CONFLICTS AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Adeyeri, Segun*

Abstract: *Conflicts and political instability are common phenomena in developing societies like Nigeria, a situation that affects peaceful co-existence and the attainment of sustainable development. Political instability arises as a result of the inability of government and the society in general to adequately address the grievances of the population or particular subset of that population. The focus of this paper is to critically examine the phenomenon of conflict and political instability in Nigeria. It observes that the occurrence of conflicts in any society could escalate and becomes more violent, leading to wanton destruction of lives and properties. The paper contends that in spite of the structural deficits and some other problems, the country still holds a better prospect that accentuate instability to be completely attenuated.*

Keywords: *Conflict, Politics, Political instability, Violence, Leadership, Corruption*

*Department of History and International Relations, Lagos State University, OJO, Lagos, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The issue of conflict and political instability in Africa will continue to dominate political discourse by both academics and non academics. Africa, the second largest continent in the world, has passed and is still passing through several restless stages. The nature of political power in many African states, together with the real and perceived consequences of capturing and maintaining power is a key source of conflict and political instability across the continent. It is frequently the case that political victory assumes a "winner-takes-all" form with respect to wealth and resources, patronage, and the prestige and prerogatives of office (Arriola, 2009).

To-date, the country is still haunted by historical injustices and oppressive structures that were bequeathed to the post colonial leadership. This is an aspect that informs the weak institutions of the state, flawed legislative systems and constant struggles for political power to the detriment of the well being of many nations, which could have moved on a path of development as part of modern societies. It was Ake (1995) who painted a gloomy picture of the African continent saying: "Most of Africa is not developing". This apt description of the decline in nearly all African countries underscores the depth of underdevelopment ravaging the people in the midst of abundant natural resources. While most of these countries gained independence in the 1960s, the struggle to ensure national development and political stability proved negative. Ake (1995) locates the genesis of this problem in the inclement political and social conditions in the developing countries. This manifests in poor planning and implementation, lack of entrepreneurial abilities, the stifling of market forces, falling commodity prices and unfavourable terms of trade, poverty of ideas, the dependency syndrome, corruption and indiscipline.

The Nigerian State is a victim of conflict, political instability and a cyclical legitimacy crisis. Consequently, national development is retarded, and the political environment uncertain. The country's authoritarian leadership faced a legitimacy crisis, political intrigues, in an ethnically - differentiated polity, where ethnic competition for resources drove much of the pervasive corruption and profligacy (Fagbadebo, 2007). Nigeria's political instability is conventionally attributed to the manner in which leaders sustain themselves in power. Leaders across the country hold onto office by purchasing support through the distribution of state resources; as such, any conflict over their allocation is thought to degenerate into a

struggle over control of the state. Violence erupts either because some elites crave a larger share of the spoils controlled by the leader or because those outside the leader's patronage-based coalition want access to resources to which they have been denied (Annan, 1998).

The thrust of this paper is to examine the problems and crises militating against the development and political stability of Nigeria. The paper examines the various dimensions of political instability in Nigeria. It argues that the heavy reliance of Nigerian society on politics as a mean to acquire or amass wealth is one of the fundamental causes of instability in the polity.

CONFLICT AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY: CONCEPTUAL EXPLANATIONS

The term conflict usually refers to a condition in which one identifiable group of human beings in a given environment (whether tribal, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religions, socioeconomic, political, among others) is engaged in conscious opposition to one or more identifiable human groups because these groups are pursuing what are or appear to be incompatible goals (Olabode and Ajibade, 2010). Chaphin (1979) defined conflict as "the simultaneous occurrence of two or more mutually antagonistic impulse or motives". It was further described by Wilson and Hanna (2010) as "struggle involving opposing ideas, values, and or limited resources".

According to Boulding (1963), conflict is a situation of competition in which the parties involved are aware of the incompatibility of their potential future positions and in which each party wishes to occupy a position that is incompatible with the wishes of the other. Conflicts usually result into massive violations of human rights and in some case. The most salient feature of these conflicts is underdevelopment, a factor that further fuels conflict. Conflicts, high debt levels, political opportunism, a global economy and international financial systems that are discriminative of the Africans are some of the factors contributing to the high levels of poverty (Makumi, 2004).

Conflict results from human interaction in the context of incompatible ends and where one's ability to satisfy needs or ends depends on the choices, decisions and behaviour of others. It is therefore, possible to argue that conflict is endemic to human relationships and societies. It is the result of interaction among people, an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions and an expression of the basic fact of human interdependence (Adejuwon and Okewale, 2009). Horowitz and Borden (1995) define conflict as

disagreement over social issues, beliefs and ideologies. Conflict has also been described as disagreement on the procedure of distributing power and resources in an organization.

