

ETHNIC MILITIA AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR NATIONAL UNITY

By

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Abstract *The issues of ethnic diversity and identity crisis have become a subject of recurring decimal since Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999. Prior to this period, successful administrations battled with implementation of various programmes to resolve the associated issues fuelling ethnicity and identity crisis that has been treating unity and national integration since independence. Government at the centre embarked on programmes and formulates different policies toward resolving those contending issues which were to no avail in realization of the programme objectives. However, the unrelenting agitations eventually led to the formation of various ethnic militias by contending groups and their activities exacerbated identity crisis, ethnic diversity that hindered the actualization of needed unity and national integration. Relying on secondary data, theoretical mode of analysis will be adopted to argue that the rising activities of ethnic militias in Nigeria can be properly addressed if government at all levels can focus fundamentally on addressing the underlying socio-political and economic issues that triggering ethnic diversity and identity crisis that resulted recurring violence activities of ethnic militias that is treating national peace, unity and general stability of Nigeria as a sovereign nation.*

Keywords: *Ethnic Militia, National Integration, Challenges, Prospects, National Unity*

Introduction

Nigeria, a sovereign state with multi-ethnic groups was amalgamated in 1914 by Fredrick Lugard, the then Governor-General of the Federation. Prior to this period, each ethnic group were administered by traditional rulers with basic provision for the existence of effective organ of government in formulation and execution of government policies which the people freely embraced. According to Anifowoshe (2000), the pre colonial rules in Nigeria promoted strong government that prevented ethnicity and identity crisis among different ethnic groups that made up the amalgamated State. The 1914 amalgamation however signaled eventual introduction of indirect rule system of administration which to some extent promoted unity and national integration among the nationalists of different ethnic groups of the amalgamated protectorates.

Furthermore, the spirit of brotherhood among pre independent nationalist leaders eventually led to successful independence of Nigeria in 1960 with commencement of the first republic which also promoted the needed unity and national integration in Nigeria until 1966 when both the military coups and the Igbo massacre led to the collapse of national unity and marginalization of some ethnic groups in socio, political and economic distribution by the ruling elite despite Gen. Gowon declaration of 3Rs and no victor and no vanquished policies of government shortly after the civil war. The effects of non committal implementation of the policies in Nigeria is insecurity, ethnicity and the national identity crisis that resulted to the formation of various ethnic militias that is treating unity and national integration in Nigeria (Anifowoshe, 2000).

Since 1999 when the country returned to democratic governance, the scenario of the ethnic militia and insurgency is tragic, spanning from the North, East, and South. The emergence of various ethnic groupings clamouring for equity in the sharing of national resources had been attributed to the feeling of marginalization which the groups believe had been going for years without being addressed. This is especially so, in the Niger Delta region, where most of the oil resources of the country are located and the various nationalities within the region feel they had been short changed in the distributional resources which resulted to the formation of different ethnic militias in Niger Delta area.

To Okumagba (2009), those who supported such militia groups, justify their existence on the basis of the fact that the region being the location of most of the wealth of the nation, need to

demand for fairness and equity in the allocation and distribution of the national wealth. But unfortunately, the dysfunctional nature of the Nigerian federal state, which had not acknowledged the contribution of the region to the national wealth, had therefore been a source of frustration to the groups resulting in their violent conduct that is treating national unity and sustainable economic development.

In south-west Nigeria, the foundation of ethnic militias can be traced to the annulment of June 12 1993 election which was generally believed to be won by Chief M K O Abiola after many unsuccessful attempt by Chief Obafemi Awolowo which was also believed to be denied the access to power by the northern oligarchy because of his uncompromised principles on national issues. This later resulted to the formation of Odua People Congress (OPC) and Renew Agbekoya Parapo with main aim of protecting the Yoruba interests among the committee of nations globally.

