

Governance, ethnicity and response to conflicts: Deficit to sustainable development in Nigeria

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Abstract: Nigeria has never been more divided in its history along ethnic and religious lines than it is today. Not even in the period preceding the Nigeria-Biafra war was Nigeria faced with the level internal dysfunction, disorder, fear and real challenge to the continued existence of the country as it is presently constituted. Internal conflicts have spread to areas hitherto believed to be insulated, the Nigeria Middle Belt or the North Central Nigeria. The current situation has raised the ethnic and religious tensions, and internal security concerns to an unprecedented and unpredictable level. There seems to be a general feeling that anything can happen any time to the Nigeria project. For over a decade the menace of the Islamist terrorism has crippled economic and social activities in the North Eastern part of Nigeria. Currently, the activities of the Fulani Herders, especially in the North Central Nigeria or the Middle Belt, pose grave danger to the future of Nigeria. Most of the states of the North Central Nigeria form the food basket of the Nigeria. The Fulani Herders have killed thousands of farmers and sacked many farming towns and communities. As much danger these activities pose to sustainable development in and indeed the corporate existence of Nigeria, the response to these recent coordinated attacks by the Fulani herders by the Federal Government of Nigeria tends to accentuate a great measure of ethno-religious perceptions of government bias in favour of the Fulani Herders who incidentally are Muslims against the Tivs and other ethnic groups in the Middle Belt states who are mostly Christians. The perceived government weak response has continued to elicit reactions from the different divides in the Nigeria Project. The reactions could not be less when the seeming government inaction is coming in the heels of brutal military operations mounted by the same government to crush the pro-Biafra group, IPOB, in its non-violent self-determination campaign for a sovereign State of Biafra. The government even went ahead and enlisted the unarmed group as a terrorist organization. There is a general perception in the South-East, South-South and North-Central Nigeria that the current Nigerian government is tacitly, to say the least, encouraging a gradual but violent Islamization programme of the Hausa-Fulani in Nigeria. The conflicts, the government lacklustre responses and the perceptions of the various ethno-religious groups at the receiving end of these conflicts, constitute sure setbacks to national development. This paper, therefore, interrogates the Nigerian Government's response to conflicts in some parts of the country and concludes that these responses tend to justify the perception that the government is pursuing an ethno-religious agenda. The paper goes on to further hold that current situation is a deficit to sustainable development in the short run, and the continued existence of Nigeria in the long run. It finally tries to suggest some line of action that may reinvigorate the Nigeria project and enhance sustainable development.

Keywords: ethnic agenda, Fulani herders, internal conflicts, sustainable development

Introduction

Nigeria has faced many challenges to its corporate existence before and since independence in 1960. The climax of this was the Nigeria – Biafran war of 1967-1970. This was so because it was a war of secession, pitching the entire country against a “recalcitrant” ethnic nationality – the Igbo –. Since after that war, Nigeria have seen many conflicts which have set back development and in many cases threaten its continued existence as an entity. The recent history of conflicts in Nigeria include the Niger Delta conflict, the Boko Haram Islamist insurgency, the Biafran agitation for sovereignty and the Herders attacks. While the armed resistance in the Niger Delta region has abated, the agitation for a sovereign state of Biafran in the South Eastern region has been “crushed” by the federal government, even though this agitation had always been non-violent. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North East, though degraded, has remained very active especially in Borno

State. The Fulani Herders brutal attacks on many farming communities in the North Central, parts of the North East, South West and South East, is the conflict currently on the front burner. These attacks which seem not to be isolated cases have resulted in widespread killings, razing and sacking of many communities. Today, there is a widespread sense of insecurity in many parts of the country over the activities of the Herders, especially in the face of seeming inaction by the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework

