Resolving Violent Conflicts in Nigeria: Towards A Social Contract Approach

By

Innocent C. Ngangah*

Abstract

Following the independence of Nigeria in 1960, there were hopes that the culturally and linguistically diverse groups of people successfully welded together by the British in 1914 would quickly become an epitome of democracy, peace and prosperity. Those hopes were dashed within the first seven years of the country's existence as an independent nation. After 30 months of civil war, decades of military rule and various democratic experiments, this richly endowed country of over 200 million people is still caught in the web of incessant mutual distrust that often gives rise to violent conflicts across the country. Various conflict-management and peace-building measures put in place have not led to reduction in incidences of violent clashes among Nigerians. It is the position of this paper that a social-contract model of resolving conflicts can galvanize the people of Nigeria towards reaching common terms for peaceful co-existence and position Nigeria for durable peace and development.

Keywords: peace, security, Nigeria, social contract, political philosophy, conflict resolution

1. Introduction

Violent conflicts have become regular occurrences in Nigeria and they cut across all the political zones of the country. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has tottered from one social or political crisis to another, most of which were preventable. She had barely spent seven years after independence when her three-year civil war erupted. For almost 30 years, Nigeria was ruled by the military. In spite of the restoration of democracy in 1999, mutual suspicion among the country's over 250 ethnic groups, bad governance, religious violence, communal clashes, proliferation of armed groups, terrorism, kidnapping, flagrant killings, and many other symptoms of bankrupt leadership, have marred Nigeria's stability.

Analysts have explores some of the reasons Nigeria has journeyed for so long as an independent country without visionary leadership, sustainable development, durable peace and security, and the capacity to effectively manage her recurring and divisive socio-political crises. Many observers have argued that the frequency of violent conflicts in the country is a result of Nigerian government's failure to adopt and implement effective conflict management measures. They consider as inadequate the government's apparent preference for and reliance on use of force as a means of quelling and managing violent conflicts. According to Akinwale (2010):

> When conflicts erupt, the inability of the Nigerian mobile police to manage them usually prompts the Nigerian government to deploy the Nigerian military to the scene of violence where the military are usually mandated to 'shoot on sight.' This situation sometimes leads to serious human rights violations and escalation of violence.... The state's imposition of curfew and use of propaganda to douse public tension are part of the Nigerian government's regular strategies for conflict management in Nigeria.

It is fair to add that the Nigerian government has openly encouraged inter-religious dialogue and has since the early 1970s used its National Youth Service Scheme (NYSC) to compel young graduates to serve the nation, for almost a year, in parts of the country culturally and linguistically different from theirs. This and other measures aimed at building trust and unity across the nation appear not to have yielded positive results. Existing conflict management approaches have proved to be ineffective in sustaining peace in Nigeria.

In the next section, we will examine some of the major causes of violent conflicts in Nigeria because understanding the nature and dimensions of these conflicts might indicate why they are so difficult to resolve and why there is need to seek new approaches and strategies towards solving this great hindrance to the country's unity and speedy development. Nigerian governments at all levels need to animate the social contract they have with the people by creating platforms that would enable the people themselves to thrash out the various issues of contention. In section three of this paper, we will discuss the social contract model – a philosophical approach by which the direct engagement of the people involved in conflict situations in peace-building efforts is used to resolve underlying grievances and enthrone enduring peace and development.

2. Causes of Violence in Nigeria

Many reasons have been adduced for the incessant violence which has become the bane of Nigeria – a country greatly blessed in human and natural resources, namely, good climate, diverse agricultural produce, solid minerals, and petroleum, to mention but a few. Nigeria has a free market economy; it is the 7th largest exporter of petroleum in the world and Africa's most populated country and largest market. What might be the cause of frequent violent outbursts across the country?

