

# Restructuring, Secession and True Federalism: Ethnic Agitations and the Deepening crises of Nigerian Federalism

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**Abstract—** One of the problems bedeviling the post-colonial Nigerian state is the failure of attempts to wield together the disparate ethnic nationalities that were brought together by colonial fiat, otherwise called the amalgamation of 1914. Thus, the desire to maintain the colonial status quo has seen the country go through series of military coups and a bloody civil war to sustain the nation's indivisibility. However, the ugly experience of the civil war, it would seem has not taught sufficient lessons on the imperatives of harmonious co-existence of various ethnic groups without confronting each other. The main contention has been competition over access to power and material resources by the various ethnic nationalities that fear the control of power and material resources by any of the ethnic groups would lead to their domination and marginalization. This has given rise to all sorts of agitations regarding the country's nature of federalism and the need to restructure so as to provide a balance federal structure capable of allaying the fear of marginalization. It is the contention of this endeavor that the fear of marginalization is behind recent uproar in the country about the restructuring debate and other sundry issues such as secession and calls for a return to regionalism and resource control.

**Index Terms-** Agitation, Ethnic, Federalism, Restructuring, Secession,

## I. INTRODUCTION

Armageddon, it seems has come, this is going by the tension that has suddenly enveloped the country as a result of the resurgence of the debate over our nature of federalism. The passion, emotions and sentiments so far exhibited by agitators of restructuring, secession and those against show clearly that these are not the best of times for the nation. While it could be conceded that Nigerians have a right to discuss issues that are affecting their daily interactions with each other, it is certainly disturbing to say the least that recent outbursts by different elements in the country leave much to be desired. Sadly too, even opinion leaders who ordinarily were expected to exercise caution and restraint in their utterances so as not to overheat the polity failed in this expected role of statesmen and women. Thus, statesmen have become non-statesmen in their utterances as they have descended from their Olympian heights to join the fray of pedestrian comments on very serious national issues. Perhaps, it is disappointing to read utterances such as this:

We cannot continue to allow a centralization policy which makes the constituent units of this nation resentful; they say

monkey dey work, baboon dey chop. And the idea of centralizing revenues, allocations system, whereby you dole out; the thing is insulting and is what I call anti-healthy rivalry. It is against the incentives to make states viable. I am on the side of those who say we must do everything to avoid disintegration. That language I understand. I don't understand Olusegun's (ex-president Obasanjo) language. I don't understand Buhari's (president mohamadu) language and all their predecessors, saying the sovereignty of this nation is non-negotiable. It's bloody well negotiable and we had better negotiate it. We better negotiate it, not even at meetings, not at conferences, but every day in our conduct towards one another.<sup>1</sup>

It is on the basis of comments such as we have witnessed in the country in recent times, and the quit notices given to some Nigerians to vacate certain parts of the country at appointed dates that a source lamented that "while there is diminished threats to Nigeria's security from outside, internal threats to her survival as a single, indivisible entity have continued to occupy the center stage."<sup>2</sup> These threats manifest in the failure of the various identities that form Nigeria to live in peace without confronting each other. This is because of the constant skirmishes over access to political power and by extension, economic opportunities between and among the various ethnic identities. These increasing contests have oftentimes stirred tension and violence. Recently, these threats have manifested in all manner and forms such as Herdsmen/Farmers conflict, calls for restructuring of the country, outright campaign by certain groups for secession from the country and others for the need to return the country to the path of true Federalism.

The sometimes rancorous nature of these issues and the emotion displayed by the agitators show clearly that Nigerians do not know their past, or even if they do, do not care, since the tendency to ignore the events of that past. Thus, there is always the tendency of that past and the ugly events associated with it to intimidate and threaten us again in times of national calamity and disagreement. It is in this context that recent calls for secession and the quit notice handed to certain ethnic groups to leave certain parts of the country are ominous signs that are not only putting Nigerians on edge, but also threatening the very foundation of our national unity. It is daily pushing the nation close to the precipice, perhaps more than at any other time since the end of the civil war.

It was Greenlee who once told us that "experience is a master teacher, even if it is not our own".<sup>3</sup> There is an increasing realization that the ugly events of the civil war, an experience that rocked the foundation of Nigeria's unity is lost on our memory as a people. This is because of the failure of opinion leaders in the country to see the danger posed by recent hate speech oozing out of their people in recent times. The experience of Rwanda should be instructive as twenty

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three years after. The country is yet to recover fully from the impact of the genocide triggered by hate speech and senseless excitement violence.