The enemy image theory can be used to explain the conflict between the herdsmen and farmers. The conflict dates back to pre-independent Nigeria, but was sharpened by the post-independence political environment. Enemy imaging refers to the exaggerated representation of an enemy or adversary as “diabolical, aggressive, and untrustworthy ... generated at the preconscious level through selective attention and memory, double standards, self-fulfilling prophecies, and ignorance” and occasioned by fear and distrust (Fabick 2007: 73). This is the hallmark of the Fulani Herders-Ethnic Farmers conflict in Nigeria. The feeling of “existential threat” by not only the actors in the Fulani Herders-Farmers conflict, but also the apprehension of many other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria towards the arms-bearing Fulani herdsmen, can better be explained with the Securitization Theory. Securitization takes place when an actor perceives and declares a threatening situation against a “referent object” and is able to reasonably establish and/or “convince an audience (inter-unit relations)” of a “legitimate need” to act in disregard of or “beyond otherwise binding rules and regulations” (Tuareck 2006). This is a social construction of security, with securitization being a product of “a specific social process”, taking into account threats to individuals and “sub-state groups” (William 2003: 513). As the Herdsmen attacks increased in frequency, intensity and geographical scope, humanitarian and economic toll, most other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria labelled the Fulani Herders an existential threat.

Poor governance, ethnic rivalry, mismanagement of land and natural resources, declining economic conditions, and widespread poverty have been argued to be precursors to most conflicts in Africa (Roe 2005, 5). But in many African conflicts, poor governance and ethnicity are conflict drivers because of how “manipulable” these factors have become in the hands of the political class. Agbu (2006, 101) opined that the application of post-colonial concept of state and system of government in Africa produced a political elite who regularly “play up ethnic awareness, sentiment and consciousness and subsequent rivalry and competition of all sorts...”

Trajectory of Recent Conflicts in Nigeria

Nigeria has seen many conflicts in virtually all its regions. For the purpose of this paper, we shall be discussing the background to just four of such conflicts from four different geopolitical zones of Nigeria – Niger Delta conflict, the Boko Haram Insurgency, Pro-Biafra Agitation and the Herders – Farmers conflict –. While the paper shall not be delving deeply into the first three, it shall be drawing from their background, impact on national development and government responses to each of them, and compare same with that of the very current conflict: the Fulani Herders attacks.

The Niger Delta Conflict

The Niger Delta militants is a term used to describe a plethora armed militant ethnic youth groups that emerged in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in the 1990s. It was a conflict with enormous global attention for the obvious reason of the region’s economic importance to both local actors, foreign multinational corporations and the global capitalist centres. For the nationalities in the region, it was a struggle for emancipation from long injustice of underdevelopment, exploitation, environmental pollution and militarization of the region by successive Nigerian governments in collaboration with the foreign companies operating in the region (Afinofan and Ojatorotu 2009: 193). For the Nigerian government, the oil companies and some other watchers, it was an internecine armed conflict and insurgency. The above government position tended to be supported by the fact that the Niger Delta conflict over time became less and less coordinated and focused struggle for freedom against injustices fired by a sense of “ethnic” nationalism. The conflict gradually metamorphosed into several strands of ethnic militias engaged in oil theft, kidnapping for ransom, terrorism and other forms of criminality (Afinofan and Ojatorotu 2009: 192).

Boko Haram

Boko Haram is an Islamist insurgency which has engulfed the North Eastern Nigeria since around 2010. Boko Haram believes politics in northern Nigeria has been seized by a group of corrupt, false Muslims who acquired western education. The group, therefore, is waging a war against them, and the Nigerian State generally, ‘to create a “pure” Islamic state ruled by sharia law’ (Walker 2012: 1). The name Boko Haram translates as “Western education is a sin”. This clearly indicates an anti-western ideological inclination of the group (Ntamu et al 2013: 367). It is not surprising, therefore, that the targets of the insurgent group in its first few years of operation was institutions capable of delivering western values – schools, churches, banks, government

institutions and international organizations offices (Osondu 2015). Between 2011 and 2015, the insurgents have expanded their targets to include mosques, markets and local communities. With this development, the impact of the Boko Haram insurgency on the Nigerian economic, social and political landscape became more pronounced, impactful and dangerous. The group also extended its operations into the Lake Chad region and started to carry out attacks in Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. With the coming of the present administration in Nigeria in May 2015, and the increased military actions and social interventions initiated by the administration, the capability of the Boko Haram has been degraded with the territories the group held recovered. The overhaul of the Nigeria's counter-insurgency strategy and operation by the present government, an improvement of the regional counter-terrorism coordination, and international supports, Boko Haram's ability to hold territory and carry out cross-border attacks has been greatly diminished. Boko Haram remains a threat with its isolated attacks in the North Eastern states especially in Borno State (Buchanan-Clarke and Knoope 2017: 1).

