



The Implication of Government Bias on the Resolution of Communal Conflict in Nigeria

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Abstract. The incidence of communal conflicts in Nigeria has been on the rise since the 1990s. These conflicts cut across all sections of the country, from the North to South. Interestingly, these conflicts are mostly anchored on disputes over land and the dichotomy between indigene and settlers. As one with the monopoly of force, the state, through the government is expected to be an effective arbiter but this has not been the case in terms of government intervention in communal conflict in the country. The reason for this is the perceived bias by the parties on government intervention. The implication of such perceived bias is that it is difficult to resolve such conflicts. This study argued that there are standard procedures that the government is expected to follow if its intervention will sail through. The study maintained that these procedures would help in building trust in government by the parties for a smooth resolution of communal conflict.

Keywords: Conflict, conflict resolution, communal conflict, land, communal bias.

1. Introduction

Conflict, generally, is a reality of social relations. Conflict at any level arises from divergences of interests, desires, goals, and value aspirations in the competition for scarce resources and in a bid to meet imposing demands on social life in a defined socio-physical environment (Otite, 2001). Conflict among nation-states has considerably reduced while the spate of intra-state conflicts has been on a steady increase due to the intense struggle for power among groups and control of the scarce resources, thereby putting tribal and ethnic groups against one other (Joshua, 2014). In Africa, conflict at sub-national level between communities or local militias is a wide spread phenomenon (Torbjornson, 2016). The continent

experienced 386 communal conflicts between 1989 and 2014 with an estimate of 131,563 lives being lost within the period (Torbjornson, 2016; Elfversson, 2013). The countries affected in this include Nigeria, Democratic of Congo, Somalia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda with Nigeria and Democratic of Congo being the most affected (Torbjornson, 2016; Elfversson, 2013).

This is hardly surprising given Nigeria's socio-cultural diversity and complexities, as defined by multiplicity of ethnic nationalities and language groups. These conflicts range from inter-ethnic conflicts to religious and communal conflicts. While inter-ethnic and religious conflicts have attracted much attention, with enormous literature and discussions, the increasing incidence of communal conflicts has not spurred much scholarly research into studying various communal conflicts in various communities in Africa. The rise in the number of communal conflicts has continued to give serious concern to all who cherish peace and are interested in nation-building in Nigeria. From the Ife-Modakeke conflict, Aguleri-Umuleri conflict, Jos conflict, Tiv-Jukun conflict, Warri conflict, Okene conflict, Ezillo/Ezza-Ezillo conflict, among others, there have been many cases of communal conflicts in Nigeria. These conflicts cut across the six geo-political zones in the country. For example, the Ife-Modakeke communities are in Osun State in the South-West zone; the Warri crises took place in Delta State in the South-South zone; the Tiv-Jukun communities are settled in Benue and Taraba States in the North-Central; and the high incidence of banditry has been high in states such as Zamfara in the North Eastern zone, Sokoto state in the North-West zone; and the duo of Aguleri-Umuleri communities which are in Anambra State and Ezillo and Ezza-Ezillo communities in Ebonyi state which are in the South-East region. Nigeria has been engulfed in various

shades of crises at all fronts. However, what has distinguished communal crises from other forms of security threats to the state is that while others are actually a threat from individuals or groups who rise in contention against the State, communal crises are usually between communities who are members of the state and only rise in contention against each other.

Interestingly, most of the communal conflicts have bordered on the contestations over land and have thus become almost intractable and recurring, despite government's intervention. Land has always been an integral part of human existence. It is central to almost all forms of communal conflicts in Africa. For all intents and purposes, most of the communal conflicts in Africa have been woven around the quest to repossess a land that one party consider its own and has been encroached on by the other party. In fact, land has been a common denominator in most recurring communal conflicts. From Ife-Modakeke conflict, Aguleri-Umuleri conflict, Jos conflict, Tiv-Jukun conflict, Warri conflict, Okene conflict, and even the Ezillo/Ezza-Ezillo conflict, one thing that is common to them all is the dispute over land and the quest to repossess supposed over-taken land. This is not surprising given the attachment of the African to land. The attachment of the African to land is borne out of the idea of land as espoused in African ontology and cosmology. The African notion of land has been argued to be different from the idea of land as espoused in Western epistemology.

