

Nigeria and the Threat of Disintegration: Issues in Proper Perspective

Didymus Tamen, PhD,
Director-General, Bureau of Archives,
Research and Documentation, Benue State.

Abstract

The human failures and energies released by great upsurges in history astonish and reverberate at their moment of impact but quickly varnish or become distorted in the dust of time. It would be right to say that Nigeria became effective by the promulgation of the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914 by Lord Frederick Lugard. This was how the seed of national insecurity was inadvertently laid, for the diversity which should have been the source of unity became constant source of political uprising and devastations. Our political elite instead of fostering our unity continue to stoke the fire of ethno-religious nationalism and imposition of harsh religious legal codes on so many unwilling and pretentiously willing people leading to agitation for a breakout of the country. This paper examines these aspect of the agitations. The paper evaluates the origin and echoes of Nigerian instability. The paper concludes that the socio-economic and political crisis being witnessed in Nigeria today is a reflection of the inherent disunity in the country following the amalgamation of the different cultural and linguistic nationalities of Nigeria into one geographical entity.

Introduction

We unfortunately live in one of the most violent nations on earth. Individuals and groups in different parts of the country own their private armies. Warlords have emerged in some states of the federation. Militias, comprising of heavily armed youths exist in parts of the country. There are threats of secession and disintegration of Nigeria by IPOB and MASSOB in the East resulting to Arewa youths issuing datelines for the Igbos to leave the North.

From the records, Nigeria is not new to crisis of state failure. After all, the conflicts which emerged from prebendal politics (Joseph: 1984), of the First Republic eventually led to the civil war (1967-70), during which million of lives were lost. Threats of national instability are rampant on the political scene, some of them being the logical manifestations of hegemonic and undemocratic actions of public

officers or occupants of the state apparatus. These crises and conflicts are exacerbated by the politics of impunity and anti-democratic temperament of the ruling elite, which make them sometimes impervious to public opinion.

Therefore, a failed state is a state which as a result of certain factors proves incapable of providing those social services, which a normal regime is expected to provide for its citizens. State collapse is an extreme case of state failure, where a regime in power because of certain political contradictions within the polity, becomes incapable of providing national security to all the territories within its jurisdiction. This may be as a result of armed political opposition or the disruptive activities of militia groups opposing a central authority.

An important point to be made about the nature and character of power struggles or wars in the African continent is that most of the conflicts are never ideological in nature. The struggles are waged essentially over the seizure and control of economic resources.

Origin and Echoes of Nigerian Instability

The socio-economic and political crisis being witnessed in Nigeria today is a reflection of the inherent disunity in the country. This disunity had its historical antecedent in the following socio political factors:-

The amalgamation of the different cultural and linguistic nationalities of Nigeria into one geographic entity called Nigeria. The conquered communities were different in race, language and in social and political organization. Emirates of northern Nigeria were Muslims. They had existed under the impact of Islamic culture for over six centuries and had little in common with the Yoruba and Ibo in the south. The political implication of this is the difficulty to find a means of binding them together to form a nation.

The massive different rate of social mobilization of the different components of Nigeria is another factor for Nigeria's political instability. The southerners were the first to be inducted into the Nigeria state, and being so, they embraced the tenets of western culture much earlier than northerners who were mobilized later. This was further compounded by the British policy of northernisation. In the south assimilation was total; they lived in the same streets mixed on all social occasions, and their children shared the same schools. While in the north, at the behest of the local rulers all southerners were herded into "*Sabon-Gari*". Schooling was segregated and two radically

different societies coexisted without any attempt by the British to urge gradual integration (Anifowose, 1978).

Furthermore, the shielding of the northerners from the modernizing effects of western culture created lapses in the political development of the country. In fact, in 1920, Sir Hugh Clifford, the colonial Governor of the country at the time, made it abundantly clear that his administration would seek to secure to each separate people the right to maintain its identity, its individuality and its nationality. This discouragement was reflected structurally by the administrative system of indirect rule and regionalization. Indeed, the genesis of Nigerian political instability was due to the imbalance in the structure of the Nigeria federation. The creation of the three regions of the North, East, and West in Nigeria in 1939 arrested the national solidarity of Nigerians.

