

Conflict Management and Sustainable Development in the Post-Pandemic Era: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

Conflict as a social problem has been identified as an indispensable feature of every given human society. Its emergence can be rightly linked to the diverse interests of the various component units and factions of the Nigerian Polity. Prior to the outbreak of the dreaded Corona Virus Pandemic which disrupted virtually all forms of human activities both in Nigeria and diaspora, conflict situations is not alien to our society. However, the post Pandemic Era in the Nigerian history has continued to witness an unprecedented surge in the cases of conflicts which includes but not limited to: the persistent clamour for restructuring, the end SARS saga, secessionist movement of the Indigenous People of Biafra, the emergence of the yet to be identified arm wielding sect (unknown gunmen), farmers/herders clashes, and the recent cases of jungle justice in some parts of South East Nigeria, owing to the breakdown of security architecture in the Polity. It is against this backdrop that the study seeks a pragmatic approach to conflict management and resolution, as well as makes necessary recommendations to forestall subsequent occurrences. The paper examines the nature and causes of social conflicts in Nigeria's post-pandemic era and the negative impacts of such on the lives and properties of citizens, as well as the implication of not resolving them amicably to the sustainable development of the country. The study anchors on Social Justice Theory as a framework of analysis. It adopts both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The finding shows that there was lack of appropriate mode of engaging aggrieved parties to achieve peaceful conflict resolution. It recommends above all, mutual respect for the fundamental rights of the Nigerian citizens, a people oriented approach to conflict management and resolution, as well as the indispensability of peaceful coexistence as a prerequisite for Sustainable Development in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Conflict Management, Sustainable Development, Post Pandemic Era, Restructuring, Peaceful Coexistence*

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Introduction

Conflict Management has gradually found its way into various academic and policy discourse in recent times, following the abysmal failure of the state security apparatus to live up to her constitutional mandate of securing the lives and properties of the citizens. Consequent upon bad governance, civil disobedience found its way back into the Nigerian polity, with enormous implications to our fragile democracy. As rightly observed by Songa Klopcic (2017):

“Conflicts are part of human nature; they can also appear within us, without any kind of external factors. They also arise from relation with others”. This goes a long way to portray the inevitable nature of conflict in any given society. The hoarding of palliatives donated by patriotic individuals

and good spirited organizations to cushion the harsh effects of the dreaded Corona Virus Pandemic on the dwindling economy, the spontaneous imposition of varying degrees of curfew in virtually all parts of the country, resulting in the disruption of people's means of livelihood, as well as the rising reports bothering on the alleged brutality of citizens by officers and men of the defunct Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian police Force, thus, pushing the citizens beyond their limit of tolerance. The resultant effect was the unprecedented widely held mass protest in various parts of the country, which led to the complete disbandment of the said special Unit of the Nigerian Police Force. The incident of 20th October, 2020 at the Lekki Toll Gate of Lagos State appeared to be the last straw which broke the camel's back. In addition, the persistent clamour by the Honourable Members of the Red and Green Chambers, political elites, public affairs analysts, as well as a significant population of patriotic citizens for the removal of service chiefs, a measure capable of curbing the growing menace of insecurity, was completely ignored by the presidency.

Theoretical Framework

In the attempt to anchor this study in its proper perspective, there is need to adopt a suitable theory as a framework for analysis. Hence, the paper aligns with the John Rawls Social Justice Theory which develops principles of justice to govern a modern social order. Developed in the early part of the 19th century, the theory holds that all people should have equal access to wealth, health, well-being, justice, privilege and opportunities, regardless of their legal, political, economic status or other affiliations. Hence, social conflicts thrive in an atmosphere of injustice, marginalization and exclusion. It follows that all sections of the country should be fairly and justly treated, and there should be a readily available platform through which aggrieved parties can duly register their grievances and seek redress as soon as possible. The relevance of Social Justice Theory to the lingering conflicts in the post-pandemic era of the Nigerian history can be seen in the biased pattern of the allocation of resources, the obvious pattern of appointment, as well as the perceived inequality meted out to the secessionist region of the country. It aligns with the conventional approach of people attempting to leave the table when justice is no longer served. Characteristically, Rahim (2002) maintained that:

- i. Conflict involves opposition
- ii. Conflict has come to stay among humans
- iii. There are processes involved that usually results in conflicts
- iv. Conflict is not to be avoided
- v. Conflict takes different shapes and forms

Supporting this view, Agbaje and Adejumbi maintained that the struggle for power among the Nigerian elites is "fierce, lawless and extremely consuming", because of the enormous opportunities attached to power. Rahim (2002) identified Five approaches to combating conflicts as:
Avoiding- This conflict management strategy is characterized by the existence of avoidance such that the avoiders ignore the conflict. It entails a conscious and deliberate effort to delay with the hope that the issues would be resolved overtime.

