

HOW DEMOCRACY CAN BE A CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT

The practice of Democracy the world over can only be meaningful if it delivers dividends of democracy and this can only be attained in a conducive, peaceful violent free society. That is why most of its characteristics are geared towards bringing stability and progress. Against this backdrop, therefore, some scholars believe that democracy can be conflict management strategy if practiced well. The paper tries to illustrate how democracy can perform the function of conflict management using the liberal theoretical perspective, it concluded that democratic system can help develop habit of compromise and consensus building.

Keywords: Democracy, Conflict management strategy

INTRODUCTION

Social science Scholars have long agreed that conflicts are inevitable in human existence and thus it has become imperative that peoples of all cultures employ any means available to them to either avoid, contain, manage or resolve conflicts. Globally, it is predictable that conflicts will arise where resources are scarce and not shared fairly; where there is little or no communication between the groups in conflict; where the groups have incorrect ideas and beliefs about each other; where unresolved grievances exist from the past; and where power is unevenly distributed (Swanstrom and Weissmann, 2005).

Conflict has many definitions which all point to the same thing. David Francis (2006) defined conflicts as the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by different groups; for Mike Oquaye (1995) it is the sequence of interactions between groups in society, between groups and governments, and between individuals; Lewis Coser (1995) sees it as the struggle over values, claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the opposing parties are not

only to gain the desired values but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals; Williams Zartman (1997:167) sees it as a normal state of human interaction; as an inevitable aspect of human interaction, an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions. Onigu Otite (1999) views conflicts as a natural announcement of an impending re-classification of a society with changed characteristics and goals with new circumstances of survival and continuity, and this entails struggle, competition, rivalry for objects to which individuals and groups attach value, which could be materials or non-materials. Perhaps, a more comprehensive definition of the concept of conflicts is that given by Miller and King (2005) as a confrontation between one more parties aspiring towards incompatible or competitive means or ends (which) may be either manifest, recognizable through actions or behavior, or latent, in which case it remains dormant for some time as incompatibilities are unarticulated or are built into systems or such institutional arrangements as governments, corporations, or even civil society.

Given the gregarious nature of man, which is seen in his activities within the State and with other fellows, there is bound to be a struggle for various interests, and this is probably the reason for R.J. Rummel's definition which states that:

A situation of conflicts is created by attitudes transformed into interests. Interests, which are a drive toward specific goals, are a necessary condition of a situation of conflict. Also involved in a situation of conflict are capabilities and expectations, particularly those defining the credibility of – the will to carry out – promises, threats, authority, expertise, love, Capability involves the resources we have to manifest our interest. Together, interests, capability, and will define a situation of conflict (Rummel, 1977:6).

Thus, interest play very important roles in all the conflicts that necessarily arise in human society. It is, therefore, only when interests coalesce that conflicts are avoided.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The inevitability of conflict in human society gives recourse to the mitigation of conflict, and at least to manage them if not totally resolving them when they arise. This elevates conflict management to be point of discourse. According to *Wikipedia*, conflict management refers to the long-term management of intractable conflict; a label for the variety of ways by which people handle grievances – standing up for what they consider to be right and against what they consider to be wrong. Those ways include such diverse phenomena as gossip, ridicule, lynching, terrorism, warfare, feuds, genocide, law, mediation and avoidance. Thus, conflict management simply means the interventionist efforts towards preventing the escalation and negative effects, especially violent ones, of ongoing conflict.

Rarely are conflicts completely resolved. More often, they are reduced, downgraded, or contained. Such developments can be followed by a reorientation of the issue, reconstitution of the divisions among conflicting parties, or even by a re emergence of past issues or grievances. Conflict management when actively conducted is, therefore, a constant process. Thus, conflict management refers to the measures that limit, mitigate and or contain a conflict without necessarily solving it (Miller and King, 2005:23-24).

A variety of techniques have been identified and employed in conflict management efforts. The following are the most prominent: First, conflicting parties are brought together to establish a mutual agreement. Second, governments or third parties to the strife may directly intervene to introduce or impose a decision. Third, new initiatives, programmes or institutional structures (for example, elections) are implemented to address the conflict in question. Fourth, contending parties are compelled or coerced to utilize previously established means of resolution or containment. Fifth, government or another third party may use coercion to eliminate or instill fear into one or all those engaged in a given conflict, leading to subsidence (Ezirim and Ifesinachi, 2009).

Conflict management should not be viewed as simple, linear or structured process. Those assuming or charged with such a task must usually overcome an intensely chaotic situation. Conflicts are frequently managed directly by the society in which they occur. When not possible or when conflicts become national in scope, government normally assumes the task, provided it is not a party to the conflict. In cases where a government is unable or unwilling to intervene, international organizations assume the role of conflict manager.

