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## **Power Struggle, Political Contest and Ethno-Religious Violence in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Conflict is as old as man himself, and pervades all societies, both ancient and modern, and thus, an inescapable aspect of human interaction, an avoidable concomitant of choices and decisions, and an inevitable part or process of social life and a continuing reality of social existence. Many studies have drawn attention on the cause-effect relationship between the character of the Nigerian state and ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, paying little attention to the cause effect of the power struggle or political contest and heightening ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. By using theory of relative autonomy of the state and qualitative method of analysis, we contend that intense struggles for political power or control of the Nigerian state heightened ethno-religious violence, and that these power struggles are primarily connected with disputes over distribution of state's resources. Power struggle or contest is therefore very fundamental in understanding basis for worsening ethno-religious violence in Nigeria both in military and civilian regimes. We recommend that the fundamental thing to do is to reconstitute the Nigerian state in such a manner as to increase its autonomy required for it to rise above class struggles

### **Introduction**

Conflict is as old as creation such that evolution of human civilization has continued to generate conflict. In other words, conflict is an inescapable aspect of human interaction, an avoidable concomitant of choices and decisions. Consequently, conflict is an inevitable part or process of social life and a continuing reality of social existence (Akpuru-Aja, 2009; Okolie, 2009; Onu, 2009; Nwachukwu, 2009). In Nigeria for example, contrary to the general belief, conflict predates colonialism or British invasion. In fact, the British came in the heat of conflict between the rampaging Fulani from the North and Yoruba

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in the South West. Also, in other parts of what is today known as Nigeria, like the South Eastern part, command, territorial and cultural conflicts proliferated. In other words colonialism did not bring conflict to Nigeria; it rather reinforced and elevated it to another level or dimension. But colonialism created different and various forms of conflict, namely, religious, tribal, ethnic, political, economic and social conflicts, while communal, territorial and cultural conflicts of pre-colonial era subsisted.

Although, the pre-colonial conflicts in Nigeria were characterized by violence, the arms used were rudimentary and as such not as sophisticated as armed conflicts of today where casualties or damages are much higher, in other words, conflicts in Nigeria today have become more complex. But in spite of this complexity, Aniche (2006) insists that ethnicity and religion constitute the two most divisive elements in Nigeria today such that one may wonder which of them divides Nigeria more.

The military regimes in Nigeria incubated some of these conflicts and disagreements, but were able to suppress and prevent some of them from hatching. Following the successful transition from military rule to civilian democratic rule in 1999. these incubated conflicts did not only come out hatching, they burst. This is because democratic regimes unlike military regimes provide platforms on which aggrieved or deprived people, or marginalized groups can easily voice out their grievances and as well compete for political space. However, the first ethno-religious conflict in post colonial Nigeria began with the pogroms in the northern part of Nigeria in 1966 in which Igbos were massacred by the Hausas prelude to the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). After the civil war, the first ethno-religious disturbance of note in Nigeria took place in December 1980, and has become a recurring decimal in Nigerian political history.

Consequently, many studies have drawn attention on the cause-effect relationship between the character of the Nigerian state and ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, paying little attention to the nexus between intensity of the power struggle or political contest and heightening ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. Our contention therefore is that intense struggles for political power or control of the Nigerian state heightened ethno-religious violence, and that these power struggles are primarily connected with disputes over distribution of state's resources whether in military regimes or civilian administration. The point is that power struggle is very fundamental in understanding the basis for ethno-religious violence in Nigeria both in military regime and civilian democratic regime.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study is essentially anchored on the theory of relative autonomy of the state. The state relative autonomy theory is situated within the ambit of the neo-Marxist political economy paradigm. The theory of relative state autonomy depicts the level or degree of detachment or aloofness of the state in the discharge of its duties such as mediating inter-class and intra-class struggles. Thus, this theory presupposes that in any state or political society, there are two levels of contradiction, namely primary contradiction and secondary contradiction. Primary contradiction is inter-class struggle or depicts class struggle between two antagonistic classes such as the ruling class and the ruled class or the bourgeois class and the proletariat (i.e. the working class). Whilst, secondary contradiction is the intra-class struggle, denoting class conflicts within the ruling-class or between different segments of the ruling-class. Marx and Engels demonstrate this intractable phenomenon of class struggle when they declare in the preface of their book, *The Communist Manifesto* that "the history of all the hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx, 1974). The exponents of the theory such as Claude Ake and others hold that a state can exhibit either low or high relative autonomy. A state exhibits high autonomy when

