

The Domination Anxiety in Nigerian Politics

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I shall begin by identifying three phases in the evolution of the Nigerian state. The first which spans the centuries between pre-history and 1861 was sporadically put in place. The next phase, to which I refer as the colonial century, involved the creation of modern social and political institutions. Mid-way through that century, anti-colonial nationalism gave the breath of life to Nigerian nationhood, transforming it into a vibrantly living polity. Were it not for the intervention of colonial rule, the "peoples of the Niger area" would have mobilized their cultural resources to meet the challenges of migration, trade, and political interaction in ways of their own choosing.

Colonial rule transformed the structure of African societies. Western education, public administration, professionalization, roads, railways, motor vehicles, and electronic communications gradually modernized the colony and protectorates of Nigeria and their successor state. Professor Adiele Afigbo has argued that this Nigeria has lacked an inherent civic consciousness or culture for the 300 or so ethnic groups (Afigbo, 1997).

It was during the third phase of growth, during the middle of the colonial century, that the forces of anti-colonial nationalism planted the seeds for what might have grown into the tree of national unity. But the tree did not grow naturally. Why? While many reasons can be adduced, I wish to discuss but one that is often ignored, namely fear; in particular, fear that is close to the heart of every ethnic group in Nigeria. That is the fear of being dominated, politically and economically, by one or more other ethnic groups. It is this fear that lies at the heart of the so called politics of hate in Nigeria. It is this fear that produces political corruption, instability, and even political underdevelopment of the Nigerian state. It is this fear that explains the very high premium that Nigerians put on political power at the center. And it is fear that gave birth to a deformed federal union.

Federalism and the fear of ethnic domination

In Nigeria, the federal system is not exactly another political import from the West. It was adopted in the 1950s for strictly domestic political considerations. In particular, it was seen as the best political system for securing peaceful coexistence among the country's three major ethnic groups. This is utterly different from the adoption of federalism in the United States, where it is part of the system of checks and balances established by the American Constitution.

When the British rulers of Nigeria called the Ibadan Conference of 1950, it was to discuss the agitation by Nigerian nationalists for political independence. The agitation was largely southern based because during the previous half century, the British consciously separated Northern Nigeria from interaction with Southern Nigerians. The result was a deeply disuniting political gulf between southern and northern political elites. In the South, where indigenous political power was allowed to revolve around two dominant ethnic nationalities, the Igbo in the East and the Yoruba in the West, mutual resentment grew out of intense political and economic competition. The three most influential founding fathers of Nigeria, at one time or another, either expressed this innate fear of ethnic domination or expressed the intention of dominating others, no doubt as a defense against being at the receiving end of ethnic domination. Indeed, it was the fear of political domination by the Yoruba and the Igbo that forced the late Sir Ahmadu Bello to reject the proposal to attain Nigeria's political independence in 1956. According to him, "the Northern region did not intend to commit suicide." In a perfectly reasonable statement, he made the point that: "Any country which accepts self government must do so with its eyes wide open, and the problem of one section of the country imposing its will on the others does not arise" (See Bello, 119). With this he moved an amendment which substituted "as soon as practicable" for the date "1956" in the motion for independence put forward by Chief Anthony Enahoro.

The language of Chief Obafemi Awolowo's fears of ethnic domination was more direct as indicated by the following expression of his fears of Igbo domination: "In 1948 another Ibo leader and a member of Nigerian Legislative Council had declared the domination of Nigeria by Ibos is a question of time" (Awolowo, p.172). He went on to assert that the only obstacle to this ambition was the Yoruba

intelligentsia and accused Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the best known Igbo leader of the time, of plotting to build up the Igbo as a master race. But this statement was not without provocation.

