Ethno-Religious and Political Conflicts: Threat to Nigeria Nascent Democracy

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Abstract

After about thirty years of military dictatorship, Nigeria found herself again in the mainstream of democratic governance. While this development was seen by some people as an avenue to explore dividends and goodies of democracy, others saw it as an opportunity to express grievances, the outcome of which is the occurrence and re-occurrence of ethno-religious and political conflicts. Since the re-emergence of democracy in May 1999, not less than one hundred politically, ethnically and religiously motivated conflicts have occurred in Nigeria. This paper examines the persistent waves of ethno-religious and political conflicts and the threat they pose to the nascent democracy in Nigeria. The paper investigates the history of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria and argues that the foundation of ethno-religious and political conflicts was laid by colonialism, boosted by military dictatorship and strengthened by the contradictions embedded in the Nigerian federalism. The paper concludes that good governance, accountability, poverty and unemployment reduction and restructuring of federalism are important issues to be addressed in order to solve permanently the problem of ethno-religious and political conflicts that have continued to threaten Nigeria democracy.

Introduction

Nigeria is the most populous countries in Africa with a diverse cultural heritage. The country has a population of about 140 million with not less than 250 ethnic groups, three (3) of which are the majority groups. The majority groups include the Hausa/ Fulani in the North, the Yoruba speaking people in the South/West and the Igbo speaking people in the Eastern part. These groups, because of their opportunistic positions have been seen as consistently dominating the political as well as economic scene before and after the attainment of independence in 1960 and this has led to agitations for state creation by the marginalized groups, however, "the more states were created, the more the complaints of marginalization and inequality by new minorities against the new majorities in

each state" (Abdulrahman, 2006). Consequently, the proliferation of ethno-religious and political turbulence in the country is therefore necessitated on one hand by cultural, communal and religious differences and on the other hand by fear of domination nursed by the minority groups. Contrary to the reality of the Nigerian situation, Osaghae and Suberu (2005) argued that the fact that a state is diverse in terms of culture, traditions, religious and ethnic groupings does not suggest that conflict is indispensable, but when mobilization around identities occurs or they are politicized only then they constitute the bases for conflict. There are evidences of diverse countries in the world (diversity in terms of ethnic, cultural and religious) that have taken advantage of their diversity to better the lots of their citizenry and enjoy a reasonable level of peace and stability. Notable among these countries are Tanzania, Switzerland, India, Belgium, and in fact the United States.

While some diverse countries in the world have taken advantage of their diversity, in Nigeria it has remained an insurmountable difficulty. The nation's diversity continues to threaten the unity of the country and the deepening of her nascent democracy thereby making the future of the country unpredictable. This is reflected in the occurrence and re-occurrence of ethno-religious and political conflicts and violence before and after independence. For instance ethnic and political differences played a prominent role in the crises and violence that followed the motion calling for independence in 1956 by Chief Anthony Enahoro, a member of the then Action Group at the floor of the House of Representatives in Lagos in 1953.

After the attainment of independence, cases of political conflicts rooted by ethno-religious undertones almost suffocated the "new" Nigeria. Among these were the Census Crisis of 1962/63, the Action Group crisis of 1962, the 1964 Federal Elections Crisis, the Western Nigerian Elections Crisis of 1965, General Elections Crisis of 1979 and General Elections Crisis of 1983 (Abdullahi, 2005).

The lack of cohesiveness in the nation polity has also manifested itself in the present democratic dispensation. This has been demonstrated by the trenchant call for Sovereign National Conference in some parts of the country, resource control as well as persistent wave of political, inter-ethnic and sectional violence. Although figures disclosed may be misleading, between 1999 and 2004 no fewer than 100 conflicts were recorded in the country (Elaigwu, 2005, Abdulrahman, 2006). This has resulted in the death of at least 10,000 people and the displacement of about 800,000 people (Global IDP Project, 2005; Nwabufo, 2005). In February 2006, as many as 50,000 people were internally displaced and about 150 killed in a wave of violence across the country, sparked off by protests against the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad by a Danish Newspaper, reproduced by one of Nigerian leading daily Newspapers (NRCS, 2006, IDMC, 2006).

