

Democracy and Violent Conflict: A Reflection on the Crisis in Nigeria

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Abstract

There is strong debate about the validity of the democratic peace theory (Przeworski, 1995). Does democracy bring domestic peace and stability to countries who embrace it? Are democracies less likely to suffer internal strife and instability? Given the proliferation of violence and conflict in Nigeria's democracy, this is a critical question. This paper explores the link between democracy and violent conflict in Nigeria. I argue that violent conflict in Nigeria is a reflection of the failure of democracy, democratic values, ideals, norms and institutions rather than the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and ethnic confrontations. On the basis of my findings, the study recommends strong democratic institutions, justice, equitable distribution of resources and the fight against poverty and youth unemployment as tools for sustainable national peace.

Keywords: Democracy, violent conflict, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

The return of multiparty democracy in 1999 was locally and internationally celebrated because of the long and tortuous history of military dictatorship in Nigeria. Among Nigerians, the expectations of the supposed gains of democratisation were and remain high. But as events have shown, the hope and expectation has been threatened by incessant violence and conflict that have consumed thousands of lives, rendered thousand more internally displaced and properties worth millions of dollars destroyed. In the last five years, Boko Haram has been on rampage, in the North Central or Middle Belt, local farmers have been at war with predominantly Fulani herdsmen. In the South West, O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC) voice is still loud and violent. In the Niger Delta, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta Mend continues talking tough even with the amnesty programme. In the South East, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) will not renege in their struggle for political equity and space. The Nigerian State seems to be at war and has almost lost its monopoly of violence particularly in the north eastern part of the country. However, events following the 2015 General Elections (former President Jonathan's visit to Maidugri) and events thereafter (invasion of Sambisa forest-Boko Haram's hide out by the Nigerian Military and the rescue of many women and children) shows how the struggle for state power can shape the dynamics of governance and commitment of the state to issues of national importance. The near absence of the kind of pre and post-election approach to governance and commitment of institutions (the presidency and the military) over the years supports my argument in this study. As a rentier state, huge oil rents, weak democratic institutions and a dysfunctional federal system means that competition for the centre by political entrepreneurs can take any dimension even if it means funding and collaborating with violent and extremist groups. Moreover, exclusionary elite pacts by unpatriotic elites (eg. PDP North-South power rotation deal) denied and nullified by the emergence of President Goodluck Jonathan a minority from the oil rich Niger Delta after the death of President Umaru Musa Yaradua also contributed to the agitations up north. Factors like the exclusion of youths in governance; a conspiracy of the elites in Abuja and the thirty six states capital and the lack of equity, justice and the ability of the democratic state (federal and federating) to distribute resources equitably, have also contributed to some violent reaction against the state. Intense political competition and the arming of youths, groups and the mobilization of religious and ethnic identities by politicians as well as the use of violence for electoral gains are also contributory factors (Vickers, 2000). When democracy is unjust in its distributional patterns, it kills the possibility of a national consensus and conflicts are bound to emerge, moreover, because those who seek power to control state resources and rents might not only use propaganda but violence in their quest for state power.

Although the recent rebasing of Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ranks the country as the largest economy in Africa, it is a truism that most Nigerians are poorer today than they were at independence in 1960, victims of the resource curse and rampant entrenched corruption. In many parts of the country, the government is unable to provide security, good roads, water, power, health and education (AfricaFocus 2014). Unemployment among youths is high, illiteracy, leading to frustration and alienation have driven many to join groups (ethnic, religious, community or civic) some of which have been hijacked by unscrupulous politicians and have become hostile to the state. Governance has been characterised by inefficient yet authoritarian centralization, a culture of impunity, and a climate of unaccountability dating back to military rule. The combination of aggrieved injustice and the social misery of the majority is producing disillusionment with democracy and it is creating conditions of conflict threatening the stability of Nigeria's political order (USAID 2006). Inequities it appears have made violence a 'veto' tool by groups who seek to bargain for a greater share

and access to the ‘national cake’. Methodologically, this study adopts a historical approach and relies on secondary data sources for analysis.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