One would, therefore, have thought that the involvement of government in the process of conflict resolution will help end such conflicts but this is often not the case. The reason for the failure of government to fully resolve the communal conflict is due to the perceived bias of government and its agents. This study there examines how government bias makes the resolution of communal conflict in Nigeria almost impossible.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Land

For the sake of this study, we define land as a property or specific piece of the earth with clearly-defined boundaries and owned by a person or group of people. It is important to mention that ownership of land is defined by the law of first possession. The law of first possession is a rule in property law in which ownership rights is granted to the party that gains control before other claimants. This rule is a standard rule of establishing property rights. Thus, the owner of

a piece of land is deemed to be the one who possessed or gained control over the land first before others.

2.2 Conflict Resolution

For the sake of this study, we adopt the definition in Heitler (1990). Conflict resolution is defined by Heitler (1990) as "*the attainment of a solution that satisfies the requirement of all the seemingly conflicting forces and thereby, produces a feeling for all participants*".

2.3 Communal Conflict

For the sake of this study, we shall use the operational definition of communal conflict as the violent conflict between non-state actors or groups that are organized based on communal identities.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is defined by Heitler (1990) as "*the attainment of a solution that satisfies the requirement of all the seemingly conflicting forces and thereby, produces a feeling for all participants*". Wallenstein (2008) defines conflict resolution as "*a situation where the conflicting parties enter into an agreement that solves their central incompatibilities, accept each other's continued existence as parties and cease all violent acts against each other*". It is primarily aimed at intervention to change or facilitate the course of a conflict. According to Albert (2001) conflict resolution serves three purposes namely: minimization of chances of destructive conflicts, stabilization of cessation of destructive conflicts so as to prevent escalation, and prevention of outbreak of a full-blown conflict done by uprooting the basic reasons for the conflict. Conflict resolution is "*Where the disputing parties reach an agreement that resolves their fundamental incompatibilities, accepts one another's continued existence as parties, and ceases all violent action against one another*" (Wallenstein, 2002; 8).

3.2 Communal Conflict

Communal conflict is made up of two words, communal and conflict. Suffice to say that conflict as a phenomenon can be described as either positive or negative depending on its outcome. When the result of a conflict situation is positive, it is defined as a functional or constructive conflict while a conflict situation that ends up producing negative outcomes are regarded as dysfunctional conflicts. For example, and as Hoelscher and Robert (2002) posited, conflict is the

underlying force that is responsible for stimulating innovation.

Communal relates particularly to group or involves things that are commonly used, shared, or experienced by a group within a society. Just as such things shared can be resources, they can also be conflicts and when it is conflict, it is known as communal conflict. Several scholars have tried to define the idea of communal conflict. Azuonwu (2002) defines it as a conflict that occurs between two or more communities. Oboh and Hyande (2006) sees communal conflict as a situation where two or more communities engage themselves in disagreement or acts of violence over various issues leading to loss of lives and destruction of properties. Dzurgba (2006) argued that communal conflict in Nigeria mostly end in communal violence and that these conflicts occur between two or more communities over territorial land, farmland and territorial water for fishing. Horowitz, (2000) also holds that communal conflict often results in communal violence - a situation where violence is perpetuated across ethnic lines, and victims are chosen based upon ethnic group membership.