there is high commodification of capital or excessive penetration of capital into the economy such that the bourgeois class indulges in accumulation of capital through direct exploitation of the working class or appropriation of surplus value when they enter into social relationships of production (i.e. private capitalism). Here, the state is not interventionist, in other words, it does not intervene in the domestic economy like participating in the productive activities (i.e. public/state enterprises) or controlling or nationalizing means of production. The role of state here, therefore, is to regulate. As such, the state is relatively an impartial umpire mediating inter-class and intra-class struggles through harmonization and reconciliation of class interests. The developed capitalist states of the West are, therefore, considered to exemplify this high relative autonomy, and as a result, exhibit high level of human rights observance and protection.

Conversely, a state exhibits low autonomy when there is low commodification of capital or low penetration of (private) capital into the economy in such a way that the ruling class is constantly engaged in primitive accumulation of capital through embezzlement of public fund. The state becomes the only avenue for capital accumulation. The state is thus, interventionist for engaging in productive activities of means of productive activities (i.e. public corporation) by nationalization of major means of production. This state does not limit itself to regulatory rule and is hence compromised, such that instead of rising above class struggle it is deeply immersed in it (Ake, 1973; 1981; 1985; Engel, 1978; Ifesinachi, 2001; Okolie 2001).

The Nigerian state like other developing state exhibits a low level of the autonomy of the state as a result of low commodification of capital. Under the electric mixture of mixed economy, Nigeria experiences the phenomenon of lack of penetration of (private) capital into the economy creating a parasitic petty bourgeois class whose major source of accumulation of capital is the state. Hence, the Nigerian state becomes the only avenue for (primitive) accumulation of capital through which the governing class (i.e. petty bourgeoisie) produce and reproduce their dominance. Then, the political contest or the struggle for state becomes so intense that as the Nigerian state immersed itself in inter-class and intra-class conflicts, the ruling class from different ethnic groups play the ethnic card in their desperate bid or struggle to capture the state power.

The problem is that a state constituted in this manner is no longer the state of all, but rather the state of the few, an instrument in the hands of the governing class (i.e. petty bourgeoisie) for producing and reproducing their dominance. Hence, in extreme case, it degenerates into a state of one man on whom everything revolves around and a personality cult that dispenses advantages /benefits to whoever it pleases him to. Sycophancy and blinded loyalty become order of the day as state power is privatized and personalized. The resultant forces (i.e. class conflicts) indeed could be very debilitating, exhausting and excruciating.

The Nigerian state therefore is very powerful, what Ake (1985) called over-developed. Thus, the political class is obsessed with one thing, that is, the desire to capture it through playing the card of ethnic politics. The fact is that the poor in the North and the downtrodden in the South all have one thing in common, which is poverty and thus occupy the same position in the social relations of production irrespective of ethnic background and religious differences. But paradoxically this class alliance has not occurred due to absence of class consciousness, rather what has developed among Nigerians is ethno-religious consciousness. The political class in Nigeria has nurtured this ethno-religious consciousness, prevented

the growth of class consciousness and exploited the ethnic and religious sentiments in the climb to the corridors of power.

