DEMOCRACY AND ETHNIC CONTESTATIONS IN NIGERIA: ISSUES AND CASES

OKPATA, Fidelis, O.
Department of Political Science
AE-FUNAI, Ebonyi State

EZIKA Goodness, A.
Department of Public Administration
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki.

ABSTRACT

Nigerian democracy has suffered serious lack of democratic consolidation and not to talk about sustainable development. Many factors have been adduced as responsible for this, particularly the plural nature of our political system which has engendered ethnic politics; with its attendant ethnic contestations. This paper is aimed at identifying the various issues that have challenged democratic consolidation in Nigeria amongst the ethnic nationalities, with the purpose to advance possible panacea for sustainable democratic development in Nigeria. The paper relied heavily on secondary data and adopted ethnic-political identity theory and group theory as models of theoretical analysis. The paper found that politics of ethnic marginalization, resource control and allocation, political exclusion, corruption and fraud together with leadership ineptitude, promote ethnic contestations in Nigeria. The paper finally recommended for political and economic restructuring, regional autonomy and inclusive politics in the democratic governance of Nigerian State.

Keywords: Democracy, Democratic Consolidation and Ethnic Contestations.

Introduction

The Nigerian federation is a forced marriage of over 400 ethnic nationalities whose consents were not sought in its formation. Taribo (2014) avers that ever since the 1914 Amalgamation, the Nigerian state has been confronted with the challenges of accommodating diversity, fostering inclusiveness and promoting national unity among the various ethnic groups that make up the polity. These challenges according to Achimugu, Ala and Abdulahi (2015), is further exacerbated by the fact that these ethnic groups have very striking differences ranging from language, religion, population, level of education and geographical terrain which was not factored into the crafting of the Nigerian State. Moreover, ethnic diversity in itself ought not to pose a threat to Nigerian democracy and its much desired sustainable development, but the political manipulations of ethnic identity and ethnic sentiments in Nigeria has engendered virulent ethnicity, with its attendant ethnic contestations in resource control and allocation, power distribution, and even access to key bureaucratic positions.

Democracy is described by Okpata, Ezika and Ukaeje (2019) as a form of governance in which supreme power and authority reside in the people but exercised in the end through an institutionalized system of representation; built on the core principles of the rule of law and constitutionalism, legitimacy of the government in power, equity, fairness, transparency and accountability by those exercising political power, liberty/right of the citizens to exercise civil and political activities, decentralization of power and resources in the State, independence of the judiciary, freedom of associational groups from the State, etc. However, ethnicity and ethnic contestations have continued to make mockery of the consolidation of these democratic principles in Nigeria. Ethnicity is a function of the existence of a multiplicity of ethnic groups as it describes in-group and out-group relations. Thus, ethnicity is the contextual discrimination by members of one group by others on the basis of differential social-cultural symbols or identity (Ugem, 2019). Ethnicity therefore houses a 'clique' consciousness of being different or unique as against others, derived from objective and subjective elements as members of different socio-cultural groups interact in a plural society.

Adetoye and Omilusi (2015) was quite nuanced in his assertion that right from the constitutional conferences organized at the colonial epoch and down to the ones organized in the post-independence era, the issues of ethnocentrism,

ethno-political identity and cleavages have been contentious. Though, the 3 decades of military intervention in Nigerian political affairs, virtually abated the full manifestation of ethno-nationalism; but the return of the country to democracy in 1999reignited the suppressed ethno-national grievances, hurling up issues beyond the capacities of our nascent democracy. Ugem (2019) affirms that ethnic politics in Nigeria has become so infective such that values, opportunities, rights, privileges, responsibilities and in fact basic aspects of moralities have been ethnized. It is therefore in view of the foregoing, that this paper sought to evaluate the issues and cases of ethnic contestations in Nigeria as it boils down to democratic consolidation and attainment of sustainable development.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Accordingly, the paper employed content analytical approach, largely relying on secondary data in which secondary were inductively and deductively analyzed to arrive at the findings of the paper. Meanwhile, the paper's theoretical framework is situated within the ambit of ethnic political identity and group theories. Ethnic political identity theory according to Nandi and Platt (2018) is a political approach that sees the state and its political system as an ethnic conception, such as: political mobilization by political parties, politicized institutions, unions and associations centered on ethnicity. Thus, the ethnic political identity theory underpins the relationship between ethnicity and politics, its analysis is based on people prioritizing the concerns most relevant to their particular racial, social, cultural, and tribal clan or kindred identity thus, forming exclusive political alliances with others of this group, instead of identifying themselves with the broader nationality of the state. This theoretical assumption therefore holds that those who prioritize their particular type of ethnic political identity possibly will promote their group's interests with complete disregard for the interests of the larger group. Likewise, the group theory as propounded by A. F. Bentley in his renowned work "The Process of Government" (1908) is a theoretical assumption that explains the virulent influence and manipulations of groups in a political system. The fundamentals of group theory holds that institutions do not provide the best framework for explaining how society functions, rather the interactions of groups are the basis of political life. Hence, the theory posits that politics is a group affair and each group is competing against each other

for power. However, the superior group interests outweigh the critical mass of the people i.e. collected interest of society (Okereka, 2015).

