Conflicts and Strategies for Conflict Management in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Conflict is a universal phenomenon and occurs at every level of society. In Nigeria, conflicts have been on for decades and efforts by the government to resolve these have not been a complete success. This work examines the concept of conflict, nature and causes of conflicts in Nigeria and the strategies for effectively managing and resolving conflicts in the country.

KEY WORDS: Conflicts, crises, conflict management, conflict resolution

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is one of Africa’s largest countries stretching across 923,768.64 square km. It lies within the tropics on the western coast of Africa, bothering Benin, Niger and Cameroon. The country’s 800 km coastline is lettered with natural harbours and sandy beaches. Nigeria is the most populous black nation in Africa with over 160 million people living in the country. According to estimates, one in every five African is a Nigerian. Because of its size, human and economic potential, Nigeria is often looked upon for leadership in black Africa (Nigeria Today 2008; Okafor 1997). The country’s population is split into 250 ethnic groups the largest being the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. It is made of predominantly Muslims in the North and Christians in the South with a small minority practicing traditional religion. Over 120 languages are spoken in the country. These diverse groups with different languages, culture and political practices were brought together during the amalgamation of 1914 to form one nation when Lord Frederick Lugard and the Colonial Office in London amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorate during British rule. In 1946, the country was divided into three regions of East, West and North for administrative purposes but this marked the beginning of political division based on tribal lines. Since then, Nigeria has been characterized by political, ethnic and religious crises which have not only marred her potentials for greatness but brought her once flourishing economy to ruins. This paper begins with a conceptualization of conflict followed by an examination of the nature of crises in Nigeria and their causes. Strategies for effective management of crises are suggested and conclusions drawn.

THE CONCEPT OF CONFLICT

Conflict is a feature of every society. It may take the form of disputes, disagreements, quarrels, struggles, fights and wars between individuals, groups and countries. It may sometimes be the result of struggle over scarce resources, disagreements or the need to assert oneself. Karl Marx believes it is a basic structural condition of society and an inherent part of human relations. He also viewed it as a natural phenomenon which contributes to social evolution (Ajodo 2011). Chaturvedi (2006) sees it as ‘opposition or competition between two or more forces, arising either from the pursuit of incomparable goals or a clash of rival opinions.’ Coser (1956) on his part views it ‘as a struggle over scarce resources that are not regulated by shared rules; it may include attempts to neutralize, eliminate, or destroy one’s rival.’ To Alamika (2000), ‘it is a product of antagonistic interest between two or more opposing forces or groups within the society and may manifest itself on a continuum range from early warning signals to violent crises or wars.’ Agha (2004), believes ‘it arises when actors or groups are dissatisfied with existing social conditions and thus seek the same goal or mutually incompatible goals.’ When conflict takes place within a group, it has a divisive effect which could result in disunity, destruction of the group or significant change in internal relationships (Brinkerhoff & White 1988).

THE NATURE OF CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Conflict in Nigeria takes the form of Political, ethnic and religious crises.

Political Crises

The Kano Riot of 1953 was the first major political crisis in Nigeria. The riot was the result of the sensitization campaign on the issue of self-government in 1956, by Southern delegates led by Chief
S.L Akintola a member of Action Group. This started when Chief Anthony Enahoro a member of the Action Group (AG) in the House of Representative tabled a motion for self-government but Sir Ahmadu Bello the leader of the Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC) who felt Nigeria was not ripe for self-government countered the motion and replaced the year 1956 with “as soon as Practicable”. Another Northern member in the House moved the motion for an adjournment, a step which infuriated the AG and NCNC members in the House who walked out angrily. When Northern delegated left the House, they met a hostile Lagos crowd which booed and jeered at them. The AG and NCNC delegation led by Chief Akintola decided to go an enlightenment campaign on the need for self-government to the North and were attacked in the process. The conflict which lasted for four days led to the death of thirty-six people and two hundred and forty-one wounded (Ojie and Ewhrudjakpor 2009).

