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Ethnic Minority Problems in Nigeria: A Historical and Political Study

Dr. Adigbuo, Ebere Richard

Senior Lecturer, Department of History and International Studies, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract:

The 1960 Nigerian Constitution under which the country gained its independence concisely forbade any discrimination against any particular community, religion or socio-political opinion. Nigeria history shows that there is no formal constitutional restriction on minority socio-political rights. Nonetheless, this general constitutional principle of non-discrimination was rested within the context of stiff competition and conflicts for economic and political resources by the ethno-regional blocs that fathered the country. Cries of varying forms of discrimination and neglect by the ethnic minorities have continued. In the wake of Nigeria's independence, many minority politicians rebuffed the stranglehold of the three ethno-regional blocs and demanded the creation of separate regions to guarantee their freedom. The departing British colonial authorities, while appreciating the fears of the minorities rejected the demand for additional regions. A Willink Commission was appointed in 1957, to investigate the minority fears. Unfortunately, the mismanagement of ethnic minority fears had at times erupted into violent conflicts. The resurgence of ethnicity in Nigeria's fourth democratic dispensation has necessitated an affirmation of the relevance of the past, the agency of history and of course the currency of the present, all combined to create a better future in Nigeria and other countries with ethnic minorities.

Keywords: Ethnicity, minority, colonialism, Nigeria, civil war

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a remarkably plural society considering its vast population, diverse ethnic groups and multiple languages. With an estimated population of over 170 million, she prides as the most populous black nation on earth (Ojo, 384-385). The country is assumed as one of the world's most ethnically diverse (Ojo, 384-385).

The country is comprised of about 374 ethnic nationalities that for analytical purposes can be classified as majorities and ethnic minorities (Mustapha, 2006). Linguistic and cultural differences are part of the characteristic features of these ethnic groups, a situation best understood with knowledge of the country's history. Nigerian historiography can in essence be divided into three phases: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial phases. But since Nigeria is a colonial creation, it is safest to look at the ethnic issue from the colonial times. Secondly, as Ikime aptly observed, the leaders of the various ethnic groups which constitute Nigeria naturally took the existence of these groups for granted. It is almost as if these groups of Nigeria have always been identified as Igbo, Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Efik, Ijo, Tiv, Idoma, Ebara, Igala, Itsekiri, Jukun, Bini, Esan, Isoko, Urhobo, etc. Yet, it is certain that these peoples did not begin to identify themselves in these terms until the emergence of the colonial state of Nigeria (Ikime, 2006, p.85).

Until the emergence of the colonial state in Nigeria, linguistically, what were spoken were variants of the same language. Ethnic identity shown in the similarity of language and culture, at the inception of colonialism, did not result in common political action as a matter of routine. At the colonial setting, it did not make sense to speak of Hausa, Yoruba, Ibibio Igbo, or Tiv. Ikime further attested that at the inception of the colonial period, it made far more sense to speak of Kano, Katsina, Zazzau, Awka, Onitsha, Afikpo, ife, Ondo, Oyo, etc., i.e. to speak in terms of groupings that regarded themselves as socio-political units. It therefore follows that ethnic consciousness, whether as majorities or minorities, was non-existent at that period of the Nigerian history.

The above assertion does not in any way preclude the consolidation of political power and the rise of many resistance movements in the pre-colonial history of Nigeria. The rise of Dan Fodio in the Sokoto Caliphate is a case in point. Dan Fodio's jihad was a success story, in the sense that his efforts contributed greatly in making the Sokoto Caliphate a prominent state that had stretched across northern Nigeria and could without reservations be described as the most prominent state in West Africa as at 1837. But as with other authoritarian regimes that relies on an ideology, Dan Fodio's ideology was constructed on Islam and effectively engineered with the use of force. Even, at the height of Dan Fodio's successes, his brother Abdullahi expressed serious reservations on what he saw as the perversion of the ideals of the jihad. The periphery, which in today's parlance can be taken as minorities, was also a problem since the ability to dominate rested on two bases: the acceptance of the ideological religion-Islam- and the effective use of force to coerce the unbelievers, particularly as the jihadist ventured into Central Nigeria. There were other non-Islamic groups that out rightly rejected Islam and the possibility of any political dominance from outsiders. Their complaint was similar to what is current in today's minority fears: the desire of an authoritarian regime to exploit the conquered, whether in drawing slaves then or in plundering resources. Sokoto caliphate can be classified as a success story politically, before its eventual overthrow by the Europeans. Though the 'success' was anchored on good combination of ideology and force, yet it is a feat that must be received with a pinch of salt. The oppositional forces

were not limited to the rejecters of Islam. Anger was unleashed when the economic plight of the new converts worsened and the degradations associated with authoritarianism increased. Thus, the sedentary pastoralists had to turn against the Fulbe leadership that was mainly the nomadic Fulani. Neither ethnicity [Hausa-Fulani] nor religious ideology [Islam] could salvage the situation (Falola, 2008). This was the situation before the Sokoto caliphate was overthrown by the British colonists.