Although political instability takes a variety of forms, such as communal violence, rural insurgency, urban riots, coups d'état, and civil wars, this paper focuses on the type that stems from elite disagreement over the distribution of power and resources. Elite conflicts are consequential for stability in Africa because they can spiral into other mass forms of violence. Political instability arises as a result of the inability of government and the society in general to adequately address the grievances of the population or particular subset of that population. The source of grievances can be internal, external or political depending on the circumstances (Ofiaga, 2011). He stated further that in such situation, patterns of conflicts or interaction also become more complex. Political instability need to be better understood and disaggregated into its various forms, because discontent alone, however, does not necessarily generate political instability, individual and mechanisms must be present to articulate the grievances and mobilise the aggrieved to demand redress from government, as tensions mount within a society. Political instability is unconstitutional change of government, either regular or irregular change of government. It is a situation whereby a country is going through political turmoil.

Given their encyclopaedic work on political events in Africa, Morrison, Mitchell, and Paden (1989) observe that other manifestations of instability are often a response on the part of communal groups in national populations to elite instability which either fails to bring about a reapportionment of ethnic representation in government or a redistribution of other goods.

CONFLICTS AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN NIGERIA: UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS AND OUTCOMES

Conflicts are common and unavoidable in all human society. All over the world, conflicts occur because society is made up of people with differing interests and values. In most societies, conflicts occur when parties in a state of independence perceive divergent views or believe that their aspirations or goals cannot be achieved simultaneously. Therefore, it is only natural that where there is inequality in access to the control of natural resources and political power for instance, there would be discontent, opposition and controversy (Afegbua, 2010).

Nigeria as a heterogeneous society in terms of ethnic, religious and cultural pluralism is prone to conflicts (Agagu, 2004). Over the last 50 years of Nigeria's political independence, the country has been confronted with varied crises and violence. These conflicts have affected the foundation of Nigeria unity and corporate existence. Scholars have described Nigeria, as an "unfinished state", and as "a truculent African tragedy", in the midst of abundant human and material resources, which are propelled in the vicious cycle of poverty and autocracy (Joseph et al., 1996; Ayittey, 2006). While there is an agreement that the political landscape of Nigeria presents contrasting faces, it is also commendable to discuss the reasons for these contrasts. The long-lasting argument which blamed the people and their leaders for the recurring conflict in Nigeria has always been a provincial argument. Today, the invalidity of this argument is more pronounced, because there is a tacit combination of factors which lucid analysis of Nigeria one should be aware of that cannot elude that current political contradictions are correlated to globalization and liberalism that promote political freedom/democracy on the one side, and market liberalization on the other (Edi, 2006). As (Kew, 2006) has noted:

The giant was brought to its knees by 20 years of brutal and corrupt military rule, which left a legacy of executive dominance and a political corruption in the hands of Nigeria's so-called "godfathers"-powerful political bosses sitting atop vast patronage networks who view the government primarily through the lens of their own personal enrichment.

In many parts of Africa where political conflicts exist, ethnicity cannot be ruled out, except in Algeria where there is religious extremism. Ethnicity has been used in many parts of the African continent in terms of mobilisation by political failures lacking tangible agenda for their countries, and for seeking economic power. When a politician fails to 'eat' he or she will probably run to his "tribe" claiming that they are being finished and this works on their psychology, thereby causing conflicts. Unpatriotic leaders use ethnicity to organise people for political action pretentiously to 'defend' ethnic interests. Ethnic consciousness is a product of contradictions embodied in political relations of structured inequality common in many African nations. A good example of this happened in the Nigerian-Biafra civil war of 1967. At independence, and even in this era of multi-party politics, many political parties were not based on any fundamental ideology but ethnicity.

Nigeria's political instability could be traced to the frequent military involvement in politics since January 15th, 1966. The Armed forces have failed to maintain peace and tranquillity as their professional calling. Instead of defending the territorial integrity of the nation, the military struggled for political control of the nation. The unhealthy intense struggle for political power within the political class and the military hierarchy on one hand and between the civilian and the soldiers on the other is indicative of an unstable political system in the country. The reality is that the Nigerian military has become an estate of the Nigerian realm (Ikokupe, 2006). To Egbon (2000), military involvement in the political lives of any state introduces instability in its political structure and subsequently brings down the economy to its knees.