Consider Awolowo's evidence, an extract from one ethnically chauvinistic article written by Dr. Azikiwe:

And then to think of the combination of Spartan heroes who crossed the lordly Niger, journeyed through the good earth of Benin, hurried across the dormains of Oshemawa of Ondo, of the Atanla of Owo, of the Owa of Ilesha, of the Oni of Ife, of the Alake of Abeaokuta in their invasion of these islands! Who but heroes of high brawn and exceptionally developed brain would have dared to make this invasion and to succeed in carrying to their River Niger home, the Golden Fleece of Intercollegiate Soccer Championship of the Eastern and Western Provinces?...Could their achievement be paralleled? Would it not be better for me to leave the answer to the laps of the gods? (Awolowo, p.139)

The ethnic superiority complex and braggadocio as represented in the above writing by Azikiwe over a high school soccer match in which Christ the King College Onitsha (in Igboland) defeated St. Gregory's College, Lagos (in Yorubaland) betrays another expression of the fear of ethnic domination among the political leaders of Nigeria at the eve of independence. Yet, these three founding fathers sat down together to negotiate the terms of Nigerian independence. The federal system which emerged was born out of the need to accommodate the different demands of the majority ethnic groups that they represented and blend the similarities of these diverse, distrustful and suspicious ethnic groups under one central government. However, the federal system singularly failed to end this fear, distrust and suspicion among the major ethnic groups because of certain inbuilt iniquities in the British enforced regional geography and structure of administration.

The first of these outrages is said to be the size of the three regions into which the so-called Richards Constitution of 1946 divided the country. One of the federating units, the North, was larger than the sum of the other two federating units, the Eastern and Western regions. This gaping inequality in the size of the regions is not just one clear evidence of the perceived or real British partiality to the North; it has remained the main source of the Eastern and Western fear of political domination since independence. The North was made so large that it could override the wishes of the other two regions in the federation. As a leading Nigerian journalist has written recently:

Certainly, the Easterners and Westerners did not feel comfortable with the Northern region towering above them. They soon began to show their resentment quite rightly and petulantly. Nearly all our problems as a nation flowed from the domination bug. The British sowed the seeds of future agitations over domination-ethnic, educational, economic and political. We are still eating the fruits thereof.(Agbese, p.xviii)

The second affront deals with the minority question. In particular, the construction of the administrations of the three regions around the numerical majority ethnic groups bred persistent political agitation by the many minority groups scattered across the country. Just as the major ethnic groups feared political domination by each other, the minority groups in the East, West and the North equally resented political domination by the Igbo, the Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani respectively. Navigating this web of domination anxieties has been the preoccupation of many Nigerian statesmen and another source of the popularity of federalism and the creation of new states in Nigeria.

Nigeria became a federation in 1954 as a result of inter-party negotiations together with the British Colonial Office. That was the era of the so called real federalism, in which some real political powers resided with the powerful regions. Prof. Peter Ekeh has recently outlined the particular features of that negotiated federalism: (1) The federalism was ethnic in the sense that ethnic nationalities formed bases of governance. (2) It appropriately assumed that the Nigerian state belonged to Nigerians. Political independence shifted the ownership of the Nigerian state from the British colonizers to the political communities of Nigeria. (3) In the South ethnic nationalities were allowed to maintain their age-old ownership of their lands and territories as was the case in the colonial times (Ekeh, p.7). Of these, the claim that Nigeria's federalism was ethnic has the greatest potential for generating some controversy. Indeed, the current movement for ethnic federalism championed by Chief Anthony Enaharo and his Movement for National Reformation springs from the same trap of distrust and fear of domination that I have already described. Justification for that fear was obvious during the dictatorship of General Sani Abacha when Nigeria's project of unity through diversity was eroded with mindless impunity. The feeling of political dispossession and marginalization became more pronounced and almost universal since the June

12 annulment of the presidential election, won by Moshood Abiola, in 1993. That annulment concretized for all and sundry the reluctance of an oligarchy of northern ethnic groups to relinquish the grip on political power in Nigeria. The fear of domination by one or more ethnic groups was made real to both majority and minority ethnic groups. During the Abacha regime, the call for ethnic federalism was vigorously renewed.