1.1. Ethnic Consciousness in Nigeria: the Colonial Creation

Colonialism did not only bequeath Nigeria with English language; it also sowed the seed of ethnicity. British colonialism forcefully welded disparate ethno-cultural groups into a single political entity, without the machinery to foster unity. Instead, the imperial master in the bid to ensure effective governance stirred up policies that kept and still keep Nigerians, to a large extent, divided. The policies include the following:

- The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates. Tied to these socio-culturally different groups, is the emergence of the North and South dichotomy that has continued to plague Nigeria till date. Wisdom demands that had the country been broken up into smaller and more equal groups, none will be talking about minority fears today. Britain ensured the solidification of that dichotomy by other policies.
- In 1939, the British Governor Bourdillon, while leaving the North of Nigeria intact, further divided the southern counterpart into, the Western and Eastern regions. Bourdillon ensured that the Hausa is the official lingua franca used in the Native administration of the North, a region that had seemingly enjoyed a Moslem majority through the jihadist wars of the Sokoto Caliphate and the British officials. No common lingua franca was recommended for the West or Eastern Regions and the Southern Regions remained distinct cultural and social groups they were in existence before Britain colonized the territory. Two issues are manifest in this regional configuration. The northern region is distinctively greater than the two southern regions; second, each of these regions was dominated by three demographically majority ethnic groups: Hausa Fulani, for the North; Igbo, for the East and Yoruba for the West. Regional politics gradually snowballed into ethnic politics.
- In law making terms, the British Governor issued proclamations in the North, while a Legislative Council made laws for the South. It was only in the 1946 Clifford Constitution, that a common law making system was introduced for the country. Hitherto, the North and the South Nigeria were recognized deliberately as separate units. Out of these proclamations and legislative statutes, emerged administrative districts, divisions, provinces and regions through which Nigerians were supposed to relate with one another or put simply, re-model their colonized lives. The eventual 1954 constitution is remarkable in enlisting Nigeria as a federal state with corresponding regions: North, West and East. Political power has to be shared between a central government and the three ethnic dominated regions. Ethnic politics started to take roots, particularly as Nnamdi Azikiwe was frustrated from representing Lagos by the Yoruba dominated Western House of Assembly, in the central legislature after winning the election. Azikiwe's return to the Eastern Region equally displaced Eyo Ita, an Ibibio, from the leadership of the National Council for Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC). Eyo's newly formed party, the United National Independence Party (UNIP), unsurprisingly became anti-Igbo, and thus reinforced ethnic sentiments and minority fears.
- 1954-1960 can be described as the period of the institutionalization of regional politics in Nigeria and the development of ethnic minority fears and discontent in the country. A *Commission of Inquiry into the Fears of Minorities and the Means of Allaying Them* was established by the British authority. The minority fear was genuinely based on the possibility of replacing the British colonial rulers with indigenous elites drawn mostly from the majorities. British failure to proffer adequate and timely solution to the minority grievances then, has continued to plague the country till date.
- The Macpherson Constitution of 1956 and the 1958 independence Constitution did not help matters. The North had a disproportionate number of representatives in the central legislature than both the East and Western Regions. Invariably, the North was the beautiful bride the British was disposed to hand over the government at independence.

From Nigeria's independence in 1960, the country's politics had been fraught with mutual suspicion, distrust, and an acute case of minority paranoia of majority domination. Claims and counterclaims of racial discrimination, socio-political and economic strangulation as well as marginalization are manifestations of Nigeria's ethnicity problems. Till date, there is the tendency to view all major political issues from the lenses of ethnicity, to the extent that 'scholarly' discussions on politics are also adjudged relevant or otherwise with the same receptacle (Ukiwo, 2005, pp. 7-23).

Thus, considering the domineering inroad and influence of ethnicity into Nigeria's politics, this study undertakes to perform a study of ethnic minority fears in Nigeria. How can ethnicity and minority be conceptualized? What are the features of the ethnic minority groups? In what phases, can Nigeria's experience of the minority problem be grouped? Why had the minority fears lingered in Nigeria despite certain palliative measures? These questions are intended to guide this study. Some clarification needs to be made on these concepts.

1.1.1. Conceptualizing Ethnicity and Minority

Ethnicity is a relatively new concept coined in 1953 by David Riesman. It gained popularity in the 60's and 1970s when scholars sought its epistemological relevance (Maleševi and Hall, 2013, pp.561-579). Ever since the concept can be described as a mobile one meaning different things to different people (Vaughan, 2003). Etymologically, ethnicity has its roots in the Greek word *ethnikos* which was used to describe pagans, non-Hellenic and non-Jewish populations. On this note, therefore, it refers to non-citizens. To Anglo-Americans however, ethnicity is often taken to mean the minority groups within a larger society. The European tradition, on its part,

considers “ethnicity” as nationhood defined by descent and territory (Maleševi, and Hall, 2013, pp. 561-579). This semantic confusion is a source of worry. Nonetheless this study will be guided by the elucidation given by both Isijaw and Gurr’s on these two concepts: ethnicity and minority. Isijaw gave four pronged conceptions of ethnicity: a primordial phenomenon, an epiphenomenon, a situational phenomenon and as a subjective phenomenon (Isajiw, 1992). The primordialist conception regards ethnicity as something given or ascribed at birth (Isajiw, 1992). This reasoning associates ethnicity with common biological or cultural origin (Yang, 2000, pp. 39-60). The primordialist approach to ethnicity is considered insightful in its explanations on the developing tendencies of ethnic groups. However, it is difficult to explain why new ethnic groups emerge, as well as why people, over time, change membership of ethnic groups (Yang, 2000.). This shortcoming must have led to the emergence of the other variants of ethnicity. The argument of the epiphenomenon approach is largely Marxist in tone. This approach stresses that ethnicity is simply a secondary effect created by social stratification. Put differently, the approach suggests that ethnicity is something created and maintained by an uneven economy, or is a product of economic exploitation (Isajiw, 1992).

