

Politics, ethno-religious conflicts and democratic consolidation in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the explosion of violent ethno-religious and communal conflicts in Nigeria, contrary to the widespread expectation that the inauguration of the civilian administration would usher in democratic stability. The nature of the politics of the transition programme and the reluctance of the post-military regime to address the national question have led to the resurgence of social groups that make demands for incorporation and empowerment. The central argument is that unbridled competition for power, and the failure of government to deliver democratic dividends, have resulted in violent conflicts, especially between ethnic and religious groups, endangering the country's nascent democracy. Good governance, especially accountability, transparency and equity, would restore governmental legitimacy, inter-ethnic and religious harmony and promote democratic consolidation.

INTRODUCTION

The use of such clichés as 'political impasse' and 'brink of the precipice' in the media, political circles and among the common folk, to depict the virtual failure of the Nigerian project during the seemingly endless interregnum that began with the annulment of the popular 12 June 1993 elections by the military cabal led by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, and terminated with the miraculous death of Gen. Sani Abacha on 8 June 1998, suggested that the country was already at the end of the road. This mood was poignantly captured by such irresistible titles as 'End-game in Nigeria', 'Nigeria: Inside the Dismal Tunnel', 'This House Has Fallen: Midnight in Nigeria', 'Nigeria: Rivers of Oil, Trails of Blood' (Lewis 1994; Joseph 1999; Maier

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2000; Sklar & Whitaker 1995), *ad infinitum* among Africanist social science that was densely afro-pessimistic (Olukoshi 1998a). Grim reports of assassinations, bomb explosions, phantom coups, kidnapping or disappearance of opposition figures, inter and intra-communal clashes and the audacious grandstanding of political sycophants culminated in the transmutation of political parties into ‘the five fingers of a leprous hand’ (Joseph 1996, 1999). Recent events that have heated up the political system indicate that though the midnight was very dark, it was only the beginning of the end. The worst was yet to come. The front page of *The Guardian* (Lagos) of 14 January 2002, which features headlines on three incidents of communal violence and a report on political assassination, is typical. The outbreak of conflicts and political violence in various parts of the country has become so frequent that Nigerians, rather than being surprised at the outbreak of conflicts, have adapted to their reality. One such adaptive strategy has been described as ‘everybody is sharpening his knife’.¹ This strategy has also generated more conflict as it leads to a situation where such a seemingly innocuous act as a child defecating in a bush is loaded with ethnic meanings and can *ipso facto* ignite violence.

The rising incidence of violent ethno-religious conflicts is being traced to the return to civil rule in Nigeria. An influential news magazine in the country has enumerated forty cases of ethno-religious conflict erupting within this period. This excludes countless incidents of inter-communal and intra-communal conflict that have become the badge of national unity.² Wittingly or unwittingly the proliferation of conflicts in the post military period engenders propositions that link ethno-religious conflict to democracy or implicate regimes in democratic transition as being unable to manage such conflict. This article attempts to examine the background and dimensions of ethno-religious and communal conflicts and their implications for democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The starting point is an examination of some of the theoretical statements that have attended the democratisation/ethnicity interface. This is followed by a chronicle of conflicts in post-military Nigeria that probes beyond the trigger factors to unearth the fundamental causes. The remaining sections examine state responses to conflict and explore reasons for the persistence and exacerbation of conflicts in spite of such conflict prevention and resolution efforts.

THEORETICAL STATEMENT

As the third wave of democracy caught up with Africa, there were fears from various quarters that democratisation would ignite bloody violence with the

disparate ethnic and religious groups in Africa as combatants. Expectedly, African leaders who defied pro-democracy social movements revived the same ideology, which in the early years of independence in Africa had been used to transform the new states into one-party states. This ideology was that the task of nation-building was so urgent that African peoples should not bother themselves with multiparty democracy, which would lead to the emergence and ossification of ethnic identities and consequently, sabotage the nation-building project. Thus, 'sit tight' leaders encouraged the idea that multiparty democracy was antithetical to national unity because it led to 'chaos, bloodshed and death'. Consequently, transitions in some countries were marred by violent conflicts between ethnic groups (Ake 2000: 92–3; Conteh-Morgan 1997; Glickman & Furia 1995). Beyond the posturing of politicians, the fear that democratisation generates ethnic conflicts has been shared in academic circles. In the wake of African democratisation, Carol Lancaster (cited in Ake 2000: 94) predicted that 'Political divisions would increasingly fall along ethnic or regional lines, heightening tensions, and ultimately threatening national unity. The volcano of ethnic or clan strife remains dormant throughout much of Sub-Saharan Africa.'

Mozaffar (1995: 33–4) traces this to the fact that 'democratic transitions are episodes of profound institutional transformation. Successful transition from autocracy to democratic governance involves not simply a change in the rules of the game. It requires a fundamental reconfiguration of the rules to craft a totally new game.' As Gurr (2000: 85) observes, 'the process of transition creates threatening uncertainties for groups and opens up a range of transitory political opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs'. Schmitter (1996: 84–5) argues that such opportunities are created because the 'prior existence of a legitimate political unit', indispensable for democratisation, is absent. In the absence of a nation 'before', 'during' and 'after' democratisation, actors manipulate boundaries and identities to 'create constituencies favourable to their respective purposes'. The result is the advent of what Horowitz (2000: 293–4) calls 'ethnic parties', thrown up by the fact that in electoral politics, voters, while desiring to get representatives for themselves as individuals, in practice pitch their tents with political groups that purport 'to represent them as components of rather bleakly perceived potential action groups'. Once political parties directly or remotely connected with an ethnic agenda emerge, democratic elections are threatened because they are often perceived in zero-sum terms. As Diamond *et al.* (1995) argue, the majoritarian principle is problematic in plural societies because ethnic parties that lose elections tend to reject not only the election results but also the whole gamut of democratic institutions

by appealing to violence. Studies in post-communist societies reveal a resurgence of ethnic conflict during democratic transitions, indicating the absence of credible and externally guaranteed commitments to respect minority rights (Gurr 2000: 85–6).