In the North, interestingly the Arewa People's Congress (APC) representing the interest of the North has not been as vociferous as the other groups in asking for separate existence for the singular reason that the north has been in control of political power in Nigeria. If anything the APC works to spoil the separatist agitation of other groups. It is the belief of the other groups that the north has benefited more than any other group from the Nigerian Project, having been in control of state power and all the largesse accruing from it. Also, the activities of Boko Haram sect which claims millions of lives in the region cannot be left out. The Obatse Cult activities in Nasarawa State in North Central Nigeria remain so volatile. Equally, the violent confrontations with security personnel, and the deliberate vandalization of public utilities by both ethnic militias and insurgency seriously undermines the safety of lives and properties, and instill fear and sense of insecurity on the populace. This has impacted negatively on the needed unity and national integration which our founding fathers graciously worked for (Ikyase and Egberi, 2015).

It is against this challenge to national unity that this paper seeks to unravel the phenomenon of ethnicity and ethnic militias in Nigeria in order to present some alternative solution to what can denied the country the expected unity and integration among various ethnic nationalities. The paper is divided into five parts starting with introduction. The second part discussed

some conceptual issues related to the topic under review while the third part examines some possible factors responsible for the growth of ethnic militias in Nigeria. The fourth part assesses the effects of ethnic militia's activities on unity and national integration while the fifth aspect is a concluding part where the necessary recommendations are made towards promotion of unity and national integration in Nigeria.

Conceptual Issues Ethnic Militias In advance countries, militia is a fighting organization of non-professional soldiers, citizens of a nation, or subjects of a state, who can be called upon for military service during a time of need, as opposed to a professional force of regular military personnel. According to Adejumobi (2002), ethnic militias is essentially a youth based groups formed with the purpose of promoting and protecting the parochial interests of their ethnic groups, and whose activities sometimes involve the use of violence which cannot do good to the unity of the country. The scholar believed that there are some basic conditions that can reinforce militarism and ethnic militias in the country. According to him, the phenomenon of personal rule and the high concentration of power perpetuated by any government can lead to formation of ethnic militias conduct in the country.

To Falana (2003), ethnic militia in the Nigerian context is viewed as a militant organization set up to protect the interest of a particular nationality within the Nigerian federation. Therefore, concentration of power in the hands of an individual entity, whether in a military or civilian administration has a strong potential of promoting ethnic tension in the society because such individuals usually construct an ethnic state access map through which they distribute social goods and scarce resources and create polarization and division among different ethnic groups in order to perpetuate their rule in the State.

The above expression is given credence by Agbu (2002) that ethnic militia movement is the extreme form of ethnic agitation for self determination because the various ethnic groups in a plural society can easily assume militant posture which can bedrock the emergence of militia groups with ethnic identity towards serving the machinery through which the desires of the people are sought to be realized. The scholar argued further that there are some basic elements that these ethnically inspired movements possess. Those elements include prompt resort to violence in the course of their agitations, preponderance of youth membership, ethnic identity affiliations with sole aim of influencing the policy of government of the day towards the interest of their people.

Sesay et al (2003) posited that militia as irregular or paramilitary group usually made up of civilians who might have received some form of non- formalized or unofficial military training and are armed with small arms and light weapons. They resemble the regular professional army in the manner of their operation and command structures with purpose of terrorizing the government in order maximize their ethnic agenda. Taking a cue from this submission, it has been observe that ethnic militias exist in multi ethnic nation where some ethnic groups were given undue advantage against other while some are being alienated in the activities of government.

To William (2016), there is scholarly confusion as to which ethnic organization to be categorized as ethnic militia in Nigeria because of the tendency of categorizing ethnic groups with a violent bent as ethnic militia. For instance, William believed that the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) which is usually categorized as militia of the Northern Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, is more or less a pan cultural organization on the same pedestal as similar organizations from other ethnic groups like the Afenifere of the Yoruba ethnic group and the Oha n' eze Ndigbo of the Igbo ethnic group that may have an ability to organize their youth against any government policy that may not beneficial to the development of their regions when the occasion demands. Therefore, the cultural organizations may not be categorized as ethnic militia or theorist's organization but they can tactically support and influence the activities of any ethnic militia group in their domain towards actualization of their organization's agenda.