Biafran Agitation (IPOB)

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is just one of the many groups agitating for an independent state of Biafra. The others include the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Customary Government of the Indigenous People of Biafra (CGIPB), Eastern Peoples' Congress (EPC), Biafra United Liberation Council (BULCO), Joint Revolutionary Council of Biafra (JRCB), Igbo Hebrew Cultural Restoration, and Biafra Actualization and Defence Squad. Others are Biafra Revolutionary Organization (BRO), Biafra Liberation Crusade (BLC), Salvation Peoples of Biafra (SPB), Biafra Peace Corps (BPC), and a host of others. These pro-Biafra groups employ non-violent means to mobilize support for their cause. Of all the pro-Biafra groups, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) stands out as having commanded far reaching acceptability and massive participation by a cross section of Igbos across the globe. Led by a young, dynamic, and articulate Nnamdi Kanu, the group mounted a radio station – Radio Biafra –, raised branches and support groups in US, Europe and across Africa. Back home in the South East Nigeria (Igboland), IPOB rallies were very massive, attended largely by youths, traders and artisans. The group's central call was for a referendum on self-determination for Biafra. The Federal Government became upset when in spite of combined effort of the Federal and State Governments in the South East to scuttle the groups campaign, IPOB was able to bring the entire South East to a standstill in a one-day sit at home it announced as "Biafra day to honour her heroes of war" on May 30, 2017. Even with government heavy military clampdown on its activities, the IPOB is still operating in the South East Nigeria.

Fulani Herders-Farmers Conflict

Various captions have been used by various scholars and commentators to describe this conflict. The International Crisis Group in its Africa Report No. 252 of 19 September 2017 captions it "Herders against Farmers". In its Report No. 262 of 26 July 2018, the same organization calls it "Farmer-Herder Violence" (ICG 2017; ICG 2018). The same conflict has been captioned "Herders-Farmers clash", "Fulani Herdsmen attacks", "Herdsmen Terrorism", and so many other captions. All these are in an attempt to capture the real contents of this conflict. The Nigerian Middle Belt or the North Central Nigeria has lived with this decades-old conflict between the local farming communities and the migrant Fulani herders. These clashes had usually centred on damage of crops by cattle, water pollution and cattle theft (ICG 2017: i). They were mostly fought with traditional weapons – bows and arrows, and machetes, with very low casualties and damages. In recent years, these conflicts have grown in frequency, intensity and geographic spread and with skyrocketing casualty figures. The hitherto isolated incident became a regular occurrence in which assault weapons are employed with heavy casualties and damages in their wake, spreading across almost all the North Central states, especially Benue, Plateau, and Nassarawa, North Eastern states of Taraba and Adamawa, and Kaduna in North West. The herders' attacks also extended to Anambra and Enugu states in the South East, Edo in the South-South, and Ekiti and Osun States in the South West.

Tens of thousands have been killed over the years. It is estimated that on the average, over 2000 fatalities are recorded each year in this conflict from 2011 to 2016, with approximately 2500 fatalities in 2016 alone (ICG 2017: i). It is becoming easy to access and procure firearms, both locally-produced and automatic military rifles. This has worsens the bloodshed.

Very importantly, the Herdsmen onslaught has threatened national security and stability like no other conflict before it. The spread of the activities of the herdsman into some southern states has seriously stoked the religious, ethnic and regional sensibilities of those already suspicious of one another. It has also reignited and accentuated the image of the enemy prevalent among the various minority ethnic nationalities in the middle and the Hausa-Fulani majority ethnic nationality in the North, but also raise the level of resentment by the southern states, majority of whom are Christians, who see the menacing armed wielding herders as both an "Islamisation Army" who are out to accomplish an ethnic cleansing. This is because the herders are predominantly Muslim and Fulani. It is, therefore, pertinent at this point out that the activities of the local Fulani herders here is can

generate substantial instability. A major conflict involving the Fulani and ethnic nationalities in Nigeria can draw fighters from the Fulani who are spread across Central and West African sub regions.

