POLITICS OF MARGINALISATION IN THE MIDDLE-BELT OF NIGERIA, C. 1940-2000: AN ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Nigeria was under British colonial domination from 1900 to 1960. This era was preceded by imperial conquest of the reign. There were established kingdoms, empires, and homogenous ethnic peoples within the Nigerian region before British occupation. These diverse ethnic groupsequally had absolute control over their natural resources without interference from external powers. It is argued that the colonial government as a result of administrative exigencies lumped these diverse ethnic groups together to form Nigeria in 1914. This development has sowed the seed of discord, ethnic power strife and bias in the Middle-Belt during the post-colonial period. The paper examines how the dominance of Hausa/Fulani oligarchs over other ethnic groups has led to the marginalization of the Middle Belt region. With the use of relevant primary and secondary sources, the paper argues that the inability of the British colonial government to find a lasting solution to the challenges of marginalization and other problems of minority rights has exacerbated agitations in the Middle-Belt. The paper further contends that since the federal structure in the post-colonial period favoured some segments of the Middle-Belt, particularly the unequal resources allocation and politics of marginalisation in the region, their social and economic development has been hampered. With the realization that the Middle-Belt’s incessant demand for equity is a threat to the corporate existence of the country, this paper concludes that the Nigerian government must take the bull by the horn through policy redirection to foster unity, integration and development of the region and Nigeria at large. It recommends that government’s prompt response to take such step would enhance a sustainable and sound democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Resources, Alienation, Integration, Development.

Introduction

Nigeria is located in Western Africa on the Gulf of Guinea and has a total area of 923, 768 km² (356,669sqm), making it the world’s 32nd largest country after Tanzania. The country is located between parallels 4° and 14° north and longitude 2° and 15° East which falls within the tropical zone and well fitted in the western area of African continent (Eluwa, 1988:9). Nigeria shares 94, 047 kilometres (2,515m) border with Benin (773 km), Niger (1,497 km), Chad (87 km), Cameroon (91,690 km), and has a coastline of at least 853 km. Evidence has revealed that Nigeria have a varied landscape, particularly in the Southern part given its tropical rain forest climate of 60 to 80 inches annual rainfall (1524 to 2,032 mm). It is noted that the south-east and south-west consists Obudu Plateau and the coastal plains. This forest zone contains salt water swamp or mangrove swamp as a result of the presence of large amount of mangrove in the area. To the North of the fresh water swamp are different vegetations from the salt water swamp called rain forest.

Evidence shows that between the far south and far north, lay the Savannah (trees covered with grasses and flowers are located between trees) with an annual rainfall of 20 and 60 inches (508 &1,524mm) (Abejide, 2009). The Savannah zone of Nigeria has three categories: Guinea forest-, savannah, Sudan and Sahel. The Middle Belt of Nigeria is situated within the Savannah zone. It should be noted that the pre-colonial period of what later became Nigeria referred to the
period before the actual conquest and the imposition of European rule. It was a period before the European had access to the natural resources of territories within the region. Evidence has revealed that there were established systems of government within these territories prior to 1914 amalgamation. It is therefore proper to say that before the colonial state creation, there were multiple ethnic groups with complete system of administration each operating independently within the Nigerian region (Abejide, 2009). There were independent centralized states such as: the Kanem-Bornu Kingdom; Fulani Emirates which ruled Northern Nigeria; the Ife Kingdom; Benin Kingdom and the Yoruba Kingdom of Oyo. To Nmadi & Martins (1992), the city-states of the Niger Delta as well as the politically decentralized but culturally homogenous Igbo of the Eastern region and small tribes of Plateau constituted an important episode in the development of large states within the Nigerian region during the period under review. Each of these kingdoms and city-states had its unique cultural identities which were later merged together as one entity or nation during the British colonial rule. This has helped in explaining the fact that there were several centralized systems of government established within the sub-region of West Africa like Nigeria. Essentially, these centralized states laid the foundation of the principle of checks and balances prior to the imposition of foreign rule. Nigeria comprised 250 ethnic groups each of which had maintained different independent states of governance before the Amalgamation of 1914 (Mary, 2002).

