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Nigerian social formation and separatist agitations: Scoping the inextricable nexus

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Abstract---In the last two decades or so, there has been a surge in violent separatist agitations in Nigeria. There is the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South-east, the Yoruba Nation Movement in the South-west, agitation for resource control in the South-south, the Boko Haram insurgency in the north, and a plethora of other violent criminal activities across the country. The paper examined the nature of the Nigerian social formation and how it has driven violent separatist agitations in the polity, in the last two decades. Data for the study was generated from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was derived from interviews, while secondary data was got from extensive library search. The Structural Conflict Theory was used as the framework of analysis, and information generated was analysed descriptively in line with the objectives of the study. The analysis established there is an inextricable nexus among the multi-ethnic nature of the Nigerian social formation; the multi-religious composition of the country; the rentier state system being operated in Nigeria, and the rise in violent agitations in the country. It was recommended that there is a need for a new national values reorientation that aim at strengthening the centripetal forces that should drive us toward a nationalistic ideal, and the weakening of the centrifugal forces which have been pulling us apart. It was also recommended that the ruling elite should work towards addressing the cries of inequity and marginalization, in the distribution of the country's wealth, by the minority ethnic nationalities, and also provide for the citizenry the most basic of their social needs such as food, shelter, education, healthcare, employment, etc., which have not been

adequately provided, and have led to the rise in violent secessionist agitations and criminality in the country.

Keywords---Nigeria, social formation, separatist agitations, ethnic nationalities.

Introduction

The history of armed revolts against successive governments in Nigeria is rooted in the past. The first person to lead such a protest, which centered around exploitation of oil and gas resources in the Niger Delta region, was Isaac Adaka Boro, an Ijaw youth activist. Isaac Boro believed that the people of the Niger Delta region, which produced the oil and gas resources that the Federal and then Eastern regional governments benefited, were not adequately compensated. Isaac Boro and his fellow Niger Deltans then clamored for a fair share of the proceeds from the sale of oil and gas resources. He formed The Niger Delta Volunteer Force, an armed militiagroup, which declared the Niger Delta republic in February 1966 and fought the Federal forces for 12 days before the secessionist revolt was crushed. Following on the heels of Adaka Boro's revolt of 1966, was the declaration of the republic of Biafra in May, 1967 by late colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu (rtd), then the governor of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. Events leading to the declaration of the Republic of Biafra, how the civil war was executed and how it ended are not part of the focus of the paper. Suffice it to say that these two secessionist attempts set the stage for the contemporary violent separatist agitations in Nigeria today.

Thus, as a social formation, Nigeria is a plural society which comprises of diverse nationalities, cultures and religious affiliations with multidimensional interests (Olomjobi, 2013). The major ethnic nationalities into which the country is divided are: the Igbo ethnic group in the east, the Hausa/Fulani in the north and the Yoruba in the west. This segmentation, along ethnic lines, provides a kind of geographical convergence: The Igbo people in the east are predominantly Christians; the Hausa/Fulani in the north are predominantly Muslims and the Yoruba in the west of the country are divided into Christians and Muslims.

These deep cleavages, along ethnic and religious lines, underlie the contestation of social forces for the control of political and economic institutions in the country. For instance, in the east we have the Ohaneze ndi Igbo which acts as an umbrella body that projects the interests of the Igbo people. In the north, we have the Arewa Consultative Assembly which acts as a mouthpiece for the Hausa-Fulani, and in the west, there is the Afenifere, which is a rallying point for the Yoruba people. These major ethnic nationalities and social forces represent the tripod upon which the Nigerian state rests. The main objective of the study is to explore the nexus between the nature

of the Nigerian social formation- the multiethnic and multi-religious composition of the country, the rentier state system operational in Nigeria, and the rise in violent separatist agitations manifested in violent sectarian and secessionists movements in the country, in the last two decades.

Literature Review

Scholarly materials, with relevant information on the nature of the Nigerian state and how it has impacted social relations, were consulted in an effort to establish the link between the independent variable (the Nigerian social formation) and the dependent variable (the surge in violent separatist agitations). For instance, Saro Wiwa (1995), Osuji (2013), Olaniyan (2003), Usman, Abba & Nuhu (2014), Awolowo (cited in Okorie, 2003), Olomjobi (2013), and a host of others, have written extensively on the subject under study. Saro Wiwa (1995:63), noted that:

“The ethnic nature of the Nigerian society is a real one. It cannot be prayed or wished away...Nigeria, a deeply divided country, is the most complex country in Africa, and perhaps, in the world”. In the same vein, Olomjobi (2013:136) noted that “Nigeria’s most striking feature is that it is divided along the fault lines of culture, language and religion...with these deep divisions, Nigeria, Africa’s most populous state and democracy, is a divided house consisting of 250 to 400 ethnic groups, with over 140 million people”.