Several causes have been identified, and they include legacy of divide and rule tactics of the colonial masters, ethnic rivalry, prolonged military rule, squabbles over election results, linguistic divisions, poverty, illiteracy, bad governance, religious intolerance, citizenship/indigene-settler issues, over-centralization of power at the centre, resource control wrangling, unemployment, injustice and unresolved long-standing grievances. To enable us understand the nature of some of these factors, let us examine three of the most recurrent ones as we cannot explore all of the above issues within the limited scope of this paper. The three we will discuss briefly are elections, religious intolerance, and ethnicity.

a. Elections: Nigeria has tried various forms of political systems: parliamentary democracy, military rule, and presidential democracy. There were violent conflicts during each period, but our focus here is election-related violence. Nigeria's pre-independence parliamentary elections were held on 12 December 1959 (Nohlen, Krennerich & Thibaut, 1999). Since then, violence has marred Nigerian elections:

> The first general elections conducted in Nigeria was in 1959. Irrespective of the flaws noticed during the elections, the 1959 general elections remain one of the few relatively peaceful and violent-free elections in Nigeria, simply because the elections were conducted under the watchful eyes of the British colonial administration. Subsequent elections starting with the second general election in 1964…were all characterized by several electoral vices, including widespread violence involving the use of political thugs, manipulation of elections through multiple voting and rigging of votes, monetization of the electoral process through bribing of electoral officials and votes buying, extreme lawlessness, hooliganism and vandalism…. (Awofeso & Odeyemi, 2016)

The presidential election of 2011 is the bloodiest in terms of post-electoral violence in Nigeria. While the 2007 presidential election was "universally decried" (Bekoe, 2011), the 2011 election was

generally adjudged relatively free and fair. In spite of this, violence still erupted:

> Deadly election-related and communal violence in northern Nigeria following the April 2011 presidential voting left more than 800 people dead, Human Rights Watch said today. The victims were killed in three days of rioting in 12 northern states…. The violence began with widespread protests by supporters of the main opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim from the Congress for Progressive Change, following the re-election of incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the Niger Delta in the south, who was the candidate for the ruling People's Democratic Party (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

The above *Human Rights Watch* report explained that the 2011 post-election protests degenerated into "violent riots or sectarian killings in the northern states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara." It noted that "Relief officials estimate that more than 65,000 people have been displaced." 2011's record of over 800 deaths within three days, regardless of the fair conduct of the election, indicated that sometimes violence could still erupt in Nigeria in spite of skillful and accountable management of elections.

b. Religious Intolerance: Religious crises constitute one of the greatest threats to peace and unity in Nigeria. Although religious violence is mostly associated with northern Nigeria because of the frequency of religious eruptions in that part of the country, a few instances of religious intolerance have also been recorded in the south. Nigeria is officially a secular state but religious considerations tend to determine, to a large extent, political privileges and key public service appointments.

The squabble is usually between adherents of the two main religious groups in the country, Christianity and Islam. Often, the bone of contention is rarely clear as most religious fires, in the volatile zones, erupt suddenly, catching many on the opposite side of the religious divide unawares, and thereby making implementation of preemptive conflict-management measures extremely difficult. In some cases, where the provokers of the crisis aim at expelling by all means a given religious group from an area, even post conflict-management processes often yield little result.

Before the Boko Haram crisis that led to the death of 6664 persons as at 2014, a record that enabled Boko Haram to snatch the "the world's deadliest terrorist organization" title from the Islamic State (IS) which had killed 6073 in the same year (Mutsvairo, Ogbondah, & Agbese, 2017), religious crisis in Nigeria was already the cause of massive destruction of lives and properties. Here is a narration of what happened in the 1980s:

> Between 1980 and 1988, more than 5000 Nigerians lost their lives in religious riots in Maiduguri and other parts of the northern states of Nigeria (in 1980 and 1982) and in Kaduna and Kano (in 1982 and 1987). These cases of violence were also accompanied by large-scale destruction of property and the displacement of many Nigerians from their usual areas of residence. The severity of such violence tends to foster an atmosphere of communal insecurity and create an air of impending social disaster and collapse (Ogba, 1989).