Following the ugly events that took place after the coup of January, 1966, Col. Ojukwu in a solemn speech while installing the Emir of Kano, Alhaji Ado Bayero as the Chancellor of University of Nsukka said:

I know that those events have greatly distressed you, as they do all well-meaning Nigerians and friends of Nigeria... We must accept the sad events as a challenge to all who have dedicated their energies to the task of unity for the country... lives and property have been lost, many have been made homeless; others have been bereft of their loved ones; confidence has been shaken; fear has replaced faith in one towards the other. There are sad reflections which must remain a source of guilt and shame for all, who, by deliberate acts of insinuations, were responsible, directly or indirectly, for them... we cannot restore the lives of which have been lost nor the blood which have been shed. But we should not ignore the fact that they have been valuable lives and blood. It must, therefore be our prayer that the innocent blood thus shed will be accepted as the supreme purchase price for the solid and everlasting unity of this country and that the events which led to this situation will forever, be the worse that this country should experience.<sup>4</sup>

Though, this prayer was not answered as Nigeria was engulfed by a conflagration that consumed more innocent lives and blood.

It was in a bid to strengthen the unity of the nation by ensuring that the country remains one indivisible entity that in his broadcast to the nation marking the end of the civil war, Gen. Gowon said on January 15, 1970 that "We have arrived at one of the greatest moments of history in our Nation, a great moment of victory for National unity and reconciliation. We have arrived at the end of a tragic and painful conflict... Long live one united Nigeria. We thank God for his mercies".<sup>5</sup> that broadcast certainly reinforced the pillars of the foundation of Nigeria's unity. In that profound broadcast, Gen. Gowon told Nigerians that there was "No Victors" No Vanquished". There is no doubt that even those who had played or contributed in one way or the other to plunge Nigeria into that unfortunate and tragic event felt a sign of relief that Nigeria had overcome attempt to balkanize it and weaken its strength in the comity of Nations. It is thus, against the backdrop of these various attempts at national unity and integration that currents agitations in the country are becoming disturbing as they are rather inciting.

This paper is concerned with current agitations for restructuring in the country and the dust raised by it. It seeks to understand the reasons behind the agitations and why the agitations are coming now and not before. Again, why are the agitators refusing to go through the normal democratic process (National Assembly) but prefer to smuggle these issues through the backdoor. Why are these people not prepared to canvass for votes using these issues in the 2019 elections? Why are people who were not earlier advocates of restructuring suddenly its die-hards? These and other issues need answers to if the agitations are not to be seen as emanating from a vocal group that has lost power and thus need something to shore its relevance, or still, a group that cannot compete in a greater Nigeria and thus prefer to compete in small enclaves where they can dominate others. The discussion is aware that it cannot in all honesty lay

claims to the fact that the last is said of the issues raised.

## II. NIGERIA'S PLURALISM

Scholars are often swift in blaming Nigeria's plural nature for every of the country's woes. In the view of Otite, Nigeria has several kinds of pluralism such as ethnicity, religion, class and demography that aid in the generation of conflict.<sup>6</sup> over the years, human societies have been confronted with the complexities associated with multi-ethnic entities in terms of their social anthropological structures, organizational processes and the seemingly inherent contradictory tendencies that tend to divide different groups: Thus, attempts to understand these contradictions have led to serious research on the concept of pluralism, its variants and symbols, social content and structural dimensions. It is conceded that these studies have yielded immense benefits. It is now clear that pluralism entails diversity which finds expression in forms and structures whose effects are most significantly felt in plural societies. In the words of Kuper, Pluralism is defined as "societies characterized by certain conditions of cultural diversity and social cleavage, (which)... arise from the contact of different peoples and cultures within a single society."<sup>7</sup> Some of the characteristics of such a society include:

- a) Absence of value consensus,
- b) Presence of cultural heterogeneity,
- c) Presence of conflicts between the significant corporate groups,
- d) Relative autonomy between parts of the social system,
- e) Use of coercion and lack of economic interdependence as basis for social integration.

These features are usually associated with societies that were held together by the forces of colonialism where policy of "divide and rule" was applied. Here, conflicts among the different identities tend to be pervasive. Conflict is inherent in this type of society because of the separate but overlapping structures that are deliberately created to clash with themselves. Thus:

[T]he social basis is a medley of a people living side by side, but separately within the same political unit. It is in the strictest sense a medley of peoples, for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet but only in the market place, in buying and selling.<sup>8</sup>

In this type of society, people read meanings into symbols interpret them as to how such symbols affect them in terms of social relevance, power politics and economic gains. If the gains are minimal, they create the basis for conflict in the society, everyone in the group or each of the group is already converted and will not like to be socially polluted by the ideas and cultural folkways of their opponents. The elites of the opposites use this very much to their advantages. In societies where there is lack of system reinforcing mechanism, conflicts are apparent in form of class, economic, gender, social, communal, political, religious and environmental phenomena.

