

A System's Analysis of Ethnic Agitations and Antagonisms in Nigeria

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Abstract

Political systems are self reinforcing aiming at stability through its mutually coordinating engagements of its structures working to a near functional perfection. The failure of institutional capacity spurts instability exemplified by political and social upheavals demanding for changes sometimes very radical. Violence and sustained agitations are exemplars in many political societies. Competition for access to scarce resources by Nigeria's ethnically choking polity has often resulted in unending spectre of instabilities since the 1960s. Ethnic agitations against marginalization have underscored the majority-minority interface in Nigeria's history of political governance. The return of democracy in the late 1990s provided the open space for eruption of State suppressed grievances. The agitations in the Niger Delta for a new phase of fiscal federalism to sustained farmers-herder clashes across the country are notable indications. Political inclusivity and a fair system of distribution of national resources hold the promise for stability in Nigeria.

Keywords: instability, system, conversion, agitations

1. Introduction

System as a body of theory takes societies and their concomitant social groups as relatively persistent institutions operating within a larger environment. Their operations are functionally related to their goals and aspirations in relation to other groups operating within the same environment. Their demands to central authorities in the face of similar demands from other groups constitute aggregate yearnings to be met by very often limited resources. This underlying factor of scarce resources creates and sustains acute competition between and among groups. These agitations may result into bitter disagreements should either groups perceive that their chances of satisfying their demands are constrained by the other social groups and so could descend into violent conflicts thereby turning competition into fierce exercise.

This attempt is to explain the cause(s) of ethnic agitations and antagonisms through the lens of systems theory. This is followed by briefly tracing the historical trajectory of ethnic demands and antagonisms in Nigeria with illustrations of failure of demands that resulted into fierce disagreements and eventual conflicts. Finally the conclusion will stress the relevance of democracy in mitigating ethnic antagonisms.

2. System's Analysis: A Theoretical Perspective

Both in a traditional and conventional sense, the most enduring problem is how to describe the internal structure of any political system. Structures refer to the patterns of power and authority which permeates relationships between rulers and the ruled. These relationships are defined by the role of the structures in terms of decision making. Political roles are primarily concerned with the making of decisions in the name of society and the orchestration of actions which implement these decisions by allocating scarce values for a society as tangible achievements (Easton, 1957). The set of responsibilities and the behaviour which arise from these duties constitute the political system.

A system is believed to be distinct from its environment, and self contained. Therefore systems have boundaries that are observable. System analysis therefore seeks to identify members of the system-whether there are individuals or merely distinct units of the system that are symbolized by their actions. With the establishment of bound systems and subsystems, systems analysis tries to account for relationship between systems. In any case no system is isolated and insulated from influence by the events in another system or subsystem. These interactive actions are what David Easton calls "inputs" and "outputs". He sees these key concepts as consisting of demands and supports.

Almond and Coleman (1960) have divided the demands/inputs for more clarification into "political socialization", recruitment", "interest articulation", "interest aggregation" and "political communication". The inputs into any political systems are demands made upon the system by various segments of the society through their organized institutions. In contemporary systems, these include pressure groups or interest groups, social institutions such as schools, religious bodies and peer groups. Notable individuals in each community may also present demands to the system on behalf of the social group. Others include political parties and the media. For the output Easton (1957) designates as decisions inform of authoritative allocation of values. Almond and Coleman (1960) modify this into "rule making", "rule application" and "rule adjudication". These concepts have come to represent the functional separation of powers among the arms of modern governments.

According to Mitchell (1962), inputs are symbolized by "expectations and demands", "resources", and

“support” while “system goals”, “values” and “costs” and “controls” are used to describe the political outputs.

While these concepts vary, they are pretty similar in the connotation of what is being exchanged across the boundaries when Easton, Almond and Coleman talk of demand and interest articulation, they are concerned with who asks for what, when and how and the general consequence of the demands upon the polity and the system.

Systems analysis is also concerned with matters affecting the stability of systems, and more especially, with political socialization and other support inputs. Indeed the stability of the system is the crucible of the theory. A stable system attracts assurance and stimulates public support through participation. But this is where society and its varying social groups have achieved a fair degree of satisfaction over their demands.

