

# Ethnic Conflict and the Issue of Secession in Nigeria: The Way Out

**AKA, AUGUSTINECHUKWUEMEKA**

Ebonyi State University, P.M.B. 053, ABAKALIKI

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## ABSTRACT

Peace is the costliest commodity that one can have in a lifetime. The word peace is what brings development, progress and success. Why some countries are under developed with a low level of political and economic productivity is because of absence of peace as no meaningful achievement can take place in the presence of conflict. If we know all these, why then do we engage in conflict in Nigeria? What is the cause of secession among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria? What can we do to curb it? These are the major concerns of this paper. This paper establishes that for conflict and secession to be drastically reduced to a barest minimum in Nigeria, her leaders should do away with injustice, marginalization, inequality, bad leadership, disobedience to court orders and mismanagement of natural resources.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Secession, Violence, Ethnicity

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country in West Africa that is made up of more than 250 ethnic groups. Among these ethnic groups, the major ones are Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. These ethnic groups differ in culture, language, religion etc. It is because of this, that Nigeria is said to be a multiethnic, multilingual (multilinguistic) and multicultural society. As a result of these differences, they struggle for power, values, scarce resource,

titles and in the process, conflict erupts. Examples of some of these conflicts are the harder-farmer conflicts, conflict between Itsekiri and Ijaw people of Delta state, Ngbo and Agila conflict, conflict between Ile-lfe and Modakeke, Ezza and Ezillo conflict, Ezza Effium and Umuezeoka conflict etc. Conflict has caused a great havoc and that is why scholars have devoted much attention to it. A lot of multidisciplinary efforts have been made on the best approaches, methods and ways of resolving conflict. According to Juergen Dedin, the multidisciplinary effort to analyze conflict processes and to identify or suggest ways and means of bridging the gap and setting the difference between the direct parties has occupied political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, economists, lawyers and other specialists (Juergen Dedin, *On Peace in Times of War: Resolving Violent Conflicts by Peaceful Means*). A study in conflict reveals a number of observations, namely that there is a large volume of literature written about the concept and theories of conflict, especially with regard to warfare; secondly, there is a lack of consensus among scholars on issues, of human conflict. Thirdly, the literature contains several dichotomies that divide the search for a dominant paradigm (Odo, 2006:1). But one thing that is certain is that conflict cannot be totally wiped away in human relationship, affairs and existence. Conflict is bound to exist in so far as humans continue to compete, struggle for power and scarce resources because these

are the things that lead to clash and conflict of interests which result in conflict.

### **Meaning of Conflict**

Conflict is a natural part of human life. Conflict is said to take place when there is squabble, strife, wrangle, bickering, controversy, discord or misunderstanding between two or more people, communities, states or countries. According to *Wikipedia*, a conflict is a situation in which unacceptable differences in interests, expectations, values, and opinions occur in or between individuals or group (*Wikipedia*, "Conflict," (Process)). Conflict is a situation in which people, groups, communities or countries are involved in serious disagreement or argument. This disagreement or controversy often results into crisis and its accompanying violent destruction of lives and properties. It is an ill wind that blows no good to anybody. It is a monster that threatens the peace, unity, harmony and progress of given communities. Because nothing good comes from conflict, it needs to be quickly resolved anytime it rears its ugly head (Alexander, 2012: 297).

One important thing that should be addressed from the onset is whether people perceive conflict as objective conditions to which all persons react or respond. That is to say, are the causes of conflict objective enough to the extent that its occurrence would necessarily lead to conflict? (Odo, 2006: III). Generally speaking, conflict is perceived by many people as something abnormal, breakdown of peace and therefore detestable. This notwithstanding, conflict cannot be wished away from every human society. Conflict remains permanent parcel of change in the society. What makes society ideal is the extent to which conflicting interests and needs are constructively managed to reduce violence. The extent to which conflict is constructively managed helps to foster positive development and growth of the society. This is because conflicts arise from the pursuit of divergent interest, views and

aspiration of people and group in a large society (Odo, 2006: III-II2). Conflict and violence are currently on the rise, with many conflicts today waged between non-state actors such as political militias, criminal and international terrorist groups. Unresolved regional tensions, a breakdown in the rule of law, absent or coopted state institutions, illicit economic gain and the scarcity of resources exacerbated by climate change, have become dominant drivers of conflict (United Nations, A New Era of Conflict and Violence).