Another major crisis which threatened the corporate existence of and unity of the country was the Action Group crisis of 1962 between Chief Obafemi Awolowo who was the leader of the AG and Chief S.L Akintola his deputy party leader. Differences in opinion among others contributed to the crisis which was one of the remote causes of the military coup of January 15, 1966.

During this period also, there was a Census crisis in 1962 which was the result of the alleged falsification of figures by the Eastern region which sought to control the House of Representatives in Lagos and break Northern dominance. A new census conducted in November and February 1963 and 1964 respectively with the result showing the North had the highest figures was rejected by many Southern students, lecturers and Politicians who violently protested it. The result of the crisis that followed was near collapse of the country. The Federal Election and Western Nigerian crises of 1964 and 1965 which centered around regional politics in which United Progressive Grand Alliance (comprising of NCNC and AG) and Nigerian National Alliance (comprising of NPC and NNDP), UPGA is south dominated while NNA is north dominated also contributed in no small measure in threatening the stability of the nation. These crises were some of the remote causes of coups and Military intervention in Nigerian politics in 1966. The first coup which took place on January 15, 1966 led to the death of Western and Northerner leaders among which were S.L Akintola, Sir Tafawa Balewa and Sir Ahmadu Bello. This coup led to the enthronement of a military leader in the person of LT. Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi. His effort to establish the Federal structure triggered tensions which culminated in the counter-coup of July, 1966 which led to the assassination of Aguiyi Ironsi and the killing of many Igbo in the north. As a result, many of them returned home to the East. During period, there was a face-off between the Military Governor of Eastern Region, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu who refused to recognize Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon as Head of State. Ojukwu felt Gowon was not qualified to succeed Aguiyi Ironsi and said he would have preferred Brigadier Ogundipe. With the division of four regions into 12 States in 1967 by Gowon, Ojukwu declared an independent state of the Republic of Biafra. The civil war which lasted for thirty months ensued led to the loss of inestimable lives and property and political instability.

Another political crisis of note was the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election by the Babangida administration. The election which was said to be the freest and fairest conducted since independence was contested by two presidential candidates; Chief M.K.O Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Alhaji Bashir Tofa , of the National Republican Convention (NRC). The election was alleged to have been won by Chief M.K.O Abiola but in a bid to extend his stay, the incumbent, Babangida annulled the results and suspended the National Electoral Commission (NEC) on the ground of administrative complications. The annulment led to ethnic tensions particularly in the South-Western part of the country which felt it was an attempt to forestall change from the North. Internal and external pressured compelled General Babangida to institute an Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan. On August 26, 1993, he formerly handed over the government to the latter. The government was later declared as an illegal regime by a Federal High Court in Lagos and was eventually overthrown in bloodless coup in November, 1993 by General Sani Abacha who was the Defence Minister (Anifowose and Enemuo 2000).

Niger Delta crisis in the South-South region of the country between Niger Delta militants and Multinational Oil Companies over environmental pollutions and the need for resource control has led to
the death of many with attendant destruction of property and loss of money. A feature of this crisis is hostage taking of foreigners which has adversely affected the country’s image.

Ethnic Conflicts

After fifty-two year of independence, Nigeria continues to be afflicted by ethnic crises. The root of ethnic cleavages could be traced to 1946 when the country was divided into three regions namely Eastern, Western and Northern regions, an arrangement which favoured the three major ethnic groups. In spite of a restructuring of this arrangement and its replacement with the state structure, smaller ethnic groups referred to as ‘ethnic minorities’ continue to complain of domination and marginalization by the major groups. In pre-independence and post independence Nigeria, ethnic cleavages continue to manifest in Nigeria’s political life. This cleavage has resulted in numerous crises in the country. From Ife/Modakeke, Ogoni/ Andonis, Ijaw/Itsekeri, Ijaw/Ilajes, Tiv/Jukun, Aguleri/Umuneri, there is an ever-lengthening thread of ethnic crisis.