The Ethno-linguistic Map of Nigeria before 1914 Amalgamation

Source: www.wikipedia.com

It is not a new thing to say that societies in pre-colonial Nigeria were very dynamic. The fact that different Kingdoms, Empires and City-States existed during that period is also not in doubt. The strife for power and politics in the post-colonial Nigeria has become subject of debate and discussion. Governmental, Non-governmental, Corporate entities, scholars and citizens in the geo-political zones in Nigeria has organized seminars and conferences towards resolving the issue of resource allocation, marginalization of the Middle-Belt people and other related issues over the years. Their agitation is link with problems of resource control, politics and economic neglect that has underpinned the process of development in the Middle Belt region and unity of the country. It will be shown that the British artificial creation of Nigeria laid the foundation for instability and was central to the Middle-Belt strife for recognition and freedom from the clutches of the Northern hegemonic control.

Conceptual Clarification

The Middle Belt consists of minority groups in the North-central parts of Nigeria. These groups are ethnically and linguistically very different, but share a historical resistance towards the domination of the Muslim Hausa-Fulani ethnic group. In the colonial years Christianity was seen as the alternative to Islam in the North, and through Christianity the Middle Belt gained access to western education. The Middle Belt elite enjoyed their golden years during the rule of Lt. Col. (Later Gen.) Gowon, when a “Middle Belt state” was created (Benue-Plateau State). However, during the Second Republic this faded as the Middle Belt elites split into three political parties: National Party of Nigeria, Nigerian Peoples Party and Great Nigeria People’s Party. Later the elites tried to restore their identity by addressing the marginalization of Igbo (Orji 2008: 72-73). Presently, the middle belt comprises Plateau, Benue, Taraba, Nassarawa, southern Adamawa, southern Kaduna, southern Gombe, part of Kogi and Kwara i.e. they are middle belters. Although they still
have minimal connection with the Hausa-Fulani population in some parts like Kwara, Adamawa, Kaduna, Gombe, Bauchi.

Evidence has revealed that the Middle Belt is a political expression of ethnic minorities in the former Northern region which are found in the North-west, North-east and particularly North-central, which have been oppressed by both the colonial regime and Fulani emirate system and their contemporary political leaderships (Orgi, 2008). Under the new dispensation of geo-political zoning of the federation, the concept has been restricted to North-central and thereby obliterating the name North-central from the political lexicon of Nigeria. Meanwhile, the late head of state General Sani Abacha in his October 1, 1995 independence day broadcast, zoned the country into six political regions: North-west, North-east, Middle Belt, South-east, South-west and Southern Minority (Haruna, 2003). While the Southern minority protested and preferred to be called South-south, the Middle Belt with time had been changed, by those who are repugnant to the concept, to North central. Nevertheless, the concept is bigger than any specific geo-political zone (Haruna, 2003, Bangudu, 2003). The concept of Middle Belt is vague or unclear as some states like Kaduna, Niger, Kwara, Yobe, Borno and Adamawa, which have a concentration of Hausa-Fulani and some major ethnic minorities, who are Moslems (Nupe, Kanuri etc), and do see themselves more of ‘Lugard North’ than belonging to the belt. There is also a marginal ethnic-minority like the Yoruba (Kwara, Kogi), whose interest and loyalty are also divided; as they prefer to identify with the South West Yorubaland when the going is bad or who would want to benefit from both sides. However, Middle Belt therefore, is encompassing and can be seen as a political entity located within the vast Savannah region of Nigeria, which has the concentration of ethnic-communal groups mostly practice African traditional religion or Christianity. They have their peculiar multifarious political systems, religious beliefs and cultural orientations, which are non-Islamic and different from the Hausa-Fulani emirate system. In the words of Richard Sklar 1970), the Middle Belt area comprise of people who were either non-Hausa speaking, non-Muslim or both.

