

# Towards Ethnic Conflict Management in Nigeria: The Adoption of a Multi-party Democracy.

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## Abstract

As a creative socio-political mechanism for managing ethnic conflict in multi-ethnic state of Nigeria, multi-party democratic system offers prospects for the sustainability of the Nigeria polity. Much as challenging as ethnic group is in a pluralistic society so also is its relevance in the building of a conflict free multi-ethnic society. The existentiality of ethnic conflict in Nigeria is not inherently destructive, but a normal aspect of any vibrant multi-ethnic society. Effective management of ethnic conflict should be seen as in the light of diffusing its potentialities which can erupt as a result of mutual fear of domination and suspicion of which the adoption of multi-party democracy is significant to allay. The adoption of a multi-party democracy in Nigeria no doubt is a political and constitutional strategy for the articulation and management of groups' interest as well as promoting national integration within the polity.

**Key words:** Management, Ethnicity, Multi-party, Institution, Democracy, Cleavages, Nigeria

## 1. Introduction

More than ever before Nigeria today faces greater socio-political challenges. Nigeria like other African countries such as Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Tanzania etc. is divided along ethnic lines which have made the state a volatile mix of insecurity, instability, corrupt political institutions, ethno-religious crisis etc. Unarguably this has made the country fall a prey to incessant ethnic conflict; some of which are as a result of ineffective and poor ethnic management. It is imperative to state here that the conflicts in Nigeria are not between the component states and the federal government, but between the various ethnic groups in the country who has inadvertently constituted themselves into majority and minority ethnic groups. Thus at the heart of socio-political development problem in Nigeria is ethnic conflict which has been detrimental to national integration and unity.

Nigeria like India, Canada, Malaysia, Gambia, Ghana; today is one of the countries in Africa that owe her existence to the imperialistic activities of Britain. The pursuit of British economic ambition and expeditions through conquest crystallized in the rather "artificial" creation called Nigeria in the famous amalgamation of 1914 subjugating people from diverse culture, traditions and ethnic nationalities and organized them to construct the Nigerian state within the British Empire thus explaining the pluralistic nature of the country, what Ayoade (1986) referred to as involuntary collection of disparate ethnic groups. Compared to the North, the Southern part of the country witnessed rapid socio-economic and political development with its attendant consequences felt in the Nigeria's political life ever since. This explain the fact that colonialism is as instrumental to ethnic conflicts in Nigeria as other factors like political corruption and weak political institutions, the result of which is fierce competition for scarce socio-political resources by the various ethnic groups in the country.

Nigeria since her independence in 1960 has had a turbulent if not tragic socio-economic and political experience, the height of which was the civil war of 1967-1970 with its physical and psychological effects on the country. Till date the various ethnic groups no longer trust each other, they no longer have confidence in the national project, in the institution of socio-economic and political life even in the future of one Nigerian state. What this means is that every ethnic group believe in itself, the reason why at every opportunity each ethnic group try to maneuver their ways to the top in order to get whatever they can, since the state's socio-political and economic wealth flows horizontally from the center to the states. This has been a fundamental obstacle to development and a source of socio-political instability, the product of which is underdevelopment of the country. Though Nigeria still stays together as one political entity but it must be stated that the country has not been able to harness its diversity to its advantage like Malaysia. Managing ethnic relations thus remains one of Nigeria's fundamental challenges considering the multi-ethnic nature of the country.

Arguably ethnic conflict – conflict between ethnic groups within a multi-ethnic state over important socio-political, economic and territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities – cannot be ruled out of Nigeria society because it brings out the developmental differences between the ethnic groups which means that ethnicity should not be singled out as a dangerous phenomenon in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria it can only be problematic when it is seen as object of discrimination, injustice, exclusion or even elimination. Therefore

necessity is laid on the political institutions to ensure effective ethnic management strategy through which national cohesion is encouraged. Therefore the moment a particular ethnic group, is been deprived of their socio-political and economic rights, it raises the ethnic consciousness of such group the resultant effect will be on the social-political and economic stability of the country.

Political institutions are organizations which create, enforce and apply laws; that mediate conflict; make governmental policy in the economy and social system; and otherwise provide representation for the citizens (Alistair, 2012). Political institutions are in some sense the rules of the game in political life and are themselves created to solve some socio-political problems. Some of the general problems that political institutions might resolve are the problems related collective action, delegation of power etc. Examples of such political institutions include political parties, trade unions and the courts. The term also refers to the recognized structure of rules and principles within which the aforementioned bodies operate. This includes such concept as the right to vote and be voted for, responsible, responsive and accountable government; whose control over government decisions and policies is constitutionally vested in them by the people.