Highly worrisome and threatening to the sustenance of the nation's nascent democracy is the issue of politically motivated assassination of important political personality. Since the installation of democratic dispensation in 1999 the country has witnessed high profile politically motivated assassinations. This trend led to the killing of a prominent lawyer of international repute and the then Attorney General of the Federation Chief Bola Ige. Others include Chief Funsho Williams, a gubernatorial aspirant in Lagos State, Ayodele Daramola also a gubernatorial aspirant in Ekiti State, Marshal Harry, an ANPP National Deputy Chairman for the South-South geo-political zone, Ogbonnaya Uche, a senatorial candidate and former Commissioner in Imo State, Theodore Agwatu, a principal secretary to the Imo State government and so on.

It is incontrovertible that ethno-religious and political crises have strong implications for socio-political and economic developments of Nigeria. This is captured by the comments made by the President of the country when he asserted that:

> *Violence has reached unprecedented levels and hundreds have been killed with*
> *much more wounded or displaced from their homes on account of their ethnic or*
> *religious identification. Schooling for children has been disrupted and interrupted;*
> *businesses have lost billions of naira and property worth much more destroyed*
> *(*Obasanjo, 2004).

Aside these, the President observed that these violent outbursts have made investors to flee the nation's troubled spots particularly Plateau State and the volatile Niger Delta Region. Also, neighbouring States have had their economies and social life disrupted by the influx of internally displaced generated by the conflict especially in Plateau. Pathetic was the fate of Warri, the once bubbling oil capital of the country turned to a ghost town as a result of the incessant communal conflict between the Ijaw and the Itsekiri ethnic groups. The Federal Government continues to incur huge resources in managing the socio-political and economic consequences of the near collapse of state authority in Plateau and the breakdown of law and order throughout the Niger Delta.

Stressing further the negative consequences of ethno-religious and political conflicts, former military dictator, General Ibrahim Babangida (2002), asserted that such conflicts most often resulted in enormous wastage of human and material resources, poses serious threat to security of life and property, resulted in the disinvestment of the fragile economy due to capital flight and contributed to the weakness of the political process. Given the irreparable loss of lives and property that most often result from these conflicts one can safely argue that these conflicts impacted negatively on the economies of the local communities and by extension that of the nation as a whole.

It is against this background, this paper examines the incidence and prevalence of ethno-religious and political conflicts in Nigeria and the threat it poses to the nascent democracy.

Conceptual Clarification

Defining conflict, Weber (1971) argues that conflict is any action that is oriented intentionally to carry-out actor's own wish against the resistance of the other party or parties. For Coser (1966) social conflict is a struggle over status, power, and scarce resources in which the sole aims of the parties involved are not only to gain the desired value but also to also neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals. Generally, conflict entails struggle and rivalry for objects to which individuals and groups attach importance. These objects can either be material or non-material. The material objects may include scarce resources like money, employment, and position including political ones, promotion in both the private and public organisations. The non-material objects include culture, tradition, religion and language (Osaghae, 2001).

According to conflict theorists, conflicts, whether political, communal, ethnic or religious are often influenced or motivated by disparity rather than similarity among the people especially unequal ones. Karl Marx wrote in 1937 in the "Communist Manifesto" that "the history of all existing society is the history of class struggle". In other words, be it agrarian, feudal or capitalist society, conflict is constant because of class differences. Arguing from this perspective, one could say that conflict is inherent in human relationships. Although this perspective has gained momentum especially among its adherents, it never suggests that every underlying relationship must be expressed with the same magnitude of hatred and jealousy neither does it suggest that such conflict can not be minimized (Duverger, 1980). As written by Elaigwu (2005)

> Every form of interaction among human beings and groups can generate conflict. Conflict is the spice of every state. It tests the fragility or otherwise of the state and creates the basis of future amelioration or adjustments. However, conflicts beyond certain thresholds are detrimental to the very survival of the state, precisely because they threaten the consensual basis of association.