Religious Conflicts

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society and a secular state as stated in sections 38(1) and 10 of the Nigerian Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits the declaration of state religion (Sampson 2012). Religion however has always played an important role in Nigeria and in Nigerian politics. The country’s population is divided between the predominantly Muslims in the North and Christians in the South with a small minority practicing traditional religion. Religious crises in the country are usually between Muslims and Christians although it could sometimes be between Muslims and Muslims, Muslims and Traditional Worshippers and Traditional Worshipers and Christians. The growing incidence of religious conflict between Muslims and Christians remains one of the greatest challenges confronting the country today. This conflict which has become a common feature of the Nigerian polity has led most religious analysts to refer to it as a coup d’état while others describe it as a civilian coup (Udoidem 2007). According to Alabi (2010) ‘religious crises are the most recurring crises in Nigeria today. There is hardly any year of rest from religious crises in the country since 1977. At times, two or three crises happened within some years. Nigeria therefore can count up to fifty (50 ) religious crises from 1977 till date.’ Cases of religious crises abound in places like Maiduguri, Kano, Kaduna, Gombe, Yobe, Ilorin and recently in parts of the of Middle-Belt such as Jos and Kogi states. This is often characterized by burning of churches and killing of innocent citizens. Religious crises continue to undermine the security and unity of the country.

CAUSES OF CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Ethnicity: The ethnicity which has its root in the amalgamation of the country and lumping of different groups together without consideration for their differences and subsequent division of the country into three regions of Eastern, Western and Northern region in 1946 laid the foundation for ethnocentrism and conflicts in Nigeria. Before this time, the various ethnic and cultural groups that now make up the country existed as autonomous political entities, each having its own political systems, social and religious values separate from those of others. The division of the country into three regions in 1946 saw a reflection of political division based on tribal lines. Pre-independence political parties were formed along tribal lines; Northern People’s Congress, with mass followership from northerners dominated the North, Action Group with mainly Yoruba followers dominated the West while National Council of Nigerian and the Cameroon with mainly Igbo followers dominated the East. At independence some groups felt disadvantaged and sought to reverse this. This was one of the causes of the Census Crisis of 1962/63 and the first military coup of 1966 as an attempt was made by the Eastern Region to forestall the dominance of the sizeable North. The census crisis and attack on Ibos by Northerners were some of the remote causes of the Nigeria Civil War of 1967-1970 with a bid to secede by the Eastern Region under the leadership of Lt-Col Odumegwu Ojukwu.
Religion: Much of the conflicts in the country in recent times, have their roots in religion. This also has been traced to the amalgamation of 1914 which brought Christians, Muslims and Traditional Worshippers together. Adherent of the different religion are intolerant of one another and view one another with suspicion and every problem is given a religious interpretation further fuelling crises.

Capitalism: The capitalist economic system inherited at independence also caused difficulties creating high levels of competition, and with individual loyalty to the tribes being the order of the day, divisions became further drawn along ethnic lines. Rulers exploit this, often resorting to ethnic feeling to gain cheap support. Thus emerge the divide and rule strategy of the elite to keep the working class permanently divided and diverting their attention away from the real problem confronting them- an insensitive and irresponsive government. The ruling elite knowing the potentials of a working class, which cuts across ethnic affiliations exploit the issues of ethnicity to advantage and this is effective because a strong sense of nationalism or statehood has not yet been achieved (Storey, 1996).

Corruption: Report has it that 37% of Africa’s assets are held abroad. According to Fapohunda (2000) this is the highest figure for any region in the world and a product of corruption. Nigeria ranks as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. It is on record that more than $400 billion was stolen from the treasury by Nigeria's leaders between 1960 and 1999. This money could have been used to provide the basic needs of the people. When such needs are not met, the end result is conflict.