Land

Amodu (2021) argued that the idea of land in African ontology abhors viewing it as a commodity or an individual possession. The author argued that the African views land as a gift of nature to human existence. In the light of this, land goes beyond the concrete as it also has a spiritual dimension to it and there is no distinction between these dual notions of land in Africa. Amodu noted that the contradiction which exists, in Western metaphysics, between the physical and the spiritual, is non-existent in African notion of land as these dual notions are considered intertwined. Land is both the space for housing the living as well as the abode for the dead. It serves as a link between the living and the ancestors. Land enjoys an anthropomorphic treatment and as such it is meant to be revered besides it being a source of food production. Hence, while man is a major player in matters concerning land, land does not belong to man alone as it is also the abode for other beings including rivers and air. It is in the light of this that Amodu attempts to define land as ‘...a holistic community of mutually reinforcement of natural life or vital forces, consisting or housing the human communities (families, villages, nations, and humanity), spirits, gods, deities, stones, sand, mountains, rivers, plants, fish, insects, birds and animals.’ This also explains how and why land becomes a medium of identity for the African. The connection between man and his land is exemplified in certain practices such as the burying of the umbilical cord of a new-born in the earth after it

has been severed from the new-born; pouring of libation to the land before drinking or during propitiation; the burying of the foreskin and blood of newly circumcised boy in the earth, among others. These actions are a signifier of how the connection between man and the land is created. Above all, when he dies, he is buried in the same earth which represent him going back to his source. The land carries a part of him and he carries a part of it and as such land is used to distinguish him from another. This captures the special connection that is created between the African and the land in which he lives on.

The ancestors of the land who had gone ahead occupy a vital force in the land and are connected to the living. It also explains why land cannot be an individual possession because these ancestors are the guiding spirit of the community. They are the vital force for the community and as such land is a communal property. The implication of this African notion of land is that there is a special attachment by each to his land of birth. Any attempt to dispossess the individual of his ancestral land is synonymous to cutting his ties with his ancestors and tearing off a part of him given that the land carried his soul and body with it. He sees himself as being the custodian and protector of his ancestral land and one with a duty to pass the land to his children in inheritance just as his own forebears passed the same land to him. This mandate is considered both physical and spiritual. It is physical in the sense of passing the concrete land to the generation to come while the spiritual aspect is represented in creating the needed connection between the coming generation and the generations that have gone past. Each generation is thus saddled with the responsibility of ensuring that the chain and cycle of life of connection is not broken in their own time.

As laudable as the ideas espoused by Amodu seem, one noticeable lacuna is the confusion of assuming that all African tribal groups would have the same ontology about land. This mistake is often the case with many assumptions with what is considered African while neglecting the uniqueness of tribal group. Similarly, the author failed to explain the fluidity in the idea of individual and communal ownership of land in African ontology. The individual is only given the land in lease by the community and within the period in which this lease subsists, he lays claim to the ownership of the land but this does not detract from the fact that the community is considered the actual owner of the land and so can withdraw the individual ownership bestowed on the individual should a sacrilege be committed.

Lentz (2013) explored the issues around land and property rights and the sense of belonging that follows from same. The book which focused on the author's exposure in Ghana and Burkina Faso is centred around the changing significance of land within the region as well as the role that the first-comer narrative plays in land ownership claims and the struggles and conflict that arise from same. The book noted that the advent of colonialism and the realities of post-colonialism has changed the notion about property rights from what used to obtain in the pre-colonial period. The new trend is that the state exerts authority in the ownership of land and as such is bequeathed with the power of allocating the resource within the state. This new trend creates a disconnection between the individual and his immediate community. Colonialism connected land ownership, belonging, and political office in a new dimension different from what obtained in pre-colonial times. Post-colonialism came with the burden population density and the scramble for the little available land space. The post-colonial period saw the introduction of new actors, who are not defined by ethnicity, in the scramble for lands.