Writing about the causes of conflicts Elaigwu (2005) asserted that conflicts can arise due to many factors among which, are:

i)   actions which lead to mutual mistrust, polarization of relations, and/or hostility among groups in apparently competitive interactions;

ii)   frustrations arising from unsatisfied human needs which may include psychological, economic, physical, social and others forms;

iii)   explosion of identity as groups begin to ask for greater participation and rights;

iv)   seemingly cultural incompatibility among groups with different communication styles; and

v)   perceived inequality and injustice expressed through competitive socio-political, economic and cultural frameworks.

These factors are eminently important in the understanding of ethno-religious and political conflicts in Nigeria.

Some Major Political, Religious and Ethnic Violence since May 1999

After many years of military dictatorship democratic governance was re-installed in May 29, 1999 in Nigeria. While some people saw the installation of democratic government in Nigeria as an opportunity for development and the time to harvest the democratic dividends, others saw it as an avenue to express their grievances. The democratic government also created new areas of conflict by the competition for political spoils (IDMC, 2006) some of which were sponsored by the aggrieved elites in order to distort the process of governance thereby creating unnecessary tension. According to IDMC (2006) ethno-religious conflict is endemic in Nigeria, with at least 14,000 people killed and hundreds of thousands displaced since military rule ended in 1999. The following are some of the politically, ethnically and religiously motivated crises and violence since the inception of democratic governance in 1999 adapted from the work of Elaigwu (2005) and Human Rights Watch (2003).

May 31, 1999: A carry-over of the violent clash between the Ijaw and Itsekiri communities, which had started under the Military administration in Warri, Delta State.

July 2, 1999: Ethnic clash between the Yorubas and the Hausa/Fulani residing in Sagamu, Ogun State.

July 22, 1999: A spillover of the July 2 crisis in Sagamu. The Hausa targeted the Yoruba as a vengeance on the killings of their kit and kin in Yoruba land.

November 8, 1999: This occurred in Odi community in Bayelsa state. "The town received a shelling and bombardment with artillery from soldiers" (Elaigwu, 2005).

February 28, 2000: A clash between Muslim and Christian extremists in Kaduna State over the introduction of Sharia in some parts of the country.

Feb. 28, 2000: The crisis started in Abia State as a reprisal to the Kaduna crisis. This later got spread to other eastern States.

March 10, 2000: Communal clash between Ife and Modakeke communities in Ijesha, Osun State. Although the this crisis had been on for several years the march 10 crisis was believed to have been

heightened by local government council creation and the tussle over the location of the Headquarters of the newly created local government.

April 14, 2000: Communal clash that started over the location of local government council in Agyragu, Nasarawa State.

May 4, 2000: Another round of communal clash between the warring communities of Ife and Modakeke in Osun State.

October17, 2000: A face-off between the militant OPC (O'Odua People's Congress) members and Ilorin community over the supremacy of Emirate system in Kwara State.

October 18, 2000: Another face off between the militant OPC and Hausa/ Fulani in Ajegunle, Lagos.

October 21, 2000: Ethnic crisis in Minna, Niger State after the OPC assaults on the Hausa/Fulani in both Lagos and Ilorin.

June 28, 2001: An ethnic violence between the Tiv and the Azara origins in Nasarawa State. It started as a retaliation of the gruesome killing of an Azara traditional ruler and later spread to Tiv village.

September 7, 2001: A serious violent ethno-religious crisis between the Muslim Hausa/Fulani and the Christian indigenes in Jos, Plateau State. It started as a politically motivated crisis between the Jasawa Development Association and Plateau Youth Council over political appointment in Jos North Local Government Council.

September 15, 2001: A reprisal killing of Northerners in Onithsha, Anambra State.

November 2, 2001: The clash started on a political ground over the relocation of the Local Government Headquarters that later resulted in ethno-religious dimension in Gwantu, Kaduna State.