The sustainability of a polity no doubt requires a workable political system devoid of manipulation from the political leaders in a polity. Put in another words for socio-political sustainability of a state, the political instrument through which the character of ethnic identities in the polity is measured remains very significant. In other words the success of national integration in a multi-ethnic state depends on the viability of the political institutions devoid of ethnic politics.

The adoption multi-party democracy as an ethnic conflict management strategy has been viewed as a laudable fit; of course this has given credence to reducing ethnic politics within the polity. Even though the system seems to have relatively reduced ethnic conflict but in a situation where the political system gives room for manipulation by the political group within the various ethnic groups, it means that the system is still weak thus forcing democratic institutions to be at the mercy of the major ethnic groups the effect of which borders on the sustainability of social and economic development of the country.

Ethnic conflict in Nigeria has since become more or less important phenomenon because of its complexity and the reason why it serve as a threat to socio-political stability of the country. The occurrence of ethnic conflict in Nigeria manifests between the majority and the minority groups, among the majority groups, among the minority groups and also manifest within the religious differences, where the North is predominantly Muslim and the South predominantly Christians. Meaning that the socio-economic, political and cultural differences within the polity has been allowed to serve as an impediment to national integration, of which attempt to achieve has brought about how best to manage ethnic differences in the country.

The constructive handling of ethnic conflict meaningfully and translating it to a benefiting phenomenon can be regarded as ethnic conflict management. In essence ethnic conflict management involves socio-economic and political development and transformational processes in the society, which translates to improvement in socio-economic and political relationship between the various ethnic groups. Ethnic conflict in the real sense of it cannot be eliminated totally but it can be successfully managed observes (Nwachukwu, 2008). In essence ethnic conflict can be reduced by acknowledging and institutionalizing differences rather than suppressing them. Thus ethnic differences must be recognized to prevent violent ethnic conflict; Porter (2003) describes this as the realization of group's social, economic, cultural and political rights which is necessary to engender peaceful living within such diversity and alleviating the vulnerability of the minorities to majority's decisions. Meaning that, a country like Nigeria that is defined by its ethnic contractions unarguably needs a constructive ethnic management that will enhance productive inter-ethnic relations that translate to socio-economic and political development.

The desire to contain and sustain the indivisibility of the Nigerian state and to guarantee ethnic equality, opportunities both in government establishments has necessitated the experiment of ethnic management. It should be noted that the challenges facing Nigeria are multifaceted and sometimes interconnected as a result of this, response and the approach to solving these problems definitely must come from different angles through a workable socio-political and economic framework which at least must be the responsibility of the central government.

Significantly this study relies on secondary data collection method. Secondary collection method contains data that have been collected and compiled by other scholars. This consists of published and unpublished records. The study will be divided into five parts. Section one is devoted to introducing the study followed by a discussion on ethnicity and ethnic consciousness, the third section takes care of the concept of ethnic conflict management, in section four the study will look at the theories of conflict management; section five examine the adoption of multi-party democracy as mechanism for managing ethnic conflict in Nigeria and the last section will conclude the study.

## 2. Ethnicity and Ethnic Consciousness

Ethnic consciousness can be viewed to be the basis for groups' pride and unity, through which groups sought to unify their members around group specific socio-cultural attributes and through which specific socio-political goods and self-respect is attained within and from those groups in the dominant population. It can as well be seen as an ideological construct carefully crafted by the political class to give them access to political power. It thus set against each other people whose values are in conflict, who want different thing, and who do not understand each other. It is the result of socio-economic and political competition between ethnically differentiated groups. Nnoli (1978) posited that the malaise of ethnicity had infected all facets of communication. In the process of socialization, ethnicity has become internalized and increased. Consequently, the ethnic factor assumed a self-fulfilling and sustaining dynamics of its own which daily reinforced the individuals internalized ethnic sentiments.

However a conflict generated based on the consciousness of one's group socio-political position in the polity is considered to be ethnic when it involves organized political movement, mass unrest, separatists' action, and civil wars with opposing lines drawn along ethnic boundaries. It is usually a conflict between minority groups and dominant (majority) groups, where the majority controls access to the power and resources of the state and the minorities, often without going into open confrontation with the dominant groups, question the state structure as a whole and act violently when the society and the state are unable to suggest any mechanisms for regulating and resolving these socio-political and economic contradictions (Stavenhagen 1991). Sometimes as in the case of Nigeria conflict occurs between the majority ethnic groups over the allocation of socio-political and economic goods.