Government response to Conflicts in Nigeria

The response of successive Nigerian governments to conflicts especially the four under review in this paper ranges from high-handedness to insensitivity. Comparing the four conflicts and government responses reveals lack of understanding of the conflict in some cases, lack of a cohesive articulation of national interest, partisan posturing of the leaders, and insensitivity to the causes of the conflict. In fact a study of these responses tend to depict some measure of double standard in government approach to the four conflicts under discuss. The Federal government of Nigeria applied every force it could muster in an attempt to quell the Niger Delta conflict including the execution of the leader of the Ogoni activists, bombing of suspected hideouts of armed militia including the killing of hundreds of innocent village men, women and children. When the conflict escalated and almost brought the Nigerian economy to its knees, the government of President Musa Yar'dua negotiated a ceasefire and amnesty with the armed militias. That brought peace to the Niger Delta. What exists in the region today is more of criminality than armed resistance.

In dealing with the Boko Haram, the government between 2011 and 2013 seemed confused at how to approach the insurgency. While the Government dwelt much time accusing the opposition of sponsoring the insurgency to force it out of office, the terrorists gained much ground, occupying more than 75% of the territories of the North East. Even the abduction of 276 female students of Government Girls' Secondary School, Chibok in Borno State on the night of 14–15 April 2014 did not elicit immediate government action even as the whole world stood still at the ease with which the operation was carried out. It was seen in government circle as simply stage-managed, a ploy to embarrass and discredit the government (Adamu 2017, id). This seemed to be the belief by that administration and most of its supporters until it lost in the general election. But the advent of the present administration in 2015 witnessed a robust military actions on the side of the government which resulted in the recovery of the areas held by the insurgents, degrading the strength by destroying numerous of its weapon caches and factories, killing or arresting many of its top commander, cutting off many of its supply routes, mobilizing communities and engaging in regional military cooperation. Today, Boko Haram no longer holds territories but engages mostly in isolated "guerrilla attacks", but still with tremendous losses, in the North East region especially in its "state of birth", Borno State.

The agitation for a sovereign state of Biafra came to its climax with the emergence of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). It was different from other previous pro-Biafra groups in strategy and appeal. Its coordinated application of ICT and leverage of the social media in communicating its message soon endeared it to most Igbo especially the youths. Its demand of an independent State of Biafra through plebiscite gained huge support in Igboland and its leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, soon became very popular with most young Igbos. His arrest, together with some of the organization's leadership, and their arraignment on treason charge received widespread protest by Igbos across the world. The government went ahead to proscribe the organization, designating it a "terrorist organization". This action was condemned by a cross-section of Nigerian as well as some members of the international community, including the US and France (Ekwueme and Ugwuanyi 2018, 41). The United States totally disagreed with the posture of the Nigerian government on IPOB. Ogbonna (2017) quoted the US Ambassador to Nigeria as stating that, "Within the context of unity, we encourage all Nigerians to support a de-escalation of tensions and peaceful resolution of grievances. The Indigenous People of Biafra is not a terrorist organisation under US law." The September 2017 military operation tagged "Operation Python Dance II", in the South East (the region where IPOB agitation is domicile) again resulted in reported death of over 40 unarmed pro-Biafra activists, over seventy others with bullet wounds, and alleged abduction of Nnamdi Kanu and the father, a traditional ruler of his community (Ekwueme and Ugwuanyi 2018: 43).

The Herders attacks took a new dimension since 2016. They now operate with assault rifles, attacking villages in the night, inflicting maximum casualties and burning down villages. These attacks have been carried out in not less than four of the six geopolitical zones of the country, but heaviest in middle belt states of Benue, Plateau, Kogi and Nassarawa, Kaduna in the North West and North East states of Taraba and Adamawa. While the government applies maximum military force against Niger Delta Militants, the Boko Haram and even unarmed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the same cannot be said about its response to the Fulani Herders armed attacks. It is, therefore, worrisome that the Fulani Herders attacks has been treated with complacency. In its September 2017 report on the herders' attacks in Nigeria and government response to those attacks, the International Crisis Group chronicled it as follows:

Under the Buhari administration, the security response has been particularly questionable. In February 2016, following public outcry over attacks by herders that killed scores of people in ten farming villages in the Agatu area of north-central

Benue state, Buhari ordered an investigation. Nothing has been heard about it since. On 24 April 2016, Information and Culture Minister Lai Mohammed said the government was working “silently” toward ending the violence, promising: “In few weeks from now, we will begin to see the result of that”. Again, there was no follow up. In April 2016, after widespread condemnation of an attack on Ukpabi Nimbo in Enugu state, the president ordered the police and military to “take all necessary action to stop the carnage”, pledging that stopping herder attacks had become a priority. Since then hundreds have died in more clashes.(ICG 2017: 11)