The Islamic religion constituted a barrier to the penetration of Christian evangelism and this intensified the slow mobilization process of northerners into the political community of Nigeria. By contrast, the South invaded by missionaries, the precursors of mass education soon developed an avid thirst for education in all its forms. The missionaries' efforts to penetrate the north were effectively stopped by Lord Lugard at the request of the Emirs when he pledged to discourage Christian apostolic work north of Kabba line. According to Fafunwa (1974), by 1947, the total Secondary School enrolment in the North was just 2.5 percent of the total in the country; while as late as 1951, the 16 million people of the North had produced only one person with a full university degree. Worst still, by 1960, the north with over half of Nigeria's 50 million population had 41 secondary schools as against the South's 842 (Forsyth, 1969).

Lack of effective Social mobilization which restricted social interactions of Nigerians created a climate of fear and suspicions. Therefore, Samuel Huntington in his book, *Political Order in Changing Societies* pointed out that "two groups which sees each other only as arch enemies cannot form the basis of political community". This situation was further compounded by the divisive language of the political elite of Nigeria. For example, in 1947, A.T. Balewa quoted in Crowder (1948), pointed out that, if the British left Nigeria, the northerners will dip their Koran into the Atlantic Ocean. In his book, *Path to Nigerian Freedom* (1947), Chief Awolowo pointed out that Nigeria is not a nation but a mere geographical expression. And Azikiwe boasted that, God has sent the son of an Ibo man to free the sons of Africa from political bondage.

Primordial loyalties of culture sections were intensified by the realization that their sections were now in competition with others within our common political system. In fact, the British colonial administration encouraged communal sentiments among Nigerians. It seized every available opportunity to spread the myth and propaganda that Nigerians were separated from one another by great distance, by difference of history and traditions, and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political and social barriers.

Thus the mobilization of the various ethnicities not towards some transcending national loyalty but rather towards the identification with their immediate cultural sections led to the formation of three major political parties to enhance regional political aspiration. The resultant effect was that the political outlook of Nigeria became consistently geared towards the articulation and promotion of their ethnic interests.

Be that as it may, political repression, elitist and undemocratic governance style of leadership was carried over from colonialism to independence, the agitations for good governance and economic growth did not end with independence. The agitation continued into the event the Nigerian state has experienced that was its closest to self implosion - the civil war of 1967-1970. However, the end of civil war did not solve the fundamental question of how to create and sustain economic development and enthrone a democratic and accountable system of governance to succor the citizens in their quest for individual, regional and national pride. Instead of instituting a viable democratic culture, national leaders, according to Kalu (2015), left the citizens legacies of persistent transitions without transformation as exemplified in erratic and, at times, nonexistent power supplies, roads in despair, devalued currency, generation of hopeless and unemployable youths, a poor and unsustainable health care system and a action where sycophancy seems to have become the only currency for individual relevance.

In addition to the prolonged psychological and physical brutalization by selfimposed military autocracies and their civilian praise singers the absence of strong institutional political structures continues to pave way for ordinary citizens to turn to themselves on each other without either traditional or informed institutional constraints, leaving conflicts to spiral out of control in the Niger Delta, Plateau, Bauchi, Borno, Kano, Taraba, Benue, Nasarawa, Kaduna, Ebonyi, Anambra, and Lagos states among others. The unresponsiveness of government to the agitations and the general absence of security in many parts of the country have spawned

organized ethnic, religious and resource based, anti-government approaches to demand attention to each groups specific needs.

In the light of the forgoing, if colonialism by its nature and character could not build an ideological liberal culture within the context of liberal constitutionalism in Nigeria, should that fact effectively prevent Nigerians after 59 years from building such a system of governance for Nigerians?