In this paper, the Middle-Belt region is seen to comprise eight states of the federation, namely: Kogi, Kwara, Niger, Plateau, Nasarawa, Benue, Adamawa, Taraba and the Federal Capital Territory. As a result of ethno-minority situation in trying to re-assert an independent entity, the place has for long become an alluring bride for many suitors, conscious of the strategic part it plays in deciding the outcome of an election. Situated in the middle of Nigeria, the Middle Belt is a relatively big complex multi-ethnic, multi-religious geographical area, where unlike the Hausa-Fulani and the Kanuris of the far north, is populated largely by minority ethnic groups. Its politics is too complex, particularly between an uneasy attachment to the far north and sometimes an alliance with southern-based political parties. As a result of the strategic location of the Middle Belt, it has since the pre-independence days been a fertile fishing water pond for the big three ethnic groups (Hausa, Yoruba and the Ibos) in their desire for political dominance in the country (Haruna, 2003).

**British Amalgamated Ploy and Middle-Belt Crisis**

It should be noted that in the beginning, there was no Nigeria. There were Ijaws, Igbos, Urhobos, Itsekiris, Yorubas, Hausas, Fulanis, Nupes, Kanuris, Ogonis, Gwaris, Katafs, Jukars, Edos, Ibibios, Efiks, Idomas, Tivs, Junkuns, Biroms, Agnas, Ogojas and so on. There were Kingdoms like, Oyo, Lagos, Calabar, Brass, Itsekiri, Benin, Tiv, Borno, Sokoto Caliphate (with loose control over Kano, Ilorin, Zaria), Bonny, Opobo, etc. (Itse, 1995). Prior to the British conquest of the different nations making up the present day Nigeria, these Nations were independent nation states - independent of each other and of Britain. The process of unification of Nigeria began in 1906, and was aimed at securing a central direction of policy and pooling resources for economic and administrative purposes. This would in turn allow the southern part of the country to cover the cost of administration and development of the financially weak protectorate of the north (Abejide, 2009; Ige, 1994). According to Ekundare (1973):

> the unification of the northern protectorate, Lagos colony and the southern protectorate “... was considered desirable and expedient in order to centralize the administrative control of the country and thus facilitate better utilization of resources and coordination of social and economic development project.”

Despite that, the amalgamation of those protectorates in Nigeria by the British had failed to consider the views of Nigerians on whether the decision for lumping them together was acceptable. As was the norm during the early years of colonial rule, the views of Nigerians were not sought on even the most basic issues. Unification was pushed through for the administrative convenience of the colonial government as well as to utilise the existing and strong export markets of the south, as well as to pay for the colonial administration and economic development in the financially weak north (Geary, 1977). On the complexities that surrounds the minority question and steps taken by the British colonial administration, evidence found that it was not efficient to resolve their marginalisation. For example, in order to address
minority fears, the British government appointed a Commission of Inquiry into the claims made by the minority groups in 1957 (Paki, 2011).

The Secretary of State to the Colonies, Oliver Stanley, announcing the creation of the Willink Commission asserted:

*Though the desire for the creation of new states arises from the fear of minorities, it would be impracticable to meet all the fears by the creation of new states. There are many different ethnic groups and people in Nigeria and however many states were created, minorities would still inevitably remain.*

The Willink Commission was set up in 1957 to achieve the following objectives:

- To ascertain the facts about the fears of minorities in any part of Nigeria and to propose means of allaying those fears whether well or ill-founded.
- To advise what safeguards should be included for this purpose in the Constitution of Nigeria.
- If, but only if, no other solution seems to the Commission to meet the case, then as a last resort to make detailed recommendations for the creation of one or more new states and in that case:
  - to specify the precise area to be included in such a state or states;
  - to recommend the governmental and administrative structure most appropriate for it.
  - to assess whether any state recommended would be viable from an economic and administrative point of view and what the effect of its creation would be on the regions from which it would be created and on the federation.
- To report its findings and recommendations to the Secretary of States for the Colonies” (National Archive Enugu, (NAE), Akinyele, 1996).