Due to their lack of essential democratic qualities, many third wave democracies are labelled as minimalist or pseudo democracy. Przeworski describes minimalist democracy as nothing short of miraculous as a means for conflict resolution (Grugel, 2002). In Larry Diamond’s term, pseudo democracy is illiberal, which means it is repressive. One party dominates others and elections may be free but not fair. They have many variants and different degree of repressiveness (Diamond, 1999). In weak democratic state with little monopoly of violence, dominated by clientelistic and ethnic networks and the inability or willingness to provide essential services to the people, these factors constitute the fundamental structural underpinning of violence and conflict (Arnson, 2012). In the literature, there is no scholarly agreement regarding the role of democracy in fostering peace or as a trigger of violent conflict. The Democratic peace theory which draws its intellectual root from the essay on *perpetual peace* written by Immanuel Kant in 1795 stipulates that liberal democracies do not engage in wars with each other and are internally peaceful. The theory hinges on the fact that democracy leads to and engender peace as peace cannot be achieved in the absence of democracy (Russett 2007). Another proposition of the democratic peace theory formed by (Rummel, 1997) is that modern democracies are least violence prone and have virtually no ‘democide’ (i.e genocide or mass murder). The inverse relationship between democracy and foreign violence, collective domestic violence, or government genocide is not simply a correlation, but a cause and effect. In a nutshell, democratic freedom promotes nonviolence (Rummel, 1997). The third wave of democracy (Huntington 1991); the expansion and spread of democracy and democratic ideals and norms around the world from the 1970s to 1990s have been also viewed as the cure to conflict and potential creator of global peace. Moaz and Russett (1993), Remmer (1998) argued that the probability of two democratised countries engaging in militarised conflict is extremely low. Domestic norms and institutions prevalent in democratic politics are seen as responsible for the peaceful relationship among democratic countries.

However, democracy as a panacea for peace has also been contested. Collier and Rohner (2007) argues that democracy constrains the technical possibility of government repression and that this makes rebellion easier. Glaeser (2005) emphasize that democratic political office seekers combining with inter-ethnic competition may be the breeding ground for ethnic hatred and conflict. For Chua (2003) democratization and globalisation can lead to ethnic violence in the presence of market dominant minorities. Huntington (1968) had argued that resentment by those left behind in an economic growth episode would cause political instability unless restraining institutions were in place (Bezemer and Jong 2013). According to Przeworski (1995) if the exercise of citizenship is to be predictable, democratic governments and officials must themselves act in accordance with the constitution and the laws. Only the state that predictably enforces laws can enable peaceful private relations. If justice and police systems are to be used as a means of exercising rights and as a system for regulating conflicts and maintaining peace, citizens must be assured that they are universally and predictably applied (*ibid.*). Democracies must therefore, address simultaneously the civil, political and social requirements of citizenship to ensure peace.

Stoker (2006) in his contribution added that democracy can be in trouble and have a dark side when the definition and status of the political community is based on the promotion of one group at the expense of another. He listed examples like Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Rwanda and for the argument I am stressing in this essay, I include Nigeria. Reynal –Querol (2004) also argued that partly democratic countries are more prone to civil war than full democracies, and full autocracies. Cervellati and Sunde (2011) contend that democratization process may trigger political violence because the scenario under which democratization takes place especially during democratic transitions provides convenient platforms for violent conflicts, especially among groups within the polity. Keane (2010) calls this the democratization of violence. Høglund, (2006) and Horowitz (1985) also argue that competitive elections result in ethnicization of electorate in a multi-ethnic society, thus creating conflict.