There are many types of conflict which include intra-personal conflict, inter-personal conflict, group conflict, direct conflict, structural conflict, symmetric conflict and asymmetric conflict. According to Onwe (2006:25), intra-personal conflict is a conflict that occurs within an individual while inter-personal conflict occurs between two or more individuals. Group conflict could be intra-group conflict (within members of the same group) and inter-group conflict (among different groups). Another type of conflict which is known as direct conflict is a situation where conflict arises from riots, demonstrations, disagreements, war, etc. and leaves a serious wound on individuals. Structural conflict is caused by standard of living, untold hardship, suppression and oppression suffered by the populace. Symmetric conflict differs from asymmetric conflict in the sense that symmetric conflict takes place between two groups of equal power which could be between two nations that have equal military and economic powers while asymmetric conflict is when there is conflict between two groups or states of unequal power like between state and local governments.

### **Ethnic Conflict: What is it?**

Ethnic conflict is a conflict that occurs between two or more ethnic groups. Ethnic conflict takes place when one ethnic group marginalizes another or when an ethnic group is oppressed, denied justice or other fundamental human rights. This conflict can

be caused by political interests, social interests, economic in Colonial and religious interests. Ethnic conflict therefore is a form of conflict in which there is an ethnic dimension. The ambitions of at least one party are defined in ethnic terms and the conflict, its antecedents, and possible solutions are perceived along ethnic lines. The conflict tends not to be about ethnic differences themselves but over political, economic, social, cultural or territorial matters (Reuter, "Conflict-Cultural, Religious, National," Encyclopedia Britannica). Reuter further notes that ethnic disputes are common in every multicultural society while intergroup problems arise in periods of substantial political, economic, and social change and lead to uncertainly, emerging opportunities for action and particularistic interests. For him, grievances and polarizing leadership lead to mobilization, ranging from political action (conventional politics, strikes, demonstrations, and other nonviolent means) to violent acts such as terrorism, armed uprisings, guerrilla activity and civil wars.

In the view of Mohapatra and Muscato, ethnic conflict can result from a number of differentiating factors. They can be broadly divided into two categories: underlying causes (religion, unequal distribution of resources, social inequalities, political factors, etc.) and proximate causes (sudden changes in economic conditions, rivalry between ethnic groups, conflict in neighbouring areas and exploitation by political authorities). Ethnic conflicts result from a combination of factors that depend on the ultimate goal.(Mohapatra and Muscato, Ethnic Conflict, Definition, Causes & Examples).Ethnic conflict is categorized into two, viz. violent ethnic conflict and non- violent ethnic conflict. Violent ethnic conflict as the name sounds is an ethnic conflict that leads to destruction of lives and properties which brings pain, ill feelings and sufferings to people. This is as a result of violent clash of interests in political, social, cultural, religious and

economic matters. Nonviolent ethnic conflict is an ethnic conflict that results from struggle for social, political, economic, religious and cultural interests which does not involve destruction of lives and properties.

For Mohapatra and Muscato, violent- ethnic conflict results from ethnic hatred and deeply nurtured political social inequality. Such divides are exploited by government leaders and end in mass destruction but non-violent ethnic conflict is subtle in its use of ethnicity as a tool for political gains, and this does not destroy life or property (Mohapatra and Muscato, Ethnic Conflict, Definition, Causes and Examples). Ethnic conflict which could be either violent or non-violent is what leads to secession. When an ethnic group experiences suppression, oppression, poor representation and exclusion in governance, the effect will be conflict which will make the less favoured ethnic group to agitate for secession.

### **Ethnic Conflict and the Issue of Secession in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a country with diverse cultures, religions, and communities. There is a great diversity in our traditions, manners, habits, tastes, and customs. Each and every region of the country portrays different customs and traditions. But, though we speak different languages, yet, we are all Nigerians (Alexander, 2012:213). Many members of an ethnic group may be found in territories other than their own; for example, the Fulani cattle- herders among many ethnic groups in the northern and middle belt states exist as migrants or moving social –economic enclaves without claim to that locality. Many Hausas live in Eastern states, vice versa. With this complex nature of Nigerian nations, one cannot but expect pockets of mutual mistrust, ethnic clashes, religious bigotry and extremism, and other forms of crises (Alexander, 2012:114).