May 2, 2002: Political violence that followed the PDP ward congress but later took an ethno-religious conflict in Jos, Plateau State.

Early March, 2003: Clash between armed supporters of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) in Sokoto State.

March 3, 2003: State Chairman of the ANPP reported shooting attack on him while in vehicle in Ebonyi State.

March 4, 2003: Clash between the PDP and ANPP after PDP state governor's convoy was attacked in Edo State.

March 6, 2003: Attack on ANPP senatorial candidate's convoy in Cross Rivers State.

March 10 and 11, 2003: Peoples Democratic Party/All Nigeria Peoples Party clash in Kebbi State.

March 11-12, 2003: Clash between PDP and Alliance for Democracy (AD) in Lagos state.

March 15, 16, 2003: Clash between PDP and ANPP supporters in Kebbi State.

July 14, 2003: Communal clash in Epen, a community in war ravaged Uvwie Local Government Council in Delta State. It was connected to political rivalry in the area.

February 17, 2004: Politically triggered mayhem in Takum LG between supporters of PDP and National Democratic Party (NDP) over local elections.

May 1, 2004: Ethno-religious crisis that claimed over 650 lives in Yelwan Shendam, Plateau state.

May 12, 2004: Kano state crisis following Yelwan Shendam ethno-religious crisis.

November 10, 2004: Anambra political crisis where hundreds of armed youth stormed the state capital destroying properties.

January 16, 2005: Religious mayhem between O'odua Peoples Congress (a Yoruba militant group) and Muslims over the erection of Ogun Shrine in a Muslim praying ground in Ipakodo, Lagos State.

February, 2005: Clash between nomads and farmers over claims of invasion of farmlands and destruction of crops in Ringim, Jigawa State.

February, 2005: Blood bath caused by invasion of Ibidi and Odioma communities by armed men in military uniform in Odioma Bayelsa State.

March 5, 2005: Communal clash between Maruta community in Jigawa State and Burmin in Bauchi State over relocation of market.

May 11, 2005: A communal clash between the Guza and Mariri communities in Lere, Kaduna State over relocation of a secondary school.

June 2005: A renewed clash between Sunni and Shiite sects over use of mosque in Sokoto State.

In 2006, new wave of political violence engulfed Anambra, Jos and Oyo states where Governors were unconstitutionally removed from their offices though some were re-instated through thorough judicial processes. The aftermaths of these events were destruction of properties by aggrieved people in those states.

Colonialism: Laying A Foundation for Ethno-Religious and Political Violence in Nigeria

> *Under colonialism, Nigerians lost the variable of relative autonomy, which defined the basis of their interactions with their neighbours in the pre-colonial era. In deed, not only did colonial conquest eroded the basis for independent action between these groups but the fundamental shift from an essentially agrarian communal economic system and patterns of interactions to a pseudo capitalist system based on the exportation of cash crops, facilitated the insertion of pre-colonial social relations into the colonial economy* (Akinwumi et al, 2006)

The above quotation point to the fact that colonial period is an important landmark in the history of the country because it shaped and determined the polity of the state and its subsequent ethno-religious

and political antagonism and violence. Adebisi (1999) pointed out that the seeds of ethnic violence in Nigeria were sown by the British with the adoption of a divide and rule tactics, which later robbed Nigerians of the common front for nation building. This tactic paved way for the emergence of regional parties, interests and leaders whose manifestoes were designed along ethnically motivated interests.

Egwu (2001) posited that the constant political, ethnic and religious violence that characterized the Nigerian state is attributable to the history and processes inherent in the state formation during the colonial and postcolonial era. According to him, the colonial state was the foundation upon which the post colonial state was built therefore the process of ethnic identity formation and the political use to which such identity is put were determined by this process. Presently, the Nigerian state, he argues, is a violent institution and to a large extent a crisis generating mechanism because the development of a bourgeois nation-state based on respect for human rights, the rule of law, and the institutionalization of democratic order and governance was not the priority of the colonialists in building the Nigerian state.

