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ETHNICITY AND POLITICS IN AFRICA

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Introduction

At independence, most African countries had expected stable and enduring democracy that would have the capacity to enhance speedy economic development. This sanguine aspiration later became a mirage basically less than a decade after political emancipation.

As events later unfolded, the euphoria of independence and by extension, liberty and freedom were completely extinguished basically due to endogenous factors. The crises that erupted in Africa were to express themselves in different forms. In some countries, it took the form of political unrests and political assassinations. In others, the shape was military putsch. But in most countries, ethnic conflicts and in some instances, out-right civil wars were evident. In short, the crises that laid siege in Africa reinforced the famous words of W. B. Yeats who had earlier observed that, "Things Fall apart: the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world".

What made the situation more perplexing was the fact that, irrespective of the colonial heritage and notwithstanding the different system of government African countries adopted, it was not possible for those crises to be averted. Most analysts attributed the crises to ethnicity.

This chapter is, therefore, designed to examine ethnicity and politics in Africa. The structure of this chapter is as follows: After the introduction, the first section examines conceptual and theoretical issues. Section 11 explores the origins of ethnicity in Africa. This is to be followed by section 111 that focuses on ethnic politics in Africa. Section IV examines the impact of ethnic politics on

sustainable democracy in Africa. The last section is the summary and conclusion.

Conceptual and Theoretical Issues

Most concepts that are to be used in this chapter are quite known and thus are self-explanatory. Nevertheless, their operationalization is imperative in order to reduce the chances of misunderstanding. The first of these concepts that readily comes to mind is ethnicity. Ethnicity refers to group consciousness and a sense of identification with either a small or large community. According to Emezi (1992:17), in most instances, community is bound by certain putative commonalities such as a common language, race, religion, tradition, region etc. According to Premdas (1992), ethnicity is a derivation from the intimate need of the Homo sapiens for community expressed dialectically in contradistinction to rival claims of other similar communities.

The next concept that is related and relevant to our discourse is that of plural society. This refers to a society, which is bifurcated by what Eckstein (1966) calls, segmental cleavages. This may take the shape of religious, ideological, linguistic, regional, cultural, racial or ethnic nature.

While elaborating this characterization further, Lijphart (1977:4) observes that in plural societies, media of communication, schools, and voluntary associations tend to be organized along the lines of segmental cleavages. In this chapter, groups of the population bounded by such cleavages will be referred to as the segment of a plural society.

Political stability as a concept is very central to our discourse. Although there is no universally acceptable definition for this term, in this work it would be defined as the capacity of the political system to maintain law and order, command legitimacy and promote civil order. This implies that such a polity has a high probability of remaining democratic and that it has a low level of actual and potential civil violence (Lijphart 1977:4). Democracy is another necessary concept to be used throughout this work. But its definition is too amorphous and nebulous. In order to obviate any misunderstanding in the context which we

fall back on ties that can likely cushion or redeem him [Chazan, 1982 and Osaghae 1994]. In metropolitan urban centers, it was, therefore, not surprising that various ethnic-based associations were formed with a view to promoting the economic well being of its members. Having examined some of the factors that were instrumental to the genesis of ethnicity, let us now focus attention on the relationship between ethnicity and politics in Africa.

Impact of Ethnicity on African Politics

Politics in Africa is essentially ethno-oriented. As a result of this, political structures in Africa do not function to specification. For this reason, most of the constitutional provisions, which are meant to ensure good governance are merely entrenched in constitution but in practice were not enforced. This position would be clarified when specifics are discussed. The first impact of ethnicity on African politics was that it led to the formation of ethnic-based political parties. In Sudan, for instance, the ethnic difference between the North and the South was so deep that the formation of a truly national party was impossible. As noted by Young [1993], the three Southern provinces of Sudan namely, Upper Nile, Equatoria and Bahr-al-Ghazal, though culturally distinct groups, are all united, only in their distinctiveness from the Arabizing north. With relation to northerners, Southern Sudanese are blacks, and do not accept Arab culture as an assimilative pole. In religion, whereas the Northerners are Muslims, the Southerners are Christians. Their combination of ethnic and religions differences made the formation of broad-based political parties impossible. Young. What accentuated the ethnic problem, was the insistence by the Northern politicians on a unitary State with Arabic as national language and Islam as a state religion [Oduho and Deng, 1963]. With intense ethnic strife, it was not surprising that whereas the North formed the Umma [Ansar] party and the NUP the southerners responded with the formation of the liberal party.