### **Background to Ethno-religious Conflicts in Nigeria**

The ethno-religious conflicts predated colonialism that is European or Arabic colonialism in Nigeria or in what is today known as Nigeria. Prior to incursion of the European colonialism there was already rapid Arabic Islamic Fulani Jihad movement southwards of what is today known as Nigeria, conquering and forcefully converting the traditionalists and few of the Christian Yorubas (Aniche, 2006). Subsequently, during the colonial rule, the ominous sign of Muslim-Christian rivalry reared its ugly head when Sarduna of Sokoto wrote to the then governor of Nigeria, Sir Fredrick Lugard (later, Lord Lugard) to check the activities of Christian missionaries in the North. As a result of the Lugardian policy of missionary exclusion of the North, the missionaries were disappointed over the refusal of the imperial regime to allow them to enter into the emirates for purpose of evangelization, proselytizing and conversion.

The import of this is that ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria were creation or by-product of Arabic and European colonialism. Subsequently, not long after colonialism or independence there were two main pogroms in the North where many Igbo Christians were killed by the Northern Moslems between 1966 and 1967; heralding the thirty-month civil war in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970, all under the military regime of Gowon (1966-1975). The next religious disturbance of note in Nigeria, according to Okwueze (1995) took place in Kano in December 1980 which was masterminded by Mohammed Marwa Maitatsine of Cameroonian origin. The Maitatsine group or followers armed with all sorts of weapons went on rampage killing and maiming people in Kano where about 4, 179 people lost their lives (Aniche, 2006). For details about ethno-religious violence in Nigeria see Tables 1,2 and 3 below.

### **The Military Rule and Ethno-religious Agitations in Nigeria**

From the foregoing, we have been able to demonstrate that the first ethno-religious violence occurred in Nigeria under military regime, which were the two pogroms in the North where many Igbo Christians were killed and injured by the Muslim Hausas under Gowon's Regime (1966-1975). The two pogroms were immediate causes for the civil war in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970 where monumental damages were recorded including death, injures, loss of properties, arson, rapes, looting, etc; and in terms of number there are less ethno-religious violence in Nigeria under the military regimes than under the civilian regimes.

Out of the 51 years of Nigeria independence, the military had been in power for 29 years and 11 months, that is, from 1966 to 1979 and from 1983 to 1999. aside from the two pogroms of 1966 and perhaps the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), other ethno-religious violence in Nigeria under military regimes include the February 1984 ethno-religious riot in former Gongola State (now Adamawa State); April 26, 1985 ethno-religious violence in Gombe State formerly in Bauchi State; 1986 religious crises in Ilorin, Kwara State; May 3, 1986 Moslem students' riot at Usman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto State; May 5, 1986, students' religious riot at University of Ibadan, Oyo State; March 1987 students' religious violence at the College of Education Kafanchan, Kaduna State; 1988 ethno-religious tension in Sokoto; April 22, 1991 ethno-religious riot in Bauchi, Banchi State; October 1991 religious riot in Kano, Kano State; 1992 ethno-religious violence in Zango-Kataf, Kaduna State, 1993 ethno-religious tension in Funtua, Katsina State; December 26, 1996 ethno-religious crises in Kano, Kano State; 1997 ethno-religious killings in Kano, Kano State; etc. See Table 1 below for details.

**Table 1: Cases of Ethno-Religious Violence in Nigeria under Military Regimes**

Date	State	Causes	Damages/Casualties
1966	Northern Regions	Coup and Counter Coup of 1966	Inestimable damages and casualties including loss of lives, properties, looting, arsons, raping, injuries, etc.
February 1984	Formerly Gongola State, now Adamawa State	An Islamic fundamentalist group Maitatsine	763 casualties where about 5,913 people were displaced
April 26, 1985	Gombe, Gombe State	An Islamic fundamentalist group, Maitatsine	More than hundred people died claiming the life of the leader of the group.
1986 (Palm - Sunday) May 3, 1986	Usman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto State	Protest by Muslim Students Society (MSS) over commemoration of achievement of Naira Asman	No casualty recorded
May5, 1986	University of Ibadan, Oyo State	Moslem students protesting the placing of the statue of Risen Christ	Destruction of N10, 000 wooden sculpture of the Risen Christ
March 1987	College of Education Kafanchan Kaduna State	Muslim faithful attacked Christian revival fellowship	Homes, churches, hotels, business houses and people were set <i>ablaze</i> .