In the same vein, Ekeh (1986) observed that the slave trade as well as colonialism was important landmark in the efforts to build the Nigerian state. According to him, the ethno-religious and political violence as well as insecurity that engulfed the eighty years of the slave trade resulted in i) "laying the foundation for ethnic/kinship behaviour"; ii) "the devaluation of human worth"; iii) the intervention of the trajectory of the economic development of the Nigerian state; and iv) "the engendering of a fatalistic worldview as the appropriate response to" problem of discontinuities in social structure and processes (Ekeh, 1996; Abdulrahman, 2006). By its exploitative tendencies, colonialism generated an extreme scarcity of socio-economic and political rewards and an intolerable degree of inequality. This scarcity and unbearable scope of inequality gave rise to the destructive socio-economic competition within and between ethnic groups in Nigeria (Adewumi et al, 2006).

The unequal competition started with the amalgamation of 1914 when the Northern and Southern protectorates were united to make Nigeria. This union was seen more of as "marriage of inconveniency" because the whole process was conceived and executed without due respect to and for the socio-cultural and political differences embedded in the political, economic and social structures of the wedded couple. Following the amalgamation of Nigeria, a council was constituted for the newly created political entity. The council made provisions only for the establishment of executive and consultative arms with little or no power to neither exercise legislative nor executive powers. Because of the inherent crisis in the council it was abolished and a seemingly more reliable one was constituted. It was called the Clifford Constitution.

With the Clifford Constitution of 1922, a legislative council was set up in Lagos to legislate for the Colony and the Southern province with the exception of the north, which was under the proclamation of the Governor. Though this constitution made provision for an election for the first time, only male adults who earned up to 100 pounds per annum, an amount that was difficult to earn by the natives then, and who had resided in the area for at least a year, were eligible to vote. With an obvious fault in the constitution it became a target of attack by the Nigerian nationalists because the Nigerians who were serving in the council were mere passive participants. This led to the abolition of the Clifford Constitution.

Having aborted the Clifford Constitution, the Richard constitution was adopted when Richard became the Governor of Nigeria in 1946. This constitution provided for the division of the country into regions, each built around one of the major ethnic groups and this has continued till date. Ironically, each of these dominant groups had its own history, customs and languages distinct from one another. Within each of these major ethnic groups there were numerous other ethnic groupings with distinct cultures. Hence, this constitution planted the pattern of political rivalry, which now characterized political competition in the nation body politics. This pattern continued to manifest until unnecessary suspicions and fear of domination led to the political uproar over the distribution of power between the North and the South at the General Conference in Ibadan in 1950. Unfortunately, this ill-fated development has continued to shaped political calculations between the two segments of the federation.

Federalism and Its Contradictory Effects

The search for an enduring system of government for heterogeneous country like Nigeria necessitates the adoption of a federal system of government. In deed, world over, federal systems are conceived as "political arrangements that afford (an) opportunity for the myriad diversities within a political system to find legitimate expression" (Alkali, 2004). In a federal system of government, constitutional powers are shared among the components units that are constitutionally recognized and largely autonomous (Oyeneye et. al, 1998). In Nigeria the true experimentation of federal government started in 1954 with the introduction of the Lyttleton constitution. Before this time the country was managed by the colonialists under a decentralized unitary system of government (Jega, 1998).

According to Jega (1998), Nigerian federalism adopted by the British was conceived as an administrative convenience and was meant to provide for unity in diversity. The constitution was meant to safeguard, protect and preserve the cultural differences and at the same time lessen the mutual fears and suspicions among the ethnic groups with a view to lay the foundation for national

development, progress and advancement. This became necessary against the backdrop of the ethnic diversity of the Nigerian state. However, the purposes of federalism are yet to be actualized in Nigeria. Instead of uniting Nigerians, the non-faithful application of federal principle has succeeded in disuniting the people the more, resulting in fears and mutual suspicions consequently leading to religious, ethnic and political violence. According to Afolabi (2006) the appellation of the term "federal" in Nigeria is just in names. He argues that Nigeria federal system is characterized by over-concentration of political powers at the centre. This has resulted in overdependence on the federal by the component states. Hence, he sees federalism in Nigeria as:

> *…that form of government where the component units of a political organization participate in sharing powers and functions in a cooperative manner through the combined forces of ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity, among others and which also tends to pull their people apart (*emphasis mine*) (quoted in Afolabi, 2006: 164).*

Osaghae and Suberu (2005) gave the following as some of the characteristics and weaknesses of the Nigeria's post civil war multi state federalism.

i) The economic over-centralization of the federation, which has explosively focused partisan, sectional and factional political and economic competition in the country on the control of the central government, with devastating consequences for national integration and stability.

ii) "The centralized funding of sub-federal authorities that continues to stimulated ethnic and sub-ethnic pressures for the formation of new sub-national units as an avenue for easy access to national oil revenues"

iii) "The proliferation of sub-federal administrative boundaries and identities, in a context defined historically by discrimination against settlers and non-indigenes, which has led to a sharp contraction of the geo-political space in which a Nigerian can claim indigene status within a particular state and enjoy full citizenship rights".

iv) "Nigeria's distributive multi-state federalism, which is based essentially on the massive redistribution of resources from the oil-rich Niger Delta to the rest of the federation, has engendered violent struggles for local or regional 'resource control' in the oil-rich region".

Contributions of the Military to Ethno-Religious and Political Conflicts

> *…despite its outward appearance of toughness, military dictatorship breeds weak citizenships... Subjects are more likely to live in expectations of obedience and violence…* (Ekeh, 1997, quoted in Ka'oje, 2005).

The democratic governance that was instituted by the British in 1960 was distorted by the Military in January 1966 barely after six years of her democratic existence, a system of government Nigerians often demonstrated as being undemocratic and unpopular (Egwu (2001). The military ventured into politics even when it lacked (and still lacks) the constitutional power and responsibility to do so. Therefore, of Nigeria's 46 years of independence, she has had only about 16 years of democratic government. About 30 years of that period witnessed military rule of all kinds. Hence, it is not an over statement to say that the Nigerian military had in one way or the other contributed to the problem of constant fear and suspicion that had resulted in laying the foundation for political, ethnic and religious crises in the country. Although the Nigerian Military seized political power in 1966 and was able to identify the intense regional competition as the cause of the country's woes, it failed to understand "the deeply entrenched interests of the regional elites and their fear of, and hostility towards, one another" (Abdulrahman, 2006). Therefore, despite its remarkable reconfiguration of the Nigerian federation in response to the threat of secession by the Igbos, the Nigerian military rulers have generally governed in an arbitrary, self-serving, centralizing, sectional and polarizing manner (cited in Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). As Afolabi (2006) noted

> *Though many Nigerians welcome the coup (January 1966 coup), the pattern of the killings began to raise doubts. Some of these include the fact that six of the seven Majors involved in the coup were Igbo; the leaders killed were from the North and the West; the Premiers of the Eastern region and Midwestern region who were Igbo were not killed; majority of the military officers killed were of Northern origin; and Aguiyi-Ironsi the most senior officer in the Nigerian Army (then) who was also an Igbo was not killed. Subsequently, he became the Head of State. On the whole it portrayed an Igbo coup (emphasis mine).*

Consequently, people in the Northern Nigeria reacted to this by killing Igbos living in their mist. According to Afolabi (2006)

> *The North reacted with violent demonstrations and riots in which Igbo speaking people in many Northern towns were killed and their properties destroyed.*

These events gingered another counter-coup and finally resulted to the Nigerian Civil War of [1967-70], which threatened the unity of the country.

Another major activity that pointed to the weakness of the military in the management of Nigeria unity was the annulment of the June 12 1993 Presidential Elections which was judged to be free and fair even by the international observers. Considering the havoc caused by the military dictatorship in Nigeria therefore, Olowu (1995) concluded that the military bureaucracy is the greatest threat to democracy not only in Nigeria but Africa in general.