The first-comer narrative which the book also centres on explores the first-comer argument. Putting up the first-comer narrative automatically confers the right of first possession on a person or group of person and so excludes others from enjoying that right. The author noted that the first-comer narrative is attractive for four reasons: it shows how the pioneer settlers got to the place in question; it shows how the pioneer settlers established their rule and order in the place where they settled; it allows for some flexibility in the framing of the nature and scope of property rights; and it establishes the encounter between the pioneer person or settlers and the spirits of the land. The fourth ground explains how the sense of belonging is created as man establishes a connection between himself and nature, thereby rendering a sense of power and absoluteness to the property claims of the pioneer settlers. By power and absoluteness, the author meant that the first-comer assumes the place of authority to determine what happens within the occupied space and this is regardless of whether late-comers consider the verdict of this authority fair or just or not. However, it is also a known fact that when a late-comer has stayed so long in a land space, there is a high tendency for him to begin to see himself as having as much claim to being a first-timer as the actual first-timer. He feels he has paid his dues by working towards the advancement of the land. The matter is even made worse where the late-comer occupies a space that has been left uninhabited but claimed by the first-timer and as such, he (the late-comer) exerted much energy into

developing the uninhabited space and making it habitable enough.

Although Lentz opined that the conflict over land is as a result of conflicting first-comer narrative, it is not the case in most situations. Rather, you have narratives where the late-comer acknowledges the fact that the first-comer got to the place before them and even allocated the space they (late-comer) now occupy to them but premise their right to claim over the land on the ground that they got the land in exchange for service delivered, have stayed long in the land, and have invested their resources into the land enough to give them a right of claim over it.

4. Communal Conflict and Government Roles

Nwagwu (2016) discussed the role of the state in ensuring the management and resolution of a conflict. He argued that the style and pattern of a government's responses actually determine how volatile any conflict will become. Put differently, maintaining peace and order is the primary responsibility of the government and is essential to ensuring the safety of lives and property. As a result, the institutional mechanisms of the government play a crucial role in conflict avoidance, conflict prevention, and tension reduction. The possibility exists that a conflict will progress into a full-scale, explosive conflict scenario if the institutions of government remain largely indifferent or partial towards one of the conflicting sides. Albert (2004), on the Ife-Modakeke communal conflict, had argued that the communal conflict will continue to result in more deaths and property damage unless the government's response pattern is changed proactively. Albert mentioned that the communities themselves are less to blame for the continued persistence of the Ife-Modakeke communal conflict than are the weak responses of governments, both past and present.

In his 2012 report titled "*Rethinking Nigeria's Indigenous-Settler Conflict*", Aaron Sayne acknowledged that most of Nigeria's communal clashes are a face-off between the acknowledged original inhabitants, or indigenes and settlers. With time, these conflicts may become more deadly and widespread. He noted that the Nigerian structure makes it such that it is up to the state and local governments to decide who is an indigene. Given that indigenous people have preferential access to land, schools, development funding, and public employment, misuse of the label can exacerbate deep socioeconomic disparities. Even though addressing inequality may not always be sufficient to put an end to violence, these inequalities contribute to it. In

addition, other identity-based divides in Nigeria reinforce the indigene-settler distinction, making it explosive. In many instances, indigenes and settlers are also separated by cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic differences but this is not intractable. Sayne arrived at this conclusion by making two assumptions. The first assumption is that government must share resources more equally among all Nigerians to reduce violence. The second assumption behind his conclusion is that government must hold more perpetrators accountable to reduce indigene-settler violence. He opines that to reduce indigene-settler violence, the government must hold more perpetrators accountable. Without justice, communities that have been severely impacted by indigene-settler violence will rarely experience lasting peace.

