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Introduction

The West African region, bordering to the south and west on the Atlantic Ocean, comprises 16 countries with a population of 365 million (Boukari 2018). It includes the fabled African Ghana, Mali and Songhay Empires and the great kingdoms of Benin, Mossi and Ashanti. Historically, these empires and kingdoms covered huge land masses with diverse cultures, traditions and religions.

History traces the origin of secessionists to the colonial period, in which the entire continent was parcelled up without taking account of the socio-cultural background of African people (Englebert, Tarango and Carter 2002).

Boukari (2018) confirms that the Igbo, Hausa and some Yoruba were forced to live together in Nigeria. The Ewe ethnic groups were split among Benin, Togo and Ghana. The Mandinka, the descendants of the Mali Empire, were dispersed among Guinea Conakry, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, and Senegal. Conrad (2005) reminds us that the Sorko and Tuareg of the Songhay Empire were divided and forced to live in Niger, Mali and Mauritania.

Boukari argues that this situation has led to the proliferation of secessionist movements across Africa, triggering social, political and economic crises in West Africa in particular. Analysts widely agree that arbitrary partitioning was the root cause of secessionist movements. Their growth has been bolstered by poor governance, unemployment, a lack of solid democratic institutions, corruption, ethnic marginalisation, and the unequal sharing of resources due to superficial decentralisation policies, as in Nigeria.

Morocco, Angola, Cameroon, Sudan, Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria, Niger and Senegal have dealt with secession crises for decades. Most of these secessionist movements have declined due to military interventions and a 'stick and carrot' approach. In order to avoid the advent of separatist movements, national governments promise their constituents social, political and economic reforms. Failure to deliver on these promises lead to discontent and eventually to violent protest, possibly worsening into civil war. Some secessionist movements have sought to advance their cause by legal means,

while others have resorted to violence. Violence fuelled by long-standing grievances eventually undermine peace, security, and economic development.

In West Africa, secessionists gained ground in Mali, Nigeria (Biafra), Senegal (Casamance) and Ghana (Togoland), leading to increased guerrilla and terrorist activities. In Ghana and Nigeria, the leaders of these movements were arrested and sent to prison (Conrad 2005). Southern Senegal has seen a long-standing conflict between the government and the MFDC (Movement of the Democratic Forces of Casamance), which wants the Casamance region of Senegal to become independent (CDD 2017).

Tuareg separatist groups started insurgencies in Mali and Niger, aimed at creating an independent state named Azawad. While the movement made headway in Mali, it failed in Niger, which led analysts to consider how the Niger government managed to avert this crisis despite having the same political history as Mali. As a result, scholars have examined how the Niger government addressed the grievances, its decentralisation policy, its strategy for deterring insurgents, and the role of the international community. According to Boukari (2018), the Niger experience holds lessons for most West African countries about how to mitigate secessionist movements.

Secessionist movements in Nigeria

Nigeria is widely regarded as a deeply divided country. From its inception as a colonial entity, Nigeria has faced a perennial crisis of territorial or state legitimacy, challenging its efforts at national cohesion, democratisation, stability and economic transformation (Boukari 2018).

In contemporary Nigeria, the threat of secession and general disintegration remains dangerously present. Ethnic nationalism and militarism and minority and majority agitations are fuelling social disharmony on an unprecedented scale. Their causes are arguably as serious – or even more serious – than the pre-1967 factors that led to the civil war. Today, the drums of terrorism, insurgency and secessionism sound louder in Nigeria than ever before. Psychologically, Nigerians are growing apart. The political elites have positioned themselves as enemies of the state. At one stage, some

threatened to make Nigeria ungovernable and to open the floodgates of terror.

Given this, it does not come as a complete surprise that the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) forecast Nigeria's disintegration by 2015. This has not happened, but Nigeria is by no means out of the woods, with ethnic intolerance and suspicion on the rise. The Northerners feel they are born to rule over the Southern infidels, and the Southerners are suspicious of an insidious Islamisation or Fulani agenda. The undeclared war among Nigerians is concerning and unsettling. Moreover, the disintegration of Nigeria could trigger or worsen secessionist tendencies across Africa (Oyebode 2019).

The evolution of Nigerian federalism

Nigeria is a large and very diverse society, encompassing three major ethnic groups – the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo – plus more than 200 others. Each of these groups dominated one of the three regions that existed before Nigerian independence.

In response to this diversity, and in line with their philosophy of indirect rule, the British colonial authorities gradually introduced federal forms of governance. The foundation was laid by the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914. They were recognised as near autonomous entities, and were administered in different ways (Nigerianscholars.com).

Under the 1946 Richards Constitution, the country was divided into three regions, namely North, East, and West. However, there was no constitutional division of powers between the centre and the regions, and the regional assemblies had no legislative powers. The Macpherson Constitution of 1951 empowered regional legislatures houses to make certain laws. However, these were subject to the approval of the central government (ibid).

The Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 introduced true federalism with a division of legislative powers between the central and regional governments. It also provided for the appointment of regional premiers. Despite this, various minority groups began to demand greater autonomy.

With independence approaching, leaders of minority groups began agitating for their own independent states. Alternatively, they demanded constitutional safeguards as guarantees against their potential domination by majority ethnic groups in an independent Nigeria.