These deep divisions, along ethnic, religious and cultural lines, scholars contend, have accounted for the propagation of conflicts of various types in the polity. For example, we have in recent times, violent agitations for the control of oil and gas resources in the Niger Delta region of the country by restive youths; terrorism in the northern part of the country, by the Boko Haram Islamist group; separatist agitations in the eastern part of the country by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which have resulted in the killing of innocent citizens and destruction of valuable property in that region, and recently the Yoruba Nation Movement led by its leader, Sunday Adeyomo (aka Sunday Igboho).

Scholars have also emphasized the multi-religious factor as one of Nigeria’s social problems which drives violent separatist agitations in the polity that have threatened the foundations of Nigeria’s national unity. Olomjobi (2013), for instance, averred that religion has the potential of causing conflict of a violent nature due to the fact that we are a multi-religious state, and operate in a tense inter-religious environment. In Nigeria, religious identities as to whether one is a Christian or Muslim, are defining characteristics of the Nigerian state. This much is evident in the contestation of social forces for the control of political and economic institutions in Nigeria. For instance, election or appointment of persons into positions of authority are determined not by competence but mostly by religious affiliation and/or the part of the country the person comes from. This has, over the years, resulted in lopsided appointments, with

strident cries of marginalization by the ethnic or religious groups that feel left out. This situation, most often, has led to cries of marginalization by the Igbo people in the eastern part of the country, resulting in the birth of such separatist movements as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and its splinter group, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement which seeks the resuscitation of the sovereign state of Biafra which was birthed in 1967 and vanquished in 1970 at the end of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970).

Apart from the ethnic and religious factors that have been considered by scholars as the drivers of separatist agitations in Nigeria, there are other scholars who point up the economic factor as crucial in establishing a link between the nature of the Nigerian social formation and the rise in violent separatist agitations in the polity. Nigeria, typically, operates a rentier state system which relies on rents that accrue from the sale of oil and gas resources. With over reliance on external rents, which comes from Multinational Oil Companies (MNOCs), little attention is paid to the domestic sector, that is, productivity of the domestic economy. Agbo & Okoli (2017) observed that the rentier character of the Nigerian state is expressed in its over-dependence on oil as its major source of revenue, and the formulation of policies that are influenced by what happens in the oil sector. This has resulted in the neglect of the development of the other productive sectors of the economy. They went further to establish a correlation between the Nigerian rentier state system and the dearth of industries, entrepreneurship and critical infrastructure as a result of the existence of the enclave economy from which the state derives a significant chunk of its revenue. Given that it is the federal government that controls the surplus accumulation from oil resources, there is inequitable distribution of the national patrimony, resulting in the polarization of the society into the “very rich” and “extremely poor”; mass unemployment, alienation, etc. This has given rise to the sprouting of armed militants in the Niger Delta region, armed banditry across the country, kidnapping for ransom, and a multiple of sectarian and secessionist movements in the polity. This point has been emphasized by Usman, Abba & Nuhu (2014:300), who noted that:

The new militancy germinated out of the fertile soil of widespread social angst in the country generally and in northern Nigeria in particular. Decades after independence, Nigeria, with its huge oil revenue, has woefully failed to provide even the most basic development imperatives such as water and power supply, health and education, as well as roads and critical infrastructure. There is deep-seated crisis of underdevelopment which breeds discontent across the country.

The point that has been emphasized by Scholars is that, separatist agitations against the Nigerian state, since 1960, have always been explained within the contexts of her multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition, as well as the rentier state system which has

impoverished, rather than improve the material well-being of the citizens, over the past six decades.

Furthermore, some scholars have emphasized the geopolitical factor as being at the core of separatist agitations in Nigeria. The argument is that Nigeria, as presently constituted, is an amalgam of disparate nationalities, which were brought together by the British colonial administration, headed by Lord Fredrick Lugard, in 1914. Thus, the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates brought together different peoples from different geo-political regions into one country, whose people do not share social, cultural, language, religious or ethnic affinities. For instance, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the first Prime Minister of Nigeria (cited in Elaigwu (2009) remarked that:

Since 1914, the British Government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but the Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious belief, and do not themselves show any sign of willingness to unite-Nigerian unity is only British creation for the country. A foremost nationalist and late former Premier of the old Western Region, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, also aligned with the above position, when he maintained that: *Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no "Nigerians" in the same sense as there are "English", "Welsh" or "French". The word "Nigeria" is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries from those who do not (cited in Okadigbo, 1987:12).*

What is emphasized is that most scholars believe that the foundation of the fissiparous tendencies that we witness today, and which are at the roots of secessionist movements in some parts of the country, was laid at the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914. Thus, agitations for a Yoruba nation and actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra, by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), show that the centrifugal forces, pulling us away from a United Nigerian state are stronger than the centripetal forces that are working for Nigeria to remain as a united country.