**Source:** Adapted from Aniche (2006:111-115).

The military regimes in Nigeria laid the foundation for post-independence ethno-religious violence but the ethno-religious agitations were largely a by-product of colonialism which continued immediately after independence under civilian democratic regimes between 1960 and 1966. But the two military coup and counter coup which were perceived to have ethno-religious undertone triggered the era of post-independence ethno-religious crises in Nigeria.

To buttress our point, in 1986 under military regime, the military head of state, Ibrahim Babangida's decision to turn Nigeria's observer status to full membership raise religious tension in Nigeria, however, the military regimes were better able to suppress, not manage, ethno-religious crises than the civilian counterpart. For example, in 1988, Sharia issues raised religious tension in Nigeria when it nearly capsized the boat of the constituent assembly headed by Justice Anthony Aniagolu (Rtd). The Assembly members were at each other's throat over Sharia when the then Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) was constrained to declare the issue a "no go" area. But the Sharia issue reared its ugly head in Nigeria under then civilian democratic regime of President Obasanjo in 1999.

### **Civilian Rule and Ethno-religious Conflicts in Nigeria**

Although, there have been some reasonable level of ethno-religious tensions and agitations in Nigeria in pre-independence era and post independence civilian era, these ethno-religious agitations did not

degenerate to violence or armed conflict. The three major, political parties then were regionally based which conform to the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria then, for instance, the NPC in the North, AG in the Southwest and the NCNC in the Southeast. Issues like minority fears were rife and marginalization became a common theme (Uju, 2004; Anyanwu, 2004). Yet ethno-religious violence was unknown during the first republic (1963-1966) and throughout the period of civilian administration prior to military coup and counter coup of 1966.

It was not until the second republic (1979-1988) that ethno-religious violence was witnessed under civilian democratic regime. This was the regime of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, the first executive president of Nigeria. For example, in December 1980 a religious riot was masterminded by Mohammed Marwa Maitatsine who with armed bands of over 10, 000 followers went on rampage killing and maiming people in the city of Kano. It was reported that about 4, 179 lost their lives and over 10 million Naira properties damaged. In 1982, in Buhumkutu, the outskirts of Maiduguri, Borno State and also in Kaduna, the disciples of Maitatsine resurfaced and about 400 lives were lost and properties worth more than 3 million were (Okwueze, 1995). It is instructive to mention that Kano riot 1980 claimed the life of Maitatsine himself.

With the successful transition programme from military rule to civilian rule in 1999, the issue of Sharia reared its ugly head. For example, in September 1999, the Governor of Zamfara State, Sani Ahmed's decision to launch the Sharia legal code triggered off religious tension in Nigeria when other Northern governors decided to follow suit. Consequently, riot erupted in Kaduna State in 2000 as a result of the decision of the government of the state to adopt Sharia legal code. There was wanton destruction of property, and many people died in the process as Muslims and Christians clashed. Adoption of Sharia legal code triggered off similar religious tension in other parts of the North. There were reprisal riots in some parts of the Southeast like Aba in Abia State (Aniche, 2006; Obeta and Ugwueye, 2004; Okwueze and Nnadi, 2004; Chukwu, 2004; Uju, 2004).

It was during the fourth republic (1999 till date) under the civilian administrations of Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo, Umaru Musa Yar Adua and Goodluck Jonathan that cases of violence of a Muslim fundamentalist group Boko Haram which is against Western education and other western influences like mode of dressing, etc, took the centre stage. For example, Table 2 shows the detail of Boko Haram violence in Nigeria.

**Table 2: Cases of Boko Haram's Violence in Nigeria under Civilian Administrations**

Date	State	Casualties
July 6, 2009	Dutsen-Tanshi, Bauchi State	All-night attack on Dutsen -Tanshi Police where 39 members, two policemen, and one soldier died.
July 27, 2009	Potiskum Police Divisional Headquarters, Yobe State	Invasion of Potiskum Police Divisional Headquarters where three policemen and one fire service officer died.
July 29, 2009	Mamudo Village, Yobe State	Confrontation with security men' at Mamudo Village along Potiskum/Damaturu road where 33 Boko Haram members were killed.