The Willink commission

In 1957, a commission of inquiry – the Sir Henry Willink Commission – was set up to 'enquire into the fears of minorities and means of allaying them'. Significantly, the commission found that these problems could not be resolved by creating more states or regions. Instead, it recommended that the interests of minorities be safeguarded by entrenching fundamental human rights in the federal constitution, thus promoting social integration. Added to this, the police should be brought under federal control; minority areas should have special councils; and a special development board should be created for the Niger Delta areas. The Independence Constitution of 1960 largely followed the federal structure introduced by the Lyttleton Constitution, and incorporated extensive 'fundamental rights'.

Despite this, demands for autonomy continued and grew more complex. In 1962, parliament agreed to create a fourth (the mid-Western) region. Demands for more states even persisted under military rule. In 1967, the then military ruler, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, created twelve states out of the former four regions. The Murtala-Obasanjo regime added seven states, and the Babangida administration created two more in 1987 and nine more in 1991 to bring the total to 30. In 1996, the Abacha regime created six more states, bringing the total to the current 36 (ibid).

The Biafran War

In the meantime, pressures for autonomy had led to a bloody civil war. In 1966, a group of young military officers, most of eastern extradition, attempted to effect a change of government. Even though the coup failed, some northern leaders were exterminated, which led to northerners turning against easterners living in the north. As a result, easterners fled back to their regions, and began to ramp up demands for independence.

The secessionist movement continues to be a problem in Nigeria as the secessionists in each region react constantly to any political, economic or social crisis.

On 30 May 1967, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, governor of Nigeria's Eastern Region, led an attempted secession in the form of the Republic of Biafra. Federal troops imposed a blockade, which led to mass starvation.[44] During the two and half years of the war, there were about 100 000 military casualties, while between 500,000 and 2 million Biafran civilians died of starvation.[45] The Biafran forces surrendered in January 1970, and the Federal government reasserted its control over the territory. However, secessionist movements have gradually re-emerged. According to Oyebode (2019), the Niger-Delta Avengers (NDA), Independent People of Biafra (IPOB), the Odua People's Congress and the Arewa Boys all pose challenges to nation-building.

Dimensions of secessionism

Insurgency has assumed different dimensions in different geo-political zones. Today, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) and other militant groups maintain a presence in the Niger-Delta area. The Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) are campaigning in the south east, and Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West Africa hold sway in the north east. Moreover, banditry posts a major security threat in the north west. While the Odua Peoples' Congress and Arewa Boys are less active, they also pose continued challenges to nation-building.

On several occasions, the Nigerian government reacted to secessionist movements by tracking down and arresting the perpetrators. Despite these crackdowns, groups continued to advocate an independent state of Biafra through non-violent means. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MAS-SOB), renewed by Ralph Uwazurike in 1999, employed secessionist strategies such as raising Biafran flags in public places, peaceful marches and protests, the and issuing of a Biafran currency and passport contesting the right of the Nigerian state, which was eventually termed a violent protest.

On 5 June 2014, the BZM, a more violent group, attacked the Enugu State Broadcasting Service (ESBS) and the Enugu State House of Assembly. The IPOB, a more aggressive movement founded in 2012, started a Radio Biafra, which was used for propaganda, and its actions have had severe socio-political and economic consequences.

In May 2017, the Nigerian government labelled IPOB a terrorist group when its leader, Nnamdi Kanu, who had been arrested on several occasions, ordered a home strike in all the south-eastern and southern states. All economic and social activities were brought to a halt, with far-reaching consequences (Oyewole 2019). On 14 September the same year, the Nigerian government launched a military crackdown called 'Operation Python Dance' in Abia state, closing down Radio Biafra and arresting Kanu along with other members (Oyewole 2019).

According to the Centre for Democracy and Development (2017), the reasons for the Biafra insurgencies include a war consciousness, the continued neglect and marginalisation of Igbos in Nigeria, the government's inability to resolve group grievances and crises, and sustain a nation-building process, and weak democratic institutions.

The secessionist movement continues to be a problem in Nigeria as the secessionists in each region react constantly to any political, economic or social crisis. Factors triggering responses by secessionist movements in Nigeria include police brutality, corruption, patronage and nepotism, sectionalism and poor governance, high inflation, escalated oil prices, leadership insensitivity and structural inequality (Obi-Ani et al 2020). All these problems and many more have led to persistent secessionist issues in Nigeria.

Proposals for countering recurrent secessionism

What can be done to subdue the separatist movements? First, the Nigerian government needs to ensure that national resources are effectively controlled and exploited. Second, policing needs to be decentralised in order to address local needs. Third, local communities and relevant stakeholders must be included in policy-making and implementation. Fourth, effective dialogue and mediation should take place between the federal government and constituents in the South East, thereby contributing to a process of healing and reconciliation.

Governance should improve, and the government should be encouraged to stop its drift towards authoritarianism and ignoring the pleas of the regions. It government should further protect the environment, facilitate economic reform, and ensure the political freedom of citizens.

Trade should be liberalised, and macro-economic policies aimed at strengthening the market should be adopted. Monetary policy should also be reformed and liberalised. Lastly, some analysts have proposed that the presidency should rotate among regions, to avoid the status quo of one region exerting a monopoly on power.

To conclude, Nigeria is struggling economically. Many manufacturing companies have moved to neighbouring countries such as Ghana. The country is sliding ever deeper into a foreign and domestic debt trap, but without productive expenditure, and unemployment is spiralling. Except for the political class which is enjoying the fruits of continued membership of the Commonwealth, people are swimming in want and poverty. To blunt the impact of the secessionist movements, all these trends need to be reversed. The government must become more accountable, reform the economy, and return to productive nation-building.

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