Ethnicity according to the Marxists is a bourgeoisie creation meant to divide the proletariats into different blocs in order to undermine the class revolution by the workers. The Marxist concept of ethnicity is believed to emerge from the mutual relations between the oppressed and oppressor nations (Gulshan, 2013). It is however instructive to note that this approach has been met with a wide range of criticisms possessing empirically disconfirming evidences (Isajiw, 1992). Ethnicity as a situational phenomenon is a constructivist approach which is based on rational choice theory. From this perspective, ethnicity is considered as neither singular nor fixed (Gulshan, 2013). Rather, it is a rational decision to belong or not to belong to a group. This approach is premised on the observation that particular contexts, usually cost and benefits, may determine which of a person’s communal identities or loyalties are appropriate at a time. Ethnicity as a situational phenomenon is considered as a set of processes and social relations which may be invoked according to circumstances (Hitchcock, 1999). Lastly, subjective approach understands ethnicity as a social-psychological reality.¹⁹ This approach explains ethnicity in two somewhat related dimensions.

First, ethnicity is described as the categorization of groups based on mutually perceived boundaries rather than objectively distinct culture. The second dimension of the subjective approach describes ethnicity as a concept which has lost its practical everyday value but now purely exists on a symbolic note (Isajiw, 1992). None of these approaches is sacrosanct since each paradigm has its merits or demerits. A synthesis must emerge. That synthesis is seen in conceiving ethnicity to mean the categorization of people within a given society along lines of ancestry, culture, self-interests, and/or economic, social and political structures.

Minority, as a concept, is less complex going by the United Nations definition of the term. In 1950, the UN defined minorities as “those non-dominant groups in a population which possess and wish to preserve ethnic, religious and linguistic traditions and characteristics markedly different from those of the rest of the population” (Helpburn, 1978, p.1). The Minority Rights Group International made further clarifications in situating minority groups as the “disadvantaged ethnic, national, religious, linguistic or cultural groups who are smaller in number than the rest of the population and who may wish to maintain and develop their identity” (Walker, 2012 p. 238). From these two definitions, size and power configurations are determinants of a minority status in a territory. A small group that enjoys a disproportionate measure of political power does not qualify in this minority categorization. It is against this backdrop that Stevenhagen observes that the uneven and exploitative relationship between the dominant and minority groups may take the form of “unequal regional development or differential access to positions of privilege or power, or of different forms of segregation and discrimination in social, economic or political life” (Stavenhagen, 1983, p.122). Ted Robert Gurr gives further examinations of what constitutes ethnic minority issues. Gurr identified five factors that had animated ethnic minority grievances since 1945:

- a. Unequal treatment of minority communities by dominant or “mainstream” groups;
- b. Competition with other groups for access to power in new states;
- c. The contagious effect of ethno-political activism elsewhere;
- d. Pattern of state building, political power and economic development that channel communal energies into either protest or rebellion; and
- e. The emergence of new ethnic minority elites who are willing to, and are adept at, mobilizing their constituents in response to changing political developments, opportunities and resources (Gurr, 1993 p.123).

Gurr went further to distinguish five types of ethnic minority groups - ethno-nationalists, indigenous peoples, ethno-classes, militant or politicized sects and communal contenders. In societies where the communal contenders predominate, political power at the center is often based on shifting intergroup coalition. Ethnic minorities from Gurr’s perspective are communal groups which experience systemic discrimination in a state, and have taken political action in support of their collective interests (Gurr, 1993). In societies where communal contenders predominate, political power usually centralized is often based on shifting inter-group coalitions. These ethnic coalitions use often a mix of concessions, co-optation and repressive measures to maintain their dominant position. African countries including Nigeria are dominated by communal contenders. Nonetheless, it is instructive to find out what actions these ethnic minority groups, as communal contenders, have taken to safeguard their interests in Nigeria and how had the pursuit of such interests been interpreted or checkmated by others groups. The pursuit of certain collective or even regime interests leads to conflict. In most multicultural societies like Nigeria, ethnicity is associated with disputes and violent conflicts occasioned in pursuit of identified or subsumed interests. This study however focuses on the political analysis of Nigeria’s ethnic minority problems, manifested in the different phases of the nation’s history.

1.1.1.1. Nigeria's First Republic and Ethnic Minority Grievances (1960-1966)

On October 1, 1960, Nigeria gained its independence from Britain. The independence was greeted with massive enthusiasm and hope for what the country holds for the teeming population and the political elites. However, independence was not an especially joyous moment for minorities whose fears of domination were not allayed as expected before independence. Thus, as far as ethnic minorities were concerned, independence did not mean a clean break from the colonial situation. The government which took over from the colonialists was a product of the 1959 federal election which was conducted under the platforms of regionalized political parties. Thus, minority groups had little or no roles to play in the newly formed independence government.

Corroborating the foregoing, Mahmudat contends that Nigerian politics in the immediate post-independence years was simply a triangular competition between the three regions, carried out through the instrumentality of ethnically controlled political parties (Mahmudat, 2010). As part of the 'triangular competition', the Mid-West Region was created in 1963.