Conflicts and development

Conflict and development are two strange bed fellows. Conflict reverses gains made in development. National development is expressed in the capacity of a state to provide an improved living standard of its citizens through the provision of social amenities such as portable water, medical care, qualitative education, transportation infrastructure, industrial advancement, employment, and security (Ntamu 2013: 396). Sustainable development is used to describe that development which “meets the needs and aspirations of the present generations, without compromising the ability to meet the need of future generations” (Ojekorotu 2009, 192; Agagu 2008). It is, therefore, that development which while improving the quality of human life in the present, has the capacity to support human flourishing in the future. Sustainable national development is not possible without good governance and peaceful coexistence among the peoples of the state. The mobilization of both human and material resources for development is not feasible in a conflict-ridden polity (Uchendu 2004: 135).

The sustained Herders-Farmers conflict has so much escalated in recent years that it has become the most poignant threat today to national security, stability and development. The attacks on Middle Belt farming communities became so regular with devastating human and material losses, and with the perceived government unwillingness to stop the attacks, calls for alternative armed self-defence is being canvassed by the prominent community and political leaders in the affected regions and their sympathizers across the country. Adebayo (2014, 480) argues that the “material progress” of every country is very much hinged on the national security. There must of a fact be an enabling environment in a polity for sustainable development to happen. This position subscribes to the opinion of Hutchful (2002) that national security, which translates into law and order, is the fulcrum of social development and survival. Insecurity and conflict are, therefore, antithetical to development. It has been proven that all forms of development whether political, economic, or social will come to naught in any society which cannot guarantee its citizens protection of life, property, and livelihoods. In fact, a threat to national security can be translated to a threat to national development (Osondu 2010: 98).

The economic implications of the Herders – Farmers conflict for Nigeria is monumental. The North Central geopolitical zone that is mostly affected by this conflict –comprising the States of Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Niger – is the “food basket” of Nigeria. This region have seen huge displacement of communities from both homes and farms, impoverishment and reversal of decades-long community and personal achievements. The conflict has also resulted in retarding the development of the children, permanent setbacks, and huge losses in human lives and all sources of livelihood.

Again, national development is all about investment. Insecurity stifles investment. Investors are mindful of where to their investments are safe and secured, and profitability guaranteed. It is known in the study of global development trends that any environment with insecurity naturally repels investment initiatives from both the foreign and local investors(Adebayo 2014, 481). In the case of these areas of conflict in Nigeria, development have not only been halted, but have been reversed considering the level of destruction visited on most of the affected communities.

Suggestions

We on the basis of the findings of this paper suggest as that:

1. Government should seek to protect the life and property of every Nigerian irrespective of religious or ethnic affiliation.
2. Government should seek the perpetrators of all the killings and punish them according to the laws of the land.
3. The root causes of the conflict has to be identified and dealt with.
4. The government should through its actions, reassure every Nigerian that there is a future for all the ethnic nationalities living together.
5. There is an urgent need to rejig the security architecture of Nigeria
6. Early and quick responses to distress calls and early warnings are important.
7. There is a need to seriously consider the possibility of restructuring as a permanent solution to the consistent contestations and conflicts among the ethnic nationalities

Conclusion

Nigeria is in dire need of development to tackle the growing population which is a huge challenge. But with the many conflicts it contends with, and the manner the government seems to be handling them, achieving the much needed development seems to be far-fetched. The continued spread of these conflicts and the attendant ruffling and stoking of the embers of ethnic sensitivity tends to threaten the very corporate existence of the country. If Nigeria will achieve any positive drive in national development and indeed sustainable development, urgent steps needs to be taken by the national government in addressing the causes and drivers of the various conflicts, and to fish out and punish the sponsors and perpetrators in the conflicts. Unless these urgent steps are taken, Nigeria's development will not only be retarded, but the very little gains that had been made since the return civilian rule in 1999 would be reversed, and Nigeria will be worse for it. Good governance is, therefore, imperative in dealing with the many conflicts in Nigeria, mitigating the fear, tension, poverty and mutual suspicion among the ethnic nationalities which is rife in the polity. This will in turn rub-off on national sustainable development. For now, what is still sustaining Nigeria as an entity is the common interest of the political class in having access to national wealth.

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