The literature on violence and conflict also varies in argument concerning conditions that makes conflict more likely. Hirshleifer (1991) and Skaperdas (1992) emphasized the ‘paradox of power’, where asymmetric situations create conflict. Esteban and Ray (1999) theorised that ethnic fragmentation can cause conflict. In their model, they showed that conflict was maximized when society was polarised along ethnic lines and groupings. Bates (2000) argues that ethnic conflict was greatest in such situation. Gurr (1970) model holds that relative deprivation can lead to violence. Stewart (2010) opines that horizontal inequality across ethnic, religious and other cultural characteristics can lead to conflicts and violence. State weakness-the absence of state monopoly on force, the inability to uphold a legal order and the inability or willingness to provide basic services to the population –interacting with some form of political or social exclusion has served in many cases as fundamental structural underpinning of conflict (Arnson 2012). Chabal and Daloz (1991) point to the political economy of disorder- the operation of political action in the realm of the informal, uncoded and unpoliced as

contributory factors to violent conflict. In what follows below, I draw from actual historical events in Nigeria and build on these theoretical perspectives for some analysis. My point as I will try to show below, is that, when a democratic state and its institutions undermine justice and is limited in the capacity to develop social programs to address deep poverty, inequality and ethnic discrimination, and further compromise and undermine citizen participation, and hinders the development of political parties as articulators of citizens interest using them rather as personalistic vehicles to win elections, it opens the space for internal aggression or violent conflict.

DEMOCRACY AND VIOLENT CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

Although violent conflict in Nigeria predates the return of multiparty democracy in 1999, the frequency of conflict and bloodletting in almost all the geo-political zones at one time or the other in the present democratic dispensation calls for concern (Segun 2013). Violent conflict is multi-causal and multi-dimensional. In Nigerian, a combination of political and institutional factors; weak state institutions, elite power struggles and political exclusion, breakdown in social contract and corruption, identity politics and ethnic rivalry have contributed to violence and conflict. Socioeconomic factors like inequality, marginalisation, absence or weakening of social cohesion, greed and unjust resource exploitation have also contributed. Stewart and O'Sullivan (1999), agree that state weakness can create the conditions for violent conflict. Political institutions that are unable to manage differing group interests peacefully to provide adequate guarantee of group protection, or to accommodate growing demands for political participation can fracture societies. Uncertainty and collective fears of the future, stemming from state weakness, clientelism and indiscriminate repression may result in the emergence of armed responses by marginalised groups and nationalist, ethnic or other populist ideologies. In Nigeria, the struggle for power is fierce, divisive and militarised. Retaining power is more through neo-patrimonial networks, state capture, militarisation and coercion. The 'Us versus Them' ideology, the kind of politics that have broadened the fault lines.

For instance, the domination of access to state structure and resources by the Peoples Democratic Party(PDP) under former President Goodluck Jonathan was seen as exclusionary by the North and this exacerbated social division. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the party in power since 1999 succeeds as a multi-ethnic coalition on the basis of informal bargains and accommodation (Kendhammer, 2010). The party's practice of "zoning" which distributes the spoils of office according to an ethnic formula, produce incentives for local elites to embark on different kinds of mobilisation as a way of advancing their interest. The institutional framework of Nigerian democracy incentivise for two faced elites- cooperating but ethnically antagonistic (Kendhammer 2010). Furthermore, the framework of rules governing state-society relations and the distribution of resources, rights and responsibilities is based on ethnic identity, religion and regional calculations. Spending on social welfare and satisfying basic needs of the populace have been very low. Corruption and graft gulps the enormous oil rent the country rakes in yearly. In this kind of environment, revolt and violent conflict is not impossible. The inability of the state to provide basic services, including justice and security to all has reduced state legitimacy and trust in state institutions. To break cycles of insecurity and reduce the risk of their recurrence, the World Development Report (2011) proposes that national reformers and their international partners need to build legitimate institutions that can provide a sustained level of citizens security, justice, and jobs-offering a stake in society to groups that may otherwise receive more respect and recognition from engaging in armed violence than in lawful activities, and punishing infractions capably and fairly.