Nigeria's political instability and other related problems are basically a consequence of its leadership problem. At domestic level, African governments are run in ways that have been regarded as far from the modern western state systems upon which they are modelled (Osei Tutu, 2004). However, it should be noted that leadership per see is not a new concept to African traditions or cultural practices. The forms and context could be different, but systems of governance in many cultures had characteristics that can be found in modern systems of governance. But in the context of adoption of the modern western state system, many African communities abandoned their ways during the colonial period, and where they embraced the western models, with the ushering in of independence", the implementation was distorted and entailed a lot of arm twisting at the height of the transition from colonialism to independence. The colonialists did not leave the continent willingly.

Political instability in Nigeria owe much of its cause to internal factors, however the interpenetration of internal and external factors especially geo-political and economic interests of the international community constantly play a significant role in undermining the very processes and institutions that are expected to nurture democracy and to instil a sense of stability for societal development in Nigeria. In combination to such factors as unequal development, poverty, disease, violence and the manipulative tendencies of the local elite, political and economic stability in Africa is constantly under threat. This threat is however not emanating from within the continent but from external interests whose thirst

for African resources, continue to shape the dynamics in areas related to governance (Antony, 2008).

One of the roots of political instability is the issue of money and politics in Nigeria. In a civilised society, money is not a determining factor for elective post. No wonder, former President of the United States, Bill Clinton once said that the problem with Nigerians is that when they want money, they go into politics, but in America when the people want to make money they go into business. Krieger in his own view argued that the frequent intereference of military in politics suggests that Nigeria's political problem is political instability associated with ethnic parochialism. According to him, it is not surprising that Nigeria has been unable to realise its potentiality as an African power despite high natural resource endowment, considerable human capital, and large domestic market. It has been too unstable to play the important role that Africa and the world expect of the "Giant of Africa". Despite robust economic growth over the last decade, political instability remains an ongoing concern for continued growth in Nigeria. Although it is difficult to predict what the future hold for Nigeria, it is possible to identify medium and long term trends that threaten political instability in Nigeria which is a direct indication of economic performance.

The Police and other security outfits have not been adequately trained to manage crises. The use of police and other security outfits has left much to be desired. In most cases, the rioters are "too hot" for the untrained and unsophisticated police to handle in times of violence outbreak. The rioters are well equipped and carry sophisticated firearms. Another reason why conflict persists and keep-on-reoccurring in the country is that the master minds, which instigate, mobilize, sponsor and even arm the rioters, are allowed to go scot-free. They are never prosecuted or tried in any law court, and if found guilty sentenced to a long prison. Some of the people, who sponsor violent conflicts, are the elites and powerful members of the society. The feeling is that these people are untouchables and their followers see them as such. Many of these masterminds go back to plan subsequent rounds of such conflicts and violence, since they are never been brought to book for their heinous crimes (Afegbua, 2010).

One of the major factors responsible for political instability is the failure of the political class to sufficiently adhere to the basic tenets of democracy and constitutionalism (Kew, 2006). As Harriman (2006) has rightly noted, this situation "has given rise to abuse of power,

brazen corruption, disregard for due process and the rule of law, intolerance of political opposition, abuse of the electoral process and the weakening of institutions." This contradicts the tenet of governance, which presupposes "the process of social engagement between the rulers and the ruled in a political community" (Adejumobi, 2004).

The leadership pattern in Nigeria lacks the necessary focus capable of instilling national development and promotes political stability (Sklar et al., 2006). Rather, Nigerian leaders are preoccupied with their desires for the appropriation and privatization of the Nigerian state (Sklar, et al., 2006; Ake, 1995). Because of this instability, the focus of the leadership became parochial with the overriding consideration for personal survival rather than national development. Attempts at promoting "democratic consolidation" were hampered by the personality cult of the emerging political gladiators who exploited the instrument of state power to promote their personal agenda. Nigeria's political elites, as Sklar et al (2006) have rightly observed, "vie for power and control over the vast spoils of office".

Conflict seems insurmountable in Nigeria because the country is preoccupied with chasing shadows rather than the fundamental causes of conflicts. The government at all levels of governance has not preoccupied themselves with the fundamental issues and objective conditions of the Nigerian polity, which were the root causes of these conflicts. Consequently, the needed regular system of re-examination and correction, which are part of the vital ingredients for conflicts mitigation, within a given polity are yet to form part of the Nigerian political culture (Imobighe, 2003). Political instability encourages underutilisation of natural and human resources and this is inherent in the Nigerian state. Thus, Nigeria has been glued to poverty, hunger and other indices of economic quagmire.