History and Threat of Nigeria's Disintegration

There is no country in the world that does not face the risk of break up and decomposition. Anthropologist tells that the Somali are the most pure "tribe" in the world, all of whom are descendants of one line and yet it is one of the most divided nations in the world today. What we know from history is that nations survive not because they are composed of the same group but because they create conditions that favor staying together.

Nigeria is confronting with a number of critical political challenges that are raising serious questions about its identity and survival as a democratic federal republic. First, there is a significant rise and expansion of sectarian conflicts, both ethnic and religious. The sustained crisis provoked by the Boko Haram insurgency has been particularly unsettling for the country. The phenomenon of rural banditry related to cattle rustling and violent conflict between pastoralist and farmers have virtually ended the "pax Nigeria" established by the British between 1903 and 1915 in rural Nigeria (Ibrahim, 2017). Increasingly, people are feeling threatened about killings in their homelands.

As rural peace recedes, the federal character politics in the country has been used to discriminate against millions of citizen labeled as settlers in most parts of the country. Violence has repeatedly been the outcome of conflict between "settlers and indigenes" in various parts of the country. More Nigerians live in areas where they are not considered indigenes, thus, the feeling of exclusion is spreading.

Nonetheless, we should not panic too much about current political developments. Nigeria was amalgamated into a single political community in 1914 for economic reasons. That act of 1914 had limited objectives. In 1939, regional autonomy was reinforced with the division of the country into three regions. Since then, Nigerian politics has had a very strong ethno-regional character and the political elites have always sought to exploit it for their political ends. At every point when the political classes felt their interests were at stake, they have not hesitated to play the trump card of secession.

It should be recalled that in the 1950s, virtually all Nigerian parties saw themselves as political expressions of ethno-regional associations with the Action Group (AG) in the west evolving from the Yoruba cultural association – *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*; the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) emerging from the Northern cultural association, *Jamiyar Mutanen Arewa*, and the National Congress of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), which started as a national party, but later narrowed its social base to a cultural association of the Igbo State Union.

These ethno-regional elite blocs struggled against each other in seeking to configure federalism to their advantage often using the secession threat. It was the Sardauna of Sokoto who first referred to the amalgamation of the Nigerian provinces as "the mistake of 1914". That was in the early 1950s, when he flagged the secession banner, because he felt that southern politicians were unwilling to understand the attitudes of the northern elite towards independence. The Sardauna's position was that the northern elite would not rush towards independence if it meant replacing European domination with southern domination (Ibrahim, 2017).

In the 1950 Ibadan Constitutional Conference to review the Richard's Constitution, a representation ratio of 44:33:33 for the North, West and East was proposed. Northern politicians felt threatened by this arrangement and the then Emir of Zaria articulated their position clearly- the North must have 50 percent of the seats or secede from the country. In May 1953, after Northern politicians had been ridiculed in Lagos for opposing the AG motion for Self-Government in 1956, the Northern House of Assembly and the Northern House of Chiefs met and passed an eight – point's resolution that amounted to a call for confederation and separation.

In the 1954 Lagos Constitutional Conference, it was the turn of the AG to demand that a secession clause be inserted in the constitution. The move was opposed by the NPC and NCNC. In 1964, following the census and election crises, southern politicians were getting disenchanted with their future in Nigeria. Michael Okpara, the Premier of the Eastern Region directly threatened in December 1964 that the East would secede. Okpara went ahead to established a committee under the Attorney-General to work out the modalities for a declaration of secession by Eastern Nigeria. When Ojukwu finally decided to embark on the course of secession three years later, he had an already made plan waiting for him.

The transition from threats to an actual attempt to secession first emerged from the Niger Delta. On 23rd February, 1966, Isaac Boro

decided that he was not ready to live in Nigeria that was ruled by Igbos. He therefore declared the Independence of the Niger Delta Peoples' Republic following the first coup and the establishment of the Ironsi regime. Boro had become very disturbed about perceived Igbo domination of Eastern Minorities since his days as a student activist at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His Republic lasted for only twelve day, the time it took the police to round up his rag-tag army of 159 volunteers. Isaac Boro and two of his colleagues were charged for treason in March and condemned to death in June 1966. Boro was eventually released at the onset of the Nigerian civil war when he joined the federal side and was killed in battle in 1968, fighting for the liberation of Rivers State from Biafra, on the platform of the Federal Government of Nigeria.