Unity in diversity has been our motto and this has helped us to achieve independence.

As history tells us, there was active participation for people of different customs and religion. In Nigeria's struggle for freedom, people from different communities participate in keeping one thing in mind that they all are Nigerians first. Unfortunately, this peace and understanding among different communities has been endangered lately (Alexander, 2012:213). Whatever that it takes for a country to prosper is in Nigeria. If Nigeria is filled with milk and honey, why then do some sections of the country threaten to secede? The answer is very simple. It is as a result of unacceptable political and economic positions of some of the ethnic groups in Nigeria that some had threatened to secede and some really unsuccessfully seceded. In the constitutional conference at Ibadan in 1950, the Emir of Zaria was supported by the Emir of Katsina in a demand for parity of the North and the South in the Central Legislative House or the North be separated from Nigeria. The issue of self government in 1956 almost made the North to secede from Nigeria (Ibezim, 1996:223). The Western Region also threatened to secede if the colony of Lagos was not merged with it. In 1954, the Yorubas openly hinted about the possibility of secession and indeed pressed for a secession clause in the Constitution of Nigeria. The Eastern Region threatened to secede over the 1963 census and the 1964 federal elections. In 1956 and again in 1966, the Hausa and Fulani leaders also threatened secession (Onyeocha, 1994:90).

The neutralization of Lagos in 1953 would have made Obafemi Awolowo to lead the Yorubas to secede from Nigeria but for the threat of war from the Governor and the Colonial office in London. The real secession that was experienced in Nigeria was that of the East in 1967. The secession was as a result of the 1966 coup and the pogrom that was perpetrated against the Igbos in the North. The East declared the Republic of Biafra and engaged Nigeria in a civil war for three years (1967-70) (Ibezim, 1996:223). This issue of secession has continued up till today, Now the Yoruba

people are agitating for Oduduwa Republic, that is in the South Southern part of Nigeria, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South Eastern part of Nigeria is agitating for Biafra Republic, in the Northern part of Nigeria, the people there are agitating for Arewa Republic while the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is agitating for Niger Delta Republic.

Even the political parties in Nigeria were formed as a result of ethnic group's interests. The NCNC, AG and NPC represented the interests of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria which include the Igbo ethnic group, Yoruba ethnic group and Hausa ethnic group. In the process, these regionalists succeeded in creating the false impression that the various political parties were the champions of the interest of various ethnic groups, and that struggles of these parties for political dominance in the country represented the struggles of the various ethnic groups for political ascendancy in the society. They covertly and even openly used emotive ethnic symbols and played on alleged ethnic conflicts of interests as a means of mobilizing mass support for their own selfish class interests (Nnoli, 1977:158). In competition for the limited numbers of positions and scarce resources within the regions and at the Federal level, the regional parties generated antagonism and hostility among the major linguistic groups in the country. Their propaganda often emphasized some alleged conflict of interests among these groups with each party claiming to be protecting and advancing the interest of one of the ethnic nationalities or the other. The inevitable consequence was the intensification of the politicisation of ethnicity (Nnoli, 1977:158-159).

It was the quest for self-government that led to the creation of regional premiers, regional governors, regional public services, judiciary and marketing bodies and provided for separate regional progress (Nnoli, 1977:158). Every ethnic group

struggles for political power because that is the only way the interests of their ethnic group can be protected. That is also why we have regional or ethnic group security networks. In the East, we have Eastern Security Network, in the West, we have Amotekun Security Network and in the North, we have Operation 'Shege Ka Fasa' Security Outfit. All these are with the intention to defend their ethnic groups against internal and external invasion and aggression. Nigeria today is divided into thirty-six states because of ethnic interests and people are still agitating for more states to be created because, some ethnic groups feel that they are being maltreated and disregarded.