National Integration The term national integration can be simply refer to as the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a country. It is a philosophical thought of patriotic citizen of the state which means that irrespective of socio, political, religious and ethnic differences among the citizens of a particular state, there is a recognize fact that we are all one. This kind of integration is very important in the building of a strong and prosperous nation in a plural society. To Baldev (2017), national integration means the process of combing all the people of the country irrespective of the ethnic, socio, religions and political consideration into a single whole and undivided country. Therefore, national integration is a particular sentiment that binds together all people in one common bond, no matter what their

religion, language or history is. National integration makes the nation strong and organized. It holds the people of various religions, sects, races, dress, civilization and culture together.

According to Baldev, national integration does not mean that there are no differences on any issue. Despite the differences, all accept what is in the larger interest of the nation because national integration makes all citizens imbued with patriotism and consider themselves as citizens of the state before religious or ethnic consideration. Notwithstanding the differences in opinions and beliefs, all the people of a nation are full of mutual love, integration and brotherhood. National integration, thus, is a sentiment which reflects solidarity or patriotism among the people belonging to a nation. It fosters a common identity amongst the citizens of a country making and them feel that they are all one which make the nation strong and organized. It holds the people together and remains in mutual harmony with each other towards promotion of the state objectives (David, 2013).

The importance of national integration is obviousness. To Olanipekun (2008), national integration helps in uniting all people of the nation and the national minorities in a country. It is a way of protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of people and to satisfy their right to judicial protection. Therefore, the basis of promoting national integration policy in the State means the country can give its people an opportunity to live together in peace and prosperity. The scholar however believed that some forces among the citizens may hamper the benefits of national integration especially when citizens have very strong feelings about their own religion and language and oppose those of others. Such feelings can lead to clashes between different sects. Such occurrences damage our unity and proved to be major hindrances to national unity and progress.

Ethnic Militias Formations and Their Activities: Nigeria's Experience The ethnic militia formations and their activities has become a recurring phenomena in Nigeria. Its establishment and growth among different ethnic nationalities arose as a result of political and socio-economic marginalization which different ethnic nationalities could no longer tolerates any longer. According to Effevottu (2016), the seed of the present structure of ethnic militant groups in Nigeria were sown in the 1990s when military rule became more repressive

and intolerant. The year 1990s witnessed the emergence of ethnic militias groups due to a combination of socio-economic and political factors, ethnic militias emerged and multiplied at such an amazing speed that they and their activities became a worrisome part of the nation's socio-political experience.

The O'odua People's Congress (OPC) was formed in 1994 with the primary aim of defending, promoting and protecting the integrity and interest of the Yoruba people who they felt were being politically marginalized with the annulment of the June 12 presidential election. But its post 1999 activities changed drastically from its fundamental objectives of seeking self-determination for Yoruba people to crime fighting activities and settlement of personal disputes in a violent way and promotion of inter-ethnic crises especially between their members and Hausa community across the south-western states. These violent activities signaled the persistent disunity that preventing national integration in Nigeria (Effevottu, 2016).

In the Northern region, Arewa People's Congress (APC) was established with full force in 1999. It is a militant group established to protect the Hausa/Fulani interests and was formally launched on December 13, 1999 with aim to checkmate the militancy of the pan-Yoruba O'odua People's Congress and threats that might emanate from other ethnic based organizations. The resolutions of the APC include one which asserts that the preservation of Nigeria as "a corporate entity" with its current composition is "not negotiable". In fact, APC has as the motto of the organization as "to preserve the indivisibility of the country". Although this body was formed by the youths of Hausa and Fulani extraction but was never comparable to the militias in other parts of the country in terms of organizational structure, employment of forces or in national propaganda to sell itself or to attract sympathy or recognition. It has been relatively inactive since the year of its formation (Shittu, 2013).