As was the case with other minorities, the claim for a separate region was rejected by the Willink Commission, as clear in the words of Phillip Manson, a member of the Commission, that:

*Neither Ogoja nor Rivers showed themselves very anxious to be subject to Calabar, enthusiasm for a state that would have the Benin Empire dwindled as one moved away from Benin; the areas that displayed an interest in the middle belt state... who were either indifferent or, as one of them put it, preferred Fulani rule to Tiv (Akinyele, 1996).*

The Commission argued further that:

*It is of the first importance to find means of allaying fears which do not perpetuate differences that might otherwise disappear...This is why we do not accept in its entirety the grouping, that is the principle that a recognizable ethnic group should whenever possible form a political unit.*

In short, the Willink’s Commission found that the creation of more regions would simply create new minority disputes that would in turn be contested by other minority groups. In their view, the creation of new regions to cater for minority fear would simply snowball over the long term and lead to the creation of more and more regions without solving the problem of majority domination. Despite this, the Commission did agree that there was need to permit areas with ‘distinguishable culture’ within a region to preserve the element of their culture.

It is argue that the British colonial government was not prepared to build any nation, but to expand their frontiers in terms of trade and resources control at the expense of their colonies. Evidence has revealed that the British socio-economic system favoured a federal option for Nigeria, but its features merely determined the allocation of functions among these heterogeneous people (Adiele, 1991). To Uma (1977), the British had no long term political programme for the country, because serious state matters were handled with ineptitude. They did not really consider the problems of unification of the country, but assumed that it would be resolved naturally (Uma, 1977, Jeremy, 1981). As a result of the hasty decision taken by the British, the federal structure was faulty right from the era of colonial rule. It has become very difficult for the post-colonial administration in Nigeria to firmly consolidate and practice true federalism.

As a result of the faulty federalism established by the British, a federal system of government, comprising three regions (north, southeast, southwest), was created in colonial Nigeria in 1954 and preserved at the time of independence in 1960. Three years later, the Western Region was partitioned to create a fourth region for ethnic minorities in that part
of the country. When the Eastern Region tried to secede from the federation in 1967, the federal military government appealed to minorities in the secessionist region and elsewhere by dividing the country into 12 states, six in the north and six in the south. That historic decision corrected a flagrant territorial imbalance, favoring the north that had been a leading cause of political instability. Thereafter, regionalist thought and organization remained relatively dormant until 1993, when the military government abruptly terminated an electoral transition to civilian rule. Meanwhile, in response to popular pressures for local autonomy, military rulers increased the number of states to 19 in 1976, 21 in 1987, and 30 in 1991. The widely despised military government of General Sani Abacha then sought to earn political credit by creating 6 additional states in 1996 to make a total of 36, which is three times the number deemed necessary to secure a stable balance of constituent states in 1967. It is argued that the proliferation has created an array of weak, and financially unviable, states that function as conduits for the transmission of federal resources and services to local authorities (Orji. 2008). Power has been centralized at the center to the extent that the component units had lost their pre-existing rights over their land and resources.

Evidence of Marginalisation of the Middle Belt

The federal structure established by the British was an instrument of divide and rule rather than unity and integration of Nigeria. To Ayoade (1980), it was an attempt by the British to preserve and extend her imperial control over Nigeria. Clearly, the ethno-power struggle among the people of Middle Belt is directly linked to this factor. They wanted a freedom, fair share and participation in the governance and control of their natural resources, particularly in a complex society like Nigeria. It should be noted that Nigeria after the lumping together in 1914 existed only in paper and not united.

Based largely on the faulty federal structure, it can be said that the tension in the Middle Belt arose variably from, competing ethnic identities, inter/intra-religious differences, disputes over arable/ grazing land and scarce natural resources, contests over chieftaincy/political representations and access to power. It should be noted that political competition, bias, stereotype, prejudices, elite manipulation, inequity, mass poverty and brash attitude of the elites had led to protracted national economic crisis, excessive centrality of national administration, long period of military rule, arbitrariness of rules, unclear citizenship identification. The structural imbalance in Nigeria federalism brought the domination, and serious marginalization of the minorities, particularly the Middle belt. The North has consistently dominated the political power in the country and had produced both civilian and military president for over 38 years (Wheat, 1963).

