic conflict between the Tivs and Jukuns is one of typical example of identity-based violence that cut across many states. Running for decades, at the centre is issue of land. Between October 2001 and January 2002 violence erupted as a result of Jukuns declaration of Tiv as settlers, therefore not entitled to any land in Jukun communities (Tonwe, and Eke, 2015). In another violent conflict, between the Jukun and the Chamba/Kuteb groups on the 13 February and 4th May 2013, in which the cause stemmed from prolonged animosity due to marginalisation on the basis of indigeneship (Tonwe, and Eke, 2015).

The policy of indigene/settler divide, which imbued within itself ethnic, communal, religious and regional origins have evolved from an enshrined system of discriminatory practices in which non-indigenes are denied equal access to opportunity and resources. These discriminatory practices which were entrenched by the colonialists and continued by post-independence regimes, have produced and sustained a system of citizenship that has provoked violent conflicts all over the country (Tonwe and

eke, 2015). “Weak political institutions that attempt to manage diversity through ethnic balancing, rather than forging understanding and acceptance among diverse groups, is at the root of identity-based conflicts in Nigeria” (Tonwe, and Eke, 2015, p.2). Due to lack of the institutional mechanism for managing identity conflict by the state, President Olusegu Obasanjo employed the military might under a democratic government to settle disputes in Odi, a remote village in Bayelsa State in November, 1999 and Zaki Biam, a remote Tiv enclave in Benue State in 2000, over killing of 19 Soldiers suspected to have aided the Jukun in a tribal war (Alubo 2006).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Barely after democratic renaissance in Nigeria, the country found itself in the throes of violent identity conflicts, mostly expressed in ethnic and religious character, particularly in the Middle Belt Area. Linked to this is political mobilisation along ethnic religious fault-lines which clearly point out that, in spite of entrenchment of democratic governance, there is the absence of profound institutionalised rule of law. The entrenchment of a highly divisive public policy of indigene/settler divide, also precipitates violent conflicts among diverse groups in the country. Identity fault-lines were possible to be exploited as a result of defective democratic governance. The paper suggests that, violent identity conflict can be checked if the government and policymakers will adopt these key recommendations. Political institutions should be deeply institutionalised and strengthened so that they would serve as mechanism for amicable management of ethnic and religious differences. National policy and programme which incorporate group desires and allay their fears, however small the group is should be established. Third, the government should build a political culture that promotes accommodation and tolerance between diverse groups, this will promote dialogues and peaceful resolution of dispute.

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