Furthermore, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) an another militia group found in the Eastern Nigeria, the group was formed in 1999 because of the feeling of marginalization and unequal treatment allegedly meted on the people of the region during the civil war. The Igbos always felt completely vanquished

because of the various policies of attrition meted out against them by different administration without minding the rhetoric of the three “R’s –Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation” declared by the federal government shortly after the civil war which were not fully implemented up to this moment. To Anifowoshe (2000), the inability of the government to effectively implement the policy and marginalization of the easterners in the cause of political, social and economic distribution made the MASSOB quests for the actualization of sovereign state for the people of eastern Nigeria which if eventually actualize can jeopardize the unity and national integration policy of the government.

Ikyase & Egberi (2015) also argued that the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) can also be categorized as ethnic militia movement that has being agitating for the restoration of the sovereignty of the defunct Republic of Biafra. The group is led by Nnamdi Kanu, who has been regarded as a leader of ethnic militia that promoted disunity in Nigeria. The Bakassi Boys is another militia group active in several states in southeast. The boys, unlike the OPC, were not conceived to protect the Igbos, but to prevent the incessant armed robbery in major markets in southeast by people who were nicked named “Mafia” that were always robbing Ariara International market in Aba, a major commercial centre in the south east.

Also, the origins of various ethnic militias in the Niger Delta area are much more complex than other parts of the country. This is because of the importance of the area to the nation’s economy with historical and contemporary force. On historical base, Shittu (2013), argued that the mysterious death of a prominent leader of Niger Delta, Adaka Boro who fought on the side of federal troop during the civil war and who had earlier protested against social neglect, ethnic chauvinism, political marginalization and economic deprivation of Niger Delta area led to the formation of the first militancy group in 1966. The militancy was named Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS) and fought seriously for the socio, political and economic liberation of the region from the ruling elites who had earlier neglected the area. The scholar averred further that the execution of another prominent Niger Delta activist Ken Saro Wiwa and other eight prominent Ogoni leaders by Abacha Military Junta in 1996 jointly contributed to the formation of ethnic militias in the region especially, the formation of “Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People” (MOSOP) a militancy group that sought for the recognition of the economic contributions of Ogoni to the Nigerian State.

Also, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is one of the largest militant groups in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Apart from the struggle for self-determination, environmental remediation and resource control, two major factors account for the formation of this more armed, better organized more vocal and more sophisticated ethnic militia. According to Effevottu (2016), the first was the arrest, impeachment and the trial of the then Governor-General of Ijaw nation, Late Diepreye Alamieyeseigha on the charges of corruption and money laundering. It believed that Alamieyeseigha may have been targeted because of his principled stance on resource control. Therefore, his trial was viewed by Ijaws as selective, vindictive and an act of political persecution by Obasanjo administration while the second factor was the arrest, detention and trial of Asari Dokubo in 2005 despite the federal government-driven 2004 peace accord.

However, the contemporary treat to the socio economic base and national integration in Nigeria is the activities of Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), a militant group who publicly announced their existence in March 2016. The NDA have attacked multi-national oil producing facilities in the Niger Delta causing the shutdown of oil terminals and a fall in Nigeria's oil production to the lowest level in twenty years. To Effevottu (2016), the attacks caused Nigeria to fall behind Angola as Africa's largest oil producer. The NDA's declared that their aim was to create a sovereign state in the Niger Delta and have threatened to disrupt Nigeria's economy if their aim is not met by the government. The NDA claim its members are young, well-travelled and educated in East Europe and other part of the globe.

The group has criticized President Muhammadu Buhari for having never visited the Niger Delta region which happens to be the treasure base of the country and his nonchalant attitudes towards the criminal conduct of Fulani headsmen that are terrorizing the region. This attitude according to the group presumed Buhari's administration as ethnic and religious bias who failed to promote the policy of unity and national integration (Sandve, 2009).

