

Decentralization: A Policy to End Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria

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Author Note

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This paper focuses on the June 13, 2017 BBC article entitled “Letter from Africa: Should Nigerian regions gain power?” In this article, the author, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, skillfully discusses the policy decisions that created the conditions for violent ethnic conflict in Nigeria. Based on the continuous call for a new federal structure that promotes the autonomy of the regions and limits the power of the center, the author examines how the implementation of a policy of devolution or decentralization could help in mitigating Nigeria’s ethno-religious crises.

The incessant ethnic conflict in Nigeria, the author contends, is a byproduct of the federal structure of the Nigerian government, and the way Nigerian leaders ruled the country since the amalgamation of the different ethnic nationalities into two regions – the northern protectorate and the southern protectorate – as well as the amalgamation of the north and south into one nation-state called Nigeria in 1914. Against the will of the Nigerian ethnic nationalities, the British forcefully united different indigenous peoples and nationalities who had no prior formal relationships. Their boundaries were modified; they were combined into one modern state by the British colonial administrators; and the name, Nigeria – a name derived from a 19th century British owned company, the *Royal Niger Company* – was imposed on them.

Prior to the independence of Nigeria in 1960, the British colonial administrators ruled Nigeria through a system of governance known as indirect rule. Indirect rule by its nature legalizes discrimination and favoritism. The British governed through their loyal traditional kings, and introduced skewed ethnic employment policies whereby the northerners were recruited for the military and the southerners for the civil service or public administration.

The skewed nature of governance and economic opportunities that the British introduced metamorphosed into interethnic animosities, comparison, suspicion, intense competition and

discrimination during the pre-independence era (1914-1959), and these culminated in interethnic violence and war six years after the 1960 declaration of independence.

Before the amalgamation of 1914, the various ethnic nationalities were autonomous entities and governed their people through their indigenous systems of governance. Because of the autonomy and self-determination of these ethnic nationalities, there were minimal or no inter-ethnic conflict. However, with the advent of the amalgamation of 1914 and the adoption of the parliamentary system of government in 1960, previously isolated and autonomous ethnic nationalities – for example, the Igbos, Yorubas, Hausas, etc. – began to ferociously compete for power at the center. The so-called Igbo-led coup d'état of January 1966 that resulted in the death of prominent government and military leaders mainly from the northern region (the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group) and the counter coup of July 1966, as well as the massacre of the Igbos in the northern Nigeria by the northerners which was viewed by the public as a revenge by the northern Hausa-Fulanis against the Igbos of the southeast, are all consequences of inter-ethnic struggle for power control at the center. Even when federalism - the presidential system of government - was adopted during the second Republic in 1979, interethnic struggle and violent competition for power and resource control at the center did not stop; rather, it intensified.

The numerous interethnic conflicts, violence and war that have plagued Nigeria over the years are therefore caused by the fight over which ethnic group will be at the helm of affairs, consolidate power at the center, and control the affairs of the federal government, including oil which is Nigeria's primary source of revenue. Nwaubani's analysis supports a theory that espouses a recurrent pattern of action and reaction in interethnic relations in Nigeria over competition for the center. When one ethnic group seizes power at the center (federal power), other ethnic groups that feel marginalized and excluded begin to agitate for inclusion. Agitations

such as these often escalate to violence and war. The military coup of January 1966 that led to the emergence of an Igbo head of state and the counter coup of July 1966 that led to the demise of the Igbo leadership and ushered in the military dictatorship of the northerners, as well as the secession of the eastern region to form the aborted independent state of Biafra from the federal government of Nigeria which led to a three-year war (1967-1970) causing the death of more than three million people, most of whom were Biafrans, are all examples of the action-reaction pattern of interethnic relationship in Nigeria. Also, the rise of Boko Haram was seen as an attempt by the northerners to cause instability in the country and weaken the government administration of President Goodluck Jonathan who hails from the oil rich Niger Delta of southern Nigeria. Incidentally, Goodluck Jonathan lost the (re)election of 2015 to the current President Muhammadu Buhari who is of the northern Hausa-Fulani ethnic group.

Buhari's ascension to the presidency is accompanied by two major social and militant movements from the south (specifically, southeast and south-south). The one is the revitalized agitation for the independence of Biafra led by the Indigenous People of Biafra. The other is the re-emergence of the environmentally based social movement in the oil rich Niger Delta led by the Niger Delta Avengers.

Based on these renewed waves of ethnic agitation for self-determination and autonomy, many scholars and policy makers are beginning to rethink the current structure of the federal government and the principles on which the federal union is based. It is argued in Nwaubani's BBC article that a more decentralized arrangement whereby the regions or ethnic nationalities are given more power and autonomy to manage their own affairs, as well as explore and control their natural resources while paying taxes to the federal government, will not only help in improving interethnic relationships in Nigeria, but most importantly, such a decentralized policy

will engender sustainable peace, security and economic growth for all the members of the Nigerian union.

The issue of decentralization or devolution hinges on the question of power. The importance of power in policy making cannot be overemphasized in democratic states. After the transition to democracy in 1999, the power to make policy decisions and implement them have been conferred to democratically elected officials, especially the law makers in congress. These law makers, however, derive their power from the citizens who elected them. Therefore, if a larger percentage of the citizens are not happy with the current system of the Nigerian government – i.e., the federal arrangement - then they have the power to talk to their representatives about the need for a policy reform through a legislation that will put in place a more decentralized system of government that will give more power to the regions and less power to the center.

If the representatives refuse to listen to the demands and needs of their constituents, then the citizens have the power to vote for law makers who will promote their interest, make their voice heard, and propose legislations in their favor. When elected officials know that they will not be re-elected if they do not support a decentralization bill that will return autonomy to the regions, they will be coerced to vote for it in order to retain their seats. Therefore, the citizens have the power to change political leadership who will enact policies that will respond to their decentralization needs and increase their happiness.

A more decentralized system of government provides flexible – not -rigid – structures for conflict resolution. The test of a good policy lies in that policy's ability to resolve existing problems or conflicts. Until now, the current federal arrangement that ascribes too much power to the center has not been able to resolve the ethnic conflicts that have crippled Nigeria since its

independence. The reason is because too much power is given to the center while the regions are stripped of their autonomy.

A more decentralized system has the potential of restoring power and autonomy to local and regional leaders who are very close to the real problems that the citizens face daily, and who have the know-how to work with the people to find lasting solutions to their problems. Because of its flexibility in increasing local participation in political and economic discussions, decentralized policies have the potential to respond to the needs of the local populations, while increasing stability in the union.

In the same way that the states in the United States are seen as political laboratories for the entire country, a decentralized policy in Nigeria will empower the regions, stimulate new ideas, and help in the incubation of these ideas and new innovations within each region or state. New innovations or policies from the regions or states could be replicated across other states before becoming a federal law.

In conclusion, this kind of political arrangement has many benefits, two of which stand out. First, a decentralized system of government will not only bring the citizens closer to politics and politics closer to the citizens, it will also shift the focus of interethnic struggle and competition over power from the center to the regions. Second, decentralization will engender economic growth and stability across the entire country, especially when new innovations and policies from one state or region are replicated in the other parts of the country.