This was the initiative of the NPC-led federal government to further weaken the Western Region and the Action Group rather than a genuine response to the plights of minorities in the Mid-West region. Incidentally, whereas the NPC and its junior partner, the NCNC-led government found some solace in creating the Mid-West Region, it had at the same time given deaf ears to the demands of the people of the Middle Belt and Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers for the creation of their own separate states (Ojo, 2012). Even with the creation of a new region, the fear of domination by the majorities continued.

While the Northerners feared Southern domination since the Southerners were more educated, the Southerners were in turn overwhelmed by the fear of Northern domination considering their numerical strength. It was therefore against the backdrop of majority suspicions and minority fears that the first republic which officially began in 1963 came to a violent end in 1966.

On January 15, 1966, in a series of coordinated actions, a group of young army officers launched Nigeria's first military coup which truncated the First Republic. The coup however faltered and eventually failed as Maj. Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi, the then military commander quickly assumed power. Intending to unify the country, Ironsi promulgated Decree No. 34 which attempted to abolish the federal system in Nigeria, raising more fears to both the dominant ethnic and minority groups.

The Northern elites understood the coup of January 15, 1966 alongside Decree No. 34 as grand strategies of the Igbos to dominate the entire country. The response was immediate. Protests and riots followed, and the result was the massacre of several Igbos and non-Igbo southerners living in the North. Besides the massacre, on July 29, 1966, some Northern military officers launched a counter-coup which ended the Ironsi regime. At the end of the coup, Col. Yakubu Gowon, a Christian of Northern minority extraction, emerged Nigeria's Head of State and was to lead the country across the tumultuous years of civil war (Meredith, 2006, p. 197).

2. Nigeria's Civil War and Ethnic Minority Issues (1967-1970)

The Nigerian Civil War was a 30-month military campaign that pitted the Nigerian Government against the Eastern Region that renamed itself the Republic of Biafra. The war officially began on July 6, 1967 when the Nigerian government ordered a "police action" to retake the secessionist Biafran territory. After months of fierce fighting, with huge material and human losses, the war ended when the Biafran troops surrendered to the Federal military commanders on January 15, 1970 (Yongo, 2015). While it lasted, the war attracted vast international attention both for the brutality, events that today would qualify for war crimes, and for the perception of certain international observers (Mahmudat, 2010). While Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu led the Biafran side, Gen. Yakubu Gowon led the Nigerian side. Decades after the end of the war, there has been a near-thorough review of the war in literature. This is evidenced by the abundance of literatures that either discusses the causes and the course of the civil war.

There are other analysts that focused on the consequences of the civil war. Iwuagwu, as an example, examined the economic effects of the Nigeria-Biafra conflict on the life of Igbos, especially as regards food production (Iwuagwu, 2012). Similarly, Effiong investigated the aftermath of the war, arguing that the Civil War would never come to an end considering the decision of the Nigerian side to continue to suppress Biafra's ingenuity and resourcefulness (Effiong, 2012). The point to stress is that scholars have over the years given attention to an analysis of the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict.

However, there is apparently a dearth of literature that addresses the condition of ethnic minorities during the Civil War. During and after the war, it was not uncommon for the media and members of the academia to quote figures of Igbos who were either killed by Nigerian soldiers or died of starvation and malnutrition. Chinua Achebe, for instance, claims that the war was a genocide launched by the Muslim North to exterminate the Igbo people (Achebe, 2012, p. 225). A similar report claims that the Nigerian troops hunted and killed all Igbo males above the age of five (China, 2012 p. 229). In the same vein, Enahoro claimed that the Igbos during the war were "bearing the burden that rightly belongs to all who sought progress for Nigeria" (Omaka, 2014). Nonetheless, without disregard to the atrocities committed against the Igbo people, it is instructive to note there seems to be a deliberate effort to misplace the plight of ethnic minorities during the war. The defunct Republic of Biafra comprised over 29,848 square miles (Minahan, 2002, p. 762). The area consists of present day Enugu, Ebonyi, Abia, Imo, Anambra, Cross-River, Akwa Ibom, Rivers and Bayelsa states.

Some parts of Delta and Edo states were also part of Republic of Biafra. This therefore connotes that some ethnic minorities were part of Biafra. Such ethnic minorities that might ordinarily not qualify to be Igbos are the Efik, Ibibio, Anang, Ijaw, Kalabari, Ogbia among others. These minorities were not excluded from the war. One may therefore wonder why the Igbo people have been the focus of most attention as regards the Civil War.

Did the Biafran minorities support secession? Ojukwu, leader of the secession, claimed that the minorities in Biafra were excited by the opportunities for liberation which secession presented (Omaka, 2014). Ojukwu's claim does not however tally with the testimony of B.J. Ikpeme, senior Medical Officer with the defunct Eastern Region, who reported that the people of Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers Province did not favour secession for fear of Igbo domination but were coerced into submission. Ikpeme further noted that all those who dared to speak against Igbo leadership were either imprisoned or tortured and sometimes summarily executed. There are reports

of Biafran soldiers invading non-Igbo communities to root out all those who opposed secession. Examples of such communities include Enyong, Attan Onoyon, Ikot Okpot, Odoro and Ikot Ekpeyong in present day Akwa-Ibom and Cross River States, where many villagers were shot and houses destroyed on the basis of suspicion of sabotage.

