

Ethnic Plurality and Democratic Process in Nigeria (1999-2011)

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Abstract

Ethnic plurality is a feature of modern day states, and Nigeria, like many other states in the world, comprises more than two ethnic groups that make up of the state. The ethnic groups in Nigeria have been in struggle for the control of state power, with attendant impacts on the democratic train as observed in the Nigerian fourth republic. This paper therefore, shall examine the linkage between ethnic plurality and democracy by reviewing the nature of power struggle among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Similarly, the paper shall examine the effects of the power struggle among the ethnic groups on the voting behaviors of Nigerians, and how democratic dividends are spread across the various ethnic groups through the processes and principles of governance. In conclusion, the paper will offer suggestions on how the relationship among the ethnic groups can be strengthened to enhance the survival of Nigerian democracy.

Keywords: Ethnic plurality, democratic process, democratization, ethnicity and election.

1. Introduction

The modern states in the world are heterogeneous states in term of ethnic composition. Many states in the world today have more than one existing ethnic groups making it a grave feature of the modern day states. Nigeria as a product of imperial interest of 1914 amalgamation is not left out of the states of ethnic diversity. It is a bone of contention among scholars on the actual number of ethnic groups that make up of Nigeria as a country. Though is generally estimated that there are some 400 ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Since the emergence of Nigeria as a state, the country has been encountering lot crises during colonial and after independence. The causes of these crises vary from religion, power struggle etc. but the struggle for political power among the ethnic groups has led to conflicts and do have vast effects on the democratic process of the country. This trend of power struggle which has characterized Nigerian politics still reflects in the fourth republic democratic process. Moreover, the different political parties in Nigeria also acknowledged this ethnic power struggle in the selection and distribution of position within the political parties. The selection of various party flag bearers at all level of elections is basically based on this ethnic power struggle. Nnoli (1974) also ascertain this “in Nigeria, ethnic polarization characterizes the political arena since down of democratic governance”.

The main focus of this paper is to examine how the struggle for political power among Nigerian ethnic groups affect the voting behaviors of the electorates, likewise the nature of the power struggle and the linkage between the power struggle and distribution of democratic dividends will be examined. After the introduction, the paper is schemed into the following sub sections: definitional issues, conceptualizing Nigeria state and politics, matter arising in the fourth republic and conclusion remarks.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Democracy

Democracy historically started from the city state of Athens. The concept does not have universally accepted definition and many scholars have attempted to give their interpretations of the concept. Prominent among these interpretations is that of Robert Dahl (1987) who argued that democratic regimes are characterized “by the existence, legality and legitimacy of a variety of organizations and associations that are relatively independent in relation to the government and to one another”. In Larry (1988), he defined the concept as “meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups, especially political parties either directly or indirectly for the major position of governmental power in addition to popular participation in the electoral process and respect for the civil and political rights of the people”.

Democracy in a nutshell is a set of ideals, institutions and process of governance that allows the broad mass of the people to choose their leaders and that guarantees them a broad range of civic rights.

2.2 Ethnic Groups

Ethnic groups are generally accepted to be the association of individuals that share some common attributes such as pedigree, language, etc. Cohen (1974) sees ethnic group as an “informal interest groups whose members are distinct from the members of other ethnic groups within the larger society because they share kinship, religious and linguistic ties”. This means that ethnic groups are social formations that informal but have interest to protect, which are distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. Nnoli (1978) observed that the most crucial variable in ethnic identity is language. It is clear from the above definitions that ethnic is make up of

those share common ancestry, language and culture, and who are so regarded by others.

Ethnic groups exist naturally but come into to true and active life by man handiwork especially politicians who make use of it to get political power. According to Nnoli (1978), he argued that the Nigerian politics have presented an image of struggle among various ethnic groups for the sharing of national resources. Also Crawford (1993) ascertains that social competition in Nigeria... political competition in Nigeria arena subsequently placed ethnicity in the centre of public cognition of power struggle. It is in this context that the paper examines the power struggle among the various Nigerian ethnic groups and consequences on Nigerian democracy in the Fourth Republic.

3. Nigerian States and Politics

Nigeria is a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation with an estimated of 400 ethnic groups. The country evolved after the 1914 amalgamation that was designed to satisfy the colonialist interests. The emergence was never as a reaction or need of the indigenous people, the colonial state lacked in the word of Wale Are- Olaitan (1995) "natural legitimating ideals". The amalgamation exercise brought the existing nations together to form a state. The most populous and prominent ethnic groups are the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, Edo, Ibibo, Tiv, Ijo, Kanuri, and the Nupe. Hence some ethnic groups are referred to minor groups that have been dominated by these populous ethnic groups. In the northern Nigeria, the Hausa/Fulani predominates while others often identify major groups are Yoruba in the west and the Igbo in the east.