The Nigeria civil war of 1967-1970 was of course the most serious threat to the existence of Nigeria as a country and it led to the loss of over a million lives. In my view, the present problems confronting the polity are to some extent less intense than the crises engendered by the census, election and coup d'états of the 1960s. The second most intense period of political crisis followed the annulment of the June 12th 1993 presidential election and the determination of the Abacha dictatorship to continue in power as the sole candidate for the five "leprous" political parties. To address the concern, General Abacha had announced in his 1995 independence address the introduction of a modified presidential system in which six key executive and legislative offices will be zoned and rotated between six identifiable geographical groupings; North-West, North-East, Middle-Belt, East-Central, South-West and Southern-Minorities. However, Abacha died and thus ended his transition.

Therefore, the reality of Nigerian politics is that fear of domination of one zone over the others played a central role in convincing politicians of the necessity of a federal solution. The First Republic, which operated essentially as an equilibrium of regional tyrannies was however characterized by the domination of each region by a majority ethnic group and the repression of regional minorities. Indeed, the central problem that has been generating the steady rise of ethno-regional tensions and conflicts has been the supplanting of Nigeria's federal transition by a virtual Jacobin unitary state that emerged under a long period of military rule. It's for this reason that I believe we should continue the tradition of the search for restructuring. Following that path might reveal a surprising outcome.

A Strong Case against Nigerian's Break-up

Many Nigerians think our country is unworkable because it was "forced" into being by the British colonialists. This view has no basis in the history and sociology of nationbuilding. There is no country in history whose formation was the consequence of a democratic consensus. Historically, most nations were formed by conquest, expansionist wars, and forceful cooptation and not by consensus.

India, a post-colonial country like ours, has a lot more diversity than Nigeria has. It has over 800 languages, severally mutually irreconcilable religions, a huge landmass that is several times the size of Nigeria; and a human population that is more than that of the entire African continent combined. Yet, it is one country, and it was formed in fairly the same way as Nigeria was formed. Most of the groups that make up present day India were independent ethnic groupings. But, you don't hear Indians interminably whining about the unnaturalness of their nation, or about the need to "renegotiate" the basis of their existence. In any case, there is no evidence that mono-ethnic nations thrive better than ethnically diverse nations.

One supreme illustration that explodes the myth of the "unnaturalness and invulnerability of mono-cultural nations is Somalia. There can be no more homogenous nation on earth than Somalia. It is a monolingual, mono-religious and mono-ethnic society. Everybody in Somalia speaks the Somali language. Everybody there is not just a Muslim, but a Sunni-Muslim. It is often said that Somalia is not just a nation; it is, in fact, a big family (Kperogi, 2017). They all have a common ancestor and preserve their ethnic purity through endogamous marriages. Yet, it is an excellent specimen of a failed State. It has been gripped by sanguinary convulsions for years on end. So homogeneity and consensus neither are nor safeguards against implosions. They are not necessary and sufficient conditions to immunize any nation from disintegration. Only justice, mutual tolerance and good governance can.

Moreover, the claim that the formation of the Nigerian nation is "forced" needs some interrogation because the history and sociology of pre-colonial relations in Nigeria don't bear testimony to this claim. According to Kperogi (2017), a lot of research has been done by historians which chronicle the robust relational intercourse between the disparate ethnic groups that populate what is today Nigeria. A good example was the burgeoning social and cultural melting between the Yoruba people and various ethnic groups in the north before colonialism. For instance, as the travel records of Arab explorers show, the "ambassadors" of the Alaafin of Oyo participating in the Trans-

Saharan Trade with Arabs were people from the extreme north. The same is true of Yoruba in the north – the entire neighborhood of *Gwammaga* and *Ayagi* in Kano are peopled by men and women whose ancestral roots are located in Yoruba land.

