

## THE POSITION OF MINORITY IDENTITY IN NIGERIA AND ITS EFFECT ON GOVERNMENTAL POLICIES

Dr. Abdullahi Ayoade Ahmad\*

### ABSTRACT

The notion of minorities in Nigeria is a complex one, while there is a broad agreement on the status of minority ethnic groups, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo are considered the majority by virtue of their large demographic size. The three accounted for roughly 60% of the populace, while hundreds of small ethnic groups that amounted to 40% are referred to as ethnic minorities due to their smaller demographic size. The significant of demographic size can be traced on historical processes, social forces and political power, especially during the colonial system of indirect rule. The colonial had consolidated their access and control over power and resources in the post-colonial era. Such control had paved way for domination and subordination of minorities within the context of inter and intra-factional struggles for power. The result had led inter-ethnic relations to be highly politicized and determining to a large extent of who gets what, when and how? The issue of power domination also led to a different perception on the system of government preferred. The dominant groups favored centralization of government, while minority sought for decentralized control of power, which they believed will provide a space for them to transcend the limitation of size in gaining access to power and its benefits. This paper examines Nigeria's policies on minorities in term of its historical and political aspects. How far it as affected the progress and stability of the country since its independence to date, and what needs to be done to improve the situation of the minorities in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Minority, Domination, Government policy, Democracy, Good Governance

\* Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Law, Accountancy, and International Relations University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu DarulIman

## Introduction

*"If it be admitted that a man possessing absolute power may misuse that power by wronging his adversaries, why should not a majority be liable to the same reproach? Men do not change their characters by uniting with one another; nor does their patience in the presence of obstacles increase with their strength. For my own part, I cannot believe it; the power to do everything, which I should refuse to one of my equals, I will never grant to any number of them. (Alexis de Tocqueville)*

Although democracy guarantee the expression of the popular will through majority rule, it is equally clear that it must guarantee that the majority will does not abuse its power to violate the basic and inalienable rights of the minority. A defining characteristic of democracy must be the people's right to change the majority through elections. This right is the people's "supreme authority, similarly, the minority deserves to be allowed to seek to become the majority and possess all the rights necessary to compete fairly in elections such as freedom of speech, assembly, association, petition etc. otherwise, the majority would make itself permanent and become a dictator and victimize minority's right. It cannot be denied that in theory, majority rule was necessary for expressing the popular will and the basis for establishing the republic. It is also cleared that consensus or rule by everyone's agreement cannot be imposed upon free people. But some scholars worried that the majority could abuse its powers to oppress a minority just as easily as a king. According to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison warning in their letters about the dangers of the tyranny of the legislature and the executive: *"It is of great importance in a republic, not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers, but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part"*(Arthur Goldhammer& co., 2004).

The minority's rights must be protected no matter how singular or alienated that minority is from the majority society; otherwise the majority's rights lose their meaning. According to John Stuart Mill, a British philosopher, in his essay on Liberty: *"The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community against his will is to prevent harm to others...no harm principle"* aims to prevent government from becoming a vehicle for the *"tyranny of the majority..."* (Mill, John Stuart,1869)

The majority tyranny lies not just in the infringements of individual rights or the marginalization of a political minority, but also in the oppression of minority groups in society based simply on criteria such as skin color, ethnicity or nationality, language, religion, or sexual orientation. The most extreme treatment of minorities has been carried out in 20th and 21<sup>st</sup> century, among them the worst examples are those of totalitarian regimes that carried out genocide to eradicate minority groups in their society: The Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany which murdered six million Jews that equivalent a one third of the total world Jewish population, as well as a significant portion of the Roma community, the Soviet Union, under Stalin, mass executions and deportations of Caucasian and Central Asian ethnic groups. The Russian Federation waged brutal war against Chechnya, killing tens of thousands of civilians and displacing more than half the population.