This is common in post-colonial plural societies where the colonial psychology of "divide-and-rule" has been ingrained into the administrative system that the people have inherited.

At the exit of colonial rule this mentality became a trigger for conflict in Nigeria particularly.

It is equally argued that there exist in such societies institutions that act as safety valves for the regulation of these structures towards peace, unity and national integration. In Nigeria, lack of institutional mechanisms for the regulation of disagreements among the country's constituent parts can only be discerned by the frequency of accusations and counter accusations over issues of political power and economic resources. Thus, as noted by Ekeh: "Citizenship relations with the civil state is in terms of and only in terms of social rights, while duties are withheld from the civil state and are either abrogated or otherwise located at primordial sources".<sup>9</sup>

Ordinarily, Nigeria's plural nature is supposed to be exploited to the Country's immense benefits and advantage. However, this seems not to be the case as the country's multi-ethnic nature has constituted an albatross on the country because of the failure of these ethnic identities to co-exist harmoniously. The main factor around the matter of discontents in the polity is centered round the matter of distribution of power and availability of resources in the nation. Reinforcing this view, Adeyemi posits that "the real problem in Nigeria is not so much the level of ethnic differences, secularity or religiosity but fear of political domination of one ethnic or religious group by another".<sup>10</sup>

So pervasive are these disagreement and fears on almost all issues that Alubo contends, have led to the abandonment of the old National anthem which recognized our diversity and differences in its, "though tribes and tongue differ, in brotherhood we stand" and substituted it with, "arise oh compatriot, Nigeria's call, Obey".<sup>11</sup> He posed the question of which compatriots of this is referring to as some Nigerians are not parts of what is supposed to be theirs in a country that is meant to be for all.

Thus, the various contestations in Nigeria manifest in different forms and are very dynamic. This means that the disagreements take on various shapes and colors at any given point in time, as it is today masquerading in the garb of restructuring, true Federalism and secession in the country. Yesterday, it was Afenifere for the Yoruba, Ohaneze for the Igbo, Middle Belt forum for minorities of the North Central region of Nigeria and Arewa consultative forum for the Hausa/Fulani of the North West and North East. What however is certain is that Nigeria is threatened by the possibility of dissolving into ethnic kingdoms. This no doubt, is far from the dream, vision and efforts of the country's Founding Fathers.

### III. THE HERITAGE FROM HISTORY

For a country like Nigeria that has passed through colonial rule, it is often very difficult to explain factors for disagreements such as exist in the country today without resorting to the country's colonial history. This is because the problems bedeviling the country in recent times have their roots traced to colonial tendencies and policies. The most common manifestation of this colonial phenomenon is in the area of its failure to forge unity among the once disparate ethnic entities through the colonial policy of indirect rule. This policy brought together previously independent states and kingdoms under the ruler ship of the dominant and more populous ones. This was done without recourse to the

differences in their culture, history, tradition, social and religious background. This point has been pointed out.

To compound matters, for fear of the "Natives" providing a united front against colonial policies, the British colonial administration erected ethnic barrier so as to divide the people for effective administration. This divide and rule first started in the recruitment of the colonial army. According to Ukpabi, the British came up with the notion that the Hausa were "Martial race".<sup>12</sup> what followed this was mass recruitment of Hausa by the Lagos consulate, the Royal Niger Company and the Niger coast protectorate. The Hausa regiment was thus used in the colonization of Bida, Ilorin, Ibadan and other societies in the south-west. This discriminatory colonial policy in the recruitment of the army was replicated in all areas of British administration in Nigeria.

For instance, the colonial administration in 1917 introduced a policy of separating ethnic groups in urban Centers along ethnic clusters. Urban centers were divided into European reservation, native reservation and nonresidential areas. In this way, Ibo, Yoruba, Hausa, were not allowed to stay together. This was deliberated to create the feeling in these ethnic groups that they were different. This was deliberated as it was meant to undermine their unity so as not to allow them move against obnoxious colonial policies. More disuniting was the British policy of Balkanizing ethnic groups and placing them under different colonial native administrations. A typical example of this was the balkanization of Tiv and their placement under different British colonial administrations in Wukari, Lafia and Ogoja.<sup>13</sup> This forceful merger policy of the British has remained a source of conflict between the Tiv and Jukum over the former's attempts to assert their identity and independence. This was the case all over Nigeria.