In Nigeria, political parties in the First and Second Republics were ethnic-oriented. In the Second Republic regardless of stiff constitutional provision, which stipulated among other things that ethnicity should not form the basis

for the establishment of political parties, all parties, which were eventually formed were ethnic-oriented. For instance, the National Party of Nigeria [NPN] was largely seen as the Northern party. Similarly, the Unity Party of Nigeria [UPN] and the Nigerian Peoples Party [NPP], were seen as representing the Yorubas and Ibos respectively.

In places with one-party system, ethnic cleavages were not divorced from party formation. In Ghana, Tanzania and Zambia where mass party system was adopted although ethnic composition of the party reflected all the ethnic composition of the country, the fact remains that one or two major ethnic groups dominated the party leadership. In addition, political appointments were based on ethnic considerations.

The second manifestation of ethnic politics in Africa was the breakdown of democracy. This phenomenon did not spare any region in Africa. In Congo, democracy collapsed almost immediately after the Belgian imperialist handed over power to the people. Although the colonial power had put in place constitutional structures after consultations with several Congolese delegations this did not prevent chaos.

According to Lijphart [1977: 182], the constitution was hurriedly drafted. Given the haste with which the constitution was made, adequate stabilizing provisions were not made to accommodate diverse ethnic configuration of the new nation. Thus, it was not surprising that although Congo gained independence on July 1, 1963 after parliamentary elections were held, a Prime Minister, his cabinet and the President were installed immediately afterwards the regime quickly plunged into chaos.

What irked political observers was that this chaotic situation started basically less than two months after the inauguration of the democratic governance. What apparently triggered off the crisis was ethnic rivalry. What started as a mutiny within the Congolese army eventually led to the secession of the Baluba ethnic group. As if this was not enough, the president, Moise Tshombe of the Katanga province purportedly sacked the Prime Minister, Patrick Lumumba. The later equally retaliated and this resulted in the massacre of the Baluba civilian population,

which was described by the then UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjold as "unprecedented massacre" [Ibid: 182].

The constitutional crisis in Congo, which was precipitated by ethnic rivalry, was not halted even with the large presence of the United Nations Peacekeeping Troops. It was at the instance of military coup d'etat, which was spearheaded by General Joseph Mobutu that ushered in a long period of non-democratic rule. However, after his death, the country has been drawn into a protracted Civil War.

Rwanda and Burundi suffered the same fate with Congo. The democratic experiment in these two countries equally collapsed few years after independence. In Rwanda, the process of decolonization coincided with a social revolution, in which the Hutu majority overthrew the traditionally dominant Tutsi minority. The UN Commission for Rwanda/Burundi described this situation in 1961 as "racial dictatorship".

Attempt at constitutional settlement of the crisis did not yield any dividend. In the first national election, which was held in 1962, the result showed that the Hutu ethnic based party recorded a landslide victory. Those that had watched the political development in that country would not have expected otherwise. Given the fact that the Tutsi minority were mainly oppressed, they had to flee to neighbouring countries. Attempt by exiled-Tutsis to invade Rwanda resulted in the killing of more than ten thousand Tutsis who were still living in Rwanda [Lemarchand, 1970: 194]. This orgy was described by the Vatican Radio as the "most terrible and systematic genocide since the genocide of the Jews by Hitler" [Ibid: 216]. Till this day, the political situation in Rwanda is not very stable. Military dictatorship, ethnic conflict, and Hutu racial domination are still the order of the day.