Various theoretical approaches to the study of ethnic conflict have been articulated, the sociological approach argue that ethnic conflict is catalyzed by the usurpation of one ethnic group of certain privileged social niches and also effects of social discrimination based on ethnic characteristics. For example, the control of the state is considered to be the greatest prize in ethnically plural societies. This explains why political position like presidency, governorship, legislative posts is keenly contested by the various ethnic groups. In political science theory, a powerful dynamic in the explanation of ethnic conflict is the roles played by the intellectuals and politicians in mobilizing ethnic consciousness and inter-ethnic strife. Williams (1994) observes that states are major actors in creating, accentuating or diminishing ethnic identities; arenas of socio-political rivalry and conflict and resources for mobilization and counter mobilization.

Ethnicity cannot be conjured out of thin air; it must be built on real cultural experience. Before ethnicity became the basis for political mobilization and action, it must be a work of intellectual construction, an imagining or invention of a common history, language and culture, typically expressed in oral or written text combining and reworking both old and new element (Berman, 1998). In essence ethnic problem in Nigeria was partly man-made and partly tailored by nature itself. Hence ethnicities as a social construct. The understanding of this is that ethnicity is considered to be a by-product of uneven access to socio-economic resources orchestrated by the reorganization of the hitherto autonomous pre-colonial societies into artificial state structure, hence the explanation of ethnicity in relation to external stimuli (King, 2002:356). Man-made problems relate mainly to the fusion of the various ethnic groups hitherto independent of each other by the colonialists perhaps for administrative purpose and economic exploitation, while problems created by nature concerned its geography and ethnic composition. Consequently, ethnicity when mobilized and manipulated can be the root causes of internal problems connected with disrespect to human rights and social justice. If appropriated properly, on the other hand, it could be the ingredients required for the realization of the ideal society, political integration, participation and common good.

Hobsbawn (1995) argued that a good deal of the politics of collaboration took place within the limits set by the colonial theory of monarchy. The colonial government manipulated African monarchical system of government and the whole process of traditional inventiveness to serve a good deal for practical purposes. As the principal clients of the colonial government the chiefs became the most powerful patrons in local societies and became the central focus of the development of client patronage networks around political institutions and positions of authority. In fact the structures and practices of the state, the expectation about African cultures and institution encourage Africans to think ethnically; leading to contest over property rights and access to resources, largely on ethnic terms. In a nuts shell colonialism energize ethnicity (socially, economically and politically) in an attempt to gain control over political activities in the country.

Fundamentally, ethnicity is a political and social phenomenon associated with interaction among members of different ethnic groups. It is a type of informal interest grouping which is called into being as a result of the intensive struggle between groups over the allocation of resources and positions within the state. Ethnicity is considered to be a phenomenon that can be utilized differently at both the individual and collective levels and can influence the life process of ethnic groups either positively or negatively (Byun-Soo, 2008). Nigeria as it is known today can be regarded as a colonial creation, the major problem the country is facing since independence

is as a result of the deep cleavages which exist between the diverse elements (people) who make up the country; often marked by strong regional loyalties that compete with much desired loyalty to the nation. In other words ethnic conflict is basically a product of competition for scarce socio-political and economic resources among the various ethnic groups in multi-ethnic societies embedded in patron-client networks – a socio-cultural norm that regulate the obligations and expectations of patrons and their clients. Because of the ethnic formation of Nigeria, a patronage network operates within its ethnic context. Thus the moral economy of the patronage network is circumscribed by the norms of the ethnic group.

In the word of Osaghae (1994) Nigeria is a country with a large number of ethnic groups, inequalities among them is size, resource endowment, education and access to state power and resources. Highly developed and fractionalized indigenous bourgeoisie, make her ethnic situation perhaps the most complicated in Africa. In other words ethnicity thrives in Nigeria because of the multiple and conflicting versions of culture and customs, as well as divergent interest of the various ethnic groups. Significantly, this has made it possible for the political class to easily manipulate and mobilize group's consciousness; a situation which has been the bane of national integration and socio-political development of the country. Put in another word ethnic conflict in Nigeria is from complex combinations of ethnic diversity, socio-political and economic inequality, political opportunity, groups' mobilization and manipulation by the political class etc. No doubt this has made the search for national unity a herculean task in Nigeria.

