Strategies for [Re]Building State Capacity to Manage Ethnic and Religious Conflict in Nigeria

by

Chris, M.A. Kwaja
Centre For Conflict Management and Peace Studies
University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria
Kwajaamc@Yahoo.Com

When ethnic and religious leaders preach reconciliation without having unequivocally committed themselves to struggle on the side of the oppressed for justice, they are caught straddling a pseudo-neutrality made of nothing but thin air (Wink, 1997:22) [emphasis added].

Abstract

Despite strong optimism that the enthronement of democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999 would avert or contain ethnic and religious conflicts, the country has witnessed high level ethnic and religious violence with devastating consequences. This paper examines ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria in terms of its causes and impacts from 1999 to date. It argues that the weakness of the state has impacted significantly on the management of ethnic and religious conflicts in view of the fact that the state has increasingly become less responsive to the security needs of its citizens. The paper contends further that the challenge of managing ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria lies squarely in rebuilding state capacity for the effective and efficient management of diversities along ethnic and religious fault-lines. In the final analysis, the paper provides some recommendations in terms of how to fast-track efforts towards peace, security and stability in the Nigerian state.

Key Words: Nigeria, State, Ethnic, Religion, Conflict, Pluralism.

Introduction

Nigeria is clearly a prototype state in accommodating ethnic and religious fault-lines. With a population of 140 million and over 250 ethno-linguistic groups, it is the only country with a population of half Christians and half Muslims (Paden, 2008:6). Since 1999, violent conflicts have become a method of collective action by the diverse ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. In the last ten years, the loss of human lives and the destruction of properties is immense and the cost is beyond measurement.

The incentive for ethnic and religious groups to approach the courts in cases of disputes is dependent on the remedies available, in terms of access to courts, the cost of judicial actions, and delay in getting court judgments and individuals' confidence in the judiciary as an impartial arbiter. Where legal institutions are weak or there is open complicity between the judges and a particular group against another group, the latter may turn to informal means of seeking redress. Thus conflict rather than co-operation or bargaining has emerged as a 'rational', though incredible method of interactions between or amongst ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. It is also the case, however, that failure to build adequate state capacity – to help put in place or resuscitate effective public institutions for law and order and the provision of social services – can also doom peace-building efforts in Nigeria.

Some of the ethno-religious conflicts that have captured national and international attention in the last ten years (1999 to 2009) in Nigeria include; the Tiv vs Jukun, Jukun vs Kuteb, Chamba vs Kuteb in Tararba State, Ogoni vs Andon in Rivers State, the Sharia crisis in Kaduna State, the Tiv vs other ethnic groups in Azara of Nasarawa State in 2001, the Hausa/Fulani vs the Anaguta, Afizere and Berom in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State in 2001, the Tarok vs Hausa/Fulani in Wase Local Government Area in 2004, the Goemai vs the Hausa/Fulani in Shendam Local government Area of Plateau State in 2002, the religious violence of Maidiguri, Borno State in 2005, the Quan vs Pan in Quan'Pan Local Government Area of Plateau State in 2006, the Hausa/Fulani vs the Anaguta, Afizere and Berom in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State in 2008, and the 'Boko Haram' violence that engulfed Borno, Yobe, Bauchi and Kano states in July, 2009 respectively.

Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in Nigeria from 1999 to 2008: An Overview of some of the Causes

While the roots of ethnic and religious conflicts have been linked to colonialism and the cold war (Machava, 2008:2), other scholars argue that ethnic and religious conflicts are rooted in bad governance, politicization of ethnic and religious identities, the competition and conflict for political power by the ethnic and religious communities respectively (Anarfi, 2004; Conversi, 1999). Takaya (1992:112) identified centrifugal factors that gave rise to the politicization of ethnic and religious identities in Nigeria, which include;

(i)   the existence of two or more ethnic and religious groups with numerical strengths that can significantly affect the outcome and direction of a democratic political process;

(ii)   the instrumentalisation of ethnicity and religion as legitimizing tool of hegemony in instances when the interests of the political class are under threat;

(iii)   when there is an ascendant radical thinking within a politically significant ethnic or religious group capable of upstaging hegemony;

(iv)   when the society is characterized by political, social or economic hardships that can cause alliances along ethnic and religious fault-lines.