Two trends are discernible from the discourse on democratisation and ethnic conflict. The first emphasises the contribution of ethnicity while the second focuses on the nature of democratisation. Whether seen from the primordialist, instrumentalist or constructivist perspective,³ ethnicity is perceived as inherently conflict prone. Claude Ake, who offers a strong critique of this perspective, argues that the term ‘ethnic conflict’ has for this reason become too popular, pointing out that ethnic relations need not always be conflictual. Evidence of harmonious coexistence between ethnic groups, both in traditional and industrial societies, debunks the assumption that ethnicity necessarily results in conflicts (Ake 2000; Jinadu 1994; Nnoli 1978, 1995; Singer 1994). Some suggest a perspective which interrogates the conditions under which ethnicity results in conflicts. Consequently, according to Stavenhagen (cited in Ake 2000: 97):

Conflicts between ethnic groups are not inevitable nor are they eternal. They arise out of specific historical situations, are moulded by particular and unique circumstances, and they are constructed to serve certain interests by idealists and ideologies, visionaries and opportunists, political leaders and ethnic power brokers of various kinds.

This contingent nature of ethnicity marks the point of departure of scholars who share the second perspective that trains the searchlight on democratisation. Thus Ake (2000: 112) posits: ‘A fruitful entry to the relationship between democratization and ethnicity must begin with the recognition of the fact that democratization is inherently conflictual because it entails a radical redistribution of power as well as the acceptance of a political culture of equality.’ In cases where there is no such redistribution of power or equalisation of opportunities to hold offices, as some African examples poignantly show, the limitations of democratic transition could also ignite violent conflicts as the mass public whose hopes were raised realise that nothing has changed. There are two entry points of ethnic groups into democratisation. An ethnic group may intervene to resist democratisation and sustain the status quo while another wants democratisation in order to struggle for incorporation and reverse its marginalisation or exclusion from power. The fact that democratisation offers groups an opportunity to retain or capture power makes it prone to conflicts, especially where the premium placed on power is too high and the

rules for political competition have not been institutionalised, making political gladiators prefer efficiency norms to legitimacy norms. Ethnicity and religion become tools deployed for the acquisition of power. If this is the case, Ake (2000: 14) dares to say that it is misleading to label what has been happening in several African countries ethnic conflicts. It is more appropriate to use 'democratic conflicts'.

The corollary of this position is to show why the ethnic ideology is compelling and more appealing than other forms of mobilisation. Omari Kokole (cited in Idowu 1999: 45) provides an answer, with his observation that ethnic consciousness and loyalties 'lend themselves to easy manipulation particularly because other identities are either weak or altogether absent'. One weak identity is citizenship. In the circumstances, there is no affective orientation to the nation state, which is yet to become a national state. Rhoda Howard (1995: 31) describes this phenomenon that is common in Africa as 'the myth of citizenship'. It explains the tendency where most people do not feel they are part of the larger territorial unit created by the departing colonial powers, because the state and ruling elite lack the capacity to create in the people a sense of belonging and make them develop the 'we' consciousness, one that makes them believe they are one people with a common history and destiny. Such capacity is enhanced by the ability of the state to provide economic and socio-political goods to the mass of the people irrespective of ethnic origins or religious inclinations. This suggests therefore that democratisation is not fundamentally the problem. If anything, democracy is increasingly seen as an antidote for ethnic conflicts in conflict management literature (Ake 2000; Gurr 2000; Leith & Solomon 2001; Nnoli 1995; Osaghae 1998). It is generally believed that 'the plural and open nature of democratic regimes tolerates the development of a culture and norms that emphasise negotiation and conciliation' (Mousseau 2001: 550). Evidence from nations with higher levels of democracy and political development generally reveals lower levels of political violence. Paradoxically, however, this is also the case in extremely authoritarian regimes because at such low levels of democracy, the political regime has the means to suppress the society so severely that little room is left for individuals or groups to engage in dissident behaviour.

On the contrary, however, in middle-level or semi-democracies, political violence and conflicts are very common. This is because individuals and groups have at least some rights to express opposition or dissatisfaction to government policies. As Mousseau (2001: 551) aptly puts it: 'In these societies opposing groups may voice their demands, but the regime is incapable of accommodating them because democratic procedures and political culture are less likely to be well developed.' Clearly, it is not the

presence of democracy but its deficit that generates conflicts. Idowu (1999: 52) makes this point with particular reference to Nigeria:

The Nigerian political situation has witnessed more breaking of heads, than counting them. In fact, even when it has been convenient for heads to be counted, the outcome has always been the breaking of heads instead. Conflict in Nigeria is so intense because of lack of democratic behaviour. The head of the individual in the democratic context signifies citizenship. So when heads are broken in the Nigerian political community, the issue in respect of broken heads is citizenship. If conflict in Nigeria means the absence of democratic behaviour, it follows, therefore, that conflict in Nigeria is interwoven with the absence of democratic governance.

Gurr (2000) has also shown that the incidence of conflicts at the global level declined in recent years with the deepening of democratisation. Nation-states where conflicts persist are those where what obtains is the democratisation of disempowerment (Ake 1996). Beyond the veneer of elections, the state remains ambushed, privatised, repressive and unpopular. The people who were tantalised by the prospect of a democratic revolution that would terminate decades of alienation and pauperisation have been shortchanged and given a 'choiceless democracy' (Mkandawire 1999). The 'credibility gap' which fostered the de-linkage of the people from the state, and ignited social forces to struggle for democracy, is not being bridged (Rothchild 1995: 58). African peoples out of clear rational calculations *sans* atavistic attachments have turned their backs on the state 'and given their loyalty to sub-national social formations such as the community, the sub-nationality or ethnic groups' (Ake 2000: 114).

It is against this backdrop that the proliferation and exacerbation of violent ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria in the post-transition period can be appreciated. This article adopts an analytical framework that holds that the interface between ethnicity and democratisation is found in absence of effective citizenship and good governance in post-transition societies. In the circumstance that democracy does not go beyond the conduct of multiparty elections to include improvement in the quality of life of the people, there is frustration, and people who already feel alienated from the state are vulnerable and likely to be mobilised around counter-elites who exploit extant popular alienation from the state by whipping up sectarian sentiments. This has been the case in Nigeria and several multiethnic states of Africa (Osaghae 1994). Although the foregoing theoretical discussion has focused on ethnicity, the term ethno-religious is adopted because some of the recent violent conflicts to be examined were triggered by religious issues. The relevance of religion is also underlined by the fact that in Nigeria ethnic boundaries tend to coincide with religion, with the exception of the Yoruba ethnic group (Ibrahim 1999). The next section examines the extent to which

these conflicts can be attributed to what has been labelled the illusion of change, given the surviving structures of authoritarianism such as personal rule, prebendal relations and repressive security forces.