On the categorization of various ethnic militias group in Nigeria, Effevottu (2016) believed that the ethnic militia groups in Nigeria can be categorized in terms of the object of their grievances. For example, there are militias whose object of engagement is the Nigerian State. Such militias include the OPC, MASSOB, MEND, Egbesu and to some extent, the APC. These militia groups can also attack other ethnic groups and corporate agencies associated with the government, the Hausa/Fulani have been the object of OPC attacks, the Yoruba the object of APC criticism and engagement, while the multi-national oil companies are the object of the Egbesu and other Niger Delta militia groups and Shittu (2013) concluded that some Nigerian militant groups does not target the state but rather, other ethnic or communal groups with who they are in conflict. These are the amorphous and transient militia groups utilized for inter communal warfare which cannot do any good to the country rather than perpetual division, disintegration and disunity which cannot help Nigeria for harmonious relationship needed for sustainable growth and development.

Factors Responsible for the Emergence of Ethnic Militias in Nigeria

According to Sandve (2009), there are many factors responsible for the emergence of ethnic militia's activities in Nigeria. Those factors include:

- **Fear of Domination and Injustice:** This is another prominent factor that gave rise to ethnic militia activities in Nigeria. The fear of domination, marginalization and social deprivation expressed by some sections of the Nigerian State and complaint against official negligence, environment degradation and denial of access to resources especially the Niger Delta are fundamental factor responsible for the emergence of ethnic militias in Nigeria and resulted to armed reaction ostensibly for self-defense and counter measure against the government leaving the nation in the state of comma and perpetual disintegration.
- **Bad Governance:** The bad governance is a complete absence of good leadership and good governance in the country. It means lack of respect for the fundamental human rights of citizens, maladministration and injustice in the cause of governance exercise by political office holders at all level of governments. There is no commitment to the public goods and promotion of ethnic equality by those in power and this hopeless situation eventually led to the growth of ethnic militias in Nigeria.

- **Insecurity:** Insecurity of life and property of Nigerians and failure of law enforcement agencies to address the situation also occasioned the increasing rate of ethnic militia activities in Nigeria. The hostility, nonchalant and growing ineptitude of the security agencies towards the welfare and proper protection of the ordinary citizens of our country made some ethnic groups to seek alternative means for the security of its people and their property. This is evident in the formation of vigilante groups by different ethnic nationalities which later graduated to ethnic militias.
- **Persistent Economic Hardship and Poverty:** The persistent economic hardship with high rate of poverty among the Nigerian youth is one of the factors responsible for the emergence of ethnic militias in Nigeria. The poor living conditions of Nigerian youth occasion with poor infrastructural facilities which make them unproductive in their choosing carriers resulted to hardship that has reached a certain level that defied solutions gave impetus to the root cause of ethnic militia's activities in the country.
- **High Rate of Unemployment:** The increasing level of unemployment in Nigeria according to the duo also responsible for the resurgence of militia groups. The economic deregulation policy of the government deepened social crises of unemployment among the able body men. Consequently, the rank of the unemployed and idle youths increased the number and people who had recourse to ethnic formations to gain livelihood, define their identity and promote ethnic nationalism.

The Effect of Ethnic Militias Activities Promotion of National Unity and Integration in Nigeria

The activities of ethnic militias Nigeria has not being positive to the country, rather it has subjected the country to disintegration and suspicious relationship among Nigerians. However, Ikyase & Egberi (2015) identified the following effects of ethnic militia's activities towards promotion of unity and national integration:

- **Volatile Investment Climate:** The volatile investments climate is one of the negative effects of ethnic militia's activities in Nigeria. For instance, the act of aggression especially from militias like the Niger Delta Avengers, the Ombatse, and Odua People's Congress (OPC) may scared both local and foreign investors from other to establish their investment in a volatile area in the country and this may likely prevents

expected collaboration on ethnic, and socio economic relations that can aid the country towards the path of greatness.