There was also vibrant pre-colonial inter-ethnic relations between such northern entities as Igalas, Tiv, Idoma with the Igbos. To this day, Igala and Idoma have councilors in some Igbo States. Take also the case of Edo State. The people of Southern Edo have shared deep cultural and historical ties with Yoruba people long before colonialism, and those in Northern Edo have deep ties with Northern Nigerians dating back to hundreds of years. The people of Akoko Edo, for instance, speak the same language as the Ebira of Kogi State, although they call their language Igara. Yet, Edo is supposed to be in the south and Kogi in the north. Again the people of Auchi have cultural values that decidedly owe their debts to Nupe and Hausa people. Auchi people were used to be called “Bendel Hausas”, when, in fact, their language is almost mutually intelligible with Bini and Ishan in Southern Edo State.

In Northern Cross Rivers, the Yala people are linguistically, ethnically, and culturally indistinct from the Idoma and Igede people of Benue State. The Ebu people in Oshimili North LGA of Delta State are actually Igala people. So are the Ilushi people in Edo State. The so called Delta Igbos are actually, descended from Igala people in what is now Kogi State.

The point of this analysis is to demonstrate the inadmissibility of the claim that Nigeria is a “forced” nation. We are too culturally and ethnically intertwined even before colonialism for that claim to have any basis in truth. Even without colonialism, it is conceivable that Nigeria in its present form would have emerged. If we related as closely as historical records show we did, the British merely accelerated what was likely to have happened anyway. Of course the result of these robust pre-colonial relational intercourses could very well have resulted in the formation of a different kind of nation from what Nigeria is today, but there is no reason to suppose that it would be the product of the kind of elaborate, unrealistic consensus that irredentists claim is indispensable to national formation.

Be that as it may, we should remember that inter-ethnic violence and horrendous blood-letting are not commonly characteristics of multi-nation countries in the rest of world. For example, the United Kingdom, Canada, Switzerland, and India (after the secession of the Islamic people of Pakistan and Bangladesh), are multi-nation countries – the UK since over 500 years, Canada nearly 300 years, Switzerland

some 400 years, and India since about 1950- and none of them is perpetually wracked by inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts, (Gboro, 2013).

What then is the Problem with Nigeria? Why the Hostility?

To me there are certain factors. The first is our chosen method of managing the difference among nationalities. While most multi-nation countries make it a point to pay due respect to their different nationalities, we in Nigeria try determinedly to suppress our nationalities. For example, in the United Kingdom starting from about 1603, though the English nation has been the largest, their policy and tradition have been to pay respect to all nationalities, especially the smaller ones (the Scots, the Irish and the Welsh). In constitution making, the policy has been gradual granting more and more autonomy to each nationality. In contrast, here in Nigeria, nation-building, means refusing to accept the fact that our nationalities are real, and thus creating constitutions, policies and traditions aimed at reducing, subduing and suppressing our nationalities, thereby, loading as much power as possible and as much resources and revenues as possible, into the hands of the central government.

Furthermore, the ascending of the aristocratic northern feudal oligarchy in politics of Nigeria in alliance with their military wing, which ran right wing military dictatorship for several years, constitutes the mainspring board for the negative application of state power in Nigeria. Thus, several decades of right wing military domination in Nigerian politics created regional disparities in development, monumental corruption and the appropriation of national resources, which were siphoned into oversea bank accounts.

Again, the neo-colonial foundation of Nigeria's economy and the feudalistic mentality of its leading political echelons especially the cabal of returnee soldier politicians has created a reactionary political consciousness in the post1999 era, giving rise to the emergence of every vocal and active ethnic political movement and their ancillary militia groupings. All these are dangerous signal which threaten the unity and cohesiveness of the federation.

But much more fundamentally, the failure of Nigeria is in the question of leadership. Leadership is the ability to mobilize followers for the achievement of set down objectives. In politics, effective leadership is one of the factors in the exercise of power and acceptance of that power (legitimacy and charisma). Development per se is not dependent on availability of resources alone, but on the quality of leadership. It is sometime marked by the emergence of a charismatic,

stable, dynamic, determined, committed and selfless leadership who afford a sense of direction to the nation. This is not the case for Nigeria.