LOOKING BEYOND THE TRIGGER FACTORS

Barely one week after the bomb explosions at a military cantonment in Lagos, which raised fears for the future of democracy in the country,⁴ Nigeria was again on the front pages of the world media. This was as a result of the outbreak of bloody clashes between Hausa and their Yoruba hosts in Idi-Araba, a densely populated community that hosts the Lagos University Teaching Hospital. For three days, the clashes spread to other parts of Lagos, claiming at least 100 lives and rendering more than 1000 homeless (see *Newswatch* 18.2.2002; *Tell* 18.2.2002). The clashes were so bloody that a CNN correspondent reported that Nigerians preferred military rule to civilian rule.⁵ While government battles to unravel the cause of the crisis and has promised severe punishment for the instigators, eye-witnesses said the clashes started when a group sent on a peace mission by the leader of the Hausa Community in Idi-Araba was attacked by members of the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC). The group had gone to find out why a young Hausa man was beaten up for defaecating in a bush close to the secretariat of the OPC.⁶

Since the return to civil rule in 1999, there have been several clashes between Yoruba and Hausa groups. The first occurred in Sagamu near Lagos on 17 July 1999, where fighting broke out as a result of the death of a Hausa woman who had allegedly desecrated the *Owo* festival. More than 50 persons lost their lives in the incident. The crisis led to reprisal attacks in Kano, as fleeing Hausa kola nut traders recounted their experiences in Sagamu. Hundreds of lives were lost in these reprisals. Again, on 26 November 1999, Yoruba and Hausa traders clashed over the control of the strategic Mile 12 Market in Ketu, Lagos. The intervention of the OPC, whose fundamental objectives include 'to monitor the various interests of all the descendants of Oduduwa, by whatever name called, anywhere on the face of the earth and struggle for the protection of these interests',⁷ culminated in the escalation of the clashes with 115 persons reported dead. (Akinyele 2001: 626–31; Ikelegbe 2001a: 15–7). Among the consequences were the formation of the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) to defend the interests of Hausa/Fulani, and a government order to the police to shoot OPC members on sight (Akinyele 2001; Ibrahim 2001). However, rather than contain clashes, these actions ignited more conflagrations. Since the Ketu crisis, there have been seven more violent clashes involving the

Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani. The rising incidence of clashes between Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani since the return to civil rule is interesting because earlier studies of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria show that there were more clashes between Igbo and Hausa-Fulani as a result of the fact that there was more contact between both groups, as Igbos tended to settle in the North (Nnoli 1978, 1995).

Why Hausa and Yoruba are at each other's throats

The new trend can be traced to the annulment of the 12 June 1993 election. While most Nigerians and civil society organisations challenged the annulment, protests persisted in predominantly Yoruba states. It was easy for the military dictatorship to use this perceived pattern of response to blackmail the pro-democracy movement and the 12 June elections as a Yoruba affair because Chief M. K. O. Abiola, the winner of the election, was a Yoruba. Subsequent events during the Abacha administration, such as the repression of the opposition spearheaded by the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), and the incarceration of senior Yoruba military officers on charges of a coup plot, ossified suspicions between both groups, as the military regime was seen as perpetuating a hidden ethnic agenda (Agbu 1998; International IDEA 2000; Joseph 1999; Lewis 1996; Olukoshi 1998b; Sklar & Whitaker 1995). The suspicion and attendant mobilisation of ethnic consciousness heightened with the death of Abiola, a month after Abacha's death had raised hopes for the resolution of the country's political crisis in such a way that Abiola would still have had a role to play. The ludicrous circumstance of the death of Abiola a few days before his expected release raised tensions. Although riots did not break out as expected in the western states, as a result of the deployment of tanks to the area, it created a situation where Afenifere – the mainstream Yoruba political elite – decided to dine with the 'new' military regime headed by Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar with a long spoon. Consequently, in the new transition programme, Afenifere formed the Alliance for Democracy (AD), which did not meet the requirements for registration as a political party because it did not have any substantial presence outside Yorubaland. However, given widespread suspicions that the ethno-military class was anti-Yoruba, the military regime surprised watchers of Nigeria's transition programme by registering AD. The registration was borne out of calculations that AD would lose the elections. Contrary to expectations however, the AD convincingly won all elections in the west. The result of the presidential elections, where the AD/APP alliance⁸ won in the western states, confirmed the dominance of Afenifere and its unwillingness to compromise its quest

for power. They rejected 'their son' who was conscripted by retired military officers from the north.⁹ Obasanjo eventually won with support from the north, west, south-south, north central and south east, despite being rejected by his 'own' people (Ibrahim 2001).¹⁰ This scenario created a problem for Obasanjo and Nigeria's fledging democracy.

Without a geopolitical base, having been imposed on the PDP by powerful military influences, Obasanjo was desperate to create one. His attempts to capture the west and exert control over the PDP, evidenced by the frequent changes of party leadership, have generated several conflicts (ARB 38: 4, 2001). The clashes between the Yoruba and Hausa arise from the fact that the mainstream Yoruba leadership and indeed the mass public resent the paternalism reflected in the choice of Obasanjo, of all aspiring Yoruba, and that the Hausa/Fulani leadership feels peeved that Obasanjo is favouring his kinsmen who rejected him at the polls. Notable Hausa/Fulani leaders such as Muhammadu Buhari, Abubakar Rimi, Abdulrahman Okene, Wada Nas and Musa Musawa have become a major opposition force against Obasanjo, rallying and mobilising the Hausa/Fulani against him. While Rimi has said that Obasanjo should go at all costs, even if it required a *coup d'état*, Buhari, a former military head of state who has declared his ambition to contest the 2003 presidential elections, in a veiled attack on Obasanjo, asked Muslims, predominantly Hausa/Fulani, not to vote for a Christian candidate in the next elections. As the battle rages on, it is clear that loss of power and opportunities for accumulation are critical factors in the crises. Prominent Hausa/Fulanis allege that Obasanjo has discriminated against the north through the recent purges in the military, has marginalised the North in appointments; and is prosecuting a dubious privatisation programme that is consolidating the control of the economy by the Yoruba; they claim that the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission and loot recovery efforts were targeted at Hausa/Fulani, and that the Obasanjo administration has failed to guarantee security, especially in the west where the OPC operates in broad daylight despite the fact that it is banned by government.¹¹