July 29, 2009	Maiduguri, Borno State	An all night battle with combined security operatives at Railway Terminus, Maiduguri, where about 20 people were killed and operational base was destroyed.
September 8, 2010	Bauchi Central Prison, Bauchi State	Set <i>ablaze</i> Bauchi Central Prison and freed members of the sect who were jailed there.
January 28, 2011	Maiduguri, Borno State	Killed governorship candidate of All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) Alhaji Modu Fannami G ubio and six others at Lawan Bukar ward, Maiduguri.
March 2, 2011	Rigasa Area, Kaduna State	Killed two policemen attached to the residence of a Divisional Police Officer (DPO), Mustapha Sandamu at Rigasa Area.
March 30, 2011	Damaturu, Yobe state	Bomb explosion in Damaturu injuring policemen.
April 2, 2011	Bauchi, Bauchi State	Bombed Dutsen -Tansen Police Station, and injured two policemen.
May 4, 2011	Maiduguri, Borno State	Shot dead a prison warder at Maiduguri Prison on Kashim Ibrahim Way.
May5, 2011	Maiduguri, Borno State	Shot duty officer at Maiduguri government house, Umaru Shehu at his Abuja Talakawa residence of Maisandami ward killing a 13 year old boy and injured another.

**Source:** The Daily Sun, June 17, 2011, Vol.6, No. 2107.

Several other bomb blasts and attacks by Boko Haram had followed since then, mainly in Borno State Bauchi State, Yobe State Gombe State and Abuja, particularly bombing of the United Nations office in Abuja. There were also cases of post-election violence in April 2011 elections in the North where many people were killed, and the post-election violence is believed to have ethno-religious undertone.

The civilian administrations have been in power for about 22 years of Nigeria's independence but have recorded more cases of ethno-religious violence than the military regimes. Although none of these cases of ethno-religious violence under the civilian democratic regimes can be equated to the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) during the military regime in terms of extent of damages, destructions, loss of lives and properties, sufferings, internal displacements, refuges, and total casualties. In just 22 years out of 51 years of Nigeria's existence, Nigeria under civilian administrations have recorded more than 50 ethno-religious crises in which billions of naira worth of property have been lost in flames and thousands of deaths recorded.

It is perhaps important to point out at this juncture that in the whole of first civilian administration, that is, between 1960 and 1966 no significant ethno-religious violence occurred meaning that the military rule brought about the post-independence ethno-religious violence in Nigeria, but some managed to suppress and incubate it, only to hatch under the civilian democratic regimes when these aggrieved groups began

to gain platform for violent expression of their grievances. Therefore, these ethno-religious violence under civilian democratic regimes occurred in just 18 years out of the 22 years of civilian administrations in both second and fourth republics.

### Power Struggles and Ethno-religious Violence in Nigeria

Nigeria is a pluralistic and heterogeneous state or a multi-ethnic and religious state in that there are many ethnic groups or nationalities as well as two major religious groups in Nigeria. All these groups are engaged in intense struggle for political power in Nigeria. As a result, some who feel marginalized or emasculated are resorting to all forms of violent struggles to express their grievances. Some of these groups believed that political power is critical for gaining leverage on economic resources that abounds in the country. For example, there had been an intense struggle by Niger-Delta radical ethnic militias or militant groups to gain control over the oil resources within their region (Obi-Ani, 2004; Mbagwu, 2004; Abada, 2004; Opata, 2004).

As a result of these struggles over political control and resource control, there has been proliferation of radical ethnic militant groups like MEND, NDPF, MAS SOB, MOSOP, IPC, OPC, Arewa Youth Wing, etc, in Nigeria, thus, exacerbating the incidences of violent ethno religions conflicts in Nigeria. See Table 3 for some of these ethno-religious struggles for political power and economic leverages in Nigeria.