It is leadership that allocates priorities and set goals for a nation. Leadership determines the path of the country and rises up to the challenge in times of crisis. Thus, the mighty 18th century Prussia as a great power was characterized by Fredrick the Great. We can see how a dynamic and focused leadership has transformed the Asian countries from underdeveloped economics to developed countries – “The Asian Tigers”. The case of Singapore is quite significant. This is as a result of a committed, dynamic, disciplined, responsive and responsible leadership at its best. Singapore, a nation without any mineral resources except human capital, was transformed from a third world to first world from 1956 – 2000 by an honest leader called Lee Kwan Yew (Alli, 2013).

Singapore, a small country with a landmass of 707sq km and a population of 4.8 million people has built the longest seaport, the biggest refinery, the most beautiful airport in the world (Changi International). Singapore, the cleanest country in the world is a city in a garden. Challenged by a small landmass, Singapore decided to use her underground and constructed high rise buildings. Singapore planned 20 years and is today the world leader in e-government. The home ownership in Singapore is 91 percent (Alli, 2013). The success in Singapore can be summarized to what they called SPIRIT – Service, Passion, Integrity, Respect, Innovation and Teamwork.

On the contrary, we have seen what visionless, idiotic and imbecile leaderships have done to our country Nigeria- a country with vast arable lands and with richly endowed natural resources. What is affecting our country over the years is sentimental leadership desires over national needs and expectations. What we term as national priority in Nigeria is nothing but largely the parochial desires of the few in power that later manifest in detrimental official policies and actions which invariably have sadly failed to stand the test of time. This trend, according to Sanusi (2014), has routinely crept into the national psyche to the extent that rather than see leadership as a privilege to better the lives of others, the few in the corridors of power see it as an opportunity to satisfy personal and class greed.

Conclusion

We went down this road 50 years ago following the secession of the East from Nigeria. But since the 1967 debacle, which led to the civil war, we have learnt to manage our differences though, with hiccups here and there. For years, the south-south, the northern minorities

and other ethnic nationalities which feel shortchanged by the system have been crying of marginalization. Despite misgivings about their agitations in some quarters, they have been careful to pursue their cause without seeking to breaking away from the entity.

The south east youths now agitating for Biafra does not seem to know what their forefathers/bears went through in the first coming of that putative republic. Biafra was an accident of history. It was a republic born in a hurry. We should emphasis that our unity is non-negotiable. We can restructure the federation if we wish, but we should avoid disintegration because that in the long run will not pay us as a nation.

References

- Awolowo, O. (1947), *Path to Nigeria Freedom*, (London: Faber & Faber).
- Crowder, M. (1948), *The Story of Nigeria*, (London: Faber & Faber).
- Fafunwa, B. (1974), *History of Education in Nigeria* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.).
- Forsyth, F. (1969), *The Biafran Story*, (London: Penguin LTD).
- Gboro, G. (2013), "Black African's deadly curse", (*The Nation*, Thursday, December,12) P.21.
- Ibrahim, J. (2017), " Is Osingbanjo right that "Nigeria is indissoluble" (*Daily Trust*, Friday, June 23). Bp.
- Joseph, R. (1982), *Prebendal Politics in Nigeria*,(Lagos: Macmillan Publishers).
- Kalu, K.A. (2005), "Echoes of Instability: Implications for State Society and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria". (*The Constitution: A Journal of Constitutional Development*, Panal Press, Lagos).
- Kperogi, F. (2017), "The Intellectual Case Against Nigeria's break up", (*Daily Trust*, Saturday, June 17). P.35.
- Ololade, O. (2014). "Youth, like Dried Leaves", (*The Nation*, Friday, May 2) P.21.
- Onyike, A. (2005), "Nigeria and the Threats of State Collapse" (*Insider Weekly*, June, 13,).P.50.