Institutional fragility of the institutions of the state in terms of their ability and capacity to manage diversity, corruption, rising inequality between the rich and poor, gross violation of human rights, environmental degradation, contestations over land, have been some of the underlining causes of violent conflicts in Nigeria since the enthronement of democratic rule in 1999. All these are further compounded largely due to the failure of the Nigeria state to live up to its primary responsibility of providing security and welfare for its citizens. Thus, as a consequence of all these, the state is consumed by internal violence, its credibility and legitimacy are being questioned by the citizens (Rotberg, 2004:1). The reality of the situation is that since the citizens have lost confidence in the capacity of the state to both manage ethnic and religious diversity on one hand, and provide protection for them on another hand, they have resort to alternative sources of security, which are currently being provided by informal or private security companies.

How Ethnic and Religious Conflicts Threaten the Consolidation of Democracy

One of the claims for the enthronement of democracy as well as democratic consolidation in Nigeria lies in the fact that as a centripetal force, democracy is the only institutional arrangement that can guarantee the peaceful resolution or management of ethnic and religious conflicts (Olayode, 2007:134). For Ibrahim (2000:69), ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are linked to citizenship within the context of identity, which is rooted in the politics of inclusion or exclusion. These are tied to claims and counter-claims over identity as a basis for determining who is excluded or included from decision making as well as access to opportunities under the 'we' versus 'them' cliché (Kwaja, 2008:83). In this sense, durable peace in which the mutual co-existence of all religious and ethnic groups can only be achieved when democracy is deepened (Hegre, et.al, 2001:15). As rightly argued by the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflicts (1997:100):

In many multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, the procedures of majoritarian democracy have proven effective for managing group relations and maintaining social cohesion. However, in societies with deep ethnic and religious divisions and little experience with democratic government and the rule of law, strict majoritarian democracy can be self-defeating. Where ethnic and religious identities are strong and national identity weak, the population may vote largely along ethnic or religious lines. Domination by one ethnic or religious group(s) can lead to a tyranny of the majority [emphasis added].

Francis (2006:76) argued that:

…contested identities (along ethnic and religious fault-lines), have dominated the literature on the analysis of conflict and have come to represent the stereotypical images of Africa. Identity constitutes, but is not limited to, the following; race, ethnicity, religion, language, nationalism and cultural/common heritage. Political ethnicity, religious fundamentalism and virulent nationalism have led to the emergence of assertive identity politics with the capacity to mobilize public support for its cause… as well as the capacity to instigate violent conflicts as witnessed in Nigeria since the since the inception of the fourth republic from May 1999 to April 2007 (Francis, 2006:76) [emphasis added].

Babangida (2002:11) also contendes that consequences of ethnic and religious conflicts consist of the following; *"waste of enormous human and material resources in ethnically and religiously inspired violent encounters, clashes and even battles, threats to security of lives and properties, the heightening of the fragility of the economy and political process"*

Thus, the ethnic and religious minority groups that feel treated as second class citizens by the three major ethnic groups (Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo) are forced to adopt both constitutional and extra-constitutional means to challenge the hegemony of these three groups. The challenge for most minority groups in Nigeria is that they are permanent minorities and the majority groups a permanent majority, which has serious implications for inter-ethnic and religious relations among the diverse ethnic and religious identities in Nigeria. In this sense, the values of cooperation, consensus and compromise would be undermined and this has posed an enormous challenge for the task of nation building in view of the fact that they are all forced to co-exist in an environment of mutual mis-trust, apathy and suspicion.

Matlosa (2006:189) contendes that the extent to which electoral democracy adds value to the constructive management of conflicts largely depends on three critical factors:

(i)   the nature of the electoral system in terms of how liberal the political space is;
(ii)   an accommodative political culture;
(iii)   the commitment of the parties in the political system to peace and stability.