The Hutugenocide of Tutsi in Rwanda 1994, Saddam Hussein's mass killing of Kurds and Shiites in Iraq in the early 1990s, Serbia victimization by Slobodan Milosevic that resulted in mass killing of over 200,000 Bosnian Muslims and 10,000 Albanian Muslims in Kosovo in 1995, the systematic killing of Rohingyas minority by majority allegedly supported by Myanmar government, and the ongoing Israel and Palestine unrest etc. These instances reflected that minority rights had suffered great loss in the hand of majority or dictatorship in several societies of the universe. Similarly, the ethnic minorities arose in Nigeria today where several crises and unrest had occurred. It has been stated that minorities is a creation of colonial master, these violence and unrest in several part of the federation started with the civil war Biafra of 1967-1970, followed by the frequency religion unrest in the north, Niger Delta crises, and the mixed wake and die crises in Jos in recent years etc. Looking at these events, this paper will concentrate on the issue of minority, for determining of ethnic minorities condition in Nigeria, their demands, how government policies had responded to it, and those areas that need improvement.

### History of Ethnic Minorities in Nigeria and Issues Arose

The ethnic variety in Nigeria was the estimation of the number of distinct ethnic groupings varied from 250 to as many as over 400. The most widely measurement is the language, in most cases, people who spoke a distinct language having a separate term for the language and or its speakers saw themselves, or were viewed by others, as ethnically different. Language groupings were numbered in the 1970s at over 400, depending upon disagreements over whether or not closely related languages were mutually intelligible or not. The minorities in Nigeria are usually defined in ethnic terms and all ethnic groups that fall outside the majorities known as Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups are considered minorities. The trio was accounted for over 60% of Nigeria population: with 29%, 22%, and 18% respectively, groups such as the Ijaw, Kanuri and the Tiv though with a considerably large number of members are categorized as minorities (See Table1). It will also worth to be noted that the definition of minorities can also be extended to encompass the religious minorities in the various parts of the country, for instance, the Christian minority in the far North or the Muslim minorities in the Middle-Belt and the South East.

The history of the minority question or minority agitations in Nigeria dated back to the period of colonization, when these agitations were carried out at regional bases as a result of the regionalization policy of the then colonial government. For example, in Northern Nigeria, minority grievances were centered around the imposition of Hausa-Fulani rulers on the indigenous ethnic populations. This meant the exclusion of the indigenes from political and economic opportunities including the control of markets. The quest for independence in the 1950's further strengthened the fears of the minorities as to their future when the colonial government left the country. These complaints of oppression and exploitation were not exclusively experienced by the minorities in the North but were also experienced by their counterparts from other parts of the country. Therefore, they based their agitations or demands to pressurize the authorities to put in place measures to guarantee their autonomy e.g. the creation of the CalabarOgoja Rivers state in the East, the Mid-West state in the West and the Middle-Belt state in the North were considered the positive responses to the minorities' demand.

**Table 1**

Population of Speakers of the 12 Largest Ethnic Groups.

Language	1963 Population	1986 Population (projected)
Hausa	11,653,000	23,233,000
Yoruba	11,321,000	22,571,000
Igbo	9,246,000	18,434,000
Fulfulde	4,784,000	9,538,000
Kanuri	2,256,000	4,498,000
Ibibio	2,006,000	3,999,000
Tiv	1,394,000	2,779,000
Ijaw (Izon)	1,089,000	2,171,000
Edo	955,000	1,904,000
Nupe	656,000	1,314,000
Urhobo	639,000	1,274,000
Igala	582,000	1,160,000

Source: Jibril, Munzali: 1991, 111]

Due to minority concern, the British colonial master setup a commission known as Willink Commission of 1957, it was established to look into fears expressed by minority ethnic groups that the colonial imposed political structure would lead to the domination of the minority groups by the majority ethnic groups in the main three regions of the federation at that time. The commission was also charged with means of allaying those fears. The fears about unequal treatment in the three powerful regions of Nigerian were expressed during the 1953 constitutional conference. The following terms of references guided the commission:

- 1- To ascertain the facts of the fears of minorities in Nigeria and proposing means to allay those fears whether well or ill founded
- 2- To advise what safeguards should be included for this purpose in the constitution
- 3- If, but only if no solution no solution seems to the commission to solve the case, then as a last resort to make case for the creation of states.
- 4- To report its findings to the secretary of State for the Colonies.