According to Akpuru – Aja (2007), conflict management means the used of dialogue to assist opponents or parties not only to have agreement against hostile image or actions, but to comply with earlier agreed resolutions and strategies. Given the fact that the end of hostilities in a conflict situation does not necessarily bring peace to the conflicting parties, and also bearing in mind that the most critical period is when conflict is in the process of being addressed and resolved, at which time any mistake can be costly, there is always need to manage conflicts very well and effectively. It is a process that spans conflict phases – from prevention through outright resolution. Thus, it is seen as the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict It covers the entire area of handling conflict positively at different stages, including those efforts made to prevent conflict, by being proactive.

It encompasses conflict limitation, containment and litigation (Best, 2006:95).

The handling of conflict in terms of its management is very vital as the process can either make or mark the process, that is to say, conflict can escalate if mishandled. That is why it employs diplomatic means to ensure the disputants understand the process and accede willingly. Thus, according to Akpuru – Aja (2007:34-35), it assumes an intervention mechanism, including monitoring and evaluation of conflict behaviours and the degree of compliance to resolutions on ending violence, demobilization of arms, or effecting concessions and remedies, which are very vital in easing tensions by all the concerned parties to the conflicts.

The nature of conflict management is such that it is very sensitive; it does not impose rigid conditions, it allows for free flow of information and communication; it is impartial, and it gives a lot of leverage and relevant concessions when necessary to achieve the desired peace, which is the end-point. It can also involve either unilateral or bilateral actors; and dialogue is the desired medium of getting to the solution of any conflict in terms of management. Knowing that conflicts are rarely completely resolved; but most often reduced, downgraded, or contained, conflict situations can be followed by a reorientation of the issue, reconstitution of the divisions among conflicting parties, or even by a re-emergence of past issues or grievances. Conflict management when actively conducted is, therefore, a constant process.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The literature on peace research often see democracy as the bedrock of peaceful coexistence in societies, probably because the promotion of liberal democracy is seen as desirable by the West given the universal claim or belief that democracies do not go to war with one another. There are two propositions for the promotion of liberal democracy as a conflict management and transformation strategy in Africa: democracy provides the overlapping consensus and public reason for containing conflict in pluralistic societies; and through institutional design, elections can be an opportunity for conflict management rather than an intoxicating brew from an ethnic concoction (Ake, 1996). There is a growing trend throughout the world towards democratization. Some 120 countries now hold generally free and fair elections, and a large number of internal conflicts end with a negotiated peace which includes an electoral process aimed at building political structures acceptable to all. The parties themselves agree to deliver a sustainable peaceful settlement through a democratic transition (Harris and Reiley, 1998).

Elections and democracy are the core concepts of the liberal paradigm of conflict management in Africa. Based on Western socio-historical experience, liberal political science theorists have arrived at certain generalizations on the relationship between election/democracy and conflict management, and even the prevention of wars. Democracy and elections are said to possess some inherent ideals that mitigate the typical severe grievances that cause populations to engage in violent protest (Ayelazuno, 2007:16). Liberal scholars believe that democracy provides the

political framework by which agreements are reached among free and equal citizens. Therefore, one of the orthodoxies in liberal democracy theory is that democracy is a system of government that is conducive for the peaceful management of conflict. As an open regime, democracy provides the channels and institutions through which various groups can peacefully pursue their interests, and for that matter are unlikely to resort to the more costly and illegal strategy of rebellion. Democracy as the best system of government provides an acceptable framework by which leaders are chosen through competitive elections without violence. Thus, so much is expected from democracy: economic development, equality, accountability, rationality and stability.

However, some scholars have argued that democracy does not provide all these and has not throughout history been responsible for all the good supposedly inherent in it as expounded by its proponents. In this light, Huntington (1991:28) argues that “democracies can and have abused individual rights and liberties but comparatively, the correlation between the existence of democracy and the existence of individual liberty is extremely high”. In his view, democracies can be unruly, but they are not often politically violent, and are less susceptible to civil violence than autocracy. In the same vein, democratic regimes do not use violence against their citizens as authoritarian regime do. Huntington believes that democracy provides a shared framework by which conflicting interests are mediated. In addition, democracy provides accepted channels for the expression of dissent and opposition within the system and regular opportunities for changing political leaders and public policies.

According to Ayelazuno (2007:18-27), contrary to conventional wisdom that civil wars in Africa are caused by ethnicity, it is rather high levels of poverty, heavy dependence on resource-based primary exports, and especially failed political institutions that are to blame. He argues that political freedom and the right political institutions can promote inter-group co-operation and stable growth-oriented states in Africa. The best and fastest strategy to reduce the incidence of conflicts in Africa is to institute democratic reforms that effectively manage the socio-cultural diversity of African societies.