While it is not the intention of this endeavor to be detained by the British colonial activities in Nigeria, it is instructive to note that the consequence of such activities and policies for Nigeria's unity and integration in post-colonial Nigeria is the refusal of Nigeria's ethnic groups to see themselves as one people with a single destiny to build Nigeria of their dream where every citizen will have equal sense of belonging. This has created a plethora of problems as Nigeria went through a civil war to sustain her unity.

### IV. ISSUES IN THE DEBATE

So far, this endeavor cannot in all honesty claim to have offered explanation for the vociferous calls for restructuring. What it has attempted to do so far is to provide generalities that stake out a context. These generalities defined the underline conditions and the environment that has increasingly aided discord and dissension by the various groups claiming marginalization in Nigeria.

In a recent statement credited to Ezeife, the former Governor of Anambra state is said to have threatened that unless Nigeria restructures it would face extinction. He said "every honest Nigerian knows we are at the brink of extinction, Nigeria will cease to exist; if we do not restructure". It is a joke for people to think we should not restructure<sup>14</sup>". There is therefore the need to understand what restructuring entails and why it has suddenly gained such seemingly

popular followership in the country to the extent that even those who pushed for state creation are now calling for restructuring.

It must be pointed out that, this concept is bedeviled by the problem of definition as it lacks any precise, unanimous, specific and definite analytical clarity. It would appear to many as an umbrella concept that encapsulates other terms or concepts such as resource control, devolution of powers/true federalism or what some people are pushing for as a return to regionalism. It can be said therefore to mean different things to different people depending on which part of the country one comes from. The reasons for it are also not devoid of this regional or ethnic bias.

For some people, Nigeria is not working because the current Federal system is flawed. Thus, Atiku argued that the current union must be reworked or renegotiated to ensure national unity and stability as these critical elements are needed for effective management of disagreements<sup>15</sup>. According to Akintoye, restructuring means a return to the Federal system with a new relationship with the federating units that are capable of competing with one another on matters of development and controlling its resources. To him; the terms of the union need renegotiated so as to allow the states to function better as the Federal Government has become large and its large and powerfulness is impoverishing the component parts<sup>16</sup>.

It is becoming increasingly clear that Nigerians are familiar with the issues embedded in the restructuring debate. This is evident by the kind of information that are continuously being volunteered on the issue. For most Nigerians, restructuring presupposes the existence of a structure, which is built on a faulty platform or foundation that then requires to be rebuilt or rearrange. This is how Awodein views restructuring. He lists other issues that are central to restructuring and hence the preservation of unity and corporate existence of Nigeria to include secularity of state, return to federalism as embodied in the 1960 constitution, marginalization and rotation of the presidency, ethnicity and need for mutual co-existence, abolition of the land use act and abolition of the petroleum act. Others include the adoption of then six zone structure, fiscal federalism, scope and powers of the central government, proportional representation in governance the structure of the police and many other issues<sup>17</sup>.

For Sagay, restructuring the country means returning to true Federalism and autonomy of the federating units as it was the case previously for him, unless Nigeria restructures, it would never develop<sup>18</sup>. He reasons that there are great disadvantages in the present overconcentration of power in the federal structure as it has made other tiers of government indolent and complacent to revenue generation in their states. Because of the persistence of the arguments that have continuously trailed this issue particularly after the 2015 general elections in the country, there is the need to look at the factors that have given impetus to the different proponents of restructuring.

It is often argued that Nigeria is not a nation state but an amalgam of previously independent nations that were coercively brought together by the British colonial administration. Those who argue this way talk as if the people that today constitute Nigeria were not interacting before colonialism. This is of course a historical fallacy. For, there is ample evidence to show that there were massive intergroup

relations in the Nigerian area before the slave trade and the jihadist movement in Hausa land in 1804. These interactions were in the areas of trade between Hausa land and Yoruba land in cola-nut, Arabic Gum, dye etc, the Ibo and other groups in the hinterland, between the Ibo and groups in the savanna region of Nigeria such as the Igala. It is on the strength of this evidence that the statement credited to Awolowo that Nigeria is not a nation cannot be completely true in the sense and contexts people are using it to advance their arguments for restructuring<sup>19</sup>.