In Burundi, democratic governance also collapsed after independence due to the weight of ethnic competition. As noted by Lijphart [1977:183], although constitutional monarchy was established and the legislature was elected by universal suffrage in 1961, Burundi did not experience any form of political stability. This was because the Tutsi king retained considerable power. This development did not

go down well with the Hutu majority ethnic group. As a result, its army officers staged series of abortive coups, which resulted in the killing of between 2,500 and 5,000 Hutus by the Tutsis minority tribe. Two further coups by Tutsi officers were staged. This last led to the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a Tutsis-dominated one-party regime.

In Nigeria, basically less than six years after independence, the first civilian regime fell due largely to ethnic factor. Although the coup plotters vehemently denied the allegation that the putsch was ethnically based, elements of the composition and tactics of the coup gave rise to growing suspicions [Young, 1993]. First, most of the conspirators were Ibos. This included 6 out of the 7 majors and 19 out of the 23 second-echelon ringleaders. Secondly, assassinations within and without the army had the appearance of ethnic selectivity. Thirdly, General Ironsi did not try the Ibo majors, who carried out the coup.

As a result of how some sections of the country perceived the coup, there was a countercoup in July 29, 1966. According to Schwarz [1972], the furies of January 15 were paid for with interest. General Ironsi was murdered and assaults mounted on Ibo officers and men in garrisons up and down the country. Some 39 officers and 171 enlisted men were assassinated; of these, 27 of the officers and all but a handful of other ranks were Ibos [Kirk-Green, 1976].

As if the systematic extermination of the Ibo military officers were not enough, the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group resorted to wanton massacre of the Ibo civilians in all major northern cities. This prompted Ojukwu to secede the Eastern region from Nigeria under the name of Biafra. Although the civil war was fought and concluded, political solution to the Nigerian crises was not immediately found. Nigeria, like Congo was thrown into many years of military rule.

What happened to the four countries we have used as case studies equally affected many other African countries. The political crisis in Angola, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Togo and Senegal are quite instructive. All these crises were basically motivated by ethnicity.

Another manifestation of ethnic politics in Africa has been domination and persecution of minority ethnic groups by the majority ethnic groups.

According to Smith [1972], the prevalence of ethnic politics necessarily entails the maintenance of political order by domination and force. Implicit in this assertion is the fact that cultural diversity or pluralism, as Kuper [1969] puts it, 'automatically imposes the structural necessity for domination by one of the cultural sections'. In Africa, this domination has expressed itself in the political arena. The majority ethnic groups, by virtue of their numerical strength, usually arrogate to themselves the power to control key political offices. In this process, national leadership is exclusively deemed to be their birthright. To worsen the situation, on assumption of office, these leaders either perpetuate themselves in power or evolve structures that will ensure that no other ethnic group can capture political power. This explains why sit-tight or life presidents abound in Africa.

In view of the fact that ethnic politics entails the maintenance of political order by domination and force, under such a situation political tolerance and compromise become untenable. Also, although a clearly defined process of power succession is clearly spelt out, in practice, this is usually ignored. Under such a situation power can only shift to other ethnic groups not through ballot box, but only through violence.

Ethnicity has also shaped the contour of African politics in two related ways. These are the structures of government and the priority of government. From independence up until date, all African countries where ethnic conflict is sharp and well pronounced were constrained to adopt a federal political framework. This was deemed to be the only form of government capable of reducing ethnic rivalry. Nigeria, Congo, Sudan, Burundi, Angola and Rwanda are typical examples of African countries that adopted federal system of government due to heterogeneity of the country.

Nation building has occupied topmost priority in the political agenda of virtually all African countries. The reason for this is not farfetched. In African politics, ethnic perceptions of national politics became entrenched. This

calls for ethnic alignment and make the struggle for power to take the shape of outright war. This, in most instances, is often translated into acrimony, hatred, prejudice and indeed political instability.

To forge ahead and grapple with the problem of underdevelopment, African countries are constrained to find realistic formula for national integration. African leaders are not under any illusion that if congenial political climate is not stimulated, economic and industrial development will not materialize. This explains why attempt at national integration has preoccupied these countries.