In Nigerian democracy, what pervades the political landscape are ferocious group competitions and ethnic contestations which negate the real essence of ideal democracy wherein individuals in whom sovereignty lies, should come together to conglomerate and garner enough strength to galvanize their interests for the betterment of the society. But unfortunately, groups' sectional quest for relevance and out-smarting approaches to gain development, positions and self-favoritism advantages at the expense of others has given rise to mutual distrust and dichotomy within the country. Consequently, ethnic political identity and interactions which form the basis of the group activities in Nigeria political system, has been characterized by various forms of anti-democratic behaviours such as leadership ineptitude and insensitivity, outright disregard for due process, nepotism, bribery and corruption, etc. Contemporarily, Nigeria's socio-political image is fraught with ethnic contradictions manifested in political and economic marginalization, geopolitical imbalances, ethnic ignited insecurity, corruption and fraud amongst other issues which has become a threat to the survival of Nigeria's fragile democracy and its corporate existence.

Issues of Ethnic Contestations in Nigeria

Over the years in the Nigerian state, there have been tsunami of issues that have swept away the real semblance of firsthand democracy in the polity and these are major concerns that have created dichotomy in Nigeria politics. Within the context of this study, the issues of ethnic contestation in Nigeria includes: Ethnized resource control branded by political and economic marginalization of some ethnic nationalities, Leadership ineptitude and insensitivity, Geopolitical imbalance and denials among ethnic groups, Corruption and fraud in management of national resources, etc.

Resource Control

Resource control and allocation in Nigeria is replete with tensions over political and economic marginalization of some ethnic nationalities. Okereka (2015) was quite vociferous in his explanation of ethicized resource control in Nigeria, as situations where by it is all about sticking to one's tribal group and favoring such against the many existing others within a society, with the seat of power and its economic benefits regarded as the exclusive preserve of some

groups over the others. Okpata (2019) avers that resource control, power sharing and power relations in Nigeria is contemporarily enmeshed with obscene social injustice and inequality as particular ethnic group has seized power at the detriment and interest of all others. Overtime since 1999, arising from party ideologies and ethnic biases, power has rotated with a particular ethnic line. The bureaucratic melodrama arising from benching a given region and/or ethnic group against the other is now the trending gimmicks of power play; culminating in humongous imbalance and hegemonic power control both socio-politically and economically.

One of the most staggering issues of ethicized resource control branded by political and economic marginalization of some ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, is the ethicized transfer of resources from one region for the development of another and the underdevelopment of the region where the resources are based or extracted from. Due to this lopsidedness, the question of a 'United Nigeria' is now more like a mere rhetoric, with the reality of an unreachable Shangri-La. The question that still begs for answers is why a refinery has not been established in Port-Harcourt or any other South-southern States from where all the crude oil is extracted, but refined and out rightly expended in Northern Nigeria? The reality is that proceeds accruing from the resources of the South are for the development of the North, while the entire South-south is underdeveloped in terms of infrastructural development. This has aggravated ethnic contestations in Nigeria particularly from the South-south and has developed some level of militias in the region.

Leadership Ineptitude and Insensitivity

Leadership according to Adebayo and Bharat (2016) depicts the great importance placed on the caliber of people that are empowered to spearhead or run various public institutions and control resources; vis-à-vis the approach or pattern of leadership they portray in ensuring an effective and productive public service. Babatunde, Tonbara and Hakeem (2018) however underscore that the quality and effectiveness of leadership processes rely heavily on the systemic embodiment of leadership and the strategic fit of the manner of leadership. Hence, Nigeria they say inherited unfit and insensitive leadership from the erstwhile colonial government who used ethnicity to perfect their political strategies and notch up their socio-economic and political gains. Buteven with the attainment of independence in 1960 and the 1999 democratization, the spinoff of leadership ineptitude and leadership crisis has

continued to undermine democratic consolidation in Nigeria and the attainment of sustainable development.

