

Socio-historical Review on Minority Rights in the First Republic of Nigeria

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Abstract

The colonial design of imposing a socio-political intermingling between the different social groups of Nigeria during the colonial era did not pay a cautious attention to the variety of cultures and cultural relations that had existed among the pre-colonial people of Nigeria prior to the advent of colonialism. Thus, the various social groups with their differentials in political organization and cultural orientation came to defy any scientific attempt for the classification of the different people of Nigeria during the colonial and post-colonial epochs. One is obliged to concede at once that the identification of minorities is almost entirely dictated by ethnic identities and loyalty. In place of tribalism, which now has a negative connotation, ethnic identities have emerged as the preferred terminology. The tribe has been defined as a group of people who have cultural and political unity, similar customs and usage and who have descended from a common ancestor. In the case of Nigeria, three major factors have been considered.

Keywords: Ethnic identities, political unity, customs, and minority rights in First Republic Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The evolution and development of Nigeria's federal system cannot be separated from the issue of minority rights [1]. In order to foster the development of a sense of national community, the evolving system in an ethnically differentiated policy should cater to the interests of all encompassing groups [2]. Where ethnic identity trumps national consciousness, the process of national community trumps national consciousness. Unfortunately, after independence, political actors politicized and manipulated the minority issue for their own political ends, at the expense of national unity. As a result, the group's demands for self-determination, resource control, Sharia adoption, the formation of new states, and, most recently, the convening of a sovereign national conference have gradually progressed [3]. One of the most notable devices or attempts to solve the minority problem is the constitutional guarantee of equitable representation of all groups in the governing process [4]. Thus,

the use of federal character and the quota system were intended to cater to the interests of minority groups in federal society. More complicated is the fact that every minority has a minority within it. No group in society is abundantly blessed across the board. As a result, there is always the risk of being taken advantage of in transactions, particularly at the highest levels of government. The consequences of leaving one section of the state bitter while another is presumed to benefit from prosperity have encouraged the search for ways to assuage the minority in any way possible. The minority question refers to the nature of agenda setting for minority groups in any society. Firstly, the Language Factor: With about 280 dialects, no one can seriously suggest that there are

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280 tribes. Secondly, there is the Religious Factor, which will give Nigeria three major tribes and three sub-divisions of each: Christians-Catholicism, Protestants and African. Moslems, Orthodox, Ahmaddiya and others, African traditional religion which may be open secret or for healing.

All this will give Nigeria five major tribes: Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Fulani, and Army.

It is my submission however that Oche Onazi's identification of the minorities does not go far enough. Junknns, Idomas, Igala, Igbira, and Nupe are not included in the definition [5]. All of whom coincidentally are to be found above the confluence of the Niger-Benue at Lokoja. It is safe to assume that the minority status they too have, entitles them to some consideration when the need arises to discuss the minority question in modern Nigeria.

What seems evident is that in the proposed new Nigeria between amalgamation in 1914 and the inauguration of the first republic and thereafter up to the first military coup, the nationalists were confronted with the problem created by the wealth of ethnic cultures within Nigeria's boundary and the difficulty of subsuming the loyalties of these ethnic cultures into the peoples' new Nigeria nation. In the struggle to give meaning to this necessary but distracting endeavor, inspiring language such as 'Unity in diversity' was deployed in a bid to foster a new loyalty, that is, to the Nigerian nation and not just to the ethnic sub nation [6]. Diversity arguably could then be made to be seen to be just another hangover from the past no longer useful in the proposed new Nigeria. Formation of a party "National Council of Nigerians and Cameroons" (NCNC) [7].

This background of political parties being instruments of tribal/ethnic interest concerned almost entirely with the continuous struggle in pre and post independent Nigeria for what each considered its fair share of 'national cake' defines and at once creates what has come to be known as the minority question [8].

An instructive example of the resistance of the southern minorities to deprivation of control of their resources is provided by the recorded history of the activities of Liverpool traders and other British colonial interest in the area known as Brass Kingdom, particularly with reference to the palm oil trade [9]. This resistance found expression in the activities of King Jaja of Opobo and Chief Nana who defiantly insisted on composting with the European traders in the oil palm business and had to be militarily defeated and sent into exile [10]. The resentment of the European traders' monopoly of the oil palm trade reached its peak when King William Koko took the offensive fortified by his belief in the Ijaw God of war 'EGBESU' and attacked the European country's headquarters in Akassa. The resistance however was ultimately futile as king Koko was defeated in battle. In the pre-independence years, it became solution to the problems of the minority lay in federalism that was a consequence of the sense of dissatisfaction with the 1946 Constitution known as the Richards Constitution [11]. It is necessary to acknowledge that the Richards Constitution was based on the interests of the state and its administration should come first. Nigeria was further divided into the Eastern, Western and Northern provinces, under the regional council; the executive council had Africans unofficial members [12]. It has been argued that this division of Nigeria into what amounted to ethnic lines contributed to the problems later tagged tribalism. More importantly, the Richards Constitution did not take into account the cultural plurality which meant in effect that no consideration was given to the smaller ethnic groups that existed in the three big provinces. The dissatisfaction led to the introduction of another Constitution making exercise under the guidance of a new governor-general Sir John Macpherson and new Constitution which came to be known as the McPherson Constitution was left entirely to Nigerians with the colonial personnel acting merely as observers. The new Constitution established a Federal House of representative for Nigerians, a House of Assembly in each region, a house of chiefs in the Northern and Southern provinces and Council of Ministers for each regional house of assembly.