Also, on October 18, 1967, The New York Times reported that the Biafran troops executed about 169 civilians in detention at Calabar, who were Biafrans of non-Igbo origin, upon the arrival of Federal troops. It is also recorded that in February 1968, Biafran soldiers evicted several Kalabari people at Bakana from their homes and forcibly sent them to such Igbo towns as Umuahia, Owerri, Abiriba and Ozuitem.

Similarly, after the Battle of Onne, Biafran soldiers forcibly evacuated some of the inhabitants of Onne, relocating them to Port Harcourt, on suspicion of having collaborated with Nigerian troops (Omaka, 2014). In addition, it is imperative to point out that ethnic minorities were also victimized by Nigerian soldiers in the course of the war.

Cronje, a Western journalist reported that the Nigerian Air Force had bombed ethnic minority areas as much as it bombed the Igbo area (Omaka, 2014). On the same note, William Norris of the Sunday Times, London, reported that a reign of terror had been created in Port Harcourt, a predominantly Ikwerre population. In his words, the ruins of Mary Slessor Memorial Hospital at Itu, of the hospital of Itigidi, and of the Cheshire Home at Port Harcourt, stand as a kind of grisly memorial to something that must be if words are to retain any meaning (Omaka, 2014). In the same tone, it is reported that during Nigeria's demining project as mandated by the United Nations' Ottawa Convention of 2001, oil fields belonging to ethnic minorities in Rivers State harbored the highest number of unexploded bombs and landmines in the entire country.

These explosives are arguably a few remnants of several others which must have exploded on some poor and unsuspecting civilians in their search for livelihood. Also, at Asaba (present day capital of Delta State, dominated by the Oshimili people, a sub-section of the Anioma ethnic minority group), the federal troops in 1967 murdered an estimated one thousand civilians including women and children (Bird, and Ottanelli, 2014). Worse still was the deliberate attempt of the federal military government to shield the Asaba event from media coverage (Bird, and Ottanelli, 2014). In light of the foregoing, the point to stress is that while the Nigerian Civil War lasted, some ethnic minority groups in Nigeria were actively involved and as such recorded some huge losses in terms of life and property. This view therefore debunks the traditional claim that the Civil War was simply an Igbo-Hausa war.

On January 15, 1970 Philip Effiong, an Ibibio indigene, who also doubled as Ojukwu's deputy, surrendered to the federal troops; thus, the Nigerian civil war came to an end. Pertinent to note however, is that prior to the official declaration of the Nigeria-Biafra War, the Federal Military Government had on May 27, 1967 replaced Nigeria's four-regional arrangement with a 12-state structure, at least to allay the fears of ethnic minorities.

There were other reasons for the state creation in May 1967. Some claim it was a strategic move by Nigeria's government to dissuade the Easterners from secession attempt. While the foregoing statement is arguable, the stated objective for state creation was "first to remove the fear of domination" and to strengthen the country's federalism (Ojo, 2008). In the new 12-state structure, the North was divided into six states, the Mid-West remained unaltered while the Eastern region was divided into three states. In the West, Lagos State was separated from the Western State. The introduction of the 12-state structure into Nigeria's federal system gave relative satisfaction to long-standing ethnic minority demands for new States. Six of the 12 states had long been demanded by ethnic minorities (Rindap, 2014). Thus, the creation of 12 states balanced the Nigerian federal system as six states comprised of ethnic majorities while the other six states were from the ethnic minorities (Suberu, 1996, pp. 16-26). As such, the creation of states appeased all those who were infuriated by Ironsi's Unification Decree. Another reason for the creation of the 12 states was to compensate the ethnic minorities for the enormous support they gave to the Nigeria's Head of State, General Gowon during the Civil War (Aghalino, 1995, pp. 16-25). Besides the Civil War, another major event that occurred in the years between 1967 and 1970 was the declaration of the independence of the Niger-Delta Republic by Isaac Adaka Boro, Sam Onwunaro and Nottingham Dick.

This was occasioned by the unmet wishes and aspirations of oil minority communities especially as regards revenue-sharing formula and environmental pollution. Arguably, it was this event that marked the beginning of the Niger Delta struggle for years to come (Aghalino, 1995, pp. 16-25).

2.1. Nigeria and Ethnic Minority in the Post War Years (1970-1983)

As Nigeria's civil war ended, the government launched a program to reconstruct, rehabilitate and as well ensure reconciliation across the war-weary country. The period coincided with an increased royalty from oil sales which increased government revenue. As such, it was the government to embark on some capital projects across the country. As regards ethnic minorities; one of the major achievements of the Gowon administration was that ethnic minorities received greater representation in form of ministerial appointments from the government (Aghalino, 1995). Also, in a bid to reduce ethnic and minority fears in the country, General Gowon established the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). This scheme made it mandatory for Nigerian graduates to contribute to the development of the country through a national service in states other than theirs. Yet ethnic minority fears did not diminish, leading to an increased demand for the creation of additional states in 1974.

This pointed to the fact the 12-state structure was inadequate and did not completely satisfy the yearnings of the Nigerian ethnic minorities. Notable Nigerian politicians at the forefront for the creation of more states include Chief Anthony Enahoro and Shettima Ali Monguno (Aghalino, 1995,). In response, Gowon observed that "in principle more states would be created" (Aghalino, 1995, pp. 16-25). Gowon's failure to create more states, continued postponement of handover to civilians as well as a growing discontent against his leadership style, led to the coup of 1975 which eventuated in the Murtala-Obasanjo regime (Aghalino, 1995,). The military regime was faced with the task of creating more states at least to assuage the fears of the ethnic minorities within the country. Murtala Mohammed eventually created seven additional states bringing the total number of states to 19 (Yongo, 2015: 71-78). Aghalino, notes

that “the creation of nineteen states was meant to reduce minority problems, give room for even development and provide for a strong Federal structure” (Aghalino, 1995, pp. 16-25). However, this new structure rather deepened Nigeria’s minority problems as it unbalanced the majority/minority equality in terms of number of states. The 19-state structure allowed ethnic majorities to dominate a total of twelve states while only seven states were allocated to the ethnic minority groups (Suberu, 1996, pp. 16-26).