In its 2014 report, International Crisis Group Africa Report (Curbing Violence in Nigeria II: The Boko Haram Insurgency) links violent conflict in Nigeria to politics, political violence, bad governance and poverty. The report points clearly to an intricate link between politics, governance, corruption poverty and violence. As shown in the report, Nigeria has lost billions of dollars to large scale corruption since independence and Nigeria have consistently ranked as one of the most corrupt countries-a failure of governance and democratic institutions. This has denied millions opportunities. When corruption and clientelism do not work, politicians often revert to violence to achieve their aims. The report further states that unemployment and mass poverty accounts for the reason some of the idle youths easily get recruited by anti-state and militia groups. The report also shows that poverty has been increasing despite relatively strong economic growth; 112.5 million –over 70 percent of the population- are classified as poor and absolutely poor. The North East, Boko Haram's main operational field has the worst poverty rate of the six geo-political zones.

Secondly, the report points to the declining human development resources as one of the root causes of the violent conflict. Nigeria's dysfunctional democratic state has tragically failed many of its people. Key human development sectors- education, health and the judiciary, as well as security agencies- are poorly funded or underperforming. Underfunding of the judiciary with a third of the 330,000 police employed by senior politicians and businessmen as private escorts. Nigerians lack security but not their leaders. Yet insecurity pays, disorder is business. As captured in the 2014 federal budget, the security services were allocated an estimated 1 trillion naira (USD 6.25 billion) of the 4.9 trillion naira 2014 budget. Again, this shows the failure of democratic institutions and governance.

Lastly, the report points to the growing alienation and radicalisation as one of the reason for the violent conflict. A deep sense of frustration and alienation the report argue is the result of entrenched inertia. Perhaps most acute in the north, it is felt by divers groups in the country. The responses are not uniform but have bred the emergence of militant groups based mainly on ethnic and religious identities. Radical Islamist the report claimed only exploited these factors.

EVIDENCE AND CASES

Boko Haram

Boko Haram grew out of a group of radical Islamic youth who worshipped at the Al-Haji Muhammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri, capital of Borno state, North East Nigeria in the 1990s (Africa Report 2014). Its leader Muhammed Yusuf, began as a preacher and leader in the youth wing. His literal interpretation of the Quran led him to advocate that aspects of western education he considered a contradiction to the holy book should be forbidden; in Hausa ‘‘Boko Haram’’. Their principal goal is to create a strict Islamic state in the north that it believes would address the ills of society, including corruption and bad governance. Yusuf was always political, wanting an Islamic government, but not violent. The Nigerian government and the Borno state government security apparatus condone him at inception and they are reports that politicians used him and his boys. The vicious circle of violent conflict and confrontational direction of the group was a result of the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf, Buji Foi and Baba Fugu in police custody in 2009. From many accounts, democratic institutions compromised the handling of Boko Haram and even top politicians; governors and senators partner with them for electoral gains. A political deal and alliance struck with Boko Haram made Ali Modu Sheriff governor of Borno state and one of Yusuf’s lieutenant was appointed commissioner for religious affairs where government funds were siphoned to support the group. When governor Ali Modu Sheriff failed to keep the agreement, Yusuf became more critical of the government, hostility broke out and the rest today is history. Although these radicals have grown and transformed from a mere local group to having external links and networks including Ansar Dine and al-Qaeda, the poor handling of the group by the state and federal government at inception, clearly reflects the failure of democratic governance, institutions and political leadership.