While it is problematic to talk of an ethnic group being in power,¹² the rising tension in relations between the Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba substantiates the proposition that perceived loss of political power is an incentive for ethno-political conflict. Groups that feel they have lost out become touchy, and strategise and mobilise to recapture power (Horowitz 2000: 141–84; Gurr 2000: 5–9). In this respect, it is not the close contact between Igbo and Hausa/Fulani but the fact that the coupists who assassinated the first-generation leaders of the north – Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Bewlewa and Sir Ahmadu Bello – were predominantly of Igbo origin, and

that the Igbos threatened Hausa/Fulani hegemony by carrying out the threat to secede, that account for the longstanding hostilities between Igbo and Hausa/Fulani.¹³ The 12 June 1993 election won by Chief Abiola, a Yoruba, the crises that followed its annulment, and the eventual consensus candidacy and presidency of Obasanjo, a Yoruba, changed the picture, as some influential Hausa/Fulani felt Yoruba had taken the birthright of Hausa/Fulani.¹⁴ Counter-elites have therefore tried to fan the embers of dispossession and disenchantment in order to ensure a speedy return of power to Hausa/Fulani within the context of the weak Nigerian state, which is also characterised by intense competition for power among the political elite, given the central role of the state in capital accumulation (Dauda 2001: 31). Several commentaries have argued that the adoption of Sharia is such a strategy (Ebojowah 2000a: 9–10; Mustapha 2000: 41–7; Ilesanmi 2001). According to the report of a recent national dialogue:

Now the government of Olusegun Obasanjo is raising fears about a reversal from Muslim to Christian dominance of the security forces and state structures ... His government is reported to have removed most of the Muslim commanders in the armed forces and replaced them with Christian officers. A chapel has been constructed in the state house in Aso Rock, previously there were three mosques and no church in the complex ... These factors might have been conjugated in the minds of Muslim activists' fears about a Christian 'hidden agenda'. The attempted introduction of the Sharia legal system by some states in the federation might therefore be an attempt to checkmate what they consider to be a Christian threat. (International IDEA 2000: 82)

Sharia and the reign of terror

The adoption of Sharia in the predominantly Muslim northern states has reanimated the longstanding animosity between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. Since the Zamfara State government succeeded in passing the Sharia Bill into law in January 2000, there has been a level of disquiet in inter-religious and ethnic relations that is unprecedented since the controversial enlisting of the country into the Organisation of Islamic Conference. The bone of contention is the fear among Christians that Sharia would apply to non-Muslims. While governments of the twelve states that have adopted Sharia have said the law is strictly for Muslims, such assurances have not been convincing enough. Christians point to the duplicity of the governors of the north during the National Council of States meeting, which agreed that Sharia will revert to the penal code. The same governors later disowned the report. Moreover, the governor of Zamfara State who promised at the beginning that Sharia would not apply to Christians recently said that Sharia criminal law would apply to Christians also

(International IDEA 2000: 85). Thus non-Muslims have generally protested against the introduction of Sharia. These attempts as well as the agitation among Muslims for Sharia have put the two groups on a collision course (*The News* 3.7.2001). An attempt by Christians to demonstrate against plans by the Kaduna State House of Assembly to pass the Sharia Bill resulted in bloody clashes that claimed hundreds of lives in February 2000. Reprisal attacks in which Hausa/Fulani were victims followed in Aba, Onitsha and Uyo, as Igbo and Ibibio reacted to the slaughter of 'their people' in Kaduna.¹⁵ Such is the reaction of southerners to the adoption of Sharia that groups in the Niger Delta have started to insist that oil revenue accruing to the federation account should not be allocated to Sharia states (Dauda 2001: 34). Such threats have only exacerbated the crises of confidence. In May 2000 another Sharia-related crisis erupted in Kaduna when a Christian was murdered in a Muslim-dominated community.¹⁶

The fact that Sharia riots broke out in Kaduna, which has a significant population of non-Hausa/Fulani and Christians, heightened fears among the largely Christian people of the north-central Zone that Sharia would be adopted. This fear also reanimated age-long suspicions among the peoples of the area, who have historically resisted political and cultural domination of the Hausa/Fulani (Dabup 1999; Egwu 1999; Hon 1999; International IDEA 2000; Osaghae 1998). Since 1999, the peoples of the area have been more proactive in creating an identity separate from that of the Hausa/Fulani dominated north. In strategic parts of Kogi, Nassarawa, Plateau and Benue states are signposts informing travellers that they are in the 'Middle Belt Region' (ARB 38: 8, 2001). This rising consciousness and the mass movement of southerners from Kaduna, Kano and other core northern states in the wake of the adoption of Sharia to Jos, account for the bloody Jos riots of September 2001, which claimed more than 1,000 lives. Though the immediate cause of the riot was a dispute between a Christian woman and a Muslim outside a mosque, the riots have been linked to the appointment of a Muslim as head of the lucrative post of coordinator of the federal government's Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP). It is said that opposition of the Christians and 'indigenous' groups to the appointment led to the resignation of the appointee, a situation which alienated the Hausa/Fulani. The crisis deepened as Muslim youths took to the streets to celebrate the terrorist attack on the United States three days later. When the United States began retaliatory attacks on Afghanistan a month later, demonstrations by Muslims youths in Kano degenerated into a riot in which 200 lives were lost. The youths were protesting not just at the attack on Afghanistan but at the fact that the Nigerian government supported US efforts to apprehend the masterminds of the 11 September tragedy.

However, observers, including a chieftain of the opposition APP in Kaduna State, pointed out that ‘the whole crisis is just a way to discredit President Obasanjo so that his second term dream, if any, would be jeopardised’ (ARB 38: 10, 2001).