### **3. Ethnic Conflict Management Conceptualized**

Significantly not every ethnic conflict is characterized by violence that is the manifestation of ethnic conflict comes in diverse forms which may either be violent or non-violent which inform us why there is no single explanation of the dynamics of ethnic conflict and its management, settlement and prevention. For example in a non-violent ethnic conflict; groups may seek for redress through law courts, press or political parties. At this juncture it is important to consider what ethnic conflict management means in relation to Nigeria's situation.

In advancing how best ethnic conflicts can be managed, it has been observed that scholars still put ethnic "resolution" in the place of "ethnic conflict management"; the point is they are two different concepts and their meaning differs. The idea of resolution refers to a situation where ethnic conflict is given what Osaghae (1996) called a once and for all treatment, while ethnic management on the other hand means that ethnic conflict cannot be whisked or disposed of at a goal. That is, it (ethnic conflict) is more or less a permanent feature of a multi-ethnic state like Nigeria that needs to be creatively dealt with. In essence this approach presents a continuous socio-political strategy of dealing with ethnic conflict considering the natures and the actors in ethnic conflict with the hope that disagreement at the level of socio-political competition can be reduced. What this translates to be is that ethnic management approach is more discerning observes Osaghae's (1996).

Basically different countries all over the world have different approaches through which ethnic conflict could be managed. This informs us that what work elsewhere may not actually work in Nigeria. Mostly ethnic conflict management falls between hegemonic and bargaining approaches (Ayoade, 1986). Hegemonic approach Ayoade observes can operate in a socio-political environment where ethnic groups occupy different hegemonic positions such that the minority ethnic group is hegemonically dominated by the politically dominant ethnic group. This was the situation in Nigeria in the First Republic that eventually led to the civil war of 1967-1970. The war was believed to have resulted from the Northern hegemonic control of the country.

The bargaining approach, on the other hand gives room for mutual socio-political exchange through which ethnic conflict is productively put under control. Ethnic conflict no doubt, does not just exists or come into being. They are the product of deliberate choices of groups to pursue certain socio-political goals with violent means (Wolff, 2006). Arguably ethnic conflicts are likely to continue, but the understanding of its causes, consequences and its dynamics can help to prevent and effectively manage it. Therefore the inclusion of both the majority and the minority groups in governance as well as promotion of the rights of people so as to promote the equality of all ethnic groups that constitute the state is highly important.

Ethnic conflict management can as well take the form of re-organizational approach so as to give room for the various ethnic groups' participation and accommodation thus strengthening the socio-political role of the minorities in the business of nation building. Such socio-political arrangement may eventually engender the desired socio-political stability. It can also take the form of restructuring of party system as well as political parties and sometimes the system of government thus engendering the sustainability of the polity. However ethnic conflict management tends to be very difficult to manage where attention is not paid to its complexity. Thus the catch all strategy of ethnic resolution may not necessarily work in a state like Nigeria.

### **4. Theories of Conflict Management**

The question of ethnicity has always been a significant factor to the study of socio-political stability of Nigeria. Significantly, ethnic conflict are as much as a result of the existentiality of the state on one hand and as a result

of the complexity of ethnic problem combined with other conflict generating cleavages such as religion, race and regionalism on the other hand. There are numerous examples of successful attempts to manage multi-ethnic states. Malaysia is a good example; where the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians have been successfully integrated into the socio-political system. However there may not be a constitutional model that can claim to be successful under all conditions, the prognosis for multi-ethnic states succeeding in solving ethnic conflict in a non-violent manner is rather poor; the immense difficulty of finding a workable formula to managing ethnic conflict has to be acknowledged, as well as the fact that the search for such a formula is still ongoing observes Odendaal (1998). Put in another word ethnic conflict management is not static but a continuous process. It is therefore imperative that political leaders in multi-ethnic states find accommodative and implementable socio-political solutions to manage ethnic conflicts.

Arguably it does not necessarily mean that a particular socio-political model must be imposed because such model may likely fail as it may ignore the socio-political integration of some ethnic groups. For example, the imposition of a two party system in a multi-ethnic society may not likely produce the desired socio-political result as opposed to its adoption in a homogeneous state. This is because it may likely deprive the minorities of been adequately and functionally represented in the polity.