**Table 3: Fact Line on Ethno-religious Conflict Scenario in the Northern States of Nigeria**

S/No	States	Incidents	Year/period	Casualties
1.	Adamawa	(a) Durno ethno religious conflict (b) Dumo ethno religious conflict	2002 June 2003	10 civilians died and 8 policemen died, mosques, churches, private and public buildings set <i>ablaze</i> .
2	Benue	Attack on Hausa community	2001	Houses, mosques and property lost.
3.	Borno	Biu ethno -religious conflict	2000	N100 million worth of property destroyed.
4.	Kaduna	Bajju Ikulu ethno religious conflicts	2001	Not definite.
5.	Kano	(a) Reprisal ethno religious conflict (b) Jos reprisal ethno -religious conflict	2001 2004	Lives and property lost many lives lost and property destroyed.
6.	Kebbi	(a) Ethno -religious conflict, Jega Town (b) Shitte police conflict	June 2004	2 dead, several wounded and property worth millions destroyed. Lives and property lost.
7.	Kwara	Oodu'a Peoples' Congress in Ilorin	2000	Many suffered bullet wounds.



8.	Nassarawa	(a) Conflict between Kwale-Tiv tribes	2001	4 people died and 40 houses bu rnr several lives and property were lost, 9 people died, 20 women and children injured.
		(b) Azara-Tiv conflict		
		(c) Tiv militia attack on Angwan-Tashi	2001	

**Source:** Adapted from Akpuru-Aja (2009:27-31).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the struggle for political power or control drives most of the ethno-religious violence in Nigeria, therefore, we concur that the struggles for political power or control of the Nigerian state heightened ethno-religious violence.

**Conclusion**

The Nigerian state is very powerful, what Ake (1985) called over-developed where the political class is obsessed with one thing, that is, the desire to capture it through playing the card of ethnic politics. The fact is that the poor in the North and the downtrodden in the South all have one thing in common, which is poverty and thus occupy the same position in the social relations of production irrespective of ethnic backgrounds and religious differences. But paradoxically this class alliance has not occurred due to absence of class consciousness across ethnic and religious lines, rather what has developed among Nigerians is ethno-religious consciousness. The political class in Nigeria has nurtured this ethno-religious consciousness, prevented the growth of class consciousness and exploited the ethnic and religious sentiments in the climb to the corridors of power.

The point being made is that class struggles, particularly intra-class conflict among the ruling class in Nigeria is ethnicized and religionized. The inability of the political class to climb the corridors of power is thus interpreted by them as marginalization of their ethnic or religious group. Several formulae or criteria have been devised to share, allocate and distribute resources and political offices, but one may ask political office for who?

Therefore, the conclusion at which we arrived is that intense struggles for political power or control of the Nigerian state heightened ethno-religious violence, and that these power struggles or political contests are primarily connected with disputes over distribution of state's resources and political offices. The fact remains that power struggle or intense political contest is very fundamental in understanding the basis for ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. This is true whether it is under the military rule or under civilian democratic regime, for example, in the military regime, coups are interpreted to be ethno-religious(ly biased depending on the dominance by any ethno-religious group.

Whilst under the civilian democratic regime, the political contest or power struggle in the form of electoral contest has degenerated into electoral violence usually interpreted as a battle between ethno-religious groups. Ethno-religious violence in Nigeria has political undertone which was evidenced in the recent 2011 post-election violence in the Northern part of Nigeria, and previously the outcomes of local government elections in Plateau State. There is indeed a direct relationship between intensification of political contest and heightening ethno-religious violence in Nigeria.

**Recommendations**

The primary thing to do which is our main recommendation is to reconstitute the Nigerian state in such away as to increase its autonomy in order to float above class struggles, particularly intra-class struggle

between the ruling class necessary for making the Nigerian state less lucrative and attractive in terms of primitive accumulations.

Other minor recommendations include the following:

1. There is urgent need for sovereign national conference to redefine the basis for our co-existence.
2. There is need to evolve true federalism and fiscal federalism in line with resource control.
3. There is need for sincere ecumenical dialogue between the Muslims and Christians in Nigeria.

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