In addition, the Murtala-Obasanjo administration had as well marginalized ethnic minorities in the South-Eastern State when it failed to implement the recommendation of the Ayo Irikefe Panel on the need to split the minority South-Eastern State into two separate states. Rather, the Federal Military Government decided to keep separate the two contiguous and homogenous Yoruba states of Lagos and Ogun even while the Irikefe Panel recommended that both states be merged (Suberu, 1996, pp. 16-26). Economically, the Murtala-Obasanjo regime introduced a stricter fiscal policy that altered the existing revenue sharing formula in the country and thus ensured the concentration of financial resources under the Federal Military Government.

By this arrangement, there was a massive transfer of wealth from oil-rich minority states in the South to other parts of the country. Whereas oil-producing states previously retained 50 percent of all mining rents and royalties, this new arrangement meant that only 20 percent of such rents and royalties were reserved for the respective states of derivation.

Later, all rents and royalties were completely withdrawn from states into a Federation Account, a move which sorely angered minorities, especially of the Niger Delta extraction. The foregoing notwithstanding, the Murtala/Obasanjo regime is hailed for handing over power to civilian administration after years of military rule.

More so, prior to the hand-over, the military regime introduced the federal character principle as an institutional and legal attempt to address Nigeria’s ethnic minority problems. The federal character principle was basically designed to ensure balanced representation of all ethnic groups at all levels of government.

2.1.1. Ethnic Minority Problem from 1979-1999

Nigeria’s second republic began the moment Obasanjo handed over power to President Shehu Shagari. However, regardless of the earlier attempts to address the ethnic minority problems, as already observed in this study, very little progress was recorded in the second republic. Political parties continued to be ethnically aligned in terms of formation and leadership (Salawu, 2011). There were six registered political parties at the time among which three were essentially of ethnic majority character.

The National Party of Nigeria was predominated by the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group while the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria dominated the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). In the East, The Igbos rallied around Nnamdi Azikiwe’s National People’s Party (NPP). Thus, this ethnic configuration of political parties alongside an ethnic conscious voting pattern eventuated in the minorities being reduced to second fiddle as far as national politics was concerned.

More so, perhaps drawing from the ethno-regional character of the general elections, the Shagari administration imbibed an ethno-regionalist zoning policy which rather than ensured the equitable distribution of the spoils of political office rather, reinforced the predominance of Nigeria’s ethnic majorities (Quaker-Dokubo, 2000). On December 31, 1983, the Shagari-led administration was toppled by a military coup led by General Muhammadu Buhari. The Buhari coup itself was read by many within the Southern political elite as a further narrowing of the base of political power to a core Hausa-Fulani oligarchy (Mustapha, 2000, pp. 88-121). Notwithstanding, Nigeria had been wholly plunged into another era of military rule which lasted until 1999, another democratic regime came in place. Gen. Buhari’s regime was short-lived but still made its lasting impressions in the history of Nigeria especially as it crippled political activities.

Buhari’s regime was however replaced in 1985 by the regime of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, another Northern military officer who ruled Nigeria from 1985 to 1993. During the Babangida era, ethnic minority discontent intensified following his polarizing political, religious and economic policies. More so, the years of Babangida’s administration coincided with a global resurgence of ethnic nationality and sectarian movements, particularly in Eastern Europe.

In 1990, ethnic minority grievance articulation came to its head when some young military officers from different minority groups across the country (especially from North-Central and South-South geo-political zones) staged a coup d’état which was allegedly on behalf of “the marginalised, oppressed and enslaved peoples of the Middle Belt and the South with a view to freeing [ourselves and children yet unborn] from eternal slavery and colonization...” (Omoigui, 1990). The coup attempt was foiled by Nigeria’s military forces but nevertheless underscored the resentment and perception of Nigeria’s minority elements who seemed out of touch with Nigerian political and economic reality (Mustapha, 2000). Similarly, in 1992, there was the Zangon-Kataf crisis which pitted the people of Kataf, a northern minority group, against the Hausa-Fulani people.

Within the Niger Delta, oil-rich minority groups were continuing in their pre-independence agitation against the domination of ethnic majority groups. Features of the Niger-Delta agitation included kidnapping of oil workers and expatriates for ransom, repeated blockading and invasion of oil installation as well as legal and publicity options. It was in the heat of the Niger Delta agitation for emancipation that Gen. Babangida established the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992, to manage allocations to oil communities and ensure the development of oil producing communities. In 1993, Gen. Babangida “stepped aside” from government after an unpopular cancellation of the 1993 general elections. An interim government was headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan who was however overthrown shortly afterwards by General Sani Abacha.