Theoretical Framework

Every research work requires an appropriate theoretical framework within which the subject matter of investigation could be explained. In this study, therefore, the Structural Theory of violent social conflicts is adopted as an analytical tool for explicating the nature of the Nigerian social formation and how it drives violent secessionist agitations in the polity. The structural theory of social conflict has two main sub-orientations: the radical structural theory, represented by the Marxist dialectical school, which has proponents such as Karl Marx and Frederick Engel, V. I. Lenin, and others, and the liberal structuralism, with Ross (1993), Galtung (1990) and Scarborough (1998) as major proponents.

The main thrust of the structural conflict theory is that violent social conflicts are explainable within the contexts of how the society is structured and organized and the tensions that arise from the competition by groups within it, for the available scarce resources. From the Marxist point of view, society is in a perpetual state of conflict caused by the competition by groups within it, for access to the available scarce resources. Also the theory states that the society is divided along economic class and the working class, the “rulers” and the “ruled”, the “haves and “have nots”, the “majority” and “minority”, etc, all these divisions are at the core of violent social conflicts in every society.

The relevance of the structural conflict theory, in explicating the multiple violent conflicts in Nigeria, be they sectarian movements, agitations for self-determination, militancy for resource control, armed banditry, etc, lies in the fact that, as a plural society made up of several ethnic groups with vested interests, violent conflicts of the nature that we experience presently in Nigeria, have become inevitable. The theory, therefore, provides a lucid explanation of violent agitations for resource control in the oil rich south-south region; (which are driven by the feeling of inequitable distribution of revenue from crude oil sales by the Nigerian state; religious extremism in the northern parts of the country (driven principally by religious identities; secessionist movements in the southeast and south-west geo- political zones (propelled by cultural identities and feelings of marginalization by these ethnic groups) and the surge in armed banditry across the country (driven by mass poverty, unemployment and the widening lacuna between the rich and the poor).

Research Methods

Data used for the study was obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was generated from interviews with some senior academics of the University of Calabar (South-south, Nigeria) and University of Jos (North Central, Nigeria) University of Ibadan (southwest, Nigeria) and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (North central Nigeria) . The choice of these universities was to enable the researcher get the views a of seasoned academics from at least four, out of the six geopolitical zones into which Nigeria is divided. The interviewees were selected from the Department of Political Science, and the Department of History and International Studies. Questions posed during interview sessions centered on the nexus between the nature of the Nigerian social formation and how it has driven separatist agitations in the polity.

Secondary data was derived from extensive library research. Textbooks, Journal articles and other relevant published materials were consulted. Information generated from both primary and secondary sources was analysed descriptively in line with the objectives of the study.

Data Analysis and Results

This section of the paper involves presentation and analysis of data obtained in the course of field survey.

Table 1
Summary of respondents based on universities and geopolitical zones

University	Geopolitical zone	Number of interviewees
University of Ibadan, Oyo State	South-west, Nigeria	20
University Of Calabar, Cross River State	South-south, Nigeria	20
University of Jos, Plateau State	North-Central, Nigeria	20
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State	Northwest, Nigeria	20
Total		80

The Table above shows the distribution of respondents according to universities and geopolitical zones in Nigeria. One university was randomly picked from four, out of the six geopolitical zones into Nigeria is politically divided. Twenty respondents were also randomly interviewed by the Research Assistants that were appointed for the purpose of the study. On the whole, eighty (80) senior academics, from the rank of senior lecturer and above, were interviewed.