The result of the Commission although foreseen the rights of minorities but denounced their demands, it was held that the creation of states would not answer the fear of the minorities, but would rather lead to an endless brake up of the country. (Akinyele T., 1996)



In the post-independence, it was cleared that the issue of minorities and majorities in Nigeria had much to do with access to resources or power. The majority ethnic groups have outmaneuvered the minority ethnic groups. There are accusation and counter accusations of favoritism to the detriment of minority ethnic groups. (Abdullah O E., undated) This has affected other area, e.g. there is no credible population census result since its independence up to date. The rational argument behind it attached with the regional and ethnics issue, hence the federal allocations of resources have consideration on the population of each state. State found it hard to maintain itself financially without the federal allocations. Subsequently, some argued that federal government had hijacked most of the sources that can generate revenue to state and local governments.

One major challenge faced by ethnic minorities in Nigeria is the dissimilarities that existed with regard to their demand. Those groups in the North i.e. the Middle-Belt Region in particular seemed to be agitating for greater participation in the central government and the equitable distribution of resources as a means of bringing about significant development to their people. On the other hand, minorities in the South seeking for a direct control of their resources as a means of achieving meaningful development in their region. This is illustrated by the recent "resource control" suit as orchestrated by the minorities within the Niger-Delta Region. Observing the spate of violence occurred in the past with regard to minorities, one will agree with Kelechi that all fall within what he termed as *procedural governance issues*, such as revenue allocation, census figures, creation of new states, Federal Government appointments, and access to national institutions. (Kelechi A. Kalu, 2004)

Despite the creation of Nigeria through the amalgamation of the three regions by the British in 1914, the post-independence period overseeing individual and collective Nigerians tend not to have interest to show allegiance to the state imposed by British. Perhaps the key reason is that the founding fathers of Nigeria are foreigners and from the colonial period to the present, there remains an absence of a national discussion on whether the entity, Nigerian should remain a collective choice. Hence, most Nigerians irrespective of their nationalist claims have the tendency to first identify themselves with their ethnic roots before identifying themselves collectively as Nigerian. This argument goes in line with the view of Okwudibia Nnoli who held that, ethnicity is the fundamental basis for identity and political cleavages in Nigeria (See Table 2).

British colonial administrators implemented policies through tripartite structure of Northern, Southern and Eastern with the intention of producing a Nigerian federation presiding over three regional governments with legislative power. This tripartite division perpetuated ethnic divisions between the Northern Hausa/Fulani, Eastern Ibo, and Western Yoruba and between the majority-minority ethnic groups; it strengthened these ethnic identities as interest groups fighting for political representation and power. Cooper states that “instead of allowing a wide-variety of interest groups to make claims on the Nigerian state, the federal system focused power on the three regions,” ignoring the concerns of unrepresented minority ethnic groups. The existence of these three politically-dominant ethnic groups conveyed the contribution of colonialism to ethno-genesis and its effect on the individual ethnic identities of the various peoples within Nigeria (Cooper, 2002).

**Table 2**

A Diary of Communal Clashes in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic (1999 – 2002)

Number of crises	Date occurred	Place of Crises
1	May 30 - June 9, 1999	Warri communal clash in Delta State
2	July 18, 1999	Oodua People’s Congress and Hausa traders clashed at Sagamu, Ogun State.
3	November 25, 1999	Communal clash in Lagos between Oodua People’s Congress and Hausa traders
4	January 25, 2000	Communal clash in Brass Local Government area of Bayelsa State.
5	January 29, 2000	Communal clash in Etsako Local Government area of Edo State
6	January 30, 2000	Communal clash at Etsako Local Government area of Edo State.
7	February 2, 2000	Boundary dispute between communities in Akwalbom and Cross Rivers State.
8	February 21, 2000	Sharia riots in Kaduna.
9	February 28, 2000	Religious riots in Aba, Abia State, reprisal killing from the Kaduna mayhem
10	March 5, 2000	Epoch of Ife – Modakeke war of attrition. Osun state
11	March 16, 2000	Renewed hostilities between the people of Eleme and Okirika in Rivers State.
12	March 28, 2000	Religious riots in Damboa, Borno State.
13	April 8, 2000	Communal clash in Ovia South Local Government area of Edo State.
14	May 18, 2000	Local farmers and Fulani cattle rearer’s clash in Saki, Oyo State.