In the literatures on ethnic conflict management a number of distinctive approaches may be identified. One notable assertion made by Simonsen (2005) to draw attention to the relevance of political institutions in managing ethnic conflict is that ethnic conflict can be effectively tamed through socio-political institutions that while; providing for proportional representation in the polity. Proportional representation is a political system which aims at ensuring the representation of every group/political party in the legislature based on the support each political party receive in an election. For example in a country where there are 120 seats and the election ends with party A having 34%, B 29%, C 30% and D 27%; it means party A will have 34 seats, B 29 seats, C 30 seats and D 27 seats. This system does not lay much emphasis on ethnicity in politics or counteract achievement towards a de-ethnicization in other sectors of the society. These institutions he believes will ideally contribute towards achieving a long term de-ethnicization of politics, through contacts and trust building across ethnic boundaries, what Lake and Rothchild (1996) referred to as confidence building measure which is believed to have a potential creative instruments through which state can assure every ethnic group of share of state positions, and political powers thus providing incentives for cooperation and basis for a shared sense of common fate among the various ethnic groups.

Lake and Rothchild (1996), Elaigwu (2002), Osaghae (2004), Muhammad (2007) and Aiyede (2009) on ethnic conflict management in Nigeria thesis albeit informed by more or less the same theoretical and perhaps the same ideological orientation argued that federalism in a multi-ethnic society is a device for socio-political and economic accommodation, promotion of confidence among ethnic groups as a workable negotiating mechanism among groups the objective of which is to integrate different ethnic units not by making them loose their identities and relative autonomy. But much as one would agree with the above, Nigeria federalism is an aberration of federalism elsewhere.

Ethnicity is believe to be one of the stumbling block that stood on the way of socio-political development thus Oyediran and Agbaje (1991) believes that party system is central to the longevity and vitality of a political system, and that its ability to aggregate freely articulate, represent, and organized within set limits is what determines the extent of accountability, tolerance of other ethnic groups in public life as well as political performance and the conflict regulation capacities of a political system. Adamolekun and Kincaid (1991) observes that this have been practically absent or weak where present, thus depriving Nigeria of the desired national unity, democratic politics and socio-economic development, hence the skepticism about the nature of political structure (party system) in a multi-ethnic Nigeria state.

Recognizing the spate of ethnic conflict in Nigeria Osaghae (1996) commenting on human right and ethnic conflict management in Nigeria submitted that in a multi-ethnic society and from human right approach there is need to balance individual and group rights arguing that there are interest as well as demands of a group nature which cannot be satisfied by granting individual rights. What this means is that the observance or granting of group demands is a prerequisite to granting individual rights. However "group right" is acknowledged only when their socio-political and economic demands are met. But where one ethnic group uses its position to deprive others of laying claim on the polity, it means there is much to adoption and practice of human right vis-a-vis ethnic conflict management. Put in another word where the rights of other groups are violated it is capable of frustrating the process of peaceful inter-ethnic relations. The end result of which is socio-political instability.

As earlier stated, ethnicity in itself does not cause ethnic conflict. Rather, the stakes in ethnic conflicts which are extremely diverse, ranging from legitimate political, social, cultural and economic grievances of disadvantaged ethnic groups. Therefore the functionality of ethnic conflict and how it can be managed hinges on the inclusivity in the political system. Put in another word ethnicity can be of a significant importance if every ethnic group is politically accommodated as it will ensure/encourage multi-ethnic and multi-party representation

within significant governmental institutions.

Without any point of contradiction one can point out “the socio-political and economic alienation” of one ethnic group by the other as the common denominator among the causative factors of ethnic conflict in Nigeria; where the apparatus of office is used by one ethnic group or the other to deprive others of their socio-political and economic rights within the polity the demand for which often lead to conflicts. Within these majorities are located the minorities highly pronounced within the Hausa and Igbo; and within the minorities there are also majority minorities, thus making ethnic management in Nigeria a serious socio-political business which account for why the adoption of multi-party democracy is seen as a mechanism through which every ethnic group would be accommodated in the polity.

### **5. Multi-party Democracy; a Mechanism for Managing Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria.**

All over the world, independent and democratic states are characterized by certain socio-political factors. One of the elements that featured prominently in such state is political parties, the avenue unarguably explored by citizens to promote healthy socio-political competition, responsiveness, accountability as well as responsibility which invariably enhances good governance if handled properly. Political parties serve the purpose of reducing ethnic conflict and promote national integration.

Political party is an association of group of people with more or less the same political ideology seeking to control the socio-political and economic system in a country through constitutional means. While party system are sets of parties that competes and cooperate with the aim of increasing their power in controlling government constitutionally. Party system is only feasible in a democratic context in which several parties participate in open elections. Apart from a multi-party democratic system, there are other forms of party system. For the purpose of this paper we shall define a two party system; this is because Nigeria had once adopted the system but failed. A two party system is one in which two fairly equally balanced large parties dominate the party system and alternate in power. The two parties have comparable sizes and equal chances of winning elections (Caramani, 2007:328). America is a perfect example of country with a two party system where the Republican and the Democrats has dominated for more than a century.