Table 2
Summary of the respondents' responses to the question on the multi-ethnic nature of the Nigerian social formation and how it has driven separatist agitations in the polity

University	Number of respondents	Percentage of those who agreed	Percentage of those who disagree
University of Ibadan	20	17(85%)	3(15%)
University of Calabar	20	19(95%)	1(5%)
University of Jos	20	16(80%)	4(20%)
Ahmadu Bello University Zaria	20	17(85%)	3(5%)
Total	80	69(86%)	11(14%)

Source: Field survey, 2022

The table above shows that out of the 20 respondents interviewed at the University of Ibadan, 17 representing 85%, agreed that the multi-ethnic character of the Nigerian state is responsible for the quest for secession that the State has faced since independence in 1960. Out of the number of respondents, 3, representing 15%, disagreed with his position. In the other three universities (Calabar, Jos and Ahmadu Bello), 19(95%), 16(80%), and 17(85%) respondents agreed, respectively, while 1% of the respondents in Calabar; 4% in Jos and 3% in Ahmadu Bello, disagreed. On the whole, 69 respondents (86%) agreed that the rise in violent separatist agitations in Nigeria is a function of the multi-ethnic nature of the Nigerian state. However, 11(1) respondents (14%), disagreed with this position.

Table 3

Summary of the respondents' responses to the question on how the multi-religious composition of the country has driven faith-based conflicts, that have threatened the corporate existence of the Nigerian state

University	Number of respondents	Percentage of those who agreed	Percentage of those who disagree
University of Ibadan	20	17(85%)	3(15%)
University of Calabar	20	16(80%)	4(20%)
University of Jos	20	18(90%)	2(10%)
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	20	15(75%)	5(25%)
Total	80	66(83%)	17(17%)

Source: Field survey, 2022

Table iii above reveals that of the 80 respondents interviewed in the sampled universities, 66, representing 83% agreed that the multi-religious composition of the Nigerian state is a cardinal factor in explicating the plethora of faith-based violence in Nigeria, especially in the northern part of the country. However, 17 respondents, representing 17% disagreed with this position. This result shows that religious identities, as to whether one is a Christian or Muslim, are at the heart of religious conflicts, such as the Boko Haram movement in that part of the country, which has unleashed devastating consequences on Nigerians in the northern part of the country.

Table 4
 Respondents' responses to the question on the rentier character of the
 Nigerian state as a trigger of secessionist agitations in the polity

University	Number of respondents	Percentage of those who agreed	Percentage of those who disagree
University of Ibadan	20	18(90%)	2(10%)
University of Calabar	20	19(95%)	1(5%)
University of Jos	20	16(80%)	4(20%)
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	20	18(90%)	2(10%)
Total	80	71(89%)	9(11%)

Source: Field survey, 2022

Data in Table iv above shows that out of the 80 academics interviewed in the four (4) sampled universities, 71, representing 89%, agreed that the rentier character of the Nigerian state, expressed in the over-dependence on crude oil and gas sales and the neglect of other productive sectors of the economy, accounts for the mass poverty, unemployment and lack of entrepreneurship experienced in the country today. This situation has given rise to discontent among the mass of the people, especially that it is only the federal government that controls the rents that accrue from the sale of oil and gas resources. Thus, the violent agitations for resource control by the Niger Delta militants can be explained within this context, considering the feelings of exploitation and neglect by the people of the Niger Delta region.

Analysis and Discussion

Based on what was gleaned from documentary materials and the opinions of those who were interviewed, it was established that the fissiparous tendencies that we experience today, which drive separatist agitations in Nigeria, are rooted in history. Nigeria, as a country, is a creation of British colonialism. Disparate nationalities, which hitherto were unknown to each other before the advent of colonialism, were forced together into a country, in 1914, by Lord Fredrick Lugard. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates, in 1914, has been described as "the mistake of 1914". This is because all efforts to weld these disparate nationalities into a nation-state, over the decades, have not yielded results. These divisive tendencies are ever present and account for the clamour for the actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra in the Southeast of the country; agitations for a Yoruba Nation in the south-west region and quest for the enthronement of the caliphate system, with a strict application of the Sharia legal system, in the northern part of the country.

Obafemi Awolowo, (cite in Okorie, 2013:14), a foremost nationalist and late former Premier of the defunct Western Region in Nigeria, aligns with the above position. He noted that the amalgamation of 1914 was “a marriage of inconvenience” grafted by the British colonialism. Also, he noted in Okadigbo (1987) that:

“Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no “Nigerians” in the same sense as they are “English”, “Welsh” or “French”. The word Nigeria is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries from those who do not”. In the same vein, Sir Abubakar Tafewa Balewa, the first Prime Minister of Nigeria, agreed that:

Since 1914, the British Government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but the Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious beliefs and do not themselves show any sign of willingness to unite-Nigerian unity is only British creation for the country. Olomojobi (2013) struck the right cord in describing the nature of the Nigerian state when he noted that Nigeria’s most striking feature is that it is divided along the fault lines of ethnicity, culture, language and religion. With these deep divisions, Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country and democracy is a divided house consisting of well over 400 ethnic groups, with an estimated population of more than 140 million people.