In forging a federal system for Nigeria at the beginning of the decolonization process, the British took into consideration many factors. One of such was the existence of previously independent states with political systems that were peculiar to themselves in terms of their history, culture, religion etc. In fact, the Clifford administration alluded to this when it stated that:

This collection of self-contained and mutually independence nation-state, separated from one another as many of them are by history, tradition religious barriers, were indeed capable of being welded into a single homogeneous nation, it would be a deadly blow to the root of national self-government in Nigeria which secures to each separate people the right to maintain its identity, its individuality, its own chosen form of government and the peculiar political institutions which have been evolved for it by wisdom and by the accumulated experience of generation of its forebears.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, throughout the period of the decolonization process, what was paramount in the thinking of British colonial administration in Nigeria was to ensure that the kind of administrative structures banqueting to Nigeria was such that would in future ensure the unity of the country and also promote a sense of belonging to all the constituent units in the country. It was this spirit that ensured the provisions enshrined in the 1960 independence constitution and also the 1963 republican constitution. What then is the problem?

As mentioned earlier in the endeavour, there are latent issues that the 2015 elections in the country that ushered in the government of President Muhamadu Buhari have exhumed and brought to the fore. This is to say that the problems that are threatening Nigeria today are problems that have right from independence been at the front burner of Nigerian Federalism. These issues are fear of marginalization of some ethnic groups by others, the alleged under representation or none at all of some ethnic groups in the federal executive council, the intensity of violent attacks on minority ethnic groups by Herdsmen with little decisive action by the state to curtail such violent attacks. Other issues are the desire of oil producing states to control their resources in line with the principle of true Federalism as practiced elsewhere. Others include the call for a return to regionalism as recently canvassed by governors of the old western Nigeria. While it is not the intensification of this endeavor to be detained by the merits and demerits of any of these issues, it must be pointed out that disagreements over these issues is not enough to pull Nigeria down. For those who argue for return to regionalism, the argument of Ayobolu may suffice. He said that the south-west did not develop because it was a region but because of Awolowo's ingenuity in the management of

resources<sup>21</sup>. If the question must be asked, how many south people and south East people have asked the governors to account for the resources given to them even though most of these states are benefiting from the 13% derivation fund every month. The current agitations should rather wear a national colouration instead of being targeted at a particular region-the North. Sadly, states and people in the north are also not faring better as poverty and deprivation have become very pervasive in the north. As for Biafra, the problems that trail this mirage are too numerous. First is the problem of geo-political conception. Going by the maps on the geography of Biafra, none Ibo speaking states were included as part of Biafra territory. The people in some of the territories claimed by Biafra denounced such claims as wishful thinking. What then are the states that constitute Biafra? Are these states Ibo speaking states only? If they are, then Biafra is an Ibo agenda. This statement is given credence by the way the south-south states declined to be party to the activities of the indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB). Thus, Biafra is more of an ideological notion rather than a concise geo-political unit. The agitation for a sovereign state of Biafra is rather drawing more on sentiments, past history of rebellion, religion and geo-politics in a contradictory manner. It is in this sense that Ahmadu Bellow's Comment on the Middle Beat fits Biafra squarely. He said:

... Apart from the fact that it would be physically difficult, if not impossible, to administer such a peculiarly shaped area, there was nothing to show that the various people making up this group would in fact agree amongst each other, if they found themselves involved in the new region: it would be only too likely that further fragmentation would ensue fairly soon after such an arrangement had been made... I have given this problem the closest consideration for years and am forced to the conclusion that there is nothing in it beyond that personal aggrandizement of its leaders and a desire to embarrass us.<sup>22</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

This endeavour has so far shown clearly that Nigeria is still going through a difficult phase in its strived to integrate the different ethnic groups in the country. This is because, far from eliminating issues of fear and domination, Nigeria's ethnics groups have found it increasingly difficult to live together without confronting each other. Because of this, the elites have continuously evolved new strategies not to build or develop the country, but to ensure that ethnic captains corner Nigeria's resources to themselves and their families and cronies. It is this competition for the proverbial cake that is threatening to pull Nigeria down. The recent regime or culture of silence witnessed over agitations for the actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra is a clear testimony of the role of the elites in sabotaging the unity of the country. While there is no doubt that there are grey areas that need talking over, these issues are not enough to pull Nigeria down. It is in this context that recent agitations in the country must be handled with all seriousness by the present administration. In the final analysis, good governance will ensure that all fears of marginalization are removed as good governance will provide all with a sense of belonging. It is

only in this that Nigeria's clarion call in the national anthem can be obeyed.

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