

**DEMOCRATIZATION AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION
IN NIGERIA (1999-2007)**

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of ethnic militias and the intensification of ethno-regional nationalism demanding a re-negotiation of the federalist foundations of the Nigerian state have resulted in the escalation of ethno-religious conflicts in many of Nigerian's urban communities. This problem seriously hampers efforts at national integration as it applies to the building of a nation-state out of the disparate ethnic, geographic, social, economic and religious elements in the country. Foundational issues, which had hitherto been classified as 'non-negotiable' in the constitution-making process of the late 1980s, appeared to have been re-invented in recent times. These issues constitute the core of the 'national question', which has lingered and remained unresolved since independence. It is in this regard that this paper explores how the resurgence of ethno-nationalism and religious extremism pose a major threat to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The study attempts to answer the following questions: Is the simultaneous spread of democracy and of ethnic conflicts an accident of history, or mutually connected processes? Is ethno-nationalism compatible with the legal framework of a nation-state? Does democracy exacerbate conflicts, or does it help resolve them? How could multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria resolve the contradiction between democratization and conflicts? The paper argues that competitive political parties and open elections tend to mobilize and politicize regional, ethnic, religious and racial solidarities in divided societies. This again tends to intensify disintegrative processes of fragile states without contributing to their stability or legitimacy - at least, in the short run.

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Résumé

La prolifération des milices ethniques et l'intensification du nationalisme ethno-régional exigeant une renégociation des fondations fédéralistes de l'État nigérian ont abouti à l'escalade des conflits ethno-religieux dans plusieurs communautés urbaines nigérianes. Ce problème nuit sérieusement aux efforts d'intégration nationale puisqu'il s'applique à la construction d'un État-nation à partir des éléments ethniques, géographiques, sociales, économiques et religieux du pays. Les enjeux fondamentaux qui avaient jusque-là été classés comme «non négociable» dans le processus constitutionnel de la fin des années 1980, semblent avoir été réinventés récemment. Ces questions constituent la base de la «question nationale», qui a persisté et est resté en suspens depuis l'indépendance. C'est dans ce contexte que cet article explore la façon dont la résurgence du nationalisme ethnique et de l'extrémisme religieux pose une menace majeure pour la consolidation démocratique au Nigeria. Cette étude tente de répondre aux questions suivantes : Est-ce que la propagation simultanée de la démocratie et des conflits ethniques serait un accident de parcours historique, ou serait-elle due à des processus interconnectés? Est-ce que le nationalisme ethnique est compatible au cadre juridique d'un État-nation? Est-ce que la démocratie accentue les conflits, ou aide-t-elle à les résoudre? Comment les sociétés multiethniques pourraient-elles résoudre la contradiction entre la démocratisation et les conflits? Cet article fait valoir que le multipartisme et les élections ouvertes ont tendance à mobiliser et politiser les solidarités régionales, ethniques, religieuses et raciales dans les sociétés divisées. Ceux-ci tendent également à intensifier, au moins à court terme, les processus de désagrégation des États fragiles sans contribuer à leur stabilité ou leur légitimité.

Introduction

The apparent triumph of liberal democratic values immediately after the cold war gave impetus to a wave of democratisation that swept through the continent of Africa in the 1990s. The fall of communism and pressures from foreign donors, coupled with years of economic mismanagement, suffocation of civil society, corruption and marginalization under ruthless dictators prepared the groundwork for the new wave of liberalization. The elevation of liberal democratic values as a 'global ideology'

involves the co-operation of a range of agencies and of many non-governmental actors, trans-national movements and organisations at the national and international levels. Popular organisations and communities, and members of all classes found themselves sufficiently empowered to undermine authoritarian rule. A direct consequence of this was the emergence of pro-democracy movements in almost all the countries of Africa to co-ordinate and spearhead the global crusade for democratisation. Thus, the immediate post-cold war democratisation led to the fall of military dictatorship (Nigeria), the fall of a president-for-life (Malawi), the end of one-party authoritarian rule (Zambia) and at least, the partial opening up of repressive one-party ethnic dominance (Kenya).

In Nigeria, the gross violations of human rights under successive military regimes between 1990 and 1999 inspired the emergence of radical pro-democracy movements and the revival of a once 'dormant civil society' and its return to the militant democratic struggle. Hitherto, the civil society had remained passive due to long periods of repression and suppression under successive military dictatorships. However, the crusade for democratisation and human rights protection in Nigeria coincided with the breakdown of the economic and social fabric of society as a result of the failure of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). After the annulment of the presidential election of June 12, 1993, the then 'military president', General Ibrahim Babangida was determined to stay in power. Ultimately, it was mass civil actions and sustained protests spearheaded by coalitions of pro-democracy movements under the aegis of Campaign for Democracy (CD) that forced President Babangida to relinquish power, thereby completely shattering the 'aura of invincibility' of the so-called 'Maradona'¹

Although, democratisation struggles enabled fledgling civil society coalitions to blossom and thereby strengthening civil society's efficacy, they were at the same time deepening centrifugal forces. These divisions were not necessarily a drawback or an indication of the absence of a genuine civil society, as claimed by the conventional

¹ President Babangida was nicknamed 'Maradona', after the famous Argentine striker, by the Nigerian press for his unpredictability and ability to manipulate (dribble), contain, bribe and even incorporate the opposition!

theorists, but part of the process of its growth and the resolution of the civil society dimensions of the 'national question'.²

Political liberalisation, rather than bringing the much expected democratic peace to Nigerian societies has encouraged the rise of primordialism, which in turn produces instability, violence, insecurity, and protracted human rights abuses. Previously disenfranchised communities and constituencies, and those marginalised in the current transition process are retreating into their regional bases to organise narrow oppositions to the state.