While most of the crises in the Middle Belt region since 1999 have been between the ethnic groups of the area and the Hausa/Fulani, conflicts have also erupted between Middle Belt groups jostling for political and economic power. In Nasarawa State, there were violent clashes between the Azare and Tiv over issues of political domination in June 2000. The war led to massive loss of lives as combatants from both sides mounted road blocks, killing innocent travellers whose only crime was that they belonged to the ‘enemy’ ethnic group. The Tiv were also engaged in conflicts with the Jukun in October 2001 over politics and control of land. The bloody clashes that ensued led to the destruction of whole communities, notably Zaki Biam in Benue State, where soldiers sacked the village in retaliation for the abduction and killing of their colleagues. One feature of conflicts in the region is the involvement of the Tiv, who are the largest ethnic group in the region, with a significant presence in Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba States. Conflicts in both Nasarawa and Taraba states were triggered by fears over alleged Tiv domination (Alubo 2002: 9–11; HRW 2001). However, there are indications that Tiv nationalism has been mobilised over what is regarded as the loss of power by the group. This is evidenced by the fact that Chief Paul Unongo, a Tiv and chieftain of the opposition APP, made an impassioned plea to President Obasanjo to reconsider the decision to remove Chief Barnabas Gemade as national chairman of the PDP. Unongo said this was necessary to give the Tiv a sense of belonging after the recent removal of Gen. Victor Malu as chief of army staff. It is thus not coincidental that the Tiv–Jukun crises erupted a few months after the exit of Malu, and that Malu’s country home was one of those torched by the soldiers who invaded Zaki Ibiam. The Tiv allege that the Jukun minister of defence instigated the removal of two of their sons from very important government positions. The murder of the nineteen soldiers was predicated on suspicions that the soldiers supported the Jukun. The minister had also been accused of subverting the restoration of peace between the Kuteb and Jukun in Taraba State.¹⁷

The role of politics and second tenure syndrome

Powerful politicians have therefore been implicated in ethno-religious and communal conflicts in the country. In Akwa Ibom State, a local militia believed to be loyal to a minister has reportedly overrun a local government

area.¹⁸ The Ogu and Okrika (Rivers State) communal conflict of 2001 was linked to the struggle for power between the incumbent governor and an APP chieftain who was governor of the old Rivers State.¹⁹ The explosion of conflicts is also linked to the obsession of incumbent public officers for a second term. This obsession is already threatening the fabric of the country's nascent democracy, as different factions of the political elite sponsor ethnic militias and vigilante groups to fight their electoral wars for them (Ukiwo 2002). The proliferation of such groups has resulted in the rising incidence of assassinations and conflicts. For instance, in October 2001, while the ruling PDP was conducting the state, LGAs and ward congress, Aba, the commercial city of Abia State, was the site of bloody clashes between the Bakassi Boys, a vigilante group, on the one hand and Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and other groups linked to the Abia Democratic Alliance, that was formed to unseat the state governor in the 2003 elections, on the other.²⁰ As incumbent office holders are determined to remain in power, they mount roadblocks to opposition forces. In the shrinking political space, opposition politicians resort to violent means to counter their exclusion from the political process. There are indications that the chain of events – assassination of justice minister Bola Ige, bomb explosions in Ikeja cantonment, rumours of *coup d'état* and the January 2002 Hausa/Yoruba riots in Lagos – that followed the Electoral Act saga, where federal legislators alleged that the Electoral Act signed by the president was different from the one that was duly passed by the National Assembly, are not coincidental.²¹ They represent pressures for the expansion of the political space to accommodate groups excluded by the present democratic dispensation. The pressures have manifested in clashes among ethno-political groups and militias.²² The mobilisation towards 2003 portends dangers. It is not just democracy that is at stake but the unity of the country, as some groups like MASSOB are campaigning for break up of the country, while others such as OPC and Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) call for a fundamental restructuring (ARB 38: 7, 2002). The government's responses to these conflicts, and its effectiveness in addressing the ethno-political conflicts that have ravaged the country in the past three years, are addressed in the next section.

STATE RESPONSES TO CONFLICTS

There is no gainsaying that the civilian administration has been concerned with the rising spate of conflicts in the country. After the riots of January 2002, President Obasanjo said 'the frequency and ferocity with which these clashes have spread across the country have made many Nigerians wonder

to what extent the generality of Nigerians are appreciative of our hard won democracy²³ (cited in Alubo 2002: 10). This statement, which was presented in the president's address to a security retreat, is typical of government's response to conflicts, namely, condemning the act and the perpetrators and sometimes the hapless victims. This is usually followed by the declaration of curfew, deployment of troops to the site, a visit to the site of the conflicts, a threat to arrest the manipulators, promises to support victims with relief materials, and the setting up of a panel to 'determine the remote and immediate causes of the conflict and recommend ways to prevent future reoccurrence' (Alubo 2002). However, it is common knowledge that these fire brigade measures constitute placeboes. Results of panels of inquiry have been left to gather dust on the shelves, because implicated actors are usually influential citizens or groups that government may not want to confront for political reasons, and the perpetrators of violence are let off the hook. While it is clear that conflict management depends less on punitive measures against the *dramatis personae*, there is no gainsaying that proactive measures to contain conflicts are needed. The civilian administration has not been able to bring the perpetrators of violence to book, despite the fact that government has sufficient information on conflict merchants.²⁴ Divisions within government circles make it impossible for the government to be coherent in its response, as different factions of the ruling party and component groups that make up government have divergent interests to protect during such conflicts. For instance, the National Council of States could not agree on an appropriate government policy on Sharia, as northern leaders disclaimed the communiqué of the meeting.²⁵ In some cases government agencies trade blame over which agency was responsible for a crisis.²⁶