While Nigeria may need to improve on her current conflict-management measures, it is the position of this paper that most of the conflicts demand a new set of approaches capable of tackling the problems at foundational levels.

c. Ethnicity: Major causes of conflict in Nigeria include ethnic, clannish, and indigene-settler squabbles – all of which are symptoms of a country that is still riddled with primitive divisions and that has done little to unite its over 250 ethnic and linguistic groups and give every part of the country, every part of its 36 states and 774 local governments, a sense of belonging. The squabbles are widespread and diverse: supremacy fights between neighbouring communities; fights over political and economic privileges between so-called indigenes and settlers within a community or across several communities; land and border disputes that cut across villages, towns and states; violent fights over grazing, farming and fishing rights; chieftaincy tussles; intense protests against government-backed companies degrading the local environment; and other forms of geo-political agitations.

To illustrate how widespread violent conflicts sparked off by ethnic and indigene-settler disagreements are in Nigeria, Nwagwu (2016) listed some of the clashes that led to "colossal loss of lives and properties...and millions of displaced people"; they include:

> Zangon-Kataf crisis in Kaduna State (1992-2001) between the Atyaps (natives) and Hausa/Fulani tribes; the Tiv-Jukun-Wukari conflict in Taraba State (1999-2001); the Aguleri and

> Umuleri conflict in Anambra State (which recurred in 30 years interval – 1936, 1966, and 1996); the Itsekiri-Urhobo-Warri inter-community conflict in Delta State (1999-2000); the Ezza-Ezillo communal conflict in Ebonyi State; the Ife-Modakeke communal conflict in Oyo State (from pre-colonial era till date); the Hausa/Fulani and Berom/Anaguta/Afizere crisis in Jos, Plateau State (2009 - date); the Niger Delta conflicts (which primarily borders on economic deprivation, environmental degradation, political marginalization, government-driven impoverishment and underdevelopment of the region);...the Tiv and Fulani herdsmen crisis in Makurdi, Benue State (2014); and a litany of other recorded and unrecorded incidents of indigenes and settlers conflicts in families, villages, and communities in Nigeria.

Akinwale (2010), giving an indication of how many lives were lost in some of these conflicts, and using a 2009 statistics released by the International Crisis Group, reported that "About 50 episodes of violent conflict, which culminated in the death of over 10000 persons and internal displacement of over 300000 people, were recorded in Nigeria between 1999 and 2003". More deaths and more internal displacements have been recorded since then.

Nigeria's current democratic dispensation began in 1999. If the deployment of conflict-management measures had made significant impact in minimizing the eruption of violent conflicts across the country, Nigeria ought to have known some measure of peace by 2022. During the military era, the military bore the blame for most of what went wrong during that period. But in spite of 21 years of uninterrupted civil rule, Nigeria's crippling violence and instability has not abated. Is this lamentable state of the nation a result of bad leadership, ineffective conflict management strategies or the result of Nigeria's failure to locate and apply more enduring panaceas?

3. Towards A Social Contract Approach to Peace Building in Nigeria

Nigeria needs to embrace the social contract model of conflict resolution in order to achieve lasting peace. The idea of organising society via the concept of "social contract" was first mooted by the political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). But he wrongly concluded that the only way to avoid a "war of all against all" (Hobbes, 2002) was for society to be governed by an absolute Sovereign. John Locke (in his *Second Treatise of Government*) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (in *The Social Contract*), while adopting Hobbes' social contract doctrine as a means of legitimizing

governmental authority, differed from him on the nature of such authority, insisting that the powers of any civil ruler should be set and limited by the people. Rousseau was emphatic that sovereignty is the heritage of the people, not that of any ruler. As such, it cannot be delegated or transferred to any authority as laws should be made to secure the "general will" (Rousseau, 2017).

Capturing the central argument of all the social contract theorists, Brian Duignan (2022) notes:

> The classic social-contract theorists of the 17th and 18th centuries—Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)—held that the social contract is the means by which civilized society, including government, arises from a historically or logically preexisting condition of stateless anarchy, or a "state of nature." Because the state of nature is in certain respects unhappy or unsatisfactory or undesirable, or because increasingly complex social relations eventually require it, each person agrees to surrender some (or all) of his or her originally expansive rights and freedoms to a central authority on the condition that every other person does the same. In exchange, each person receives the benefits that supposedly only such a central authority can provide, notably including domestic peace.