It is in this regard that this paper examines the implications of ethno-nationalism and religious extremism for human security and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The paper is organised in six sections. The introduction provides a background analysis of the national question in Nigeria's turbulent political history. The second section on theoretical issues examines various issues and problems associated with democratisation and the national question. The third section focuses on the Nigerian experience in democratisation and the role of the pro-democracy movements in the struggles. The fourth section examines the issues of the national question under Nigeria's fourth republic and the implications of ethno-nationalism for democratic consolidation. The fifth section explores the institutional mechanisms for managing conflicts in multi-ethnic society, while the conclusion provides a summary of the arguments expounded in the paper.

Theoretical Framework

The Global Context of Democratization

Africa was not bypassed in the wave of political liberalisation that swept through the developing world in the immediate post-cold war order. Although popular struggle for democracy, accountability and social justice had been a continuing phenomenon in Africa through independence to post-independent years, this struggle, however, became a mass movement after the collapse of communism. This movement stirred up

² For examples, see Harbeson, J.W., Rothschild, D., and Charzan, N (1994) (eds.), *Civil Society and the State in Africa*, Boulder: Lynner Rienner

civil society into democratic struggle and transformed the political landscape of Africa. This new wave of democratization was so intense and had such far reaching consequences that it was variously referred to as Africa's 'second independence' or 'Africa's third wave of democratisation' (Huntington, 1991; Ihonvbere, 1993).

Grugel (1999) in her studies of the context of democratisation demonstrates the impact of the trans-nationalisation of international relations on the democratisation process. She argues that 'many democratisations in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Eastern Europe were initiated as a result of international pressures or the activities of actors from outside the states concerned. The argument was that the collapse of Communism and the dismantling of the Soviet Empire heralded 'the universal victory' of Western liberal democracy and Africa like other regions had no alternative than to adopt the Western model through democratization. Thus, the 'victory' of market capitalism after the cold war meant that western economic and political models became the international 'standard' for regimes wishing to integrate into the global order.

Huntington (1991:34-76) has identified five factors in the 'third wave of democratization', all of which, have an international dimension: the unprecedented economic growth of the 1960s; legitimacy problems linked to declining performance during the 1970s; doctrinal and policy transformation on the part of the Vatican and a new social and political role for national churches; changes in the policies of international actors, including Carter's human rights policies; the new interest of EU in human rights, linked in part to Gorbachev's policy changes in the late 1980s; and, finally, snowballing or diffusion effects.

Another transnational influence on the democratisation process is the Western pressures reflected in the arm-twisting tactics of Western aid donors, lenders and financial institutions (Akinrinade, 1988:75). Increasingly, progress towards democratisation was set as a condition for economic assistance, giving birth to the curious marriage of the economic conditionality of structural adjustment with political conditionality of good governance (Ibid). The imposition of political conditionality by western aids donors and multilateral organisations forced African leaders to accommodate new political demands and to embrace political pluralism.

However, the democratisation struggle in Africa is not just a response to changes in Eastern Europe or an imposition by donors or international pressures. In almost all the countries that have witnessed a sort of democratic change, there were internal forces, already struggling for democracy and human rights. The local pro-democracy movements seized the opportunity provided by the new global disposition towards democratisation. Thus, the new international order that resulted from the changes in Eastern Europe has given a new momentum for democratisation, assisting and complementing the internal forces already struggling for democratic change.

Democratization and the National Question

Many scholars have attempted a conceptual definition of democratisation from different angles; however, there is no commonly agreed definition of the concept and features of its constitutive elements. Olukoshi (1996:14) for example noted that ‘... democratisation is a process without a finite limit and whose content and vitality at any point in time is reflective of the balance of social forces in a given social system’. He adds further that there is no such thing as a full and pure democracy, since the democratic process is constantly being renewed in international and local scales. For Huntington (1991:266-271) however, ‘the critical point in the process of democratisation is the replacement of a government that was not chosen by one that is selected in a free, open, and fair election’. However, in view of the lack of objective yardsticks about ‘free, open, and fair’ elections, singling out electoral politics as the crucial element of the democratisation process is problematic. Equating democratisation simply with ‘free and fair elections’ is more disturbing, as the western-driven enterprise of election monitoring has developed the practice of giving international legitimacy to outcomes of controversial elections. In the vast majority of African states, democratisation without reconstruction of political, economic, and social relations, has encouraged the localization of loyalties and the emergence of a series of opposition parties and movements led by opportunists and those currently marginalized from power. Although, the proliferation of parties, organisations, unions and the like is evidence of a robust civil society and the freedom to both organise and to act, yet, to what extent can societies with fractured political bases, vulnerable relations with powerful external forces, and desperate and insecure elites succeed in

harnessing these countless points of opposition and possibilities for genuine democratisation?

Adopting a comprehensive approach, Nwabueze (1993:10-11) defined democratisation, as

... not only a concept, nor synonymous with multi-partyism, but also concerned with certain conditions of other things such as a virile civil society, a democratic society, a free-society, a just society, equal treatment of all citizens by the state, an ordered, stable society infused with the spirit of liberty, justice and equality.

Nwabueze's stated thesis is that democratisation requires that the society, economy, politics, the constitution of the state, the electoral system and the practice of the government be democratised. However, the listing of those elements involved in democratisation does not, and is not intended to, carry the implication of 'pre-conditions' or 'pre-requisites' without which democratisation cannot, and must not be embarked upon.