However systems analysis is said to have three major deficiencies; methodological weaknesses, unsuitability for empirical research and its conservative inclination. Critics argue that the reality of systems is highly debatable and given this societies consist of more isolated events with little or no harmful consequences on the system. The interdependence within the system as emphasized is a matter for empirical research rather than axiomatic treatment.

Critics also argue that it is difficult to postulate and ascribe boundaries to political systems because system analysis cannot account for all the variables that permeate systems. The axiomatic conclusion of systems analytical goal of equilibrium is also questioned. They insist that system analysis cannot prove the existence of systems themselves neither can the theory elicit non linear variables for measurement to determine the state of equilibrium.

In spite of these criticisms, the theory lends itself for analysis of political systems irrespective of regions and how each segment of any society demands and obtains for itself what resource or value they need and mechanisms and strategies employed by societies to support and maintain a stable polity in the face of challenges that have become increasingly heightened and complex in all modern societies at whatever level of development. In the context of Nigeria, ethnic and religious fissures are here considered.

3. Genesis of Ethnic Agitations and Antagonisms in Nigeria

Nigeria is a plural society with over 250 ethnic and ethno linguistic groups (Dunmoye, 1989). The historic amalgamation of 1914 formally brought these ethnic entities under one colonial state of Nigeria. The colonial state became the legitimate authority for resources and value allocation among these groups. The struggle for economic resources under colonial authorities in the face of their acute scarcity created tension and threatened cordial ethnic relations (Nnoli, 1977). As a consequence of certain methods of production and distribution of products in a particular society, some resources may be abundant for some members of the society, still very scarce for others and totally inaccessible for the rest.

The nature of colonialism through its capitalist orientation created dislocations in the economic life of the natives. Education for instance which became a means for improved status and income was very scarce. Colonial authorities rationalized that it was expensive and with few colonial jobs, mass education will produce mass unemployment in the future. By 1938, however, mass education through scholarship was introduced. With introduction of universal free education in the Western region in the early 50s, and with corresponding increase in school enrolment in other regions, educated Nigerians seeking for work dramatically rose. With stiff competition for colonial jobs, ethnic solidarity became a refuge point thereby enhancing ethnic sentiments (Coleman, 1968).

The balkanization of the country into regions each dominated by one major ethnic group or the other created the opportunity for ethnically dominant political parties. The struggle for elective political office also required strong ethnic identification. The Action Group (AG) for instance was formed in march 1951 to take advantage of the regional notion of ethnic grouping created by the 1946 constitution (Nnoli, 1977) although its leader chief Obafemi Awolowo had earlier in 1947 agitated for ethnic constituted regions, it was later in 1951 that the AG was formed as a party to exercise this idea (Sklar, 1963). This party was founded on the assumption that under prevailing circumstances only under a regional political order can political office be sought and won. Thus the AG became the `first party to be founded on, inspired by and nourished by ethnic chauvinism and regional parochialism (Nnoli, 1977). This ethnic line of mobilization and shaping of inter-ethnic relations was forced on National Council Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and Nigeria People’s Congress (NPC).

The ethnicization of politics in Nigeria followed an oscillating curve. For instance, although Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe had advocated for the creation of ethnic protectorates in Nigeria in between 1943 and 1948 his party the NCNC was to later preach a unitary government. After 1948 however, it became clear, that the NCNC will never win support in the pro-AG west and pro-British and Hausa north. In any case the party felt it could win support in the middle belt where finally it had to accept the reality that political support flew from the geographic homelands of ethnic groups. This situation Coleman (1968) asserts completed the regionalization of Nigerian politics and the politicization of ethnicity. This politicization of ethnicity resulted in calibration of every demand in ethnic coloration. For example, the 1959 general election was contested on the belief that

access to state resources depended upon the ethnic dominance of the state and failure to do so would necessitate coalitions.

In 1953, the demand for the creation of the mid western state by the NPC was to destabilize the AG and not for consideration of national unity. The support of the AG for the creation of the middle belt state was also in the same thinking (Dudley, 1973). The demand for the middle belt region was to carve out an area of influence for the Tiv as a dominant group in the region and formalized the check against the dominant attitude of the Hausa-Fulani in the northern region. The agitation for state creation by ethnic groups had its origin from this process. It was this tendency that led to the threat for secession in 1953 by the AG following the insistence of the NPC for the excision of Lagos from the west (Coleman, 1968; Dudley, 1973).