According to Nnoli (1977:176), most Nigerians have come to believe that unless their "own men" are in government they are unable to secure those socio-economic amenities that are disbursed by the government. Hence, government decisions about the sitting of industries, the building of roads, award of scholarships, and appointments to positions in the public services, are closely examined in terms of their benefits to the various ethnic groups in the country. That is to say that government decisions contribute to secession among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. Other causes of secession in Nigeria include:

- ✓ Failure of leadership that leads to recession and poor economy.
- ✓ Inadequate resources, resource competition and unequal distribution of resources.
- ✓ Disobedience to rule of law and court orders.
- ✓ Nepotism and favoritism.
- ✓ Lopsided appointments.
- ✓ Uncontrollable and desperate aspiration to power.
- ✓ Discriminating government policies and programmes.
- ✓ Intolerance to opposition and opposing views.
- ✓ Injustice, domination, oppression and suppression.

✓ Environmental degradation and other problems.

Secession can never cease to exist if Nigerian government continues with the same method of leadership. That is why Nkrumah (1964:57) opines that there can be peaceful co-existence between states with different social systems; but as long as oppressive classes exist, there can be no such thing as peaceful co-existence between opposing ideologies. Exclusion from access to power, opportunity, services and security creates fertile ground for mobilizing group grievances to violence, especially in areas with weak state capacity or legitimacy or in the context of human rights abuses (United Nations and World Bank, 2018). The summary of this matter on ethnicity is that ethnicity is a very complex phenomenon. Its complexity is not always adequately reflected in sociopolitical thought. The methodological difficulties of studying it may be traced to this complexity. Like any other social phenomenon, ethnicity is not immutable. It alters its form, its place, and its role in the life of society. New elements appear in its content. Its links with other social phenomena change, posing new questions (Nnoli, 1977:8). In our time, for example, ethnicity poses such a threat to the national revolutionary process that special importance ought to be attached to the elucidation of the relationship between the class element and the ethnic element. Also, ethnicity does not exist in a pure form. It is always closely associated with political, juridical, religious and other social views, which constitute its important ingredients as well. It also tends to change its specific historical content and to assume many different forms (Nnoli 1977:8).

### **The Way Out**

You cannot solve a problem by running away from it. The only way to run out of a problem is to solve it. Secession in Nigeria is a serious problem that needs to be addressed urgently before things will spoil. Government should start giving good leadership to the people. Our leaders should

lead us well and involve economic experts in their leadership to address the economic hardships that Nigerians are facing at this critical moment. This will help to reduce recession and make economy better. The available resources should be distributed equitably without any preferential treatment to any ethnic group. Also government positions should be distributed equally and lopsided appointments should be avoided.

All the geopolitical zones in Nigeria which include North West, North East, North Central, South South, South East and South West should have equal number of states. Those with lesser number of states should be completed. Another one that is important is obedience to court orders which can only be possible when the judiciary is independent. With that, there will be justice and people's rights will not be trampled underfoot.

An idle mind is a devil's workshop. The minds of our youth should be made to be busy by providing job opportunities for them. Empowerment programmes and poverty alleviation programmes should be put in place. When the youth are meaningfully engaged, they cannot involve themselves in illegitimate activities and will not have time to threaten to secede. Peace education should also be imparted to people. When people are educated on the importance of peace, they will see conflict as something that will be an impediment to their brighter future and run away from it. Again, we should be tolerant of our differences in culture, religion, language etc. Also youthocracy should be placed at the highest level because those who are in the fore front of the agitation for secession are the youth. As a result of that, youth should be involved in governance.

Another one that is important is the role of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in the conduct of election. INEC is a body that will help to stop secession in Nigeria by being transparent. They should conduct free, fair and credible elections so that bad leaders will be wiped out of the system. If elections become free, fair and

credible in Nigeria, people will elect those who will know when they are happy and when they are not. Those who see leadership as business will not be accommodated.

## CONCLUSION

Ethnic conflict and the issue of secession in Nigeria is a problem that is as old as Nigeria and it will continue to surface in so far as it is not addressed. To reduce ethnic conflict and secession in Nigeria, government should embrace inclusive governance and regional sustainable development. There should be good policy formulations and implementations. Due process should be enthroned and dialogue should be seen as a good means of resolving ethnic conflict and secession. If we apply dialogue and negotiations instead of using force, Nigerians will experience peace and secession will reduce.

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