Northern Domination: Though, these areas regarded as the middle-belt had been politically dominated and absorbed into the Hausa-Fulani influence, they are not allowed to seek their own future outside the political, socio-cultural and economic influence of the Hausa-Fulani ruling class in Nigeria. The above reason was one of the factors that led to the coup of Gideon Okar in 1990, April 22. As part of post-colonial steps taken by the federal government to resolve the ethnicity problems of the Middle-Belt, Nigeria was divided into six geo-political zones. Yet there are profound political differences among the zones, and these minimize the potential for success of regionalist solutions to national problems. In three of the six zones, a regional language is spoken by nearly all of the people: Hausa in the northwest, Igbo in the southeast, and Yoruba in the southwest. These three zones are relatively cohesive, both culturally and politically. Two of them, the southeast and southwest, have pronounced autonomist tendencies. The northwest, however, is not autonomist because the Hausa-speaking emirate leaders have trans-regional aims and interests based on both pre-colonial history and religious culture (Harunah. 2003). Specifically, the emirate system, created by Hausa- speaking Fulani warriors and their allies during the first decade of the nineteenth century, extended into the northeastern zone and portions of the north-central. Furthermore, the emirate peoples share a common tradition of Islamic political organization, including a disposition to live in accordance with the precepts and practices of Islamic law. The other three zones are ethnically and linguistically diversified.

In the northeast, there is a large Kanuri-speaking population as well as many other ethno-linguistic groups. Its traditional political organization includes many emirates, some of which acknowledge the traditional leadership of the Sokoto Caliphate of the northwest, in addition to the historic and staunchly independent Kanuri kingdom, which is also Islamic in belief and emirate-like in form. Hence, the region as a whole is not autonomist, and the desire for separation from the emirate sector is limited to areas within its southermost states, where non-Muslim communities predominate (Richard, 1970). The north-central zone is extremely diversified; known popularly and historically as the Middle Belt, this zone contains a multitude of languages and ethnic groups -- by far the largest number of nationalities among the zones.
Most of the groups are motivated by an age-long desire to secure their separation from the Muslim emirates, nowadays within the context of a Nigerian federation. Lacking cohesiveness as a geopolitical zone, the political orientation of the north-central is defensive rather than autonomist. This is also true of the southern zone that encompasses a broad band of ethnic and linguistic groups, from Itsekeri-, Urhobo-, Edo-, and Ijaw-speakers in the western and central sections to Ibibio, other Efik-speakers, and Eko-speakers in the east. This zone, named at first “southern minorities,” then “south-south,” is defined by its separation from the Igbo (southeastern) and Yoruba (southwestern) areas. It includes the oil-bearing Niger Delta and adjacent wetland sector that currently accounts for more than 90 percent of the value of Nigerian exports.

**Political marginalization of Middle Belt people:** The limited positions and seats occupied by their people in the house of parliament had served as another factor for the perennial strife in that region. In Nigeria, power-sharing is evident in three important areas: territory (federalism), economy (revenue-sharing) and politics (office-distribution and the Federal Character). Roeder & Rothchild (2005) provides distinction between power-sharing and power dividing. While power-sharing aims at including all parties in the power decision process, they define power dividing as a process: “[to] allocate state powers between government and the civil society with strong, enforceable civil liberties that take many responsibilities out of the hands of the government”. According to this definition federalism can be included as a power dividing arrangement. The goal of federalism is often to give local communities or ethnic groups the decision-making power over their territory, and not a share of power on the central governmental level. This fits very well with how the Nigerian federal state has evolved since independence. On the other hand, the office-distribution and revenue-sharing can mainly be regarded as inclusive power-sharing where all states take part in the decision making process. Even though the three types of power-sharing have developed fairly independently from each other, they all have the same motive for being established: a mutual suspicion and fear that a particular ethnic group, state or region would gain power over the others. The different types of power-sharing arrangements in Nigeria can be seen as attempts to accommodate the fear among different groups. Ideally, Federalism should hinder the center from becoming too strong. Revenue-sharing has been implemented so that the Niger Delta region would not become much wealthier than the rest of the country and possibly secede and take the oil resource out of the country. The Federal Character has been accommodating the less developed North and the minorities.