For the purpose of this study, democratisation is broadly conceived as a multi-faceted process that leads to the construction of a stable democratic system of governance, incorporating such elements as political participation, economic and social justice, free and fair elections. The process of democratisation begins with political challenges to authoritarian regimes, advances through the political struggles over liberation, and requires the installation of a freely elected government. It concludes only when democratic rules become firmly institutionalised as well as valued by political actors at large. In other words, democratisation is a protracted process, which could unfold over several generations.

One of the most persistent claims for the promotion of democratic reforms is the argument that democracy is the only institutional mechanism for resolving political and ethnic conflicts in a peaceful manner. The 'thesis of democratic peace' suggests that the spread of democracy will promote a decline in interstate warfare (Russett 1993). Apart from the theoretical debate between liberals and realists, the question of the democratic peace also has practical significance. If democracies never go to war

with one another, as assumed by the thesis, then the best prescription for international peace may be to encourage the spread of democracy. The apparent absence of war between democracies has prompted U.S. policymakers and commentators to argue that promoting democracy should become the basic mission of U.S. foreign policy. President Bill Clinton's 1994 State of the Union address invoked the absence of war between democracies as justification for promoting democratisation around the world. The National Security Adviser, Anthony Lake (1994:35) reiterated that 'spreading democracy serves our interests' because democracies 'tend not to abuse their citizens' rights or wage war on one another'.

While the claim of the democratic peace thesis is open to challenge, it nevertheless has an empirical basis. Using data from one hundred and fifty-two countries in the period between 1816 and 1992, a research project by the Norwegian Peace Institute (PRIO) concluded that the most reliable way to stable domestic peace is to 'democratise as much as possible' (Hegre et al. 2001: 15). Thus, from a perspective of 'democratic peace', the challenge for African states is not only to develop stable democratic systems, but also to ensure that their neighbouring states follow in the same direction.

However, the rapid and often chaotic transitions to democratic governance and free market economies sweeping through Africa have been associated with an apparent increase in violent intra-state conflicts; civil or ethnic wars, which are structured around competing identity claims based on religion, race, nationality, clan and political control. The question then is whether the simultaneous spread of democracy and of conflict is an accident of history, or mutually connected processes? There is a conventional view that sees democratisation as a major cause, or at the very least precipitant, of the rising tide of violent conflicts. This view contends that the opening of democratic space 'throws up many groups pulling in different directions, and that it causes demand overload, systemic breakdown and even violent conflicts' (Ake 1997:8). Since such conflicts tend to be organised around 'non-negotiable' identity claims, it is argued that they pose a particular problem for democracy; indeed by helping politicise these claims, democracy may even make them worse (Baker 1996:14). The paradox is that democratisation opens the space for ethnic revival since only under conditions of democracy does such movement become a public issue.

The contemporary era shows that incipient or partial democratisation can be an occasion for the rise of belligerent nationalism and war. Why should democratizing states be so belligerent? First, the social changes associated with democratisation create a wide spectrum of politically significant groups with diverse, incompatible interests. In principle, a fully institutionalised democracy can integrate even the widest spectrum of interests through party competition for the favours of the voters. But where democracy is only incipient and partial, the widespread of politically mobilised social interests characteristic of a transition to democracy may make the formation of stable coalitions extremely difficult. Also, groups threatened by social change and democratisation, including still-powerful elites, are often compelled to take a very inflexible view of their own interests, especially when their interests cannot be readily adapted to changing political and economic conditions. Compromises that may lead down the slippery slope toward social extinction or irrelevance have no appeal and thus these groups may take intransigent stances which may provoke conflicts during democratisation.

Furthermore, in a period of democratisation, threatened elite groups have an overwhelming incentive to mobilise allies among the mass of people, but only on their own terms, using whatever special resources they still retain. Thus, the elites' resources allow them to influence the direction of mass political participation, but the imperative to compete for mass favour makes it difficult for a single elite group to control the outcome of this process. In this way, the process of elite mobilisation of the masses adds to the political impasse of democratising states. Finally, the political impasse and recklessness of democratising states is exacerbated further by the weakening of the state's authority. Autocratic power is in decline *vis-à-vis* both the elite interest groups and mass groups, but democratic institutions lack the strength to integrate these contending interests and views. Parties are weak and lack mass loyalty. Elections are rigged or intermittent. Institutions of public political participation are distrusted, because they are subject to manipulation by elites and to arbitrary constraints imposed by the state, which fears the outcome of unfettered competition.

The argument that democracy can be destabilising dates back to earlier theorists of political order, but has been revived in more recent analyses of the developing states

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(Huntington 1968). The original focus was not democracy per se, but the tendency of political participation to overwhelm weak political institutions in developing countries; an academic position which was readily adopted to legitimise western support for institution-building by authoritarian governments (Colin 1996). This argument has also proved popular with many Third World leaders such as Houphouet-Boigny of Ivory Coast, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia or Sukarno of Indonesia – who all argued that a one-party system or ‘guided democracy’ was needed to contain the social tensions in multi-ethnic post-colonial states. Also a new generation of leaders like Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohammad, or Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, likewise claimed that unrestrained multi-party competition and ‘too much emphasis on political and civil rights tend to destabilise even democracy itself’ (Olayode 2004:215).