Ethnic federalism

The call to rebuild Nigeria's federalism along ethnic lines has long history. Chief Obafemi Awolowo wrote favorably about ethnic federalism in his autobiography over forty years ago. There, he argued that in dividing the country into regions, it is necessary to group people into political regions on the basis of shared ethnicity and cultural affinity. Before this, a memorandum penned by Chief Awolowo himself spoke directly to the issue of ethnic federalism, thus:

We advocate the grouping of Nigeria into various autonomous states or regions, purely on ethnical basis. Experience of other countries shows that this basis is more natural, and invariably more satisfactory than any other basis. For this reason, we urge that the Yoruba-speaking people in the Northern Region, and the Ibo-speaking people in the Western Region, should be grouped respectively with the Western and Eastern Regions....(Awolowo, p.176)

Chief Anthony Enahoro, himself a former chieftain of Awolowo's political party, sees ethnic federalism as the best way to expand democracy in the Nigerian political system. He argues that 'electoralism' in the popular form of "one-man-one vote," is not enough expression of political equality in an ethnically heterogeneous society like Nigeria. In multi-national polities, spheres of national relationships exist where the nationality rather than the individual constitutes the fundamental unit of political equality. The level of equality of individual citizens is directly proportional to the level of equality of the nationalities that make up the country. Surely, in a society still mired in ethnic nepotism and in ethnic rather than national loyalties, this conception of political equality has some merit. Nigerians are first and foremost, Tivs, Efiks, Yorubas, Igbos, Hausa, Ogonis, Urhobos, Kanuris and Fulanis. These ethno-linguistic groups, which number more than 400, cannot be united on a consensual basis without creative management of the "nationalities question," of which Enahoro's model is a thoughtful exposition.

To be sure, the critics of ethnic federalism have entered the lists of debate with cogent arguments of their own, thus: In a country of 300 to 400 ethnic groups, how many ethnic states should we have? A federation of even 250 ethnic states would be too unwieldily to control. And, in any case, most of the states will be so weak as to promote more rather than less centralization of power. Second, a central assumption in the arguments of proponents of ethnic federalism is that ethnic groups were political units at the pre-colonial period, but this assumption may not be based on an accurate reading of history. Most of the ethnic groups that comprise modern Nigeria did not constitute political units before the colonial conquest of Africa. Indeed, it has been persuasively argued that it is the existence of Nigeria itself that produced the consciousness of ethnicity among the country's ethnic groups (See Nnoli; Appiah,173-180). Third, ethnic federalism presupposes unity within individual ethnic groups. However, the evidence now among us since the current democratic dispensation shows that there are more intra-ethnic conflicts than there are inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. A fourth argument against ethnic federalism is that it does not anticipate what may happen with ethnic groups that are not geographically contiguous. On the matter of where a Fulani state might be, this could be confusing given the existence of a Fulani, as distinct from Hausa linguistic identity, and the presence of pastoral Fulani all over the north. Take the Fulani in Plateau state who have lived there continuously for over 150 years. Suppose now that a state is created for them in Sokoto. Will this not produce ethnic cleansing of sorts against them in Plateau? If what we have observed from the creation of additional states out of ethnically contiguous Nigerian states is anything to go by, they will be automatically forced to leave. Finally, as an unapologetic federalist myself, my main opposition to ethnic federalism is that it will most likely lead to confederation.

My objection to confederation is that it will dilute the regional influences of Nigeria and may even lead to disintegration. I believe strongly that most Nigerians are better off under one Nigeria than they will be under many unviable independent states. Still, I do realize that I do not prefer one Nigeria at all cost. In particular, the one Nigeria that is worth preserving is one in which there is popular government and political stability without tyranny; one in which citizenship is equal and nationalized. That is to say, a Nigeria where all citizens will have the ability to live and invest in any part of the country without fear of

abuse to their persons and to their properties. All these ills are based on ethnic fears of domination. That fear is producing many erratic and divisive demands on the Obasonjo administration, such as the call for ethnic federalism, real federalism, sovereign national conference, confederation, and the implementation of the Sharia. Of these demands, only the call for the implementation of Sharia is being attained. If this permanently succeeds, then we would have a Nigeria where a system of religious laws is allowed to take the place of the penal code. This would mean that citizenship in Nigeria becomes woefully unstandardized and unequal, and the idea of confederation becomes more and more tenacious and irrepressible.