Another implication of conflict is the loss of lives. Violent crises in Nigeria have resulted in a number of causalities. The Civil war (1967 – 1970) had produced the largest casualty in which an estimated two million lives were claimed by the hostility. Other minor wars in the country have also recorded loss of human lives. Loss of human lives has implications for the nation's economy as the killings have effects on the productive workforce. As an illustration, the Niger-Delta violent conflicts have claimed the lives of hundreds of oil workers and expatriates (O'Neil, 2004). Government's revenue generation capacity is affected mostly during industrial unrest. Incessant industrial strikes are major characteristics of the nation. For instance, the 1993 strike by Civil Servants across Nigeria, respectively cost the State and

Federal Governments between N4 million and N720 million in terms of service. The Nigerian government loses sizeable chunk of revenue wherever there are crises in the country. For instance, tax charges and rates on varied items by local governments cannot be collected during violent crises, implying loss of revenue for development purposes (Ajakaiye: 2000; Adeniyi, et al, 1993). It seems as though as usual Nigeria is putting a bandage on a festering wound without cleaning it first. The bandage itself seems to be a used one and brings with it additional problems. Nigeria will therefore remain the poorest in the world, and will suffer the consequences of conflict and political instability. All this is accompanied by the "threatening impatience" of a population increasingly thirsty for modernity, progress and consumerism.

Most solutions that have been prescribed in recent times seem to view Nigeria through the prism of the continent's natural resources and the competition to reap the benefit of their exploitation or as an object of humanitarian or military concerns. However what needs recognition is the fact that Nigeria is beginning to see the emergence of new social actors, different form of social and political mobilisation. In the process, the political and economic play field is also changing. Long term solutions to Nigeria's instability problems will basically be determined by a new type of leadership both within Nigeria and in African countries, where policy issues whose repercussions heavily impact upon development in Africa are made (Antony, 2008).

To ensure political stability, Nigerians should not see politics as a business but as a calling to help distribute fairly the resources that are given by God. The country's political leaders at all levels of government have a spearheading role to play. They should stop making inciting statements that will disunite the country and plunge it into crisis, but rather they should focus their attention on those things that promote peaceful coexistence and unity among the citizenry. The present crops of leaders in the country have failed in the above role and instead, they constantly promote tension in the system, thereby consistently over-heating the polity. Again, the National Assembly in conjunction with the Executive arm of government in the country needs to work out an enduring crises management and resolution mechanism. There is indeed an urgent need for committees on conflict management and resolution in the National Assembly. There should also be a department or unit in the presidency that will be in charge of conflict management and resolution.

Nigerian leaders need to create avenues for discussing and designing a popularly accepted non-violent national strategy for managing conflicts in the country.

Again, government needs to redesign the strategy of managing crises in the country. For instance, the use of military operatives to quell crises or to trouble-shoot internal civil disobedience should not always be seen as the only best way to manage internal crises. This method will merely compound and aggravate the problems, as a military approach to crisis resolution will only increase the level of casualty and untold hardship. It will lead to what the late Fela Anikulapo described as a situation of sorrow, tears and blood in the lives of the rioters as well as the remaining population.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that governance issues are the bane of national development and political instability in Nigeria. The authoritarian leadership faced a legitimacy crisis; political intrigues in an ethnically-differentiated polity became the cover-up for corruption and profligacy. Immunity from accountability and transparency, accentuated by the enormous oil revenues, further impoverished the inhabitants of the oil-producing areas. Thus, the underdevelopment or no development syndrome became cyclical. This paper submits that one of the biggest misfortunes of Nigeria is military incursion into the nation's politics. Their frequent intervention in Nigeria's politics affects the nation's socio-economic and political stability. Nigeria would have been better off without military intervention in politics, because the military has been found to be corrupt, disrespectful to the rule of law and guilty of over staying in office. There had been much records of embezzlement, self-aggrandizement and lack of accountability in almost all the military regimes in the country as their interventions are often motivated by greed and personal ambition which has resulted in instability.

In conclusion, conflict and instability in Nigeria have consistently threatened peaceful co-existence and sustainable development. Consequently, addressing the security deficit in Nigeria goes beyond mere huge expenditure on military and security operatives. Managing conflict and political instability should be proactive. It entails formulating policies that have the capacity of addressing incessant conflict and political instability in the country.