Ogbolomabiri, Bayelsa State and Ogu/Bolo Rivers State

Political violence is another cause of violent conflict in Nigeria. Because political power is one of the few ways to access wealth in Nigeria, politics often becomes what is frequently referred to in Nigeria as ‘‘a do or die’’ affair. Accounts of violent conflict like the one of Nembe Local Government Area, South of Nigeria were dozens of people were reported killed in a political conflict abound across the country. In this case, fighting broke out in the local state primaries for the PDP, the former national ruling party (Human Rights Watch 2003). This is virtually the story in a large number of the 774 local government areas in Nigeria. Competitive politics and the struggle for power is always violence prone. In previous elections in Ogu/Bolo local government area in Rivers State, fighting between rival political parties (the PDP and ANPP) resulted to deaths and displacement of local communities. Recently, during the 2015 general elections, same reports of violent competition were again recorded. The fierce struggle for power by rival political parties and the inability of state institutions to regulate and arbitrate have contributed not only to the loss of many lives and properties but also to communal and ethnic rivalry since the return to civil rule in Nigeria.

Kwara State and Anambra State

Across Nigeria, shifting individual and party alliance and allegiance by politicians is done with disconcerting regularity. When politicians shift grounds from the parties of their ‘‘godfathers’’ or sponsors, the godfathers and sponsors resort to using violence to make the state ungovernable for their protégé. The case of Governor Mohammed Lawal and his mentor Olusola Saraki in Kwara state deteriorated to violence and conflict in the state with both men surrounding themselves with armed supporters leading to the lost of many lives. In Anambra State South East Nigeria, Governor Chris Ngige was abducted by armed police men for failing to abide to his deal with his political godfather Chris Uba. When informal rules of the game are broken among political actors, disagreement usually turn their states into heated political battle grounds that end up violent in some cases.

Enugu State and Jos Plateau State

In Enugu state South East, political disagreement and contestation between Governor Chimaroke Nnamani and senator Jim Nwobodo was reported to have spread from the State House of Assembly to the society. The governor in struggle to retain power resorted to violence and intimidation of rivals and political enemies. In the Middle Belt or North Central, serious fighting has occurred in states like Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa and Taraba between groups that view themselves as indigenes and those viewed as settlers, or non natives to the area, resulting in hundreds of deaths (Human Rights Watch 2007). While these fights have not been overtly political, competition for electoral office and political space has provided incentive and excuse for violence. In Plateau

State specifically where thousands have been killed, politicians have been accused of making political capital out of the indigene settler squabbles. Various commissions of enquiries and investigations have repeatedly been set up, yet no one has been jailed or declared guilty for the many killings and wanton destruction of properties in the state. A democracy that rides on ethnicity, ethnic identity and violence as political resources, where government does not distribute resources equitably and institutions cannot set, define and enforce clearly the ‘‘rules of the game’’ is at the risk of incessant violence and conflict. Regrettably, this is the story resonating in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

This study is not a claim that violent conflict in Nigeria can exclusively and exhaustively be explained or attributed to the failure of democracy and democratic institutions. I have argued rather, that the failure of democracy, democratic ideals and institutions have provided the atmosphere to ventilate frustrations, grievances, struggles, confrontations, competition and interactions that incentives violent conflict. To mitigate violent conflict and ensure lasting national peace, democracy must accompany strong institutions to set and enforce the rules of the game and ensure inclusive economic governance to reduce poverty and unemployment.

Although there is no consensus on how to measure democracy and definitions of democracy are contested. The Economist Intelligence Unit democracy index of 2010 ranks Nigeria in the 123rd position with an overall score of 3.47 percent as an authoritarian regime. Freedom House ranks Nigeria as partly free; an electoral democracy without liberal freedom. The 2010 Polity IV Country Report says Nigeria is in a gradual transition from un-institutionalised competition. A fragile state with weak and falling democratic institutions (courts, the legislature, the police, armed forces and civil society). These rankings suggest Nigeria’s democracy is only but a hybrid regime- pseudo or minimalist democracy or an electoral authoritarianism. The success of the 2015 general elections and change of government from one political party to another may certainly alter these ranking. What this study cannot predict is whether Nigeria will be more peaceful as a full democracy. This, time and further research will help us answer.

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