In discussing the multi-religious composition of Nigeria and how this drives violent separatist agitations in the polity, Olomojobi (2013) agrees that religion has the potential of causing conflict of a violent nature. This, according to him, is due to the fact that as a multi-religious state, we operate under a tense inter-religious atmosphere. The division, as to whether one is a Christian or Muslim, accounts for all the faith-based violence in Nigeria, especially in the northern part of the country. It is to be added that at the initial stage of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria, the sect appeared to target mostly Christians considering the number of Christian workshop centres that came under the sect’s series of attacks.

However, with passage of time, the sect’s activities have extended to include public institutions, market places, motor-parks, mosques, etc. With these attacks, it has become difficult to assign religious underpinnings to its mission. Thus, because of the intertwined nature of politics and religion, Olomojobi (2013) averred that faith-based conflicts in Northern Nigeria are either incited by politicians or the elites, by using religion as a mobilizing tool, or by the people of the grassroots level where there is a perceived threat to religious identities.

One common feature of the Nigerian state is the rentier state system which allows the control of surplus accumulation from oil resources solely by the federal government. The resultant effects of the rentier character of the Nigerian state is the over-dependence on oil, as the major source

of revenue; the formulation of policies that are influenced by what happens in the oil sector, and the neglect of other productive sectors of the economy (Agbo, N.H & Okoli, R.C (2017). This has occasioned the polarization of the Nigerian society into the “very rich” and the “very poor”, mass unemployment among the productive segment of the state, and a general feeling of discontent among the majority of the people. The result has been armed militancy, highway robberies, kidnapping for ransom, abductions by armed bandits, etc. In aligning with the position above, Usman, Abba & Nuhu (2014:300) noted that:

The new militancy germinated out of the fertile soil of wide-spread angst in the country generally and in northern Nigeria in particular. Decades after independence, Nigeria, with its huge oil revenue, has woefully failed to provide even the most basic of development imperatives such as water and power supply, health and education, as well as roads and critical infrastructure. There is deep-seated crisis of underdevelopment which breeds discontent across the country.

The summary of the information derived from extant literature and opinions expressed by the interviewees is that the internal security threats which have afflicted the Nigerian state since independence in 1960, are a function of the nature of the Nigerian social formation, with its divisive tendencies; poor governance; corruption and mismanagement of the national patrimony, by the ruling elite. This situation has created ethnic and religious tensions, mass poverty and a general sense of frustration with the state of affairs, resulting in the clamour by separatist groups for independence from the Nigerian state. This also accounts for agitations for resource control by armed militants in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of the country, and a rise in criminality across the country.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, the rise in violent separatist agitations, across the country in the last two decades, has remained a topical issue in national discourses. The paper laid bare the three factors that are critical in explicating the current internal security challenges the country is facing. These three factors are, but not limited to, the multi-ethnic nature of the Nigerian social formation, multi-religious composition of the state and the rentier character of the economy. These three factors, it was established, are at the core of any form of violence that the country faced in the past and still faces, be it agitations for resource control, clamour for self-determination, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, religious fundamentalism, etc.

Arising from the multiple security challenges that Nigeria faces at the moment, the following actionable recommendations are made: First, there is the need to re-orientate our national values, which at the moment promote ethnicity, parochialism and religious fundamentalism, etc. Nigerians, at the moment, emphasize the ethnic region where they come

from, the kind of religion they practice, Muslim or Christian, etc, rather than promoting the ideals that will strengthen our national unity such as being proud to be a Nigerian, irrespective of the region one comes from or the type of religion one practices. This has been the root cause(s) of violent ethnic and religious conflicts in the country. The new national value reorientation proposed should be in the form of mass enlightenment campaigns at all levels of government, in schools and worship centres, on the need for Nigerians to see themselves as Nigerians first before other primordial considerations. Also, that Allah or God is one and the same being who created all of us in His image and likeness, suggesting that one needs not kill another for His sake.

Second, the ruling elite in Nigeria, since 1960, have not managed our common patrimony to address the basic needs of the citizens, like food, shelter, employment, education, healthcare, etc. The inability of the ruling elite to provide these basic social needs has led to a general discontent among the mass of the people, resulting in violent secessionist or separatist agitations and a rise in criminal activities across the country. There is therefore an urgent need for the political elite to have a change of attitude towards public funds by judiciously applying our national resources to address the critical social and development of needs of the citizenry, rather than diverting such to service pecuniary interests, as it is the case in Nigeria today.

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