Poverty: Nigeria ranks as one of the poorest countries in the world despite its oil wealth. Most of the people live below poverty line. Conflict in the country is endemic in the poorest parts of the country like the South-South and the North. The ever increasing level of poverty typified by joblessness and frustration exacerbates conflicts. This explains why unemployed youths are often recruited in times of crises.

Population Explosion: There has been tremendous increase in the population of Nigeria with very little economic growth. This ever increasing population leads to scramble for scarce resources which in turn results in conflicts (Aku and Ujo 2011). The scramble becomes imperative when resources are not enough or inequitably distributed.

Faulty Electoral Processes: Faulty electoral processes and unwillingness of the incumbent government to relinquish power constitute another problem. Faulty electoral process is a situation whereby leaders emerge through manipulation and not through the electoral will of the people. In Nigeria, it is not the most popular candidate that wins an election but the wealthiest. Ability to rig elections through bribing of electoral officers, thugs and violence among others determine who wins. That is why we discover that it is often difficult in most cases for an incumbent to lose an election; they secure their mandate through hook or crook.

Volatile Climate and Environment: It is argued that conflict in Nigeria like most African countries is the result of volatile climate and elementary forces such as droughts and famine in its environment that have affected growth.

The Media: This is a contributory factor. Media reports have led to escalation of conflicts as a result of the manner such reports were made.

STRATEGIES FOR CURBING CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

The atmosphere of insecurity created during and after the crises disrupts productive activities and discourages local and international investments. Crises encourage political instability and undermine government’s legitimacy and ability to carry out its normal functions. The breakdown of law and order during the crises also undermine public safety. Furthermore, crises situations cause a great deal of human suffering, and leads to displacements and destruction of lives and property (Sanusi 1996).
Government’s efforts to manage conflicts have always been confrontational and coercive, involving the use of the police and military which often heightens such crises. Considering that a poorly handled crises could become destructive thereby hindering national peace and security, the following strategies are advocated.

The use of force in settling differences is discouraged. Dialogue should be embraced by all and parties involved in a crisis must be equally represented. Mediators on their part should be sincere and fair in making judgments; they should see their task as that of ending a conflict and must do all within their power to ensure this. Willingness to toe the line of peace on the part of the parties involved is imperative. In this regard, they must cooperate with mediators, be willing to make compromises if it becomes necessary and adhered to decisions arrived at (Alabi 2010).

Social amenities and infrastructural facilities should be provided. Government should create jobs in order to reduce the level of unemployment and poverty, which are breeding grounds for discontent, frustration and recourse to violence at the slightest provocation.

Peaceful co-operation, respect for universal basic rights, ethno-religious tolerance and the functioning of real democracy are should be emphasized.

People should be educated on the need to view one another as God’s unique creatures and not on the basis of ethnic or religious affiliations. The different ethnic groups in Nigeria should view their differences as a gift from God, not a tool of violence.

Collective peace should be encouraged. African elders such as politicians, economists, scholars, diplomats, church leaders, members of NGOs and elders in the village must be involved in the peace process (Kasomo 2010).

There is need for emphasis on being our brother’s keeper. Every Nigerian should make it a point of living peaceably with their neighbours and pursue peace at all cost.

Law enforcement agents should be constantly alert and a strong force and there is also need to create an effective collective National Security System that will act as deterrence against the persecutors of different ethnic groups.

CONCLUSION

Dating from the pre-independence period, Nigeria has been enmeshed in crises. These crises have their roots in the amalgamation of 1914 which brought people with different political system, culture and religion together. Since then, conflict in Nigeria continues to spread like wildfire with instability, violence, elusive peace becoming the order of the day. Many lives have been lost, thousands displaced and property worth billions of naira destroyed. Government’s confrontational and coercive approach in most cases has not yielded the fruit of peace. The ordinary Nigeria is confused and seeks solution to these conflicts. The solutions proffered in this study are not exhaustive but if they are implemented would go a long way to reduce conflicts and ensure the security of lives and properties of the ordinary Nigeria.

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