In analyzing the plethora of leaders that have spanned the Nigeria leadership ladder, Imhonopi and Ugochukwu (2018:81) were assertive that "selfish, mediocre, tribal leaders and opportunistic small money-minded people masquerading as leaders have continued to regenerate in Nigeria" Over time, Nigeria has become a mockery of the so-called 'Giant of Africa' and an epitome of unproductiveness, ineptitude, mediocre, parochial and ethnic-drunk leadership; such that the preference of self-preservation over national interest continues to undermine Nigeria's attempt to liberate itself from the clutches of underdevelopment. In recent time, ethnic contestation is now the order of Nigeria politics; even within a given political party, ethnic consciousness is replete within the echelon of the political party executives cum leadership. This leadership ineptitude is breaking up the corporate existence of the Nigerian state, such that the present administration characterized by the 'Cabal system' apparently has no direction, no vision and no agenda.

Leadership ineptitude and insensitivity are also about the wrong leadership recruitment in the Nigerian system where the recruitment process lacks scientism and does not enthrone merit system. Onwe, Abah and Nwokwu (2015) avow that the politics of ethnicity in leadership recruitment has completely destroyed the principles of meritocracy in Nigeria recruitment and appointment standards. This is why even the people who stand for election in Nigeria are not qualified candidates by the requirement of the law; yet the very fact that the Electoral Commission is inclined to leadership ineptitude, has paved way for the enthronement of a leader who has no qualification (a mediocre). All over again, this has aggravated a lot of Nigerians in a country where there are millions of Professors and enlightened men in all sectors of the country. But what we have is leadership that is piled-up with illiterates, not enlightened, not exposed, daftly-minded aging men. Nigeria's recruitment/appointment/election process is faulty, and when the means of enthroning public leadership is faulty, that country is bound to have a faulty leadership and a dysfunctional polity. This whole reality affects the style of leadership and frustrates any effort towards the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria and the attainment of the much desired sustainable development.

Geopolitical Imbalance and Denials among Ethnic Groups

One of the most glaring bases for ethnic contestation in Nigeria is the far-reaching lack of social justice in the conduct of public affairs as contained in Section 14 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The concept of the 'Federal Character Principle' as enshrined in the Constitution has been thrown overboard as particular ethnic group has seized power at the detriment and interest of all others. Asaju and Egberi (2015:52) succinctly emphasize that "It was in realization of some inherent cleavages of inequalities, that the federal character principle was introduced". Hence, the essence of the federal character principle was to ensure that in power relations and power sharing, government decisions on citing industries, building roads, awarding scholarships, recruitment or appointment or employment of public office holders, admission and revenue allocations, etc. reflect federal character. To this end, Section 14(3) of the 1999 Constitution provides that:

> The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic of other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.

Taribo (2014) explained that though the intentions of the initiators of federal character was noble, guided by Nigeria's historical experiences and the reality of the Nigerian situation; however the principle is obviously volatile in practice, as its inappropriate ethicized application makes it susceptible to the same ills it was designed to expunge. Consequently, this has engendered geopolitical imbalance and denials among ethnic groups thereby aggravating ethnic contestations in Nigeria. The inability of Nigeria political system to adhere to social justice in administration of public affairs has made appointments Northern region skewed, especially in the present administration.

Corruption and Fraud in the Management of National Resources

Corruption has eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigeria political system and as vividly put by Nyukorong (2014) corruption describes any organized, interdependent system in which part of the system is either not performing duties it was originally intended to perform, or performing them in an improper way, to the detriment of the system's original purpose. Hence, corruption can occur in many forms. It can affect the "physical" being in terms of disintegration or by decomposition, with its attendant unwholesome and loathsome connotations, and it can affect the "moral" being by the "perversion" or "destruction" of integrity, particularly in the discharge of public duties by bribery or favor and other forms of illicit gains. Nwankwo (2006) cited in Okpata (2011) went further to juxtapose corruption in Nigerian leadership concomitantly with sadism. He reasoned that much of the explanation of the "care free" attitude of typical Nigerian leader has to do with sadism. In its simplest meaning, sadism is a state of the mind by which an individual derives joy in seeing other people suffer. This despicable euphoria derived from others suffering, makes most public servants in Nigeria irresponsive to the demands of the public they are meant to serve.

The foregoing assertion makes a truism of the cliché that "You must first and foremost remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye". President Muhammedu Buhari on assumption of office declared an Anti-graft war against all forms of corruption and to this effect; the Presidency has enrolled series of anti-corruption programmes and Agencies to advice the incumbent administration on prosecution of 'War Against Corruption' and the implementation of required reforms in the Nation's Criminal Justice System. However, the President has been criticized by Nigerians and the International community of leading a selective war against corruption (Ezika and Okpata, 2019). He is also accused of appointing certain corrupt officials as members of his cabinet; likewise his so-called Anti-graft War Agencies are also accused of lack of transparency as the recovered loots of public funds are not properly accounted for.