The overriding motive of government appears to have been not the resolution of crises but their suppression by armed soldiers. This is why issues that were fundamental to the crises are brushed aside during the de-escalation phase of conflicts. The same approach was adopted by previous regimes, and there is a sense in which some of the conflicts that erupted during this period can be traced to past conflicts that were suppressed by military diktat. The restoration of civilian rule terminated the period of 'suspended animation' and afforded aggrieved groups the opportunity to go back to the issues, leading to violent conflicts. Clearly a more holistic approach to conflict management is needed beyond isolating individual conflicts for resolution. This appears to be the motivation of the president in setting up a Security Commission to investigate all socio-economic and political factors that have bedevilled internal security in the country. The Obasanjo administration has also taken certain programmatic approaches

to conflict management. Prominent among such programmes that are indirectly aimed at checking conflicts are the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), implementation of the 13 per cent derivation fund, and the poverty alleviation programme (PAP). While the first two are targeted at the Niger Delta, which has been engulfed in crisis between oil producing communities and oil companies and government (HRW 1999; ERA 2000; Ojo 2002; Raji *et al.* 2000), as well as the opportunities for self-government under the democratic regime, have led to some reduction in the incidence of conflict in the Delta, the PAP has not achieved the expected result. Widespread resentment over the administration of the PAP led to a review after the first year of the programme. However the change of name has not changed the basic orientation, as the programme remains a means of dispensing patronage to the party faithful and cronies. It is therefore not surprising that the Jos riots were traced to the politics of the PAP (HRW 2001: 5–6). The failure of government's feeble efforts at conflict resolution and management is further explained by the following factors.

The nature of the state

To all intents and purposes the Nigerian state remains oppressive, privatised, unpopular and unhegemonic. The state is barely able to stand on neutral ground to mediate conflict, because it lacks autonomy from the political class. It is difficult to separate government from the state, much less the personalities. Thus the style of the leader rubs off on the state. The authoritarian provenance of the present power brokers²⁷ has led to the personification of the state. No wonder that opponents of the president attack the fabric of the Nigerian 'federation'. Thus, though the country is two years into democracy, the government deploys tanks to 'quell' riots, and the president responds to criticisms with such replies as 'if you don't want soldiers, then don't find trouble'. The lack of state neutrality results in double standards, which denude the emaciated legitimacy of the government. Powerless groups tend to suffer more. While Odi and Zaki Biam – minority communities – and MASSOB are suppressed by violent means, communities and groups from more powerful ethnic groups are allegedly treated with courtesy. For instance, when nine policemen were killed during a clash in Katsina State – in the core north – no military action was taken (*Punch* 26.1.2002). Individuals and ethno-religious groups easily see the state as an agent of the enemy. Soldiers sent on routine duties are described as an army of occupation and treated as such, because they are seen as agents of oppression or mercenaries of powerful men in government.

The security agencies have also lost credibility in the process. During the Jos riots, Christians believed the Muslim commissioner of police favoured the Muslims. He allegedly sent police to protect mosques while the churches were not guarded (HRW 2001). It is important to state that this phenomenon is not new. During the conflicts of the late 1980s in northern Nigeria, such claims and counter claims of partiality of security agencies were also traded (Ibrahim 1999). A major consequence of this lack of trust is that southern state governments have been clamouring for state police because they believe the Nigeria Police Force is not only ineffective but also partial. Some state governments have gone a step further to enlist the services of vigilante groups and ethnic militias to maintain law and order (Akinyele 2001; Ukiwo 2002). There is in the country a Hobbesian obsession with power, manifested in the fierce competition for spheres of control between politicians. Politicians based at the federal level want to dominate their counterparts in the states. The latter in turn bully local government officials, all in violation of the constitution imposed by the military during the transition. This explains the tension in intergovernmental relations. The situation is worse at the federal level, where the executive and legislative arms of government have been engrossed in a battle for supremacy, which by August 2002 led the House of Representatives to call on the president to resign or face impeachment proceedings. An earlier attempt by the Senate to debate a motion of impeachment was scuttled as it generated so much controversy within the ruling PDP.²⁸

Fleeting democracy dividends

What is worse, the government lacks the capacity to deliver public goods. Civil servants and policemen have to go on strike before receiving their emoluments. Public utilities are epileptic. In the circumstances, private operators are taking over the provision of resources such as water and electricity. It is instructive that the recent ethnic conflict in Lagos was traced to the inability of a young man to pay for using a commercial latrine. The rate of unemployment is still very high. So also is public perception of the incidence of corruption.²⁹ Most Nigerians believe that the civilian administration has failed to deliver the much expected democracy dividends, beyond restoring normal supply of petroleum products at the cost of an unpopular increase in tariffs and respecting human rights (Ibrahim 2001).³⁰ The results of a recent opinion survey say it all (Lewis *et al.* 2001: 1–3):

Post-transition euphoria has given way to political realism among the public. Nigerians are less content with current political circumstances than they were 18 months ago, and less enthusiastic about the system of democracy. These changes

indicate that many people today are coming to terms with the difficulties of democratic change, in contrast to the largely uncritical views expressed in the wake of the transition ... General dissatisfaction is echoed by negative assessments of government performance on key policy issues ... Only about 45 % approve the performance of their representative to the national assembly, state government or local government authority. The majority of Nigerians do not believe that their representatives are concerned with their problems or work for their interests ... More than half of Nigerians believe that the 1999 Constitution does not reflect the nation's values and aspirations. Furthermore, trust has diminished in the National Assembly, the electoral authorities and local governments ... A number of reports of food shortages ... A growing majority believes the government is not effectively handling the problems of inequality, and more than half thinks that the gap between the rich and poor has worsened under the current regime.

While it is admitted that public perception of government's performance reflects impatience underlined by decades of neglect by the ethno-military clique, it is also true that the transformation of the fortunes of politicians within a space of two years has exacerbated declining support for the democratic regime. It is hardly surprising therefore that this hostile political economy has provided a fertile ground for the germination and exacerbation of conflicts. Common disputes degenerate into clashes as socio-economic alienation leads to resentment against competitors with social miscreants and the growing mass of unemployed lumpen elements taking advantage of minor clashes to loot public and private property.³¹