There is no doubt that emerging democracies or transitional regimes are more likely than authoritarian states to experience regional and internal conflicts. Competitive political parties and open elections tend to mobilise and politicise regional, ethnic, religious and racial solidarities. This again tends to intensify disintegrative processes of fragile states without contributing to their stability or legitimacy - at least, in the short run.

In the best of circumstances, democratisation may succeed in occupying the political space opened up by the retreat of authoritarian elites. But that space may instead be re-occupied by violence; either that of those who fear their loss of power, or that of their opponents who turn to violence because they lack more legitimate means of expressing their political demands. Such violence may overtake the transition from the very start, as in Angola, Bosnia, Congo-Brazzaville or Somalia. It may also occur after democratic institutions have been introduced as in Sierra-Leone, Nigeria, Liberia, Rwanda and Central Africa Republic. In addition, conflicts may also be generated when such institutions fail to address the fears of politically excluded groups, as in Northern Uganda and the Niger/Delta region in Nigeria.

The National Question in Nigeria

The most salient issue among a broad spectrum of the Nigerian society - the political elite, working class, civil society actors, artisans, market women, students and the

unemployed - is the "national question." This "question" is believed to be at the root of the crisis of the Nigerian state and the problem of peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. What then is the national question? The national question differs in time and space, and may be viewed from two angles. The first angle is inter-group relations, i.e., the tensions and contradictions that arise from inter-group relations dwelling on the issues of marginalization, domination, inequality, fairness, and justice among ethnic groups. This may be real or imagined. The second angle to the national question is the class dimension, i.e., the exacerbation of class inequalities and antagonisms in society between the rich and the poor, the affluent and the underclass, or to use the Marxist parlance, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The latter sometimes reinforce the former, increasing ethnic conflicts and antagonism in society (Adejumobi, 2002:156). While both perspectives of the national question are quite relevant to the Nigerian situation, the former, i.e., the relationship among ethnic groups, gains currency in the contemporary discourse of the national question in Nigeria.

The main issue of the national question in Nigeria is how to structure the Nigerian federation in order to accommodate groups and guarantee access to power and equitable distribution of resources (Osaghae, 1995: 315). The background to it is the perceived domination of some ethnic groups by the others engendered by the structural nature of the Nigerian federation, the heavy lopsidedness in center-state relations, which, according to Wole Soyinka, is highly "unbalanced, exploitative, and acquisitive" and the growing impoverishment, frustrations and disillusionment of the people, which is viewed as a direct consequence of power structure and ruling class politics in Nigeria (Adejumobi, 2000:126). In the final analysis, as Abubakar Momoh rightly noted, the national question is fundamentally related to the question of rights of nations and peoples, particularly in the context of oppression (Momoh, 2002: 2).

The national question generally refers to the issue of the composition of the nation-state or the fundamental basis of the political existence of a nation as an entity. The debate on the national question has been an engaging issue for many Nigerians. Professor J.F. Ade Ajayi while lending his voice to the growing call for a re-examination of the national question captures its essence thus:

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The National Question is the perennial debate about how to order the relations between the different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groupings so that they have the same rights and privileges, access to power and an equitable share of national resources; debate as to whether or not we are on the right path to nationhood; debate as to whether our constitution facilitates or inhibits our march to nationhood, or whether the goal itself is mistaken and we should seek other political arrangements to facilitate our search for legitimacy and development
(Anyanwu 1993:28)

From the above, it is obvious that the need to work out modalities and to reach a consensus for the evolution of a just and equitable basis, through which the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria can unite and pursue a common destiny of national development as 'Nigerians', is the major issue of the national question. It not only involves the territorial integrity of Nigeria, power sharing and management of resources in terms of access, control and distribution, but it also encompasses the issues of minority interests, ethnicity, citizenship, revenue allocation, creation of states and local governments as well as religious, linguistic, cultural and educational policies.

The National Question in Nigeria is probably one of the most complicated in the world, with over five hundred different languages spoken in the country. The main groups are the Yorubas, Hausa-Fulani and the Igbos, none of whom constitute a majority of the population. On top of the ethnic and linguistic divide there is also the religious divide, mainly between Muslims (who dominate in the North) and Christians (who dominate in the South). Over the past few years thousands of people have been killed in ethnic clashes. Behind these conflicts lie the interests of the elite in each state.

The issues involved in the national question revolve around the following:

1. What should be the component units and tiers of government in the Nigerian federation?
2. How should they be constituted, based on ethnic contiguity or administrative expediency?

3. How should political power and administrative responsibilities be shared among the levels and tiers of government?
4. How should the ownership of economic resources be structured in the Nigerian federation?
5. What should be the acceptable formulae for sharing federally collected revenue?
6. What should be the nature of inter-governmental relations in Nigeria (Adejumobi, 2000: 126)?

Democratisation and the National Question in Nigeria (1990-1999)

The struggle for democratisation from below was championed by the Campaign for Democracy (CD). It was launched on November 11, 1991, by eight organisations, namely, the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR); the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO); National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS); National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL); the Gani Fawehinmi Solidarity Association (GFSA); Women in Nigeria (WIN); the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ); and, the National Consultative Forum (NCF). The CD's objectives were clear and unambiguously political: military rule must be terminated and popular sovereignty restored.

The real test for the CD came shortly after the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election. The public protests provoked by the annulment were the largest in the country's history. But the demonstrations proved to be a double-edged sword. Their scalp gave the CD a sense of power since it believed the regime would knuckle under. On the other hand, the concentration of the demonstrations in the south-west enabled critics to deem them narrowly 'tribalistic'.

The annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election greatly exposed the ethnic and regional cleavages, which from the start had been the defining characteristics of Nigerian politics. The annulment re-opened ethnic and regional cleavages, which the political engineering initiated by former President Babangida, seemed initially to have papered over. Subsequently, the post-election period witnessed the emergence of

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ethno-regional organisations in the political landscape of Nigeria with the attendant violence that threatened the corporate existence of Nigeria.

The cancellation of the election results, more than anything else, brought to surface, the resentment and fear of political domination of the ruling Hausa / Fulani. Many Southerners advanced this ethno-regionalist interpretation of the annulment, especially the Yoruba politicians. One of its immediate consequences was to give the democratic struggle for the actualisation of the election an ethnic and sectional character. According to Suberu (1993: 53):

Babangida's cancellation of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, before the results were completely announced but after it was apparent that M.K.O. Abiola had clearly won, provoked a crisis not merely for democracy, but for the future of regional and ethnic relations. More than any previous elections, the 1993 presidential election had emerged as a test of whether a southerner will ever be permitted to win power at the centre

The annulment of the presidential election also signifies that constitutional and institutional engineering alone were not enough to address the regional and ethnic imbalance of the system. Without strong leaders who are dedicated to addressing these imbalances, efforts to overcome the problems engendered by regional and ethnic animosities are bound to fail. Also, commenting on the implications of the annulment of the 1993 presidential elections, Adebayo Adedeji as quoted by Nmowa (1995: 340) observed:

If the presidential election of June 12, 1993 had been allowed to stand, it would have done Nigeria a world of good. For the first time, all the myths, the people themselves destroyed all the clichés about Nigeria. The media, particularly in the West, thought that Nigerian voters could never vote for anybody other than those from their ethnic group. That was disproved. It was really a pity that Babangida annulled the presidential elections, because it would have been a solid foundation for the unity and development of Nigeria.

Following the annulment, there was a strong resurgence of ethno-regional forces, which rocked the foundation of Nigeria's nationhood with the strong threat of civil

war or total disintegration. However, the fact that the Yoruba formed the core of the pro-democracy movements, and that the uprisings subsequent to the annulment were concentrated in the South-West had the unwanted effect of giving the democratisation struggle an ethno-regional character.

Although the CD had attracted supporters throughout the federation, the demonstrators were largely confined to south-western Nigeria, particularly Lagos State. Apart from the fact that majority of the umbrella organisations that formed CD were based there, the Lagos urban populace and the surrounding communities of Ibadan, Abeokuta, Oyo, Ogbomoso and Ile-Ife had long histories of popular mobilisation. Local sensitivity in Lagos particularly was heightened by the presence of many ethnic groups. Also, the economic pressures and hardship of structural adjustment were especially marked in Lagos where about three-quarters of Nigeria's non-oil industrial sector is located. The prostrate economy meant few factories were operating at more than one-third capacity and unemployment was rampant. As a result, local anger against Babangida became the rallying point for CD. Furthermore, the fact that a Yoruba man had won the election added to the popular discontent; though it certainly did not cause it.

The annulment galvanised the popular forces of civil society into action, spearheaded by the CD. Under pressure from the same military colleagues who had counselled him to 'hang tough', Babangida had to concede defeat to popular forces and formally 'step aside' on August 27, 1993. A civilian named Ernest Shonekan (from the same ethnic group as Abiola) assumed the reins of control in theory. In reality, the armed forces remained in power, as indicated by the retention of General Sani Abacha as Defence Minister under the Interim National Government (ING).

The Nigerian experience provided important lessons about the role and limitations of human rights movements in the democratisation process. In the first place, political parties are best suited to carry out political struggles. Human rights groups lack many of the skills requisite for political campaigns. They risk their independence in becoming formally linked to parties. Hence, efforts by human rights groups to pressure government to democratise inevitably confront difficulties at critical periods

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of transition. Human rights groups may be weakened if they do not press for greater democratisation; they may similarly be weakened if they become partisan.

Also, the speed with which Babangida, and later Abacha, dismissed the CD's protests as Yoruba sour grapes showed that the ethnic trump card could still be played in Nigerian politics. The sweeping national victory of Chief Abiola's Social Democratic Party was overlooked; instead, the location and ethnic origin of the Chief were emphasised. Ethnicity continues to draw a fault line in Nigeria, as in most African states. Thus, there are not only problems in establishing a 'human rights culture', there are problems of creating and sustaining a 'national 'political culture as well' (Olayode 2004:164).

The Nigerian experience is a reflection of the general trend. African politics remain severely divided by ethnic conflicts. Transitions away from authoritarian rule provide some opportunities for trans-ethnic co-operation, but in the near term and on the whole, they have the opposite effect. Africa continues to demonstrate a range of political vectors with regard to ethnicity and democratic trends in politics. The warlord politics of Somalia or the savage massacres in Rwanda, the brutal wars in Liberia and Sierra-Leone, and the political crisis in Ivory Coast are cases where ethnicity featured prominently in political conflicts.

As in other parts of the world, in Africa, transitions away from varieties of authoritarian rule, which allow for more open politics and for mass elections for representatives and political leadership are perhaps only the first faltering steps toward dealing with the problem of ethno-politics as part of the process of democratisation. Ethnic group sentiments have been recognised and exploited in the past in African authoritarian politics, most notably, in providing the major excuse for the suppression of popular expression, but also as a major path to patronage and influence. Just as democratisation and empowerment unleash opportunities for individuals to present their claims, likewise they open up the chance for groups to demand greater recognition and power. Newly emerged democracies seemed threatened by splintering from within. Authoritarianism in retrospect seemed better at driving ethnic pluralism underground than at creating a solid sense of national unity.