Meanwhile, it is instructive to note that in 1993 alone, an estimated 3.69 billion naira was lost to Niger-Delta agitation (Quaker-Dokubo, 2000). Also, it is needful to point out that Babangida in his attempt to address minority agitation for the creation of new states added a total of eleven states to Nigeria’s 19-state structure (Leith, and Solomon, 2001). However, the creation of new states did not entirely assuage the fears of the minorities. Examples of such ethnic minorities include the Urhobo, Isoko and Ijaw people of Delta state as well as the Hadejia people of Jigawa state (Aghalino, and Danmole, 1995: 16-25). The regime of Gen. Sani Abacha engaged

the carrot and stick methods in addressing Nigeria's ethnic minority problems (Quaker-Dokubo, Charles, 2000). Sometimes the regime coerced the people into obedience, while at other times it instituted policies meant to address ethnic minority agitation across the country.

One of the most remarkable policies of the Abacha regime as regards addressing ethnic minority problems was the creation of six additional states which increased Nigeria's federation to a total of 36 states. The number of local governments was also increased to 774 (Rindap and Mari, 2013). The creation of new states did not however resolve ethnic minority grievances as the fears of marginalization continued. In Benue state as an example, smaller ethnic groups like Idoma, Jukun, Igede among others continued to lament the domination of the Tivs at the expense of minority ethnic groups (Rindap and Mari, 2013). Similar situation is seen in Delta State where the Anioma people have repeatedly condemned the domination of the Urhobo people. In effect, with the creation of new states, new minority groups emerged in an erstwhile minority area. The Abacha regime is especially remembered for its clampdown on the agitation of oil-producing minorities in the Niger Delta region; Abacha is particularly remembered for the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, an activist that derided the exploitation and degradation of oil producing communities by the multinational corporations. The regime however came to its end in 1998 following Abacha's death; he was succeeded by General Abdusalami Abubakar, who is credited for conducting an election and handing the government to an elected civilian administration within a year.

2.1.1.1. Ethnic Minority Problems from 1999...

Nigeria became a representative liberal democracy in 1999. A former military dictator, Olusegun Obasanjo was elected as the president. The restoration of democracy in Nigeria however, coincided with the resurgence of ethnic minorities' agitations for equity in the distribution of resources, and for inclusion in mainstream politics (Leith, and Solomon, 2001). Agitators this time were from the oil-rich minority groups in of the Niger Delta.

These peoples have advanced their claims through such movements and organizations as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), as well as the South-South Elders' Forum, among others. During the Obasanjo era, Nigeria's security forces responded to Niger-Delta militant activities by launching Operation Restore Hope, a military campaign comprising of personnel drawn from virtually all national security agencies.

The resultant effect was the destruction of several Niger Delta communities, loss of lives and disruption of commercial activities. Nigeria's President Yar'Adua however adopted a different tactic to resolving the Niger-Delta crisis. Amnesty was granted to militants who exchanged their arms for some material benefits from the Federal Government. The Amnesty Initiative was largely successful in managing the Niger Delta crisis, though pockets of revolts continued thereafter. In 2010, following Yar'Adua's death, his deputy Goodluck Jonathan, from Bayelsa state in the Niger Delta became Nigeria's president. He was the first person from the Southern ethnic minority to rule Nigeria. The moment he sought for a re-election in 2015, the minority ethnic groups under the aegis of the Nigeria Ethnic Minority Rights Movement, NEMRM, opted to support Jonathan's presidential bid for re-election in the 2015 general elections.

- The early minority's fears of domination by the majority ethnic groups would prove to be justified when the British left, and signs abound that this would be continued should we vote in a majority/majority ticket which the APC has fielded. We urge our people to rise against this domination and develop a fourth force (after the three major language groups of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo) that will counter this evil agenda against ethnic minorities (Ibrahim, 2015).

After about six years of governance, President Jonathan relinquished power to Mohammed Buhari, the flag bearer from APC. President Jonathan was endorsed by all the minorities for a second term. Jonathan's successor, President Buhari had scarcely completed one year when he was inundated with criticisms over his appointments, favoring mainly his people from the North. Attesting to this is Peter Ameh the National Chairman of Progressive Peoples' Alliance who attested that Buhari's appointments "do not reflect fairness, equity and balance in all the geopolitical zones of the country". Ameh perceived the appointments of the president as the 'confirmation' of the regional agenda of Buhari's government:

- It is painful to see that the South-East zone, which constitutes the third leg of the tripod on which Nigerian nation was built as of independence and even today, has been conspicuously missing from all the sensitive appointments so far made since his resumption of office as our dear President (Ameh, 2015).

Nigeria's eminent constitutional lawyer, Professor Ben Nwabueze lent his support on the accusation of marginalization of the South East geo-political zone. According to the jurist, the South East was excluded in 31 strategic appointments, President Buhari made in his first ten months of office:

- He appointed thirty-one appointments, none from the South East; is that what they call justice? In thirty-one strategic appointments in a constitution that says that social order is founded in justice. What does justice mean and what does it require...The Constitution can fairly be described as consultative government; you have to consult with various agencies established by the constitution. Is he doing that? (Achi and Silas, 2016).

President Buhari did not help matters over his unconcealed choice of his kit and kin in these strategic appointments. His choice of words is quite revealing:

- If I select people whom I know quite well in my political party, whom we came all the way right from the APP, CPC and APC, and have remained together in good or bad situation, the people I have confidence in and I can trust them with any post, will that amount to anything wrong? I have been with them throughout our trying times, what then is the reward of such dedication and suffering? They did not defect because of positions, they did not involve themselves in the pursuit of personal gains, and they accepted their fate throughout our trying moments. What is wrong if I make you the secretary (of the federal government) because I have confidence that things will go normal? (Odunsi, 2015).