Messianic ethno-religious groups

In the midst of the crisis of state and governance, the people find succour in fissiparous ethno-religious groups. Such groups take over the functions of state and its legitimacy because citizenship is precarious (Idowu 1999). An earlier survey by Lewis *et al.* (2000) showed that 49 per cent and 21 per cent of Nigerians prefer ethnic and religious identity respectively to occupational, class and individual identities. When asked in the latter study to identify persons whom they would approach if they had a problem, most Nigerians said they would meet a religious leader, influential person and traditional ruler in order of preference (Lewis *et al.* 2001: 29–30). This explains the messianic attraction of leaders of ethno-religious groups. It is interesting to note that the young man who was manhandled in Lagos did not meet the councillor of his ward of residence and could not afford the services of a lawyer. He went straight to his ethnic group leader. The ethno-religious groups are taking over the responsibilities of the state. They provide security and settle disputes and defend the rights of their members, who are defined

by blood and creed. Thus OPC rose in defence of Yoruba unionists who lost elections to predominantly Ijaw unionists at Lagos Port (Akinyele 2001). More dramatically, the OPC rose in defence of President Obasanjo as the House of Representatives threatened impeachment, describing it as a ploy by the 'northern oligarchy' to seize power.³² Ohanaeze, the Igbo socio-cultural organisation, protested when some Igbo politicians and bureaucrats lost their positions. The APC is still voicing its opposition to the prosecution of northern military officers for their roles in the Abacha regime, and has openly supported the move by the House of Representatives to impeach President Obasanjo. The matter is worsened by the fact that public officers sacked or reprimanded for corrupt practices derive support from the groups that trivialise the charges against their 'sons and daughters'. The real political space occupied by the groups continues to render ineffective any attempt by the government to ban them.³³ As long as the state remains marginally relevant, as long as citizenship remains void, the appeal of the groups will remain irresistible, further eclipsing the state. It is true that the existence of such groups does not necessarily lead to violent conflicts. Other forms of inter-ethnic and state interactions exist. However, excessive militarisation of society and shrinking spaces for participation have made confrontation attractive (Agozino & Idem 2001).

Diminishing returns from consociationalism

Since the 1970s, Nigeria's constitution-making experiences have taken special interest in developing the consociational model for plural societies. The result is the adoption of the 'federal character' principle in the constitution, and agreements by the political class on zoning and rotation of offices among ethnic groups (Ebojowah 2000b; Nmoma 1995; Osaghae 2001). The rationale behind the consociational model is to balance the blatant inequity inherent in the majoritarian principle of liberal democracy (Lijphart 1984, 1996a). However, the overpoliticisation of consociationalism, devaluation of federalism and de-autonomisation of the state during the military era have led to diminishing returns from the consociational model. The divisions in the National Assembly on appointments reflect how deep-seated the fears of marginalisation are in the country. For instance, the Senate overwhelmingly rejected the president's nominee for the post of auditor-general because occupants of the major offices in the finance sector – minister of state for finance, Central Bank governor and accountant general of the federation – are Yoruba. This incident vividly shows the extent of polarisation and the absence of consensus on basic rules of behaviour, negotiation and bargaining among the political elite. The

overpolitisation of the consociational principle has affected its potency in checking ethnic-based political competition and conflicts in the country. It has been suggested that consociationalism is ineffective under strong presidential systems where the winner takes all and where there are no legitimate ethnic leaders (Glickman & Furia 1995; Lijphart 1996a, 1996b; Ruppie in Leith & Solomon 2001; Williams 1992). This factor constrains the efficacy of consociationalism in Nigeria. The 1999 Constitution, contrary to general expectations, retained so much power in the presidency that it increased the stakes for the office. The result is that many politicians feel it is dangerous to allow one ethnic group to produce the president for eight years. Already, some politicians from the Igbo ethnic group insist there was a pact among stakeholders during the transition that Obasanjo who filled the Yoruba slot for the presidency would not re-contest but would allow an Igbo presidency. The politics of the Igbo presidency, which has divided politicians who oppose Obasanjo's second tenure and those who support it, has led to incessant political violence in the east.³⁴ This controversy over the pact is a travesty of the consociational principle of consensus among all parties (Ebojowah 2000b: 5). The inability of the Igbo to speak with one voice, while traceable to the republican culture of the people (Nmoma 1995: 311), also symptomatises the absence of legitimate leaders for the different ethnic groups since the passing of the first-generation elites. In the more cohesive south-west, the leadership of Afenifere and Yoruba Elders Forum are struggling for supremacy. There are also fissiparous tendencies in the north, with retired military men jostling for leadership with the present vice-president. Different groups that are competing for prominence champion the agitation for self-determination in the so-called minority groups (Ebojowah 2000c; Ikelegbe 2001b; Osaghae 2001).³⁵ Finally, the involvement of government in religion and its increasing politicisation in the country – as evidenced by continued state support for pilgrimage and adoption of Sharia by several states in the north – trivialises the consociational principle of depoliticisation, 'whereby groups agree not to involve government in policy areas that might touch on the values of others' (Ebojowah 2000b: 5).



Significantly, the UNDP Human Development Report (2002: 35), in an attempt to capture the disappointments over expectations of a peace dividend from democracy in fragmented societies, found the comments of a Nigerian irresistible: 'When we were in the military regime, we didn't get anything from the government but we had peace. Now we are in a democracy, we don't get anything from the government and we do not get

peace.' After many years of authoritarian rule, when the military clique and their civilian collaborators privatised the Nigerian state, politicians in the emergent Fourth Republic are anxious to take control of the state and oil wealth. This has led to unbridled competition for political relevance and spheres of interests among politicians, especially in the context of the division of the country into geopolitical zones, states and local governments and the fact that distribution of benefits among the political class depends on the ability of each member of the ruling class to deliver his constituency. In the circumstance, ethnicity, religion and other sectarian identities are exploited, resulting in avoidable violent conflicts among component units of the country. The persistence of mass poverty and increasing income inequality,³⁶ largely as a result of the transformation of the fortunes of politicians and their allies from jobless neighbours to emergency billionaires in less than two years after capturing power, have deepened popular alienation and called into question the legitimacy of the post-military regime. Consequently, some of the easiest things to do in contemporary Nigeria are to mobilise an assassin, vigilante, ethnic-cum-religious militia, rioter, crowd or rented pro-government demonstrator. These are not people who deepen democracy. Yet it is not just democracy that is at stake in Nigeria. The Nigerian house may not have fallen, but it is a house divided against itself. Democracy and good governance would give the people a sense of belonging.