The philosopher, R.J. Rummel (1981), adopted social contract principles in developing what he called "the social contract model" of the "just peace". His model is applicable to dealing with issues that threaten global peace but his concepts can also be related to conflicts in sovereign nations. According to him, his objective was "to determine what principles of social justice individuals would adopt voluntarily and fairly were their judgments not biased by self interest". Since most people's judgments would be biased by self interest, Rummel stressed the need to ensure that the parties to a conflict are encouraged, as a primary basis to peace talks, to agree to just principles: "These ideal just principles constitute a social contract against which the justice of current institutions (and situations) can be assessed and to which social reforms can be directed…so as to minimize social violence." (Bracketed words mine)

Rummel emphasizes the need to ensure equality, justice and fairplay in working out a framework for conflict resolution that would lead to a sustainable peaceful and progressive environment. Below are his thoughts on fairness, rightness, impartiality, and

justice:

> Besides fairness, rightness, and impartiality, justice also implies order. A society in a constant state of social violence, insecurity, and war is hardly just. Justice must assume a prior state of law and order to which we can then apply questions of fairness, rightness, and the like…. It is contradictory to call a violent society just.
>
> The social contract that defines a just peace must not only be just, therefore, but must also frame a relatively nonviolent system of relations. Accordingly, the peace *requirement…*of the social contract model means this. *A just peace is a just…social contract structuring a system of minimal social violence.*

Underlying Rummel's social contract model is his belief that enabling the parties to a conflict to agree voluntarily to terms of peace and peaceful co-existence would yield more lasting result than imposing "solutions" from governmental authorities or third parties. To make a voluntary agreement and commitment to that agreement possible, the parties to a conflict must be ready to make voluntary compromises. This is because, in the words of the political and social philosopher, John Rawls:

> No society can, of course, be a scheme of cooperation which people enter voluntarily in a literal sense; each person finds himself placed at birth in some particular position in some particular society, and the nature of this position materially affects his life prospects. Yet a society satisfying the principles of justice as fairness comes as close as a society can to being a voluntary scheme, for it meets the principles which free and equal persons would assent to under circumstances that are fair. In this sense its members are autonomous and the obligations they recognize self-imposed. (Rawls, 1971:13)

To build lasting peace in Nigeria, there is need to reach out to various groups of Nigerians to harness their views on the critical issues that generate violence or create a sense of injustice, marginalization or oppression. Let us stop presuming that we know what the issues are. The actors or victims of violent conflict should be allowed to openly tell us what they feel and what they think is a way out of the problem. Whatever modalities this grassroots dialogue may take can be worked out by the Government and the National Assembly who themselves cannot be direct participants in this process but to whom the result of this process should be submitted for implementation.

The elite have already told us what they think about the best ways to stabilize this country: some recommend the continuation of the current unitary system they regard as "federalism"; some canvass for "fiscal federalism"; others are calling for a new constitution that will lead to decentralization of power via regional or zonal restructuring of the country; while some are making separatist demands. To enable "we the people" forge a binding social contract among Nigerians, it is high time we found a way of assessing and assembling the views of ordinary Nigerians.

4. Conclusion

It should be observed that, in recommending the social contract model of resolving chronic conflicts, this paper has avoided the urge to make prescriptions as to how the conference or dialogue of Nigerian groups should be held. If the idea is adopted in principle, the authorities, the media and civil society groups can be constructively engaged so that modalities that would ensure equal participation of all Nigerian groups can be worked out.

We have only briefly discussed Rummel's exhaustive social contract model as a way of introducing to Nigerians this peace-building method which, he submits, can be further "developed through experience and thought and as imbued with the historical lessons embodied in our culture and society" (Rummel, 1981).

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*About the Author: Prof. Innocent C. Ngangah (ic.ngangah@coou.edu.ng) is of the Department of Philosophy, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Anambra State, Nigeria.