15	June 5, 2000	Epoch of the Owo mayhem in Ondo State.
16	June 12, 2000	Communal clash in Isoko North Local Government area of Edo State.
17	June 23, 2000	Communal clash between the people of Ikot Offiong and Oku-Iboku of Cross River State.
18	July 1, 2000	The commencement of communal clash at IkareAkoko, Ondo State.
19	July 21, 2000	Renewed hostilities between the Ijaws and Urhobos in Delta State.
20	August 12, 2000	Renewed hostilities between the Ijaws and Urhobos in Delta State.
21	August 12, 2000	Communal clash in Bendel Local Government area of Abia State.
22	August 22, 2000	Violent clash at Agboma community in Epe Local Government area of Lagos State.
23	October 16, 2000	Igbos and Hausa traders clashed at Alaba Rago market area of Lagos State.
24	December 11, 2000	Renewed clashes between Ife and Modakeke, Osun State.
25	March 13, 2001	Renewed communal clashes at Owo, Ondo State.
26	April 13, 2001	Religious riot in Kano State.
27	May 12, 2001	Communal clash between the Ijaws and Itsekiri of Delta State.
28	July 2, 2001	Communal clash between Odimodu and Ogulagba communities of Delta State.
29	July 12, 2000	Ethnic violence in Nassarawa State.
30	September 7, 2001	Religious clash in Jos, Plateau State.
31	September 16, 2001	Religious riot in Kano.
32	September 18, 2001	Religious riot in Benue State.
33	January 12, 2002	Oodua People's Congress clash at Owo, Ondo State
34	February 2, 2002	Oodua People's Congress and Hausa people clashed at Idi-Araba, Lagos State.
35	February 26, 2002	Communal clash between Apprapum and Osatura communities of Cross Rivers State.
36	March 10, 2002	Egbira youth's revolt on Local Government creation.
37	March 30-April 2, 2002	All Peoples Party Intra party clash at Ilorin, Kwara State.
38	August 31, 2002	Communal clash at Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State.
39	September 3, 2002	Renewed communal clashes at Owo, Ondo State.
40	November 21, 2002	Religious riots in Kaduna State and Abuja.

Source: 2000 Annual report on the Human Rights Situation in Nigeria, Tell Magazine, September 24, 2001 and The Nigerian Tribune September 19, 2001, The Punch, November 22, 2002.



### Government Policy and its Effectiveness

The problem of minorities and their agitations still remained unattended or not properly handled to date. An attempt by the successive government to permanently ameliorate these problems is yet to yield any significant success. These attempts include, the defunct Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) which only seemed to exist in form and appearance but not in substance and therefore not able to achieve anything meaningful. The Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF) was also another device but it was accused of being selective in carrying out its projects and now the Niger Delta Development Cooperation (NDDC) which was established by Yaradua administration. These bodies were established as a result of agitations of the minorities in the Niger Delta Region. They have also been called by some Governors within the Middle Belt Region to set up a similar Cooperation to assist in developing areas in the Middle Belt. Despite that the region have suffered from the exploration of solid minerals, but these calls appear not to have succeeded probably because they were done half-heartedly (OcheOnazi, 2002).

Federal solutions include creation of states from 3 regions in the 1940s to 36 and the federal capital territory of Abuja by 1996. The principle of federal character and rotation of the presidency among the three regions is another. Military dictatorship is one of the culprits in this regard, it was accounted that under two military regimes of 1966-1979 and 1983-1999, over centralization of public policies has weakened Nigerian federalism. Reckless creation of states under military rule has debased the states, making them overly dependent on the central government. Nigerian federalism functioned fully between 1954 and 1966, while it was weaker in the second republic 1979-1983, essentially because of imitation of the ways of military rule. It has to be noted that the 1960 Independence and 1963 Republican Constitutions stringent conditions which were laid down for creating new states in a manner that would not trivialize the process, were set aside. Instead, military governments have frequently used uncertain and obscure criteria in creating more states. As a consequence, some of these newly created states were unable to perform the normal functions of states in a full fledged federal system (See Table 3).