Buhari's decision to reward his ethnic nationality – Hausa Fulani - with strategic positions at the expense of others has re-invigorated ethnic minority fears in Nigeria. Cautious strategies in handling these fears will disprove, possibly, the claims of his detractors that “Buhari is Nigeria's problem, not its solution” (Hoekstra, 2016). Hoekstra, the former chairman of the U.S. House Intelligence Committee, further accused Buhari of heightening ethnic fears and tension within the polity:

- Much of these tensions arise from Mr. Buhari's decision to cut amnesty payments to militants and an excessively hard-line approach in a socially and politically sensitive environment...In the country's south, protests have been met by a bloody response from the Nigerian military, stoking the fire and galvanizing support for an independent state of Biafra. Rising tensions could again pose one of the greatest threats to Nigeria's stability and future (Hoekstra, 2016).

3. Some Observations and Conclusion

Minority problem has existed at every stage of world history. Nigeria is therefore not an exception. What might be unique is how the ethnic minority problem has been handled in Nigeria. The Nigerian government has actually taken many measures to eradicate or rather minimize the problem. These include the creation of states, the division of the country into six geo-ethnic zones to facilitate inter-ethnic power sharing, establishment of a federal Character Commission, to monitor, enhance and enforce the implementation of the federal character principle in public institutions, a proposed devolution of some federal powers to state and local governments to ensure that the “competition for political power at the federal level may become less intensive, less attractive or acrimonious” (Vanguard, 1995, p.10). The restive Niger Delta oil producing states, received a 13 percent of mineral revenues on a derivation basis; this measure was possibly made to compensate them for the ecological damages that accompanied oil explorations. To what extent had these measures relieved the country of minority complaints? Using the state creation as an example, it is sad to note that minority problems have not vanished from the country.

State creation had been conceived as a way of allaying the fears of the minorities from 1957 the Willink Commission was established. Today, Nigeria has 36 states with a Federal Capital territory in Abuja. This ironically makes Nigeria with about 170 million to have more states than China and India, with 34 and 28 states respectively. Both China and India have over one billion people each. Equally, while states have multiplied in Nigeria, there has not been commensurate economic growth. What has actually multiplied is duplication of offices and political appointments. It is unfortunate that only Lagos and three or four other states are today solvent and can today pay their workers' salaries as at this moment the paper is written. Others owe their workers up to eight months in arrears.

Minority conception is almost an ideological smokescreen with the continued shouts of domination by the majorities. This does not in any way obviate leadership lapses associated with particular regimes in Nigeria. What is certain is that the ethnic minorities have actually produced more political leaders than their ethnic majorities. What was not received through the soap box was got through military coups; this meant that the minorities produced more military heads of states than their majority counterparts. It is at this instance that Kukah aptly remarked:

- With the entrance of the Presidential Villas firmly shut to the minorities, it became evident that the best way to attain power was subverting the democratic process since it offered them no prospects. After all, it is, they argue their blood that has held Nigeria together in her war and crisis. Why should they do the dying only for the big three to merely produce the distributors and do the living? The military, therefore, has become an aphrodisiac for the minorities (Kukah, 1994, p. 7).

Thirdly, the pervasiveness of the word – minority – has not helped matters. The solution of one minority issue has led to the creation of others. The creation of Delta State has today endowed the erstwhile minority Urhobo group a majority status, while the Ijaw, Ishekiri, Ndokwa and Anioma groups are now the minorities. There is now an emergence of what can be described as ‘majority minorities’ and ‘minority minorities’ in Nigeria. It is in this sense that Tatari Ali once asked his compatriots in the 1997 Constituent Assembly the following questions:

- Why should people think of minority? Is it because of size or population? At district level, also they talk of minority and at the village level also they talk of minority and where do we stop...even in the so-called minority area you will find that within themselves there are minorities (Tatari, 1997).

Without counting on the denials of what constitutes the meaning of minority, its existential implications can never be wished away. The resurgence of ethnic minority conflicts in Nigeria and all over the world is a source of concern. Efforts must be made to checkmate these conflicts. Gurr's prescription in handling such conflicts is apt. Gurr identifies conflict reduction mechanisms to include the process of dispersing inter-ethnic conflict by diluting the points of power to take the heat off any one focal point; encouraging political alignments based on interests other than ethnicity; creating opportunities and incentives for inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic cooperation; and targeting political, economic and social policies to reduce disparities between groups (Gurr, 1991 pp. 185-6). This is a call for tangible devolution of powers in a way that promotes popular participation in the decision making process; the devolution is a sufficient

guaranty for local autonomy to all the federating units, including Nigeria's restive areas.

Drawing from the foregoing is the need to re-visit the contested debates over the national question in Nigeria. This issue is significant if the lesson from the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia is anything to go by. Irredentist movements in Spain, Scotland and Canada can never be wished away. Nigeria must revisit its basis of co-habitation, whether through a sovereign national conference or through the representatives of its ethnic nationalities. There is no denying the fact that there is a clash between an imposed western-style nation-state project and one that advocates a national unity project that recognizes and upholds plural identities. The sovereign call for local autonomy and equal access to power and resources by the federating units remains the panacea for a possible dissolution of the union, previously described as a geographical expression.

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