Cases of Ethnic Contestations in Nigeria

The discussion of empirical situations of ethnic contestations in Nigeria is inexhaustible however, the most basic manifestations of ethnic agitations in contemporary Nigeria include: Religious politics and ethnic imposition, Insecurity as a result of frustration among ethnic nationalities, Imbalance in allocation, the rise of Militias and attempted secession, etc.

Religious Politics and Ethnic Imposition

Religious politics and ethnic imposition depicts the gradual islamization of Nigeria directly and indirectly by the present administration, taking away the secularity of the Nigerian State as contained in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Nigerian Constitution pre-supposes that an individual has freedom to practice religion of his or her choice without government interference. Momoh (2016) asserts that this is where secularism comes into play. The argument is that secularism is a legal position in the supreme law of Nigeria, stating that religious belief should not influence any public and/ or governmental decisions. In other words, secularism is a documented position in the Nigerian Constitution relating to political belief in the separation of religion and state, such that while people are allowed to practice whatever they believe in as their religion, the government must not allow that to influence leadership, public policy or power relations/control.

It is very disheartening and worrisome that today, the Southerners are already besieged by the psychological warfare of islamization. The introduction of Ruggar settlement saga perpetrated by the present administrations is deemed to have some sort of religious undertones. Likewise, the latest border closure trending in Nigeria, with the borders indirectly still open to African Muslims coming in preparatory to conquer Nigeria as a land for the Muslim. No wonder the entire (Non-Muslim) Nigeria citizens are gripped with fear of total Islamization of the country, as an agenda of the present administration. This is what ethnic politics by extension, is bringing to the Nigerian polity.

Insecurity as a Result of Frustration among Ethnic Nationalities

In response to the ethno-politicized governance of the Nigerian State, so many marginalized ethnic groups are blatantly taking out their frustrations on weaponry due to anxiety and timidity. These agitations have escalated the level of insecurity and insurgency in the Nigerian communities, with

reoccurring incidences of armed robbery, kidnappings, ritual killings, cyber fraud and other forms of violent crime. To be truthful to ourselves, the present Boko-Haram insurgence started with political coloration before it turned out to become global terrorism. Nigerian roads are not just unsafe due to deplorable road conditions, but as regards the high rate of kidnappings; all of which are responses to dysfunctional political leadership.

This pocket and classes of insecurity is an endpoint of what the present political landscape is producing in the North; and then the result is that most regions have been frustrated. Consequently youths have taken up arms and cyber criminality, such that today, crime rate is increasing. Okpata (2019) notes that it is not because people ordinarily want to go into crime, rather they are looking for ways to survive since they have been marginalized and bottled-up. Hence, in response to the suppressed feelings of injustice, insecurity has grown towards ethnic lines, thus the ethnic contestations in Nigeria.

Imbalance in Allocation, the Rise of Militias and Attempted Secession

At the attainment of Independence in 1960 and the 1999 democratization of Nigeria that followed after, the people of Nigeria thought that the much desired transformation of their lives was very near. Balogun (2015) avows that the masses had high hopes for Nigeria believing that positive change was just around the corner through their own chosen leaders. Unfortunately, democratic good governance and its concomitant benefits has continued to elude us, such that the people are tired and at the verge of giving up completely. In response, so many ethnic groups have developed some level of Militias with threats of secession such as the Biafra-induced IPOB. According to Okereke (2019) The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a group that leads the calls for Biafra's freedom from Nigeria. Led by Nnamdi Kanu, IPOB have been clamoring for settlement of their grievances through a referendum in the Nigerian states that were part of the old Eastern Region.

The Niger Delta Militias, the O'odua People Congress (OPC), Bakassi Boys, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Egbesu boys, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) Arewa People's Congress (APC), the Shiites and Fulani Militias in Nigeria have all risen to become problems for political leadership in Nigeria. All these Militias are cases of ethnic contestations in Nigeria as the youths in different regions

are forming militia groups to see whether they can attract the attention of the federal government; thereby causing all sorts of political, economic and social deleterious waves in the country.

Conclusion

The forgoing issues and cases, leave nobody in doubt as to the blatant mockery Nigerian democratic governance has become, a causality of the dire issues and cases of ethnic contestations in Nigeria. Needless to say that the Nigerian State still have a very long way to go for the consolidation of democracy and actualization of sustainable development in the near future. The implications of ethnic politics and its attendant ethnic contestations is not just deleterious to the socio-economic transformation of the Nigerian society; but also expected to have malignant multiplier effects in terms of daily increases in the level of criminality, insecurity, unemployment, poverty and outright anarchy if urgent concerted measures are not taken to make amends.