NOTES

1. See interview with Gov. C. Mbadinuju of Anambra State, *Tell* 8.10.2001.
2. See the list in *Tell* 18.2.2002.
3. Primordialists emphasise the bond of blood, while instrumentalists draw attention to the political uses of ethnicity. Recent analyses reframe the discourse to include objectivists and constructivists. See, for instance, Ake 2000: 93–4; Gurr 2000: 3–5.
4. Early reports on the explosions alleged mutiny. Several elected officials went underground until the Lagos State governor refuted the reports of a coup (*Tell* 18.2.2002).
5. Some Nigerians protested against the story in pro-democracy mass rallies organised in Port Harcourt and Jos (see *The Guardian* 9.2.2002).
6. Another account of the conflict said it arose out of the refusal of the Hausa boy to pay for the toilet facility provided by private operators.
7. See *OPC Constitution*, 7–8, for these and other objectives.
8. Following the successes of the PDP in earlier polls, the AD and All Peoples Party (APP) formed an alliance to present a common candidate during the presidential elections.
9. This was not the first time a presidential aspirant lost his base in elections. In 1989, Alhaji Lateef Jakande lost the primaries of the Social Democratic party (SDP) to Shehu Musa Yar'Adua in Lagos State. Provisional results of the annulled 12 June election showed that Chief Abiola won Alhaji Bashir Tofa's home state of Kano, and even his ward.
10. It is instructive to note that opposition to President Obasanjo in the west is shrinking, following the ability of Obasanjo's associates to split the Yoruba opposition and through such critical appointments as that of late Chief Bola Ige as justice minister (see ARB 38: 12, 2001; Ibrahim 2001).
11. For various allegations of marginalisation of the north see *The News* 5.6.2000, 18.9.2001.

12. It would appear that selfish interests are being presented as group interests. While northerners in the regime have refuted allegations of marginalisation, those who are not in government are leading the opposition. This includes Alhaji Abubakar Rimi who lost out in the appointment of vice-president, and Gen. Buhari who resigned his position as executive chairman following the planned dissolution of the Petroleum Trust Fund. See *The News* 18.2.2002.

13. This is confirmed by Alhaji Liman Ciroma, prominent northern leader who recently said the reluctance of Gen. Ironsi (an Igbo man), to punish the predominantly Igbo officers who killed northern political leaders in the botched 1966 coup sent the wrong signals to northerners and pitted the northerners against the Igbo (*This Day* 28.2.2002).

14. Alhaji Maitama Sule (1992), a prominent northerner, constructed a myth in which the Hausa/Fulani had the divine right to rule while other ethnic groups were gifted in other mundane areas.

15. See 'Blood for Blood', *The News* 12.10.2001.

16. See 'Nigeria's Kigali', *The News* 5.6.2000.

17. See 'Re: Our Case Against Danjuma', *The News* 5.6.2000.

18. See 'Waiting for the worst', *Tell* 18.2.2002.

19. It is alleged that attempts by the PDP to capture the two APP controlled local government areas in the next elections triggered the crisis. In the tussle, the two factions supported two factions in the succession crisis to the throne of the *Amayanabo* of Okrika and *Amayanabo* of Ogu. See 'A Tug of Blood', *Tell* 3.12.2001; 'War of Okrika Brothers', *Tell* 3.12.2001.

20. See, 'Bakassi versus MASSOB', *Tell* 26.11.2001. This is also true in Anambra State where Abuja based politicians are challenging the governor.

21. The bone of contention is the section on registration of political parties. While the National Assembly was favourable to the registration of new political parties, the version signed by the president ruled out this possibility. Nigerians suspected this was a ploy by the president and his faction of the ruling PDP to forestall opposition in the next elections.

22. See Akinyele 2001; 'Killing for Power', *Tell* 8.10.2001; 'End of war', *The News* 16.4.2001.

23. In a national broadcast to say why he would not resign following the impeachment threat by the House of Representatives, the president also attributed the poor performance of the economy to conflicts, which scare away foreign investors. See *The Guardian* 26.8.2002.

24. Investigations by Human Rights Watch (2001) show that several groups warned the state government and security agencies of the impending Jos crisis but that the authorities took no pre-emptive action. Participants at the special edition of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) *Tuesday Live* on the Jos Riots, stunned Nigerians when they said that the federal government and security agencies had information on the identity of the perpetrators of conflicts in Kaduna and Jos, but lacked the political will to arrest them.

25. See A. Adebajo. 'The Politics of Sharia', *Tell* 3.12.2001.

26. Recently, for instance, the House of Representatives criticised the executive for inability to provide security for Nigerians. See *The Guardian* 14.2.2002.

27. Like the president, many actors in politics are former military men or civilians who served military regimes.

28. See A. Esajere, 'Ultimatum, impeachment and other matters', *The Guardian* 25.8.2002.

29. Transparency International Report ranked Nigeria as the second most corrupt country in the world in 2002. Though the country moved from its first position in 2001, the report confirmed the failure of government's anti-corruption programme. See *This Day* 29.8.2002.

30. The gains in the human rights arena may be fast disappearing as the government closes on opposition groups. Labour leaders were arrested for leading workers to strike. Striking policemen were sacked and their colleagues who contemplated a sympathy strike were stopped when government threatened to prosecute them for treason. A critical religious leader was recently questioned by security agencies for his anti-government views. See *This Day* 22.1.2002; *Punch* 9.3.2002; *The Guardian* 14.3.2002.

31. Furthermore, participants at an International Conference on 'An Assessment of Nigeria's Democratic Journey so far', organised by the Centre for Advanced Social Science (CASS), linked the parlous state of socio-economic provisioning to the outbreak of conflicts and violent crimes across the country. See Communiqué, *Daily Trust* 11.3.2002.

32. See I. Nzeako, 'Impeachment: ploy by northerners to seize power', *The Post Express* 24.8.2002.

33. At the time of revising the paper, the federal government had sent a controversial bill to the national assembly for the proscription of the groups categorised as ethnic militias. It is doubtful whether the legislators, some of whom have links with these groups, will pass the bill.

34. See A. Agbo 'Trouble in Igboland', *Tell* 11.3.2002.

35. See also J. Ameh. 'North is still divided', *Punch* 7.3.2002; Y. Owolabi, 'War of the Oduduwa Brothers', *Tell* 26.3.2002.

36. Nigeria's Gini coefficient is 0.506, above the sub-Saharan average which is 0.440. For a discussion of the performance of the Nigerian economy see 'Nigeria: Untapped potential', ECA 2002: 153-83.

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