Ethno-nationalism and Conflicts in Post-democratic Nigeria (1999-2007)

Following the inauguration of Nigeria's Fourth Republic on May 29, 1999, the normally liberal environment provided by democracy for the exercise of freedoms and personal rights, engendered an unprecedented wave of ethnic activism, and political tensions across the country. Foundational issues, which had hitherto been classified as 'non-negotiable' in the constitution-making process of the late 1980s, appeared to have been re-invented in recent times. The restoration of democracy raised high hopes among many Nigerians for a speedy and peaceful restoration of the issues of the national question. The opening up of the political space by the return to democracy has not only raised the hopes of those groups that had hitherto been marginalized or repressed, but it also, paradoxically, raised the stakes in the competition for access to power and resources

However, the capability of the new democratic government to address these issues was largely constrained by its institutional weakness, which was a fall-out of decades of military dictatorships. For example, the party-structures and the legislatures that were non-existent during military rule emerged too weak and inexperienced to respond to the challenges of post-transitional conflicts. Also, the police and the judiciary had been greatly enfeebled and subjected to governmental manipulation during the military era, thereby lacking the public credibility and popular confidence to arbitrate on conflictual issues.

In addition, the inadequacy of the constitution to address the national question, and to define the nature and sphere of political authority and power, to provide for the autonomy of the constituent units of the federation, and to guarantee the rights of citizens in the context of a larger democratic framework precipitates numerous conflicts and crises at the socio-economic, religious and political levels. For instance, the process that culminated in the 1999 constitution, which ushered in the current democratic order ignored the 'foundation issues' that have bedevilled Nigeria's ability to enthrone a stable democratic order.

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Consequently, with such expectations not being met, the people resorted to venting their disappointment with violence. Ochoche Sunday, a peace studies analyst, aptly described it: 'the post-transitional conflicts are a reflection of the absence of institutions capable of dealing with them'.³ Osita Ezekiel, another analyst, however, asserted that the conflicts had roots in the issue of justice. To him, 'Nigerian people and communities wanted a system that defined how they relate with one another and with the state, and unless there is justice, there will be no peace'.⁴ In his view, Julius Ihonvbere linked the series of civil violence in Nigeria to the national question that would 'guarantee the rule of law, define how Nigerians live together and how national resources are re-distributed for the common good'.⁵ For Ihonvbere therefore, the national question has implications for the survival of democracy in Nigeria.

It has been estimated that between 1999 and 2002, over fifty ethno-religious conflicts were recorded in Nigeria in which more than twenty-five thousand lives were lost and property worth billions of Naira destroyed (The Guardian, October 22, 2001). A chronicle of some of the recent conflicts portrayed danger for Nigeria's nascent democracy.⁶

In the oil-producing region of the south-south, resource control and environmental conflicts waged by ethnic militias of the Niger Delta have become an endemic stigma on the oil-rich region and Nigeria in general. These conflicts are efforts at seeking redress after long years of marginalisation and environmental degradation under

³ Dr Ochoche Sunday is the director of the Abuja-based Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution. Interview in Abuja, Nigeria: 23rd July, 2010.

⁴ Professor Osita Ezekiel is also of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution. Interview in Abuja, Nigeria: 23rd July, 2010.

⁵ Ihonvbere, Julius ' *Understanding, Preventing and Managing Religious and Ethnic Violence in Nigeria* ' (Public Discourse in New York, and transcriptions published by Thisday Newsmagazine, 8th August, 2001)

⁶ Some of the most notable of these conflicts were: the Yoruba/ Fulani conflict at Sagamu, 1999; the Hausa/Fulani retaliatory strike against the Yoruba at Kano, October/November, 1999; the destruction of Odi, Bayelsa State by the Army in retaliation for the murder of twelve policemen by local militias, November, 1991; the Kaduna ethno-religious conflict, 2001; the Jos ethnic crisis, 2001; the Tiv-Jukun conflict, 2001, and; the 'Miss World' riots in Kaduna and Abuja, November/December, 2002 (*Vanguard*, September 16, 2001).

succeeding military regimes. Some of the interest and pressure groups opposing the government in the oil-producing areas have now metamorphosed into ethnic militias, who liberally engage in sabotaging oil pipelines, piracy, abduction of expatriate oil company workers, and also militarily prepared to engage federal troops in bloody confrontations. Among these groups are: the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA); the Bakassi Boys; the Niger/Delta Volunteers Force; the Movement for the Survival of the Itshekiri Ethnic Nationality; the Mass Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOBA); the Chicoco Movement, and of recent, the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND).

The response of the Nigerian state to the Niger Delta crisis has been to militarize the environment by stationing an "army of occupation" in the oil producing communities that would keep at bay restive youths, individuals and associations through the force of arms in order to ensure the free flow of oil to the Nigerian state. Several environmental, minority rights and human rights activists in the area were regularly hounded, arrested and detained without trial for long periods of time, or murdered by the state. Driven to heights of frustration, some groups in those communities resorted to armed reaction ostensibly in self-defense. Several militant youth groups emerged, while the existing non-violent groups established radical youth wings. The objective was to counter the violence of the state, and drive home their point of deprivation and marginalization.