Elfverson (2019) in her treatise titled *“How Government Bias can fuel Communal Conflicts in Africa”* explains the way the bias or perceived bias of a government can be an ingredient for communal conflict. It also explains why government may not be successful in resolving some conflicts because one or both parties in the conflict already see her as taking sides with one of the conflicting parties. She posited that recent studies have shed new light on how political maneuvering and poor governance raise the likelihood of communal violence. To garner support for their campaigns, politicians, for instance, may take advantage of and incite hostility along ethnic or other identity lines. In another instance, it can be that certain groups gain preferential access to state resources and economic opportunities, thereby fueling hatred between groups. In other circumstances, failing to provide certain regions with services, such as security, increases the likelihood that the local communities will arm themselves to fight for control of scarce resources. In general, her research suggests that in situations of communal conflict, governments rarely can act as a neutral arbiter. Political leaders frequently find themselves at the center of any conflict. This could happen directly as a result of active bias or incitement, or it could happen indirectly as a result of bad policies and services not being provided equally to citizens.

Johan Brosche (2015) undertook a study where he tried to establish a relationship between government bias and communal conflict. In his article, *Causes of Communal Conflict: Government Bias, Elites, and Conditions for Cooperation*. This study provides a causal explanation for how violent communal conflicts are brought on by government bias. The fact that interactions between central and local elites, as well as between local elites, will be disrupted by a biased regime is the first step in the causal story. The

government is the most important central elite in communal conflicts, and the leaders of various communities, as well as the native administrations that they frequently belong to, are the most important local elites. Since the government is the most important central elite, its actions have a significant impact on the actions of other actors. Local elites who are marginalized are more likely to be reluctant to work with the government when the regime exhibits bias. The likelihood of collaboration between central and local elites is reduced as a result. The relationships that exist among the elites of the area can also be affected by government bias. That the public authority is fundamental for relations among nearby elites could appear to be a bit outlandish. However, the regime has the ability to both replace elites it dislikes and undermine arenas that are essential for fostering constructive relations among local elites. Conflictual behavior, including violence, is less risky for a state-favored local elite. As a result, governments can foster distrust not only between themselves and local elites but also within those elites themselves by favoring particular communities. In conclusion, this study argues that interaction between local elites and central elites will be disrupted by government bias. Government predisposition, and the unconstructive first-class communication it involves, will adversely influence the three components fundamental for forestalling shared struggle. Violent racial and ethnic strife is brought about by all three mechanisms. We can avoid a greater number of violent communal conflicts in regions where the government takes a more neutral stance than in regions where the regime is partial.

5. Government Bias and Communal Conflict in Nigeria: The Way Forward

As we have established in this study, the actions of government determine how well government's position will sit well with the people and be acceptable. The place of government intervention in either dousing already raised tension or inflaming it more will depend on the conditions that Brosche (2015) outlined. It is expected that a government will ensure it balances the differences, wills, and capabilities of the disputing communities by making sure it gets the perspective and desires of the parties to the conflict. (Burton 1997). A second principle is to conduct a situation analysis so as to know the root causes of the conflict. The third principle is to explore the role of local actors so as to get a better framework of the issues leading to the conflict. The fourth principle is that government should establish an inter-community peace advocacy committee. That will be people centred. A fifth principle is that government

must not show any sense or iota of partiality in the conflict resolution process. The sixth is to aim at assimilating the conflicting interest of the conflicting parties. Government has a duty to identify the meeting points between the communities and seek to deplore this towards unifying them. According to Brosché (2015), *'This avoids unnecessary reactions; and strengthens the credibility of the resolution mechanisms.* this would engender commitment from all parties involved. Amy I also add that where promises are made by government towards restituting victims, it has to be done in good time lest the victim builds an accumulation of frustration as a result of the misery that the conflict has imposed on him.

In the same vein, the principles set by Lamidi (2019) for government intervention in communal conflict are quite instructive. Balancing the differences, wills, and capacities of the opposing people, organizations, or communities is initially the main focus of peacemaking. In order to accomplish this primary objective, it is necessary to have the most comprehensive understanding of the viewpoints of the parties involved in the conflict, particularly a solid grasp of the objectives of the warring parties (Burton 1997). Since government acts must be planned appropriately, this deserves to be considered the fundamental principle. With regard to balancing the differences, these insights might be useful in determining which panel or committee should be established and under what terms.