- **Social, Political Instability:** This is another negative effect of ethnic militia's activities on expected unity and national integration. The ethnic militancy which has been engaged in subversive activities against the government is capable of destabilizing socio-political activities process which can some renegades being used by politicians as thugs, assassins and kidnappers to deal with their political opponents and this cannot bring good things to the country.
- **Destructions of Life's and Property:** Another negative effect of ethnic militia activities is the deliberate vandalization and destruction of public utilities such as oil pipelines, electrical installation, telecommunication equipment etc. However, destruction of these public utilities, especially the disruption of electricity and telecommunication facilities may resulted to unequal services render to the public by service providers and this may cause bad blood among the people which may negatively impacted on the expected unity among Nigerians.
- **Disintegration Drift:** Equally, the violent activities of militia groups has which instilled fear and insecurity among the citizenry and this has discouraged the people from different ethnic background to collaborate and relate together because of fear of being attacked, kidnapped or killed by opposing group. Therefore, the violent activities of militia groups always promoting socio, political and economic disintegration in the country.

Ethnic Militias Activities in Nigeria: The Possible Way Out

As the activities of ethnic militia's increases in strength since Nigerian returned to democratic rule in 1999, the research has proved that the menace of ethnic militias has become recurring decimal that needed to be urgently put to an end in order to actualize the principles of peace, unity and national integration as cardinal objective of State policy in Nigeria. However, these suggestions can eliminate the rise of ethnic militarism in Nigeria. They are:

- **Encouragement of the Mutual Interdependency:** The encouragement of mutual interdependency among ethnic groups can engender inter ethnic relations and harmonious relationship of all Nigerians irrespective of ethnicity and socio-political background. The government should make provision for a better environment that can enhance meaningful negotiation and resolution of conflict among the citizenry so that

expected unity and national integration objectives can be easily achieved in Nigeria within a shortest period of time.

- **Accommodative Principle:** This principle if adopted will embrace the spirit of togetherness among Nigerians irrespective of socio, religious, ethnic and political affiliations. Accommodative principle is a process of discontinuation of competitive approach which often generates exaggeration of value among different ethnic groups.
- **Education and Skill Acquisitions Programme:** The government should intensify their efforts towards promotion of skill acquisition programme for unemployed youth in the country. Doing this will graciously reduce the rate of youth restiveness and prevent them from unwarranted attraction in joining ethnic militias group. There is also the need for imaginative and far-reaching initiatives in the areas of job creation, poverty alleviation and the refocusing of youthful energy towards constructive endeavours.
- **Collaborative Principle:** This principle is a way of making an effort in constituting formal mechanism structure that will be responsible for formal grievance handling among ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Effective implementation of this principle involves the establishment of joint committees from the government and all ethnic groups and the committee could be responsible for the smooth implementation of jointly agreed resolutions that may promote sectionalism and disunity among Nigerians.
- **Equitable Resources Allocation:** The resources allocation to all tiers of government in the country must be equitable and be properly integrative to all the concerns of the people. Also, circumventing of resources meant for the developmental projects in the society by the elite group must be blocked so that the people will not have any cause to revolt against the government in power at all levels.

Conclusion

The activities of ethnic militias in post independent Nigeria points to the inability of the government at all level to address some basic fundamental issues that are threatening the unity and national integration in the country. According to Anifowoshe (2000), the formation of ethnic militias among ethnic nationalities came as a way of protecting the domestic interests

of the people against some government policies that were not in line with people's interests especially on sectionalism, political and economical marginalization.

However, those expected interests on socio-political and economic equity, safety to lives and property, human rights and resource control were failed to be implemented equitably among different ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. The failure of this eventually gave impetus to the emergence of ethnic militia groups' activities which centered on seeking redress from injustice and economic marginalization from the ruling elites and their sympathizers in power which their activities have eventually resulted to total destruction of public goods and inter-communal crisis among opposing groups.

Since peace, unity and justice are vital to national integration and total development of any sovereign State and the government at the centre as a matter of urgency need to adopt holistic approach towards resolution of all associated issues that resulted to recurring ethnic agitations and any other related matters that can be hindering the expected unity and harmonious relationship among Nigerians. The urgent convocation of a National Conference, where everyone including the ethnic militias can table and discuss their fears and grievances can also be of help in putting end to violence activities of various ethnic militias because, the conference can provide option of working out a compromise acceptable policy towards addressing any grievances that may hindering the realization of the needed peace, unity and national integration in Nigeria.

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