In explaining the effects of conflicts, Colier (2007) defines conflict as a 'trap' that; keeps the world's poorest countries poor and confines the world's 'bottom billion' people to a life of poverty in stagnation or shrinking economies. This shows that the Nigerian state has lost enormous human and material resources that are critical to national development as a result of ethnic and religious violence.

Does the State Possess the Capacity to Manage Ethnic and Religious Conflicts?

The maintenance of peace and security is critical to the responsibility of the state. Thus, Section 14 (1) of the Nigerian constitution states that; *"the security and welfare of the people shall be a primary purpose of government"* [1]. The emerging consensus on the study of ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria emphasizes the role of the state as the both the regulator of competition among the diverse ethnic groups as well as the guarantor of security (Osaghae, 2007:171). Regrettably, the post-colonial Nigerian state has become so entangled in ethnic and religious issues to the extent that its neutrality and legitimacy has also become suspect. In the light of the foregoing, certain probing question become germane: Whose interest does the state seek to protect in terms of access and opportunities? Which of the ethnic or religious interests does the state seek to protect or obstruct? Does the state possess the capacity to manage ethnic and religious conflicts? How can such capacity be transformed with the aim of guaranteeing durable peace, security and stability? The question of how to reconcile the contradictory role of the diverse ethnic and religious groups is central to our analysis of the capacity of the state to manage ethnic and religious conflicts.

The inability of the state to effectively perform its core functions of providing or guaranteeing security for the people as well as act as regulator has led to a weakening of its bargaining strength and capacity in relation to the ethnic and religious groups in society, which poses a serious challenge for national security. In this light, loyalty to ethnic or religious cleavages is being placed far and above the state, in view of the fact that people prefer to be seen and described based on the ethnic or religious groups they belong rather than their status as citizens of Nigeria.

Notwithstanding the above challenges, the Nigerian state has, to a large extent, managed ethnic and religious pluralism through the following ways:

(i)   in the design and report of population census, questions of religious or ethnic identity were downplayed;

(ii)   the promotion of inter-faith cooperation through the setting up of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), which consists of clerics from both Christian and Muslim leaders. At present, NIREC is co-chaired by Arch-Bishop John Oneiykan and the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar III;

(iii)   the establishment of the Federal Character Commission (FCC) in the Nigerian constitution, so as to ensure inclusivity of all the state of the federation in appointments, admission and promotion among others;

(iv)   the application of the principle of the North –South power sharing arrangement. For instance, if the President comes from the North, the Vice President would no doubt come from the South and vice versa; and

(v)   emphasis on the non-registration of political parties with ethnic or religious colourations so as not to heighten ethnic or religious apathy in the electoral process.

Furthermore, the Nigerian state has become increasingly engaged in the management of ethnic and religious conflicts through the use of maximum retaliatory measure to respond to emergencies as witnessed in Zaki-Biam, in Benue State, as well as other non-coercive means such as treaties as witnessed in Kaduna and Plateau States, demobilizing and reintegrating combatants; designing and enforcing civil and criminal legal systems; training police in the area of community policing, reconstructing and operating public utilities as well as the reconstruction of education and health systems. In a sense, ethnicity and religion as manifestations of conflicts that are rooted in the crisis of identities (Egwu, 2001:5), provides a vehicle for organization and mobilization across ethnic and religious fault-lines in the struggle for space, power and resources as a form of open resistance to the brutality and the coercive nature of the state

Despite efforts put in place by the state to contain or resolve tensions as reflected above, the continuing ethnic and religious conflicts witnessed in the country in the last ten years, raises serious questions about the effectiveness and efficiency of the state and its institutions in managing pluralism. As Jinadu (2007:11) rightly observes about the nature and character of the state:

...the state and its institutions are ethnicised and immersed in clientelist ethnic and religious networks and in ethnic/religious based struggle to implant and entrench ethnic or religious 'gatekeepers' in critical, key positions in the bureaucracy and educational institutions, and in other public sector institutions and even in the private sector, which in many African countries relies heavily on the public sector.