Among other functions, political parties bring the government closer to the people and in particular bridge the gap between ethnic cleavages which is the reason why the membership of a party needed to cut across all ethnic groups. The existence of political parties within a political system breeds various forms of relationship or co-existence within the polity itself. Political parties should therefore be seen as important to the survival of a democratic system as well as a means to stem ethnic conflict while promoting peace, stability and socio-political development. What this means is that party system can lead to the rise and fall of conflict in ethnically divided society writes Reilly (2006).

In any political system party system is inevitable; democratic system is completely impossible without the existence of political parties. Awopetu et al. (2012:11) notes that political parties are indispensable features of democratic societies due to conglomeration of people with similar ideologies under one umbrella. It can thus be said that political parties serves as a constitutional agent for the articulation and management of group interest and conflict within a polity. Scholars have argued that multi-party system does a better job in representing the interest that exist in multi-ethnic society than a two party system, hence the adoption of a multi-party system in Nigeria.

A multi-party system is a political system in which more than two political parties exist. Put in another word the number of political parties ranges from three to as many as possible. This account for why there are over forty political parties that are constitutionally recognized in Nigeria. It is a system where there are large amount of major and minor political parties and they all have the chance of holding office, and because they all compete, a majority may not emerge forcing the creation of coalition. In essence all the political parties have the capacity to gain control of government separately or in coalition – a coalition is a political system where two or more political parties come together to form one political party. Multi-party system is facilitated by the existence of multiple social cleavages as the case of Nigeria.

Multi-party system is considered to represent better socio-political pluralism in countries with ethno-linguistics cleavages; hence the only viable ways to involve ethnic minorities in decision making process and reach consensus (Caramani, 2007). In essence multi-party system gives room for adequate representation of variety of interest that exists in a democratic system. Significantly, multi-party system is often associated with multi-ethnic states. Ghana, Tanzania, Senegal, South Africa, Malaysia are examples of countries with multi-party system. Perhaps what inform Nigeria’s adoption of multi-party system and considering the multi-ethnic nature of the country; is the vulnerability of a two party system to polarizing the polity and thus endangered national unity. The formation and the establishment of British administration in Nigeria no doubt changed the structure of Nigeria traditional society as well as the perspective of Nigerian peoples; this of course created situations and attitudes that have predisposed many Nigerians to ethnic consciousness and nationalistic activities (Coleman,

1963). In the early years of Nigeria's statehood, political parties were formed along ethnic lines and regional borders. The first political party in Nigeria, Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP) emerged in 1923, with the adoption of Clifford's constitution in 1922, the party dominated political activities in Lagos and Southern Nigeria, Nigeria National Democratic Party was followed by the Nigeria Youth Movement in 1934 whose activities was also limited to Southern Nigeria; which means the parties were not national in outlook.

Multi-party politics started springing up in Nigeria in the early 50s but was an ethnically based political parties, what produced this trend was the fear and suspicion of domination shown by all the ethnic groups thus leading to the rise of these parties which were mainly ethnic in their origin, composition and the socio-economic and political interests they served; which gave them the opportunity to appeal more to ethnic identities. What Olugbade (1992) called three-player ethnic game. For example, the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) dominated the politics in the Northern Region, the Action Group (AG) in the Western Region and the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) in the Eastern Region, thus making it much easier for them to attract voters support by appealing to ethnic allegiances.

What this translates to be is that apart from the primary objective role of integrative mechanism, these parties were truncated by various vices such as polarizing and widening of ethnic cleavages in the country, as a marginalizing tool and exploitative in their bid to have political control of their regions (Azeez, 2009). Thus ethnically based political parties only represent the interest of one ethnic group and the emergence of such often heightens ethnic tensions in a multi-ethnic state as witnessed in Nigeria in the First Republic. What this means is that just as a two party system cannot work effectively, ethnically defined party system cannot work, hence the searchlight on multi-party democracy that will define the corporate existence of Nigeria ethnic groups.

In a multi-ethnic state the role of political parties is highly significant in managing ethnic conflicts the reason is because these parties channel, aggregate and express political demands (Reilly 2003). Thus multi-ethnic parties need to appeal to a broader support base in order to have a more impact on the socio-economic and political development of the country, aggregating diverse interests. In a nut shell the adoption of a multi-party system is more advantageous for social political integration and ethnic conflict management in a pluralistic society. This informed the adoption of a multi-party system as an institution and political strategy, broad based socio-economic and political development as well as giving every ethnic group the opportunity to have their socio-economic and political interests represented.