The religious factor has also emerged as a primary cause of some of these conflicts following the 'politicisation' of the 'Sharia question', and the adoption of the Sharia law by some of the core Northern states as the basis of civil and criminal law in these parts of the country. This has generated tension, particularly in some states with substantial numbers of Christians, such as Kaduna, Niger, and Kano.

Ethnic rivalry and schism had previously been between the three dominant ethnic groups; however, since the late eighties, the minority ethnic groups have started to redefine the ethnic terrain of Nigeria. What emerges from this is that even after the bitter civil war, the national question remains a crucial one in the development scheme of the nation. The National Question has exacerbated the crises of federalism, the politics of revenue allocation and social crises. Although, many states were created by

the military as a way of resolving ethnicity in Nigeria, it did not solve the problem of ethnic division in the country. New majorities and minorities emerged in the new states leading to complaints of marginalisation and domination and increased rivalry and conflicts.

One of the greatest appeals of democracy is the prospect it offers for guaranteeing individual and group rights. This can only occur, however, where democracy is not burdened with negative influences such as ethnic conflicts. Neither can it be achieved where largely primordial ethnic sentiments are placed above the ideals of democracy. Such situations debilitate any attempts at creating a democracy and furthering the development of society.

The link between ethnic conflict and democracy is especially crucial in view of the popular assumption that democracy engenders development. Much historical evidence shows, however, that development has not been possible where there are marked divisions or intense conflicts between groups in a given society. Therefore, ethnic conflicts negate the developmental function of democracy and may ultimately attack the roots of democracy in a society (Anugwom, 2000:69).

The concern of most Nigerians with the escalation of ethno-religious crises is its impact on democratic consolidation. As Nigerian's contemporary history has shown, periods of great socio-political instability are usually climaxed by the overthrow of the civilian government and the assumption of power by the military. Beside the threat of the military, the growing domestic instability and turmoil seriously negates the ideals of democracy. Hence, democratic consolidation in a context of heightened inter-ethnic rivalry, division and distrust seems quite unlikely.

Institutional Arrangements for Managing Ethnic Conflicts in a Democratic Order

Liberal democracy, as Horowitz aptly observes, is about 'inclusion and exclusion, about access to power, about privileges that go with inclusion and the penalties that

accompany exclusion' (Horowitz 1993:18). In societies, where political mobilisation takes the form of ethnic grouping, winning and losing elections is not a simple matter as 'the game theory' that underlines the liberal democratic perspective might suggest. It means the exclusion of the losing ethnic groups, whether the majority or the minority, from power and distribution of resources for development. The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflicts (1997:100) vividly captures this:

In many multi-ethnic societies, the procedures of majoritarian democracy have proven effective for managing group relations and maintaining social cohesion. However, in societies with deep ethnic divisions and little experience with democratic government and the rule of law, strict majoritarian democracy can be self-defeating. Where ethnic identities are strong and national identity weak, population may vote largely on ethnic lines. Domination by one ethnic group can lead to a tyranny of the majority

The Commission highlights various forms of power sharing in order to redress this scenario. These include: consensual decision making by the executive; proportional electoral systems; proportional representation of groups in administrative appointments; non-ethnic federal structures, and encouragement of cross-ethnic coalitions (Carnegie Commission 1997).

The main challenge confronting democratic consolidation in Africa, therefore, is to build democratic institutions, which will ensure that neither the majority nor the minority are threatened with permanent exclusion from power and resources for development. While democratic states suffer from conflict just as others do and the presence of democracy is not a guarantee of a society without political violence, democratic societies tend to develop the institutions, resources and flexibility, in the long term, to peacefully manage these kinds of conflicts. Neither democracy nor democratisation is without contradictions. In as much as they entail the 'redistribution of power', they indeed have an inherent potential for conflict. But democracy can also be understood as a system for the peaceful management of conflicts. It provides a non-violent method for selecting leaders, a forum through which different viewpoints can be represented, and an opportunity for inclusive participation.

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Therefore, democratic institutions should in principle, be capable of handling the issues of the national question, even when they are characterised by extreme violence. As Horowitz (1993:18) argues, “there is no case to be made for the futility of democracy or the inevitability of uncontrolled conflict”. While, it is unrealistic to expect democracy to resolve all such conflicts, it should be able to transform enemies into opponents and violent struggles into debate, contestation and competition. Bose (1995:87-116) suggests that to endorse the claim that plural societies are incompatible with democratic values:

Seems to imply that plural society the world over are condemned to an undemocratic future simply because of their plural composition. If this is correct, it would appear that democratic aspirations are a futile fantasy for the majority of mankind.

One way of ensuring stability in post-conflict transitions is to introduce accommodation to moderate the possible ‘exclusiveness and lopsidedness of unfettered democracy’ (Olayode 2004:218). An arrangement that would open up opportunities to disadvantaged communities ought to be devised. In this case, all nationalities, religious, social, and cultural groups should have a stake in the system and work together for its preservation. Such issues as minority rights, religious status of the state, equality of rights, citizens’ duties and obligations to the state should be clearly spelt out in the constitution. Constitutional provisions must consciously allay the fears and apprehension of minority groups by meeting their legitimate demands and involving them, in the political systems that are evolved and in nation-building efforts.