Democratic principles provide the essential starting point for implementation of such settlements, which usually involve not only democratizing the state but also giving more power to civil society. Once political actors accept the need for peaceful management of deep-rooted conflicts, democratic systems of government can help them develop habits of compromise, co-operation and consensus building. These are not abstract statements, but practical conclusions drawn from experiences of conflict resolution in the field. This explains why we think democracy can best serve as the vehicle for a more cohesive society through the management of the conflicts that exist in the Nigerian society.

We are taking for granted that democracy is a well-known concept which has received a lot of attention in various discourses. Having been accepted as the best form of government by numerous authorities, our job is thus made easier by the fact that we all know what we mean by “Democracy” – a form of government that allows for full participation of citizens in the affairs that concern them. We are of the view that it engenders peace and helps in the management of conflicts in human societies, and thus is adequate for Nigeria and other African states. For system to be democratic, it must combine three essential conditions: meaningful competition for political power among individuals and organized groups; inclusive participation in selection of leaders and politics through free and fair elections; and a level of civil and political competition and participation (Dokubo, 2006:114-116).

According to Sisk (2003), democracy is promising as a conflict management strategy because the principles, institutions, and rules associated with democratic practice seek to manage inevitable social conflicts in deeply divided and less conflicted societies alike. Democracy provides predictable procedures in which collective decisions can be taken without the risk that losing a political battle will mean grave misfortune, imprisonment, or even loss of life. Democracy as a system of political decision making is in many ways a system of conflict management in which the outcomes are unknown but the fundamental rules of the game provide a safe arena in which to compete. It provides a level playing ground for everybody which should mitigate bitterness even in the event of a loss in political struggle.

The importance of democracy in multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria and most states in West Africa manifests two salient facts: Firstly, despite many trials and tribulations with democracy in today’s multiethnic societies, no other form of government can more effectively reconcile competing social interests. For this reason, understanding how types and practices of democracy may contribute to or help exacerbate intractable conflict is a critical concern. Secondly, among the possible ways of constructing a democracy will help manage intractable conflicts in deeply divided societies.

Another important factor in the democratic process is that of rule of law, which involves a lot of things. According to Kristi Samuels (2006:2), the rule of law is a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards. It requires as well measures to ensure adherence to the principles of supremacy of law, equality before the law, accountability to the law, fairness in the application of the law, separation of powers, participation in decision-making, legal certainty, avoidance of arbitrariness and procedural and legal transparency. The rule of law, however, is not a single unified good but is

broken down into five separate, socially desirable goods, or elements, viz: a government bound by law; equality before the law; law and order; predictable and efficient rulings, and human rights (Kleinfeld-Belton, 2005:27).

It is noteworthy to mention that the Nigerian State has been experiencing an upsurge of armed conflicts over the past decade and this is consequent upon various factors – ethnic, religious, economic and political – and these conflicts have been responsible for a lot of the insecurity in the Nigerian State. This periodisation is germane as it is within a democracy, during which period Nigerians would ordinarily expect a peaceful and conflict-free co-existence after a long and tumultuous period of military rule. However, this has not been the case as there have been more cases of armed conflicts in Nigeria in the past sixteen years or so than was the case since independence. As aptly noted by Jega (2002:37), it would seem that decades of bottled up anger under military rule had suddenly exploded and found expression in violent ethnic, religious and communal conflicts, in the context of the little democratic space which had opened up since 29 May 1999.

Given the fact that every geo-political region of the country has witnessed one or more conflict situations since the advent of ‘steady’ democratic governance in Nigeria, the Federal Government was prompted in 2002 to constitute a thorough study of the situation via the Institute for Peace and Conflicts. The Institute produced the mechanisms for early warning and prevention of conflicts. The Institute produced the Strategy Conflict Assessment Nigeria: Consolidated Report, which discovered four major sources of conflict: resource competition; corruption of the political system; blatant undermining of social and political values by long military dictatorships; and finally, that the mere holding of elections and removal of the military from power cannot dissolve all the conflicts already in the Nigerian State. The IPCR’s Report notes that there are manifestations of conflicts in Nigeria, which border on the political, economic, social and psycho-cultural (FGN, 2002:12-21).