The above is against the fact that ethnically based party politics is likely to lead to socio-political and economic suppression of the minority groups and to counter the domination of the majority group, the minorities may resort to violent means to protect their interests, it may also raise the stakes in political game, thus fanning people's emotions and raise the likelihood of ethnic disturbances and also deepened ethnic cleavages which will further keep people apart instead of the desired integration for the pursuit of common socio-political and economic development (Basedau et al. 2007). For these reasons there is need to build a multi-ethnic political parties whose membership will cut across the barriers of ethnicity and invariably stem down ethnic conflict and mid-wife peaceful consolidation of a democratic society that breeds a rapid socio-political development. In essence a broad based multi-ethnic political party is a significant factor to facilitate the avoidance of ethnic conflict in the polity.

Arguably, the first attempt to properly manage ethnic conflict through the instrument of multi-party system was during the Second Republic (1979-1983) when six political parties; National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Great Nigeria's Peoples Party (GNPP), Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP) and Nigeria Advance Party (NAP); contested for elective political offices in 1979 and 1983 (NAP was registered in 1983). The problem associated with these political parties was the fact that their formation and leadership pattern no doubt reflected their ethnic affiliation. For example NPN was from the old NPC as well as NPP who rose from the support base of NPC, UPN emerged from the defunct AG, the split of NPP led to the formation of GNPP, the PRP was a reincarnation of old NEPU. Thus the desire for a national democratic political system was frustrated by the deepening ethnic affinity of these parties. The only party without a clear cut ethnic or regional identification was NAP, who perhaps wanted to experiment whether a non-ethnic party could succeed in Nigeria; of course the party did not win a single seat at national, state, as well as local government level, indicating how deep ethnic cleavage is in Nigeria. Relatively, these parties enjoyed membership from other ethnic groups outside their "home ground". But the fact is that these membership were somehow considered to be insignificant; which means that their electoral success depend solely on their ability to command and mobilize their ethnic identities; whose interests they claimed to represent, protect and defend. In essence these political parties believe more in social political emancipation of their ethnic group rather than national. The product unarguably was the failure of the Second Republic.

In 1993, the military government under General Babangida adopted two party systems (Social Democratic Party and National Republican Convention). With the aim that the adoption of a two party system would not give room for ethnic dominance of any of these parties which means that the membership of these two parties would

cut across every ethnic group in the country. Of course the two parties relatively became representatives of all ethnic groups in the country. However the fact that the two Presidential candidates (MKO Abiola and Bashir Tofa) were representing South/North shows the inherent danger in the system to Nigeria ethnic integration; as it could lead to weakening the commitment of the minority groups thus forcing them to engage in anti-systemic means to express their interest, it could also reduce the polity to North/South dichotomy.

However the unfortunate annulment of the result of the election truncated the Third Republic project and once again sparks the light of ethnicity in Nigeria polity. It should be noted that once one political party opted for ethnically chauvinistic, it becomes a logical reason for others to define and consolidate an ethnic base; the outcome of which will be to the detriment of socio-economic and political progress of the country Nolutshungu (cited in Rawlison, 2003). More so it become imperative for all parties to appeal to their ethnic identity for fear of losing to their political rivals, as such socio-economic and political matters are either fashioned in ethnic interest or end up sidelined from the polity. Put in another word party system where ethnically based political parties dominates are prone to conflict, thus deepening existing cleavages.

Benjamin Reilly (2006) eloquently suggested that the common approach to managing ethnic conflict through party system in a multi-ethnic society is to introduce regulations that will guide the formation, registration as well as the behavioral patterns of the parties. The implication is either ethnic parties are either ban or make it constitutionally difficult for ethnic parties to thrive or even make it a basic requirement for political parties to demonstrate a cross ethnic composition before it can be registered.

Consequently in 1999, another step at re-engineering ethnic conflict in Nigeria through the instrument of party system was taken. The 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in section 221 (b) (e) states that no association by whatever name called shall function as a political party unless the membership of the association is open to every citizen of Nigeria irrespective of his place of origin, sex, religion or ethnic groupings; the name of the association, its symbols or logo does not contain any ethnic or religious connotation or give the appearances that the activities of the association are confined to a part only of the geographical area of Nigeria (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

What the above suggests is that the political freedom of both the majority and the minority groups is expanded giving room for healthy socio-political development. At the beginning in 1999, three political parties – Peoples Democratic Party, Alliance for Democracy and All Nigeria Peoples' Party – were registered and participated in the general elections of 1999. Till date there more than forty political parties in the country thus giving every ethnic group big or small the room to participate in governance on one hand and also stem ethnic conflicts on the other hand.