The consequences of ethnic and religious conflicts since the enthronement of democratic rule in 1999 is that the state has proven incapacitated as a result of ethnic pressures and demands which has severe implications in terms of its ability to manage ethnic and religious contradictions in the political system. This also exposes its lack of autonomy and ability to stand above society as a neutral agency.

The State and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: What Needs to be Done?

The state is very critical to the construction or deconstruction of conflicts in society. It has also been argued that the state system in Nigeria provides us with an arena for the definition of structures, identity, goals and interests, which all groups seek to pursue as well as achieve, to their own advantages at the expense of other groups On the role of the state in averting or managing conflict in human society, Ibrahim (1999:94) captures the consequences thus;

The legitimacy of the modern state is linked to its capacity to present itself as a provider of public goods and, more important, a neutral arbiter that guarantees the security of all sections of the society. When the state is generally perceived as serving the particularistic interest of one group, it starts losing its legitimacy and. Indeed, its authority. As state capacity declines, fear of the other rises and people resort to other levels of solidarity-religious, ethnic and regional-in search of security.

In order to prevent both state failure and ensure lasting peace, security and stability in Nigeria, the following needs to be done:

(i)   state and institution building, which should be premised on the provision of basic security, effective and legitimate public and civil society institutions, with adequate accountability safeguards, are essential to meet the on-going public safety and social/economic welfare needs necessary to ensure public confidence in any system of governance is a central goal of conflict management and peacebuilding that should be put in place and strengthened;

(ii)   Ensure that political, social and economic development strategies are integral parts of a well-focused approach to conflict prevention, management and peacebuilding efforts. In this sense, immediate attention also needs to be paid to laying the foundations for durable peace, security, stability and development;

(iii)   Since democracy guarantees and recognizes ethnic and religious pluralism, efforts should be made by the state and its institution to ensure the safeguarding of inclusivity in the task of nation building, equitable political representation, social justice, mutual respect and tolerance among the diverse groups that make up the state;

(iv)   The continued and sustained analysis and mapping of conflict flashpoints (conflict prone or proof areas) as well as early warning signs demands the highest priority of the state and other non-state actors. This would no doubt help in containing or managing conflicts with the aim of averting or reducing conflicts to the barest minimum;

(v)   Efforts towards the secularization of the state from religion should be pursued vigorously. This would no doubt help to regain the credibility and legitimacy of the state. Thus, constitutional reform should deal with such issues as the secularity of the state, minority rights, equality of rights, duties and obligations of the citizens to the state and vice versa;

(vi)   Efforts should be made by the government and other stakeholders to strengthen state institutions so as to ensure that the existence of majority or minority ethnic and religious groups are not threatened by exclusion in terms of access to power, space and resources;

(vii)   Ethnic and religious conflicts are not avoidable but can be prevented. This requires, however, that potential sources of conflicts, which threatens national cohesion need to be identified and analyzed with a view to their early resolution, and concrete preventive steps taken to forestall armed confrontation or violence.

Concluding Remarks

Ethnic and religious identities in themselves do not create conflicts; it is the politicization of these identities. Such identities become problematic when access to opportunities in the political system in terms of power and resources are dependent on membership of a particular ethnic or religious group, as well as when the state is relatively weak in terms of its capacity to protect its citizens and provide for their basic needs. The Nigerian experience as it relates to ethnic and religious conflicts has become a major phenomenon as politics is defined along ethnic and religious fault-lines.

Drawing from our analysis of the role of the state and its institutions in the management of ethnic and religious diversity in Nigeria, it is obvious that the interests and goals that all the groups pursue are rooted in the quest for access to power and opportunities via patronage and clientelism, which can only be gotten through the use of the machineries of the state and in the process the privatization of violence as well as the manipulation and mobilization of ethnic and religious sentiments are often being used by the political elites. In the final analysis, genuine efforts should be made to focus on strengthening institutions rather than individuals. This is in line with the clarion call by the United States President, Barak Obama during his address to the Ghanaian Parliamentarians that; 'Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions.'[2]

Notes

1. See the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.
2. See text of President Barak Obama's speech in Ghana on 11th July, 2009.

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