SECURITY ISSUES

The security situation in the country is frightening as there are serious proliferation of arms by the military, police and civilians (militants). This is a result of the high level of corruption that has permeated every facet of the society as a result of low morale and poor conditions of services. Another disturbing aspect is that security being very important, various people have taken their fate in their own hands, seeing government’s ineptitude in that regard. Thus, there is also a proliferation of vigilante groups that turn to political thuggery to abuse citizens and destroy property; foreign mercenaries and international tensions that infiltrate Nigeria through her porous borders; and the blatant misuse of military personnel in volatile regions of the country as in the case of the Niger Delta, where militants had sustained hostilities in the creeks with the

Joint Military Task Force (JTF). As noted by the Report, the deployment of the military to suppress conflicts without addressing underlying issues exacerbates conflicts further. The impunity of military personnel in the region has already caused deeper grievances in the Nigerian society. The above is also the same in the North-East region of the country which has escalated the issue of insurgency and terrorism.

POLITICAL ISSUES

Since the advent of civilian government in 1999, Nigeria has been embroiled in one form of political conflict or the other, observable in political parties scheming for control of the political space and for top positions, succession problems, problems of accountability and transparency, godfatherism, and electoral violence. The many examples of political clashes between political parties, the many cases that went into the various electoral tribunals and courts, more than two years into a 4-year tenure, and the bastardisation of Constitution because of electoral and political matters, go to a great extent to show that the political terrain is greatly insecure. The major political actors in the country have polarized the nation into various camps and groups all fighting for the soul of the nation, in order to gain political ascendancy over rivals. Moreover, the insensitivity of government to the plight of the populace show to a great extent that it is not interested in the affairs of its citizens. It is evident in the face off between the Federal Government and many labour unions and parastatals in the country over the various and unending agreements they have been entering into and which government has been breaching over the years. Government has often refused to do what it is supposed to until a particular union goes on industrial action before government would react.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

There is abject poverty and a great level of inequality in Nigeria presently, because of uneven distribution of resources. The yawning gap that separates the ruling class from the vast majority of the population is painfully evident at every turn. Like elites the world over, the Nigerian bourgeoisie, as it were and government officials are not averse to conspicuous display of wealth in a country where most people lack access to even the most basic necessities of life. Luxurious chauffeur-driven pleasure cars abound with rich passengers who show marked disdain for fellow Nigerians. Some have even gone a step further by buying private jets, which explains why virtually all the major roads in the country are death traps. The very presence of these elites as islands of wealth in a sea of despair and poverty is distasteful to everyone. While the elite can purchase imported food from the supermarkets, there is increasing poverty and malnutrition amongst the population at large due to a near-total absence of reasonably priced basic foodstuffs. Thus, the Report notes that the allocation of Nigeria's wealth generates conflict because of its uneven allocation; resource competition over land; unequal development, and market

competition (FGN, 2002:16-18). As is very clear, ostentatious display of wealth is a conflict trigger in impoverished societies, as the poor feel that the only way they can make themselves heard is by taking what they want forcefully.

SOCIAL ISSUES

The social manifestations of the conflicts in the Nigerian State are seen in the various ethnic, communal and religious conflicts in various parts of the country. For lack of space, we cannot go into the issue of the various conflicts ongoing in the Nigerian polity, but the fact is that the level of consciousness of every region and facet of the Nigerian society has been so sharpened by the activities of the militancy going on in various parts of the country. It has degenerated to criminality and has made the nation very unsafe. The kidnapping of expatriate and indigenous oil workers has resulted in the loss of interest in the Nigerian oil by the international community. There is serious unemployment with its attendant problems translating to domestic violence involving women and children, etc. There is also the psycho-cultural aspect that is closely related to the social, which impedes the resolution of conflicts in Nigeria as a result of disillusionment of people who do not believe whatever government tells them as the latter has consistently proved untrustworthy over the years.

The cultural and religious divide between Islam and Christianity overlapped by socio-political rivalries between major ethnic groups, represent the most violence prone rift in a country divided along a multitude of conflict lines. Ethnic divisions exist between the Hausa –Fulani (predominantly Muslim, North), Yoruba (Christian/Muslim, South-West), Igbo (predominantly Christian, South-East) as well as the multiethnic minorities in the northern (Muslim), central (Muslim/Christian) and southern (Christian) regions. The potential for violence inherent in the religious and the ethnic heterogeneity of Nigeria is further aggravated by the lopsided structure of the economy (Roth, 2009).

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian leadership and the led must show genuine concern on the escalation of violence and provide effective ways and means of making democracy to provide the desired tools for managing these conflicts. The government can effectively handle most of the violence by providing good governance.

As the IPCR Report states, Nigeria democracy cannot be preserved and sustained unless the root causes of conflicts in Nigeria are addressed and a wider range of policy responses considered. We believe a sane and level-headed civil society can make a mark in this regard.

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