Thus by 1960, Nigerian politics had become synonymous with interethnic struggle for power. Political power was widely perceived as being important and instrumental in the struggle among the ethnic groups for the distribution of the national wealth.

4. Ethnic Demands and Interethnic Conflicts in Contemporary Nigeria

On and after independence, ethnic characterization of politics as a basis to demand recognition was intensified. This was very much evidenced by the maintenance of the derivation revenue formula in favour of the regional governments. The various marketing boards controlled by each region, accumulated revenue for their regions which indeed superseded that of the federal government.

However, a crucial test of ethnic demand presented itself in 1955 following the sequestration of Southern Cameroun from Nigeria and the attendant vacancies at the federal civil service. Given the lack of northern representation at the senior cadre the NPC led government threatened to halt the Nigerianization of northern civil service that northerners would not be given their fair share of the positions. Since electoral power placed the NPC at advantage in holding the Prime Ministerial position and controlling the federal legislature, Northerners were then accepted into these positions for political reasons rather than merit.

A similar problem creating ethnic tension existed in the armed forces. At independence, the southerners notably the Igbo dominated north. The north called for restructuring to reflect the population of the major ethnic groups. It was also in the same vein that the 1965 population census was disputed by the regional political leadership. The inability of the regional leaders to resolve these contentious issues indeed resulted in the 1966 January Coup and the Igbo pogrom of the same year.

Ethnic antagonisms date back to the colonial era and open conflicts degenerating into political violence have occurred repeatedly since then. A classical case of ethnic antagonism resulting from uncompromised positions first played out in 1959 between the Tiv and the Hausa following the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) led by J.S. Tarka demanding for the excision of the middle belt from the Northern region. The UMBC won the 1959 elections in alliance with AG to the utter defeat of the NPC. The NPC reacted by dismissing some Native Authority (NA) workers whom they perceived to have worked against the party. The latter reacted by attacking the NA Police and disobeying court summons and refusing to pay taxes (Makintosh, 1966). Wide spread arrest were made there by swelling the Gboko prisons. Another confrontation occurred between NPC and UMBC's Tiv supporters in 1964.

The series of politically motivated killings against the Igbos especially in the aftermath of the July 1966 coup led to the threat to the very survival the Nigerian State. The military government of the Eastern region expelled non easterners and refused to accept the authority of General Yakubu Gowon as the new Head of State. This situation promoted crucial questions regarding the overall control of the armed forces, the relationship between regions, the resumption of constitutional negotiations and settlement and compensation of millions of persons displaced by the preceding massacres (Nnoli, 1977). At Aburi in Ghana a confederal agreement was reached between the Biafran representatives and the Nigerian delegation. Back home these agreements were unilaterally abrogated by the Federal Government when it dawned on General Gowon that the federal system of government had been negotiated away. The inevitable end of this conflict was the succession and the civil war of 1967-70.

Throughout the era of military rule, the federal government grew fiscally stronger by abolishing the derivation formula in favour of other criteria for sharing national revenue such as population and need. Except for the brief interruption from 1983 – 1985, the military had effectively suppressed ethnic demands and antagonisms with application of force. While these measures kept ethnic demands at bay, they did not disappear from the political radar of the country. One of these is the demand for a review of the revenue formula which had outlived the military. It was a corollary function of this demand that ignited the Ogoni struggle for recognition in terms of federal presence and address of the neglect of the Niger Delta area. The Ogoni demands came to a climax in 1995 following the execution of the leader of that struggle.