The creation of states, by successive regimes in the country was mainly a result of minority agitations and has brought the number of states in Nigeria to 36. Although, it has temporarily

solved problem of some small ethnic groups, but it has brought about states that are too small to function economically, therefore, without the statutory allocations from the central government, these states would hardly be able to exist. Recently more than 20mstates in the federation failed to pay teachers' salaries for several months simply due to lesser federal allocation to their various states budgets. One notable feature of the creation of states is that a new minority question or agitation of an entirely different perspective has arisen. That is, the larger ethnic minorities pitched together with the smaller groups are accused of the same crimes of domination and marginalization that are usually committed by the ethnic majorities. As a result, scholars had argued that any serious attempt at restoring normalcy to governance in Nigeria must include a return to genuine federalism in which the states would regain their autonomy, becoming once again units of economic production. This would mean that the issue of revenue allocation must be revisited in the real sense.

The most notable devices or attempts to solve the minority questions include, the Federal Character or quota system which was first provided for by the 1979 and now the 1999 Constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It was provided to guide the allocation of development projects and provision of amenities, as well as appointment into key political offices. However, these provisions have a major shortcoming e.g., if these provisions are not followed in the making of appointments or the citing of projects, as usually the case, aggrieved parties can do nothing to enforce these rights.

Another main concern is rising in demand from the minorities within minority. A classic example of this is found in Benue state of Nigeria, where the Tiv ethnic group who constitutes the majority over the Idoma's are accused by the Idoma of using their numerical strength to dominate and relegate the Idoma's to the background in terms of political appointments, civil service jobs and the lack of development of their areas i.e. light, water, roads, schools and government projects. The result of which has led Idoma to demand for a separate state in 1995, this request was turned down by the then Federal Military Government. Minorities within minorities are not exclusive to Benue state but exist in other states such as Middle Belt states: Taraba, Nasarawa, Plateau, Kogi states and states within the NigerDelta Region of the country. This situation has warranted a question as to whether state creation is an effective solution to the issue of minorities. (OcheOnazi, 2002).

**Table 3**  
Efforts At Integrated Statehood

Regime	Attempt At Integrated Statehood
Gowon ,1966-75	i. Program for reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation. ii. Establishment of unity schools iii. Establishment of National Youth Service Corp. iv. Creation of 12 States.
Murtala/Obasanjo,1975-79	I .Creation of additional 7 states ii. Ethical revolution.
Shagari,1979-83	I .Green revolution
Buhari/Idiagbon,1984-85	I .War Against Indiscipline (WAI)
Babangida,1985-93	i. Mass Mobilization Program, MAMSER ii .National Directorate for Employment, NDE iii .Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure, DFFRI iv. Better Life Program v. State Creation.
Abacha,1993-98	i. War Against Indiscipline and Corruption,WAIC ii, National Reconciliation Committee, NARECOM iii. National Orientation Agency NOA iv. Family Support Program v. State Creation vi. Vision 2010
Abubakar,1989-99	i. National Reconciliation
Obasanjo,1999-	i. National Rebirth ii. Human Rights Abuse Investigation Committee iii .Poverty Alleviation Program iv. Constitutional Review

Source: LanreOlu-Adeyemi, 2006. Ethno-Religious Conflicts And The Travails of National Integration In Nigeria's Fourth Republic

### The Way Forward

Minority's right is a serious issue in Nigeria, noting the fact that it has recorded number of unrest and tragedies in the last six decades of independence. The civil war of 1967-70 had taught Nigeria a great lesson to put variousunrests under control and avoid situation like the ethnic cleansing incidents that occurred in Rwanda and Bosnia at a point in time. It is therefore instructive to observe that irrespective of the fact that a group may be majority or minority, each group has tendencies of manipulating smaller groups. This is why you find ethnic groups that fall within the larger national definition of ethnic majorities states but now

pitched with ethnic minorities accuse the minorities of discrimination. For instance, the Hausa settlers in Plateau state accuse the indigenes of discriminatory practices; the indigenes on the other hand justify their actions by accusing the Hausa of trying to impose their aristocratic practices of the colonial days. The Yoruba in Kwara state made similar accusations against the ruling Fulani dynasty. As a result, scholars viewed that the tangible solution to the issue of minorities should be considered on the context of Citizen Rights, and National Integration, as it was cited in the Wilberforce Conference:

*“Any serious attempt at restoring normalcy to governance in Nigeria must include a return to genuine federalism in which the states would regain their autonomy, becoming once again units of economic production. This would mean that the issue of revenue allocation must be revisited”* (Wilberforce Conference, 1997)

In a country like Nigeria, the focus of the minority agitations should be centered on stronger constitutional provisions that will protect the rights of minorities. The ethnic minorities' protection Clauses in the Nigeria constitution has a far reaching implication for minorities' rights. The amendment of the constitution and its practicality can better option than the creation of more states, as it will continue bring about economically unviable states. The federal character principle should be made justifiable. It has to be strongly argued that, the minorities' right had not been given adequate solution so far, apart from the first civilian government that ended in 1966, the point that creation of state allocations and channeling infrastructure are not actually base on equitable demand and needs, rather on political influences and impartial distribution, which construes by heavy corruption practices.

If a proactive and just leader lead Nigeria, with over whelming performances, Nigerians will maintain the country's identity rather than their various ethnic groups, and of course to achieve this, the country resources has to be fairly projected for the national benefit and interest. The feeling of nationality will be generated; the Igbo, Hausa, Ijaw, Yoruba etc. will identify themselves as Nigerian before their various ethnic or tribal identity is considered. The current administration of President Muhammad Buhari is predicted to be one of the hope to rescue Nigeria from it epidemic deceases, apart from high expectation within Nigeria, foreign government have also place their trust upon him. Mr. Carson, who was the Assistant Secretary of State, stated the American position during Buhari's official visit to US: “We now have a man of enormous integrity; one that has shown so much faith in the democratic

process; one that refused to be frustrated even in the face of massively rigged elections. He submitted to the judicial process and even when that was compromised he never gave up....America has done its check and we are convinced that this President is the one that Nigeria needs at this time to regain its leadership of the African continent.

Carson continues;

“America now has a partner worthy of relations because they believe that every dollar that America provides to support Nigeria whether in the area of security, in the area of education, or encouraging American investors to invest in Nigeria, there is an enabling environment because what had been destroying the country is corruption”. (OlalekanAdetayo, 2015) Such leadership quality is the very hope for the Nigerian ethnic disparities

### Conclusion

The paper investigated the minorities issue and their expectations from the Nigerian federal government. The feelings and assertion of ethnic nationalism has been the bane of nation building in Nigeria since independence. The government policies had yet to address those demands, it has been asserted that regardless of the responses from government, the ethno-minorities' ideology in Nigeria has gain more ground rapidly and is far from being resolved. Digging the root of minorities issue in Nigeria, observation shows that it might go for decades before any tangible mechanism can be placed to tackle it. The fact that Nigeria today is not a creation of Nigerians themselves but an instrument of British colonial power to fit their interest at the time had heavy impact in cooperation and feeling of being a nation rather than perception of demographically economic, political, and linguistic ethnic groups. The result of which had generated feeling of mistrust, unfaithfulness, rather than impartiality which work side by side with good governance that advocate cooperation and unity of Nigeria regardless of ethnic disparity. It is sad that since independence in 1960 till present, Nigeria is yet to produce a national president that will be acceptable to the populace, but so far a regional or zoning leader which had not receives the allegiance of the populace but only on majority vote platform.

UN had established specific standards for the protection of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities; the right to participate in decision making,



protection of their identity, and discrimination. Several aspects need to be advocated by the federal, state and local governments, and ethnic societies of any type to resolve minorities' issues. To pacify minorities issue is a key to development, prosperity, and unification of all ethnics as a single nation. Constitution amendment, true federalism practices, National Conference, and compromises through the notion of give and take, recognition, respects, and rights of various ethnic groups are major solution to maintain a harmonious and peaceful Nigeria. These can only be achieved if Nigeria possesses good governance.

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