Impacts of Ethnic Politics on Sustainable Democracy in Africa

For democracy to flourish, all its sacred tenets are to be enforced to the letter. But the African experience has shown that there is no true democracy in Africa. What African states practice is nothing but a perverted type of democracy. As a result of ethnicity virtually all the civilized norms of democracy have been flouted. Let us now examine them in detail.

The main basis of democracy is liberty and equality. With this principle, the citizens are expected to criticize the government in order to alert the leaders about their shortcomings. In Africa, due to politics of domination, criticism is regarded as subversive activity and this is usually punished by arrest and detention. The press is suppressed and gagged. Fundamental human rights of the citizens are similarly ignored. Under this atmosphere, democracy cannot strive.

Equality is another vital ingredient of democracy special emphasis is placed on. This means that there is no disparity among the people on the basis of sex, religion, place of birth or ethnic background. Besides, this all are seen to be equal in the eyes of the law. In addition, democracy dictates that political and economic equality should be established to reinforce social equality. In Africa, this is an exception than rule. Due to ethnic politics certain ethnic groups arrogate to themselves the power to be more equal. The domineering posture of these arrogant ethnic groups works against sustainable democracy. In addition, true democracy exists under the atmosphere of fraternity.

As noted by Agarwal [2005:267], democracy can become successful only in a peaceful atmosphere; otherwise democracy has to faced many difficulties. Thus, all democratic societies are expected to search for peace. In African ethnic politics promotes chaos and conflict thus blocking the chances of sustainable democracy.

In a democracy, people are the ultimate source of sovereignty, and the government derives its power from them. For this reason, elections take place periodically in all democratic societies. In Africa, sit-tight presidents and military dictators have nothing to do with elections. In places where elections are periodically held, election results are manipulated to favour certain ethnic-sponsored candidates. This negates the principle of democracy.

Independence of the judiciary is another important canon of democracy. In a genuine democratic culture, it is the responsibility of the judiciary to protect the fundamental rights of the people. The judiciary can only discharge its constitutional responsibilities if the government does not control it. But where ethnic and other primordial factors are used in the appointments and promotions of the personnel of that department, it is well nigh impossible for the judiciary to be independent. Due to ethnic considerations, the judiciary in some African countries serves the interest of the government.

All democratic states strive to provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number of persons [Bentham, quoted by Appadorai, 1974:42]. This means that democracy is a welfare state and in it, special attention is paid to the welfare of the people as a whole and not just to a particular class or ethnic group [Agarwal, 2005:267]. The way democracy is practiced in Africa gives power and wealth to only certain classes of people. As a result of this, poverty, squalor, unemployment, misery, etc. are still plaguing African societies. This is obviously not the type of democratic dividend Africa deserves.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter examined ethnicity and politics in Africa. It noted that ethnicity is inextricably interwoven with African politics and thus exerts a negative impact on democratic governance in Africa. The chapter traced the

origins of ethnicity in Africa to colonial rule. But adds that the elites, urbanization and the formation of ethnic unions were other forces that gave birth to ethnic politics in Africa.

The chapter also examined the impacts of ethnicity on African politics as well as its effects on sustainable democracy. In the former, ethnicity led to the formation of ethnic based political parties, breakdown of democracy, politics of domination and above all its shapes the contour of African politics as well as the political agenda of Africa. Consequent upon this development, sustainable democracy in Africa is supplanted. This position becomes obvious when it was noted that all the sacred tenets of democracy were breached in Africa due to ethnic politics.

Democracy cannot succeed in Africa if the fetters of ethnicity are not completely exterminated. Africans must learn to think beyond their narrow ethnic interest. National interest must supercede all other primordial considerations. In a highly globalized world where emphasis is placed on ideals of democracy such as transparency, accountability and good governance, Africans should cultivate democratic norms. Realistic and feasible strategies should be evolved by the African Union to foster national integration and continental unity.

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