### Table 1: Breakdown of Revenue Allocation to States, June 1999–July 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No.</th>
<th>States</th>
<th>Dominant Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Amount Allocated in Billions of naira</th>
<th>% of Amount Allocated</th>
<th>% of total Population 2006 estimate.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Adamawa</td>
<td>Fulani</td>
<td>50.424</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Bauchi</td>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>56.248</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Borno</td>
<td>Kanuri</td>
<td>55.628</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Gombe</td>
<td>Fulani</td>
<td>41.776</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Jigawa</td>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>51.075</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Kaduna</td>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>65.422</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Kano</td>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>80.127</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>6.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Kebbi</td>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>49.452</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>2.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Nasarawa</td>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>38.540</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>Nupe/Hausa</td>
<td>57.488</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.82</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Sokoto</td>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>50.907</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Yobe</td>
<td>Kanuri</td>
<td>47.102</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Zamfara</td>
<td>Hausa/Fulani</td>
<td>49.468</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>2.32</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>Kwara</td>
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<td>44.469</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1.69</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>Ekiti</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>38.675</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.70</td>
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<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Lagos</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>85.833</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>6.43</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>Ogun</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>52.077</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.66</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>73.471</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Ogun</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>47.700</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>61.097</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|        |            |                       | 403.322                             | 17.01                  | 21.36                                |
Table 1. Explain the fact that the minority states of the Middle Belt received the least revenue allocation of about N251,633 billion naira between 1999 and 2004. It shows the unfair distribution of national wealth which to a large extent, responsible for the struggles and agitations in the region. It is noted that the Middle Belt zone, (which includes the North Central Zone) also reacted to a number of issues in the federation. The trigger for the Middle Belt reaction was the complaint by the core North that the Service Chiefs of the Armed Forces came from the Middle Belt and not the core North (Eliagwu, 2013). There were spontaneous reactions to what was regarded as Northern hypocrisy – using the Middle Belt when it was convenient, to fight its war, and turn around to dump them. The Middle Belt Forum made it clear that it was no longer interested in being part of the old Northern geo-polity, or share Northern identity with the Hausa-Fulani (Vanguard, 2000). The Middle Belt supported a federation with a strong centre, with equity in opportunities for all. It called for equity in the distribution of resources and the need to encourage solid minerals, agriculture and industrial development in the zone. The unequal representation in governance and power sharing, particularly, in economic and resource control allocation, and poverty etc. to a large extent orchestrated communal and ethnic clash and violence.

**Consequences of Marginalisation on the Middle Belt People**

The Middle Belt search for identity started in the 1950s and had seen the zone as the major seat of opposition in the old Northern Region. Both the Middle Belt Forum and the Middle Belt Progressive Movement also called for a conference of ethnic nationalities to assert their right in the Nigerian Federation. The Sharia riots aggravated the demands for separate identity and political course from the Hausa/Fulani. In response to the Middle Belt demand for a separate identity, Alhaji Wada Nas (General Abacha’s Cabinet Minister) accused them of “suffering from inferiority complex”. He further stressed that “as far as we are concerned, we are in a democratic system where only the majority can have its way. So nothing can be done about this” (Vanguard, 2000). His position is questionable, particularly when...
we consider the role of the minority states during the presidential elections that brought Shehu Shagari and Olusegun Obasanjo into power.