The phenomenon of ethnic militias is a logical derivative of the process of de-federalisation, which Nigeria has experienced under successive military dictatorships since 1966. The consequence has been an explosion in the negative use of ethnicity across the broad-spectrum of society. As discussed earlier, ethnic-militias were formed in response to specific injustices against their communities by the ‘nation-state’. Against the background of the persistent clamours for the convening of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) by many Nigerians where all groups and nationalities can express their grievances and offer ideas on how to recompose

Nigerian federalism, the present democratic government needs to take an emollient stance towards this issue.⁷ This forum will provide the opportunity for Nigerians to reach some consensus on how the nation should be structured, how rights will be protected and how a truly democratic Nigeria can be established. For example, in its Third Interim Report, the Presidential Committee on the Review of the 1999 Constitution, in line with the memoranda received from groups and individuals on the ‘imperative for a conference of ethnic nationalities’, recommended as follows:

Contentious as the issue may appear, the committee recommends that, in view of the democratic space now provided for civil society to exercise its fundamental rights of free speech, there is a compelling reason to convene a National Conference (not sovereign) at the end of the committee’s assignment to discuss the report of the committee and other engaging national issues.⁸

The entrenchment of ‘true federalism’ may reduce the problem of ethnic and regional parochialisms in multi-ethnic societies. Federalism no doubt, allows for the plurality of viewpoints, and enshrines the principle of equality among the different federated nationalities in the nation-state. Federalisation of the Nigerian polity would need to include the following: (a) a full democratisation of the political institutions; (b) subordination of the military to the authority of the elected civilians as an antidote to military coups; (c) adoption of fiscal federalism through a review of the revenue allocation formula in order to make more resources available to the states and local governments; (d) increasing allocation of resources to the mineral producing communities as compensation for environmental damages inflicted as a result of exploratory activities ; (e) adoption of a participatory approach to constitution making such that nationality groups, communities and interest groups would be involved in

⁷ Although various groups and individuals, particularly leaders of the Southern-based ethno-regional groups, have persistently been calling for a sovereign national conference, notable leaders from the North have stoutly been arguing against the conference, expressing fears of the likelihood of break-up of the existing national composition of the Nigerian state as a possible fall-out of such conference.

⁸ Reports of the Presidential Committee on the Review of the 1999 Constitution: (Recommendation on the National Conference).

the process, and ; (f) a drastic reduction in the powers and responsibilities of the federal government to reduce the 'over centralisation of politics , and the undue 'concentration of resources at the centre'(Amuwo et al. 1998 :177-187).

Conclusion

This paper has endeavoured to provide an analysis of the conflicts generated in the turbulent political history of Nigeria from the perspective of the national question. The paper has argued that the issues of the 'national questions' have remained lingering and unresolved since independence.

Despite the persistence of ethno-regional conflicts in the politics of African states, significant liberalisation and democratisation are still possible. Ethnic conflict is not incompatible with institutions of democratic government if it finds expression as a group interest among other interests, and if the means of expression provide opening for rewards and not merely sure defeat. Far from being primordial and a largely uncontrollable source of instability, then, modern ethnic sectarianism is political and to some extent, artificial. Ethnic mobilisation has been a political instrument of the African elites in the post-independence period, much the same way that the phenomenon of nationalism was in the decolonisation struggle. However, by encouraging a clientelist attitude towards the state, whose resources are perceived as a 'pie' from which each group must try to carve out as large a slice as possible, and by hampering any efforts at co-operative nation-building, the emergence of a wider cohesive national identity, which is essential for the implementation of developmental strategies, has been stymied.

Conceptually, where there are scarce resources, there is bound to be competition. This is clearly evident from the nature of conflicts besieging the African continent. In the Nigerian experience, the struggle for access to economic resources, predominantly proceeds from oil revenue, have intensified the competition for 'capturing state power'. This often results in conflicts of significant proportion. The conflict generated from this competition has since escalated with the inauguration of a democratically elected government on 29th May 1999, threatening the survival of the nascent

democracy. The primary cause of these conflicts, which has pointed to the unresolved 'national question', is the focus of analysis in this paper.

While democratisation struggles enabled fledgling civil society coalitions to blossom thereby strengthening civil society's efficacy, at the same time it also deepened centrifugal forces. The inability of various groups to agree on some of the issues related to the national question is primarily responsible for the fragmentation of civil society along ethno-religious lines. The expression of ethnicity itself, though, is a measure of the openness that the liberal democratic environment accommodates, however, to the extent that it is exclusive in intent and character, ethnicity could be dysfunctional for democracy, especially where majority insists on dominating power. One of the deductions from this paper is that democracy may be difficult to consolidate in an atmosphere of unbridled ethnic claims and contestations.

A realistic approach to the lingering national question in Africa is the consolidation of democracy as a means of nation building. Democracy thus, enhances national integration, which is not only a flattening process of assimilation, but also embodies equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual peaceful co-existence, tolerance and forbearance among constituent units of a state.

In addition, the paper also observed that while democratic states experience conflicts and political violence, just as other states do, and the presence of democracy is not a guarantee of a society without political violence, democratic societies tend to develop the institutions, resources and flexibility, in the long term, to peacefully manage these kinds of conflicts. Therefore, democratic states should in principle, be capable of handling the issues of the national question, even when they are characterised by extreme violence, as is the Nigerian case.

Concluding on a more optimistic note, the freedom created for the expression of dissatisfaction by various groups, even though often abused, is a reflection of the healthy socio-political environment fostered by democracy. Therefore, the mere creation of an environment where dissension is allowed is an indication of the possible consolidation of democracy in the country in the long term. But this can only be if the state acts decisively to limit the destruction and violence associated with it.

While democracy facilitates the resolution of the national question through dialogue, compromise, supremacy of the rule of law, justice and equity, and human rights, a constructive approach should be adopted in channelling grievances in order not to jeopardise the stability of democracy.

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