Efforts at Addressing Ethno-Religious and Political Violence

In order to allay the fear of domination and to minimize the occurrence of political and ethno-religious violence in Nigeria, the Nigerian governments had taken some measures in the past. The creation of states was seen as a measure to avoid and control violence in Nigeria. The creation of states was precedent upon yearnings and aspirations in some quarters. This has brought the total number of states to 36 plus the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

In 1975, the Military Government under General Gowon as a prime measure to ensure cultural tolerance among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria introduced the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme. Youth Service Corps allows mandates graduates from the Nigerian Universities and Polytechnics to serve their fatherland in other states rather than theirs, this, according to spirit that established the Youth Corp will lessen ethnocentric tendencies.

The present democratic government led by President Obasanjo has also strengthened his interests in the maintenance of unity with its faithful application of Federal Character and quota systems. The reason being i) to gratify the value expectation of the diverse ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria; and ii) to ensure equity and equality with regards to representation in the government, public service, political appointments and other offices.

Policy Options for the Control of Ethno-Religious and Political Conflicts

Despite measures taken to achieve some level of social integration and unity in Nigeria, political, ethnic and religious violence have continued to linger thereby threatening the very existence of the

country and constituting threat to the nascent democracy in Nigeria. The following are policy options in controlling the pandemic.

First and fore most, the Nigerian constitution must be strengthened to cater for her unity in diversity. Federalism must be articulate enough to encapsulate yearnings of the majority and the minority groups. This requires that states of the federation must be constitutionally empowered so that they can be sufficiently independent to measure up to the expectations of their people. The present heavy reliance on the federal revenue and allocations should be discouraged.

Poverty reduction is another important step towards managing ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. The high rate of poverty in Nigeria has affected great number of youths and these are the categories that could be bought over by the elites in order to distort the nascent democracy in Nigeria. Addressing this problem has become very pertinent. For example, in 1960 about 15% of the population was poor, but by 1980 this percentage had risen to 28%. By 1996, the incidence of poverty in Nigeria was 66% to put in glaring term 76.6 million Nigerians were affected by poverty (Ali, 2006). According to the World Bank estimation, about 70 per cent of the Nigerian population lives under one dollar per day. If poverty is not addressed it certainly has the tendency to fuel crisis.

Also related to the issue of poverty is the problem of unemployment. Unemployment rate is high especially among the youth. In 1992 estimations put unemployment rate at about 28 per cent. To tackle the problem of unemployment the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) was established with mandate to alleviate the problem of unemployment both in the rural and urban centre. Unfortunately, this establishment is yet to achieve its stated objectives. This kind of programme needs to be pursued with vigour if unemployment is to be fought to a standstill.

Finally, governance that is devoid of corruption will bring democratic dividends to the teaming population of the country. Accountability and equity should be the watchwords of the political leaders. This will go a long way in addressing the problem of ethno-religious and political conflicts in the country.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the persistence wave of ethno-religious and political conflicts. The paper argues that colonialism laid the foundation for ethno-religious and political conflicts that have continued to endanger the unity of the country and the nascent democracy. This was made so because colonialism did not take cognizance of the differences in culture, politics, and religions of the diverse entities during the forceful marriage of 1914. It therefore became practically impossible to

manage postcolonial conflicts. The paper also sees military intervention as a threat to democracy in Nigeria, a phenomenon, which has contributed to the fear of domination and its underlying conflicts. In addition, the Nigerian federal system of government has done little in addressing the problem of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. The system rather than uniting the people contains some contradictory underpinnings that have contributed to the problem. Although efforts were made to ensure peace among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, much still need to be done to address the problem because of its negative effects on the socio-political and economic developments of the country and given the fact that there can be no meaningful development amidst violence and conflicts. Apart from addressing poverty and unemployment, good governance, accountability and restructuring of the federal arraignments are necessary matters in order to solve the problem of ethno-religious conflicts that continued to threaten Nigeria's democratization process.

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