The second principle is to investigate and clarify the underlying causes of conflicts within a community by conducting a situational analysis. This would reveal the dynamic influences of cultural affinities and historical precedents that have led to the intensification of communal conflicts. Furthermore, because of the thorough comprehension of the incidental elements and cultural nuances resulting from the situational analysis's execution, the resolution mechanisms would thus become identifiable.

The third principle focuses on investigating the potential role of local actors, who may, in certain circumstances, think about the applicability of a customary method that is most frequently helpful in conducting a situational analysis, in order to further strengthen the government's capacity on peacemaking processes. The local players are in a unique position to offer thorough intelligence for comprehending the paths of communal conflicts. Furthermore, the design of the process for identifying the reasons of communal conflict benefits more from the involvement of local players. They can clearly contribute significantly to

local peacemaking efforts and accomplish this far more quickly than state-led efforts.

The fourth principle requires the government to assist in the formation of an intercommunity peace advocacy group during any communal peacemaking effort. This would allow the parties to the conflict to engage. The committee would give the government greater access to the individuals and circumstances surrounding the conflicts. Additionally, the committee would offer a framework for peacemaking that would incentivize individuals, organizations, and communities to reciprocate by honoring their commitments to maintain peace.

As a coordinating mediator, the government's interest should be impartial, according to the fifth principle. Strict adherence to the courses of action that the parties agree to and believe to be lawful is required. Although it may take some time for the parties involved to adjust to a mediation mission's methodology, it could ultimately prove to be quite beneficial.

To include or assimilate the separatist interests of the opposing groups, a sixth and logical premise of peacemaking is to develop an overarching purpose with a particular emphasis on overcoming fixation with ethnic attachment. This should be accomplished carefully by balancing all competing interests in terms of a shared objective. It has been proposed that this is possible because there is always a point of convergence for every variety (Kalyvas 2003; Wilkinson 2006:1779; Boone 2014). The potential for quest unification and purpose visualization despite the "indispensable" goals of the involved parties might then be examined at the meeting location. The basic premise is that the likelihood of slowing down the speed of a conflict increases with the importance of the goal to the disputants' quest. Others must be able to clearly distinguish the viewpoints in order to further solidify the integrative approach. "This avoids unnecessary reactions; and strengthens the credibility of the resolution mechanisms," claims Brosché (2014). All parties may show their commitment as a result, and excessive promises may be avoided through moderation.

For a peace process to be effective, each of these principles must be adhered to strictly. A partial adherence to the principles will almost yield the same result as a non-adherence. Hence, adhering to just five out of the six principles will not yield the desired results. This said, a cursory look at the principles shows that the government adhered to all but two of the principles. Without doubt, the government tried to balance the differences of the parties; investigated and

clarified the underlying causes of conflicts by conducting a situational analysis; investigated the potential role of actors and parties in the conflict; and assisted in the formation of an intercommunity peace advocacy group.

The underlying point here is that government has to earn the trust of the conflicting parties if it would be able to effectively end such communal conflict. The place of trust in conflict resolution has been espoused by scholars as an important factor in conflict is to be resolved (See Nooteboom, 1996; Zaheer, McEvily and Perrone, 1998). Sullivan, Peterson, Kameda and Shimada (1981) also argued that the presence of trust between the conflicting parties would mean they will both work towards sorting their difference. It is a building block for working out a solution between.

6. Conclusion

The delicateness of land in African cosmology is trite. It is at the heart of most communal conflicts in Nigeria. It is therefore understandable that these communal conflicts are often heated and fatal. The failure of government to be able to resolve these communal conflicts has, as explained earlier, been as a result of the absence of trust in the intervention of government. If government will be able to intervene effectively in the communal conflict, the place of trust building is most important. By its actions and the adequate equitable distribution of resources among all communities, it will be a lot easier to bring the conflicts to an end.

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