Cases of ethnic antagonisms abound from 1980s and seem not to have an end in sight. These disagreements range from land disputes, location of government projects or local government headquarters to chieftaincy affairs. For instance the Tiv-Jukun crisis over land in the early 1990s had reoccurred in early 2000s

with far more devastating consequences on inter-ethnic relations. Indeed the antagonisms impacted both the state and the inter-ethnic relations in ways that have left more tension between the groups after the seemingly genocidal intervention by the Nigerian state (Genyi, 2006). The Itsekiri-Ijaw confrontations over local government headquarter location in the 1990s and the Zango Katap-Hausa clashes of the late 1980s over chieftaincy tool are very illustrative. The Tiv farmers and Fulani herdsman's violent clashes in Benue state from 2013-2014 have shown a new phase in inter-ethnic antagonism arising from contestation over land based resources. The use of sophisticated weapons in the conflict and the level of destruction suggest that groups are no longer willing to wait for too long on the state for their aspirations to be met. Put differently, groups are fully prepared to take whatever measures to achieve their demands should the state fail to heed to them on time. This tendency has implication for the stability of the system. There is no doubt that these events have profound impact on the polity. These were also indications of the system's failure to address the imputable demands of systems segments and where output decisions such as citing of governmental authority in total disregard of group sensibilities, the outcome is the instability the system undergoes (Genyi, 2014).

The annulment of June 12 Presidential election was seen as an ethnic design to perpetuate the Hausa-Fulani interest in dominating political power in Nigeria. The resulting violence was ethnically characterized and illustrated the rejection of the annulment output. This was despite the fact that the annulment of the election was a scheme to entrench the personal dictatorship of President Ibrahim Babangida who was reluctant to leave office (Jibrin, 1997).

Agitations can be suppressed as long as possible but would burst to the surface at the slightest opportunity. At the return of democratic government in 1999, there have been a plethora of ethnic demands and antagonisms. The call for a restructuring of the federation with the specific reference to the armed forces and other federal institutions by the Pan Yoruba group the Afenifere is quite illustrative. The call has been accompanied by the demand for a sovereign national conference. On the heels of these demands are the ethnic agitations in the Niger Delta for a redress of the historical neglect of the region. Until the introduction of the Amnesty program by Yar'Adua administration in 2007, the Nigerian state was almost brought to its knees following the violent insurgency orchestrated by various Niger Delta militant groups. Militant activities forced the reduction in oil exploration and crude oil production and sales to their nadir. The climax of these agitations is the introduction of the Sharia criminal legal code in most part of the North. The demand for recognition of this form of Islamic law to be in existence with the national constitution sparked off ethnic violence in different parts of the country.

The Nigerian state has begun to respond to these concerns first by the constitutional recognition of the principle of derivation in revenue allocation. The 13% derivation provision for oil producing states is not totally accepted but is an indication of a shift in position by the central authorities. This resonates with Easton's conception of a system as a value allocation institution. In addition to this, the Federal Government had established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NNDC) and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs. The relative peace and stability in the region is indicative of acceptance of the systems response to demands and their restraint from further demand and violence is a sign of their support to the system.

However, it is instructive to note that following the lost of election by the President Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) being of the Ijaw ethnic minority, to the opposition candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC) General Muhammadu Buhari, from the ethnic majority of the Hausa-Fulani in the 2015 elections, ethnic agitations, antagonisms and militancy were reignited in the South-east and the Niger Delta. For example the Niger Delta Avengers, a new militant group began bombing oil facilities in the Niger Delta demanding for political restructuring to pave way for regional control of resources (DiChristopher, 2016). While the federal government has adopted a military approach to stem the agitations, it is obvious that their emergence was engendered that by the seeming loss of access to state resources through privileges and positions that the Jonathan presidency had guaranteed to prominent individuals in the region including former militant leaders. The farmers-herder conflict has also risen to a national challenge in competition for scarce land based resources between the Fulani nomadic herders and sedentary peasant farmers threatening the stability of the Nigerian political system.

5. Conclusion

Using the Systems Analysis paradigm, the Nigerian Political System has undergone trying movements in the course of value allocation in response to demands and aspirations of the social groups that make up the country. The plurality of the polity underscores the ubiquity of strains in the face of near non-compromising demands from its component entities. The very existence of the polity has come under enormous stress over time. The real test of the system's ability to survive disequilibria tendencies is created by the present democratic system. There is in existence more plurality with unqualified freedom for articulation and aggregation of positions. The difference however is the organized way in which they may be carried out. Whether the system will survive, stabilize and achieve equilibrium will depend on its capacity to respond to these demands without compromising

others in the face of increasing sophistication of plural requests against the backdrop of limited resources, the dexterity with which the system dispense itself will tell on its survival instincts.

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