REFERENCES

1. Adejumobi, S. (2004). Democracy, Good Governance and Constitutionalism in Africa. in Sylvester Odion-Akhaine, *Governance: Nigeria in the World*. Lagos: Centre for Constitutionalism and Demilitarisation

2. Adejuwon, K.D and Okewale, R.A, (2009). Ethnic Militancy, Insurrections and Democracy in Africa: The Case of Nigeria. *Journal of Social and Policy Issues*. 6(4)

3. Afegbua, S.I. (2010). Conflicts and Political Instability in Nigeria: Causes, Consequences and Prospects. *Journal of Social Science and Public Policy.* 2:10-18 December

4. Agagu, A.A and Ola, R.F. (2004). *Development Agenda of the Nigerian State*. Lagos: Flag Publishers.

5. Ake, C. (1995). Socio-Political Approaches and Policies for Sustainable Development in Africa. *A paper delivered at the Annual Meeting Symposium of the African Development Banks,* Abuja, May, 25, 1995.

6. Annan, K. (1998). *The Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa: Report of the Secretary-General*. New York: United Nations.

7. Antony, O.O. (2008). Political instability in Africa: Where the Problem lies and Alternative Perspectives. *A paper Presented at the Symposium 2008: "Afrika: een continent op drift"* Organised by Stichting Nationaal Erfgoed Hotel De Wereld Wageningen, 19th of September, 2008

8. Arriola, L.R. (2009). Patronage and Political Stability in Africa. *Comparative Political Studies.* 42(10):1339-1362

9. Ayittey, B.N.G. (2006). Nigeria's Struggle with Corruption. *A testimony before the Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations House Committee on Africa, U.S. House of Representatives,* Washington, D.C, Thursday, May 18.

10. Boulding, K. (1963). *Conflict and Defence: A General Theory.* New York: Oxford University Press.

11. Chaphin, J.P, (1979). *Dictionary of Psychology.* New York: Dell Publishing.

12. Edi, E. (2006). Pan West Africanism and Political Instability in West Africa: Perspectives and Reflections. *The Journal of Pan African Studies.*1(3), March

13. Egbon, S. (2000). *Political Soldiering: Nigeria man in Horse.* Enugu: John Jacobs Publishers

14. Fagbadebo, O. (2007). Corruption, Governance and Political Instability in Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations.* 1 (2): 028-037, November

15. Harriman, T. (2006). Is there a Future for Democracy in Nigeria? *Text of a Public Lecture Delivered at the Department of International Development,* Oxford University, Monday 5th June.

16. Horowitz, A.I. and Bordens, K.S. (1995). *Social Psychology*. Toronto: Mayfield Publishing Company.

17. Huntington, S.P. (1991). The *Third Wave*: *Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press

18. Joseph, R.S and Agbaje, T.A. (1996). Nigeria. in Mark Kesselman, J.K and Williams, J (eds). *Comparative Politics at the Crossroads.* Lexington D.C.: Heath and Company.

19. Kew, D. (2006). Nigeria. in Sanja, T. (ed.) *Countries at the Crossroads.* New York: Freedom House.

20. Makumi, M. (2004). Introduction. in Makumi, M. (eds). *African Regional Security in the Age of Globalisation.* Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation.

21. Mohamoud, A. A. (2005). *Reversing Brain Drain in Africa, Harnessing the Intellectual capital of the Diaspora for Knowledge and Development in Africa.* Amsterdam: Sahan

22. Mohamoud, A.A. (2006b). *State Collapse and Post-Conflict Development in Africa.* Indiana: Purdue University Press

23. Morrison, D.G., Mitchell, R.C., and Paden, J.N. (1989). *Black Africa: A Comparative Handbook*. New York: Irvington.

24. O'Neil, S. (2004). Five killed in Delta Gun Battle. *The Comet Newspaper.* Lagos, April, 29

25. Olabode A.D. and Ajibade, L.T, (2010). Environment Induced Conflict and Sustainable Development: A Case of Fulani-Farmers' Conflict in Oke-Ero LGA, Kwara State, Nigeria. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa.* 12(5)

26. Osei-Tutu, O. (2004). Traditional Systems of Governance and the Modern State. *Keynote Address Presented at the Fourth African Development Forum, Addis Ababa,* October 12, 2004

27. Sklar, R.L; Onwudiwe, E and Kew, D. (2006). Nigeria: Completing Obasanjo's Legacy. *Journal of Democracy,* 17 (3):100-115.