This political engineering system is not common to Nigeria, for example in Tanzania, the political Act of 1992 requires that parties be national in nature, the same thing in Ghana, Indonesia, and Turkey etc. Perhaps one can say here that the success of this system in the aforementioned countries informed its adoption in Nigeria, thus bringing it to reality that the presence of ethnic political parties can engender ethnic conflict which is detrimental to national/ethnic integration as well as socio-political progress. The argument is that ethnic cleavages in Nigeria is a serious issue that need to be creatively tackled as Nigeria is yet to recover from the socio-economic and political trauma of 1967-1970 civil war. The suggestion here is that from the experience of the First Republic, the interplay of party alliances along ethnic line must of necessity not be overlooked as it is dangerous to achieving desired national unity.

Much as challenging as ethnic group is in a pluralistic society so also is its relevance in the building of a conflict free multi-ethnic society hence the importance of the instrument of party system as a means of bridging ethnic cleavages in Nigeria. Constitutionally, ethnic party politics is not allowed thus emphasizing the fact that the institutionalization of multi-party system in Nigeria polity is a means to achieving ethnic integration, the result of which is going to be a productive ethnic relation.

Nigeria is not the only multi-ethnic state in the world, that is to say ethnicity is not peculiar to Nigeria. The capacity to manage ethnic conflicts depends crucially on the nature of institutions adopted as well as the democratic nature of the political parties and how effective they are to manage conflicts. This is because ethnic tension exists independently of the so called ethno-political apologists; they do not create mutual suspicion and distrust but only exploit it through presentation of socio-political issues of influence and distribution from where they manipulate ethnicity for their own political gains thus making ethnicity a factor that has continued to play a pivotal role in socio-political and economic development of Nigeria till date.

## **Conclusion**

As stated above ethnic conflict management is not static but a continuous process. Thinking about ethnic conflict management in Nigeria political system, it weigh the evidence that political institutions essentially reflect the basic features of Nigeria society against the fact that these institutions shape political outcomes in many ways. One of the most important mechanisms to reduce the conflicts between ethnic groups – in Nigeria – and to

promote national integration is the establishment of national political party (Wallerstein, 1965). But where political parties exacerbate ethnic political participation there is bound to be conflict of interest. It is necessary to point out here that if ethnic groups find it difficult to appeal to ethnic identities in order for them to gain socio-political and economic recognition through their leaders; they will definitely find other ways to achieve their goals.

What the above means is that a socio-political balance needs to be struck between the various ethnic groups that make up the country. To achieve this there is need to de-emphasize the importance of ethnicity in the polity. In essence nationally oriented socio-political institutions will no doubt offer a frame work for inter-ethnic relations, accommodation which will prevent ethnic conflict but promote socio-political stability of the country. Therefore it is possible to draw a line that ethnic conflict management should be seen as a continuous process, that is to say there is no final socio-political solution to managing ethnic conflict in an ethnically divided society. Lake and Rotchild (1996) opines that it does not matter how well ethnicity is managed in a multi-ethnic society, there will always be potentials for conflicts over the allocation of socio-political and economic resources. Effectively, managing ethnic conflict should be seen as in the light of diffusing the flames of ethnic conflict potentialities which can erupt as a result of mutual fear of domination and suspicion of which the adoption of multi-party democracy is significant to allay.

One significant fact that needs to be pointed out here is that the functionality of socio-political system in a pluralistic state depends on the ability of the administrative system to identify the strengths and the weaknesses inherent in each ethnic group, a systemic socio-political solution that can be exploited to better the lots of the country's socio-political development on one hand. On the other hand the country's socio-political and economic strength arguably can only come from the unity of its ethnic groups and the fact that the differences in the ethnic groups if utilized can make the country a great, peaceful and a developed nation. The only means through which this can be identified is by allowing adequate representation of every ethnic group in governance, hence the adoption of multi-party democracy.

Without any point of contradiction the central determinant of the quality of ethnic conflict management mechanism in Nigeria hinges on the institution that guarantee that the policies and laws created by the government will have a reasonable fit with the fundamental interest of every ethnic group.

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