Despite the reforms there still remained a sense of dissatisfaction and a sense of neglect of the minority rights and interest. This sense of dissatisfaction led to delegates from the three prominent

parties in existence, the NPC (Northern People's Congress), AG (Action Group) and the NCNC (Council of Nigerians and Cameroons) going to London to attend the Constitutional conference with the then Colonial Secretary, Oliver Littleton in 1953 and 1954 respectively [13]. These conferences laid down the foundation for a Federal Constitution for Nigeria. With a view to addressing the problem, a Commission on minority groups was set up headed by Sir Henry Willink. The commission was to gather evidence and consider all the groups, received suggestions and make recommendations accordingly [14]. However, it recognized, foreshadowing today's complaints, that among the people of the delta "lay a deep-rooted conviction that the difficulties of this difficult stretch of country were not understood at Government headquarters". The Commission advocated for "the declaration of the Ijaw country as a Special Area, "which would" draw public attention to a neglected tract and allow the Ijaws to put forward plans for their own improvement [15]". It is a matter of some interests to note that the Ijaw sub nationality can now be found in four states of present day Nigeria: Ondo, Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta State, and in fact constitutes by reason of population if not spread, a fourth major ethnic group in Nigeria. The Littleton Constitution which formed the foundation of the 1960 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria enshrined the principle that federalism was the answer to the problems of minority interests. Classical federalism by definition was meant to be an inclusive system which arguably could satisfy the aspirations of the entire component parts of the federation and in a peculiar circumstance of Nigeria, ethnic pluralism, it seemed an adequate mechanism to achieve political accommodation. In practical terms, it certainly proved useful for political elites who found an effective tool for sharing the spoils and certainly it was a useful tool for striking a balance between regional and national interests and identities. But regrettably the interests of minority groups took a back seat in the arrangement. It is the view expressed by Sanni Bala Shehu in his article that the federal system was structurally flawed right from the start.

Post-Independence

Tribalism/ethnicity became the tool of party politics after independence essentially among the three major tribal conglomerates: the Hausa, Yoruba's and Igbo, who dominated the party in power in their respective regional conclaves and therefore regional Government and the spoils thereof, i.e., the location of development project distribution of public offices etc. The three main tribes with their regions as their power base then negotiated for a share of the spoils of Federal Government at the center. That is to say, the country found it being governed on the Nigeria was a three legged-stool 50 long as each leg of the stool had a reasonable share of the spoils of governance, all was well with the nation state. It hardly needs to be overemphasized that this had no place for the minorities and the continued discontent of the minorities led to the creation of serious fault lines in Nigeria's body politics. The discontent led for instance to what came to be known as the Tiv riot. It also found expression in serious agitation in what was known as the Niger Delta, manifesting itself in the brief but pointed activities. In the course of time, it became politically expedient for the governing coalition at the federal level to exploit the agitations and sense of dissatisfaction among the minorities in a part of Niger-Delta located in the then western region. Ironically, the party in power in the western region, i.e., the Action Group (AG) had in fact been more sympathetic to the aspirations of minority groups in the country, a sharp contrast to the disposition of the coalition parties in control of the Federal Government who hitherto had shown complete indifference, if not hostility, to any of the minority tribes, i.e., the Northern People's Congress (NPC) to the Tivs sub-nation. Not only did they dismiss out of hand any talk of Tiv interests, they caused the Federal Government to deploy troops in the region in a bid to suppress violent Tivs agitations. Using its numerical superiority in the federal parliament, the coalition successfully midwived the creation of an additional region (the Midwest region) from the then western region. This exercise remains the only example of the use of the Constitutional provisions of the 1963 Constitution to effect changes in the face of a group of minorities. However, it must be admitted that the Constitutional provisions would have been difficult to satisfy had it not been that there was what amounted to a grand conspiracy to carry out the exercise in the face of the opposition of the party in Government in the western region. The Constitution provided for a plebiscite in the area where the new region was to be created, it also provided for a

regional assembly to support the proposed new region amongst other stringent provision including the endorsement by the House of Representatives. Future events however, went on to show that even as the aspirations of the minorities were satisfied on one level, it opened the road to another level of agitation for sub-interests within what was once a minority group so much that regionalism gave way to statism in the course of time and seemingly endless demands for more states, thus leading to the absurd situation where there are as many demands for new states as there are ethnic groups and/or dialects in Nigeria. In the final analysis, one is led to the same conclusion that the Willink Commission arrived at that it would be impracticable to provide for new states or regions to satisfy every single ethnic sub-nationality. It must therefore be the case that the solution to the question on minority rights is to provide for good and effective governance in such a way as to be all inclusive, this may well account for the provision in every Subsequent Constitution of Fundamental DiREctives and State Policies which stipulates that: The composition of the Government.

CONCLUSION

From a pluralist perspective, federalization created new opportunities for participation and new venues for groups to assert their claims. The Tyranny of Regional Politics was defeated by broadening the scope of the conflict, shifting the battlefield, and thus changing the range of group interests involved. Indeed, the federal system was designed to accommodate diverse groups with a common goal.

By broadening the scope of the conflict, shifting the battlefield, and thus changing the range of group interests involved, the Tyranny of Regional Politics was defeated. The new opportunities for cooperation at independence were squandered due to the predominance of regional suspicion of domination and marginalization. While the colonial orientation was antithetical to the emergence of a more stable federal system, the unbridled ambitions of the political elites led to the exploration of devices that reinforced the acute ethnic differentiation. Corruption and mismanagement of these measures for personal gain by political elites triggered a governance crisis, resulting in a demand for minority rights protection within the various ethnic enclaves and the national arena at large.

The re-examination of the Willink Commission report in order to devise a measure to ensure the emergence of a new culture of accommodation. Aside from that, transparent institutional arrangements should be designed to limit the political elites' unbridled appetite for stimulating the promotion of good governance.

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