In the search for greater political opportunity and survival mechanism, the Middle Belt Forum and Niger-Delta formed a new alliance of Northern and Southern minorities. The alliance was aimed, according to Chief David Dafinone, at bringing together like-minded people of both regions, refocus their energies, create an economic haven where human rights are respected, and advocate for the restructuring of the federation to effect equitable distribution of powers, resources and opportunities (Abuja Today, 2000). Marginalisation of the Middle-Belt people over the years has propelled the two ethnic minorities of the Middle Belt and the Niger Delta to demand for self-determination. The issues of self-determination and control of resources are not negotiable. Nigeria fought the civil war with the resources from the Middle Belt, and reconstructed the country with resources from the Niger-Delta and the hallmark of the struggle is the coming together of the two wealthy but marginalized regions, the Niger-Delta and the Middle Belt.

Middle Belt demand for greater recognition from the federal government has continued unabated since 1999. For example, Chief A. K. Horsfall, (former Chairman of the Oil Mineral Producing and Development Commission) succinctly made the case for this alliance: ...The Igbo, Hausas and Yorubas have dealt with minorities. All the same, when the Hausas want to fight a war, they will go to the Middle Belt and recruit soldiers. When they want to exploit them, the Middle Belt is part of the North; in this place, when they want to marginalize us, we are part of the East. But when the time for sharing power and resources comes, we are seen as slaves. We have therefore come together to take over our destiny into our hands… We have come to the conclusion that we cannot fight that war alone. The only way we can fight and win is by fighting together. They call us minorities, but we are giants of this country (Vanguard, 2000).

Inter-ethnic intolerance has equally become very chronic in the middle belt as a result of the oppression and their strife for freedom. For example, it has led to conflict and violence in the Middle Belt of Plateau State when in September 2001 the Hausa-Fulani settlers had a face-off with the Berom, Aka and Afezire who are indigens. The most recent clash was in Jos South between the Tarok and Hausa-Fulani in Wase etc. The Benue part of the Middle Belt has equally witnessed inter-state conflict and violence between Benue and Nassarawa (Tiv and others), Benue and Taraba (Tiv and Jukun). There was also the intra-communal conflict among the Ushongo versus the Konshisha (Tiv ethnic group), Ushongo versus the Gboko communities (Tiv ethnic group), and theKwande versus the Ushongo (Tiv ethnic group) etc. (Action Aid, 2008). Clearly, the politicisation of differences in culture, ethnicity and religions, ownership, allocation and access to resources, domination of one ethnic power, poverty and youth unemployment has triggered consistent demand by the Middle Belt people for a sense of belonging, and freedom from the Northern involvement in their state matters.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the politics of marginalization of the Middle-Belt people of Nigeria, in relation to their central role in the development of the country. The British colonial administration’s inability to address the fears of the Middle Belt and other minorities naturally sowed seed of discord among the people. Through this process, the British handed over a faulty federal structure to the post-colonial leaders. It could be said that the federal structure established by the British was an instrument of divide and rule rather than for unity and integration of the country. The structural imbalance in a federal system like Nigeria engendered chaos and ethnic power struggle. Each geo-political zone now struggles for recognition within a complex Nigerian society. Clearly, the Hausa-Fulani hegemony in the Middle Belt poses a serious threat to the stability and integration of Nigeria’s nascent democracy. Agitations and strife for freedom by the Middle Belt people has continued unabated, particularly when the nation returned to democratic system in 1999. They demanded for equal political representation, and resource sharing, youth employment as well as state autonomy. Evidence has revealed that the federal government’s policy on politics and allocation of national resources has favoured some segment of the Middle Belt. To an extent, government’s bias has impeded the process of economic and social development of the Middle Belt. The federal structure has made it virtually impossible for the Middle Belt to control political power at the centre, given the ethno-regional politics of the country. With the realization that the continuous strife and conflict in the Middle-Belt poses greater danger to the co-existence of the region and Nigeria, there is need for the federal government to re-direct its policies on political representation, resource allocation and sharing of wealth. The Middle Belt people while uniting with the other states through a federal government should enjoy some forms of autonomous existence. Only then will peace and stability return into that region and to a large extent, Nigeria.
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