Recommendations

This paper therefore recommends that, for the Nigerian State to be strategically focused, more productive and sustainably developed, there is need for government to enable regional autonomy and inclusive politics in the democratic governance of the Nigerian State. Further to this is the imperative of restructuring both the economy and the politics of Nigeria. Arising from the issues of resource control and allocation, there is therefore need that state self-government be enshrined in the ongoing constitutional amendment to ensure economic restructuring, just as political imbalance has also necessitated political restructuring in the South-south and South-east geopolitical regions. If we are inclined to the unity of Nigeria in the real sense of it, these issues raised must be addressed in the present political governance of Nigeria to enable the attainment of a United State that will experience democratic development in this 21st century. If this is done, our democracy will not only strive but be consolidated with transformational changes ensured in the whole gamut of Nigerian democratic governance.

REFERENCES

Achimugu, H., Ala-Agboni, U. J. and Abdulahi, A. (2013). Ethnicity, Ethnic Crisis and Good Governance in Nigeria: Implications for Sustainable National Development. *Public Policy Administration Research Journa*l. 3(12):46-51.

Adebayo, A. A. and Bharat, T. (2016).Nigerian Public Administration Leadership Styles and their Perceived Effectiveness.*International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences.* 6(9):85-92.

Asaju, K. and Egberi, T. (2015). Federal Character and National Integration in Nigeria: The Need for Discretion and Interface. *Review of History and Political Science Journal*. 3(1): 126-134.

Babatunde, G., Tonbara, S. A., and Hakeem, S. A. (2018).Impact of Leadership Styles on Employee Engagement and Conflict Management Practices in Nigeria Universities.*Issues in Educational Research Journal.* 28(4):830-848.

Balogun, B. A. (2015). Leadership Styles in Nigeria: Errors, Problems and Solutions. *Continental Journal of Social Sciences*. 8(2):17-31.

Ezika, G. A. and Okpata, F. O. (2018). Public Accountability in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges. *Arabian Groups Journal of Social Development.* 7(2):11-20.

Imhonopi, D. and Ugochukwu, M. U. (2018). Leadership Crisis and Corruption in Nigerian Public Sector: An Albatross of National Development. *The African Symposium: Journal of African Educational Research.* 78(15)1-10.

Momoh, L. Y. (2016). Impact of Religion on a Secular State: The Nigerian Experience. *National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies.* 2(1):11-23.

Nandi, A. and Platt, L. (2018).The Relationship between Political and Ethnic Ideality among UK Ethnic Minority and Majority Populations. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.*1(2):12-23.

Nyukorong, R. (2014). Corruption, Nepotism or the 'Whom You Know' factor and how it Affects Recruitment in the Banking Sector of Ghana. *Developing Countries Studies.*4(24).

Okereka, O. P. (2015). Understanding the Thrust of the Group Theory and its Applicability to Contemporary Party Politics in Nigeria.*Public Policy and Administration Research*. 5(5):99-107.

Okereke, C. (2019). Armed Violence and Development Background Information on Imo State.*Cledesor.org.ng*. Retrieved Saturday 21st September, 2019.

Okpata, F. O. (2019). Social Justice Administration, Equality and Security Questions in Nigerian Government: Issues and Case Studies. *A Paper Presented at the Faculty of Management and Social Sciences International Conference,* Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike, Ikwo. 26th June, 2019.

Okpata, F. O. Ezika, G. A. and Ukaeje, C. (2019). Democratic Governance and the Underdevelopment of Public Service System in Nigerian States: The Ebonyi State Experiment (2015-2019). *A Paper Presented at the 31st National Conference of Nigerian Association of Political Science Students. 22nd -25th July, 2019.*

Okpata, F.O. (2011). Politics of Staff Recruitment and Development in Nigerian Public Service.*Readings in Modern Public Administration.*1(1).

Onwe, S.O., Abah, E.O. and Nwokwu, P.M. (2015). Politics of Recruitment and Selection in the Nigerian Civil Service: An Ebonyi State Experience. *Public Policy and Administration Research.*5(2).

Taribo, S.M.K. (2014). *Federal Character Principle and Destiny of Nigeria.*TND Press Ltd, Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria.

Ugem, C. E. (2019). Ethnicity, Democracy and the Development Nexus in Nigeria.*International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention.* 6(4):5400-5406.