In addition, 1914 amalgamation led to the division of the country into southern and northern protectorates but the two protectorates were administered separately until the introduction of 1946 constitution that created an assembly for the whole colony. As noted by Schwarz (1968), "the arid predominantly Moslem north and the tropical, predominantly Christian south are different countries". The constitution further divided the colony into three regions namely north, south and western region. With this division, the struggle for political power in Nigeria started immediately and various regions started agitating for more political power and this reflected in the creation of political party by the nationalists during colonial era. These political parties were created based on ethnic groups and each party was after the interests of their respective ethnic groups. Salawu and Hassan (2000) argued that the fear of ethnic groups of being dominated by another ethnic group led to the formation of political parties based on ethnic groups that will agitate and agitating for their interests. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) represented the interest of the north, the Action Group (AG) also represented the interests of the Western part of Nigeria and NCNC represented the Easterners interest at the central level.

At independence, the trend continued and these parties representing their various ethnic groups' interests struggle out for the central government power. They struggle out for the purpose of controlling the newly independent state. In effect, ethnicity soon became the bane of the first republic. As a result of this no political party was able to qualify to form government at the central and consequently the central government at independence/first republic was formed by the NPC and NCNC while the AG was the opposition. This simply means that the Yoruba was out of the central power and became the official opposition, viewing all government actions and policies through an ethnic prism. Despite the coalition of NPC and NCNC, the Tafawa Balewa led government still made use of the power to for the purpose of domination of the state by the Hausa/Fulani. Ojie and Okabo (2005) observed that "at independence, in 1960, the Tafawa Balewa led government ensured the domination the country by the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group". This power struggle among the ethnic groups led to crises which brought a halt to the first republic in 1966 when the "khaki boys" took over the affairs the state.

The democratic process of second republic also witnessed power struggle based on ethnic association especially in the formation of political parties and citizens' affiliation with the parties. Also political debates and contests during the period were always tainted with ethnic biases and proclivity. Though the political parties of the second republic did not bear names associated to any region and even the concept of state as the second tier of government have taken over the concept of region yet the second republic parties had ethnic and regional outlook. As is emphasized by Anugwon (2000) "the three major political parties: National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Unity party of Nigeria (UPN) and Nigeria People Party(NPP) were all ethnic and regional in outlook". A simple explanation of Anugwon's assertion is that the parties were replica of the first republic parties in operations.

4. Matter Arising in the Fourth Republic

The returned of Nigeria to democratic rule on May 29th, 1999, after the deadlock encountered as a result of the cancellation of June 12 presidential election result brought another civilian government led by Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. The choice of Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba from south-western part of the country, by the military wing of the political elites was expected to pacify the aggrieved Yoruba over the June 12 election which the Yoruba perceived as a plan by the northern elites to retain political power.

With the emergence of democratic rule, the various ethnic groups both minority and majority started agitating for more political power or resources control. Majority of the protests by the groups' agitator is always

on neglect in the appointments to offices especially the “key offices”. At the early stage of the fourth republic the minority group of the south-south region started agitating that the political position of the minister for petroleum should be reserved for the region only since the resource is tapped from their area.

Furthermore, to satisfy the various ethnic groups there is the informal power sharing arrangement of principal political offices such as the Presidency, Vice Presidency, Senate President, Deputy Senate President, Speaker, and Deputy Speaker are divided among the six geo-political zones in Nigeria. This in effect has affected the selection of political parties’ flag bearers as the interest of power sharing formula is considered before merit. With this, the voters are left with the choice of voting for candidates not on merit but as a matter of ethnic association. Consequently, the voting pattern follows high degree of ethnic based voting as seen in the Presidential election of 2011 in which the ruling party PDP flag bearer had overwhelming result in his region, south-south, and lesser result in the North.

Not only at the central level do ethnic groups struggle for political power but also at the state level. Many groups in the state also do agitate for the control of political power at the state level. In the state like ogun state, there has been power struggle among the various groups in the state: Ijebu and Egba. Also same thing can be seen in River state where the governor Rotimi Amaechi insists that power must shift from his to another tribe after 8 years its tribe has been ruling.

5. Conclusion

In the area of distribution of dividends of democracy the ruling ethnic group does see it as a venue for them to enrich their region. They do agitate that the ruling government should allocate more developmental project to their region at the expense of other groups who also feel cheated because government is not doing anything to them. But despite Nigeria’s ethnic plurality, the wrongs can be right by good governance. Though purposeful leadership with a vision of placing its citizens at the center of political project without recourse to ethnic chauvinism but to serve the collective welfare of its people regardless of their ethnic origin.

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