- i. **Accommodation-** Here, the parties involved are expected to accept the views of one another. Essentially, this approach to conflict management fosters unity.
- ii. **Compromising-** This strategy can be found between parties with near equal capacity to further escalate issues in such a manner that will generate conflict. Notwithstanding, both decide to give in by accepting how resolution can be established.
- iii. **Collaborating-** Here, despite the differences in ideology capable of causing a rift, parties integrate ideas to find a common ground of acceptance for all those involved.
- iv. **Competing-** In this approach, individuals who are assertive and have the will power fight until their goals are achieved to the detriment of others.

The End SARS Movement

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), as a branch of the Nigerian Police Force, was created in the year 1992, under the State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department (SCIID), as one of the fourteen units in the Force Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department. Its mandate was to detain, investigate and prosecute people involved in criminal activities such as armed robbery, kidnapping, and other related violent crimes. The Squad was established as a masked Police Unit to perform undercover operations against violent crimes including cattle rustling and illegal possession of firearms.

Prior to this period, there have been series of reports bothering on the extra-judicial killings, inhuman treatments and threats from Operatives of the Defunct Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). For so many years, reports of such nature was never accorded the desired attention. A 2016 Report by Amnesty International indicted SARS, and maintained that the squad was responsible for human right abuses, cruelty, degrading treatment of Nigerians in their custody, and other widespread torture i.e. shooting of detainees, mock executions, threats of executions, extortions, hanging and physical assault. Similarly, a 2020 publication by the organization documented 82 cases of human rights abuses extrajudicial killings by SARS operatives between January 2017 and May 2020. The alleged shooting of a young man at Wetland Hotel in Ughelli, Delta State, on 3rd October 2020 by the operatives of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), stands out as a recent example. The incident which went viral via various social media handles as #End SARS, triggered massive outcry. By 8th October, demonstrations associated with the #End SARS Movement began to increase both in size and number, spreading across the entire country. On 20th October, Nigeria Military Forces fired life ammunitions at End SARS demonstrators in Lagos, who had sat down to peacefully protest against Police brutality, reportedly killing at least 15 young Nigerians still reeling from the shock and after effects of government's heavy-handed response. Military officials have rejected claims that they killed unarmed protesters, alleging that soldiers had only fired blank bullets (BBC, 15 November, 2020).

Similar reports indict SARS operatives of profiling young Nigerians, mostly males, based on fashion choices, tattoos and hairstyles. They were also known to mount illegal road blocks, conduct unwarranted checks and searches, arrest and detain without warrant or trial, rape women, and extort young male Nigerians for driving exotic vehicles and using laptops and iPhones. Nigerians have at one point or another, circulated both stories and videos of how the defunct SARS operatives engaged in kidnapping, murder, theft, rape torture, unlawful arrests, humiliation, unlawful detention, extrajudicial killings and extortion of Nigerian citizens. While the supporters of #EndSARS movement staged some demonstrations in November and December, including several panels of inquiry constituted in response to the violence, there has been little activity since the end of October. Nigerians yet expect the results of various panels of inquiry, if it's likely going to result in any meaningful police reform, or go down the drain like the rest before it. The National Bureau of Statistics on 13 November 2020, reports that the #EndSARS movement saw a majority of Nigeria's marginalized youths - who make up 35.6 percent of the total population - participate in one of the largest demonstration movements since the country's democratic transition in 1999.

The government's response to the public outcry over police brutality and excessive force against protesters has further widened the growing distrust between the citizens and the government. Although the federal government has mandated the 36 states of the federation and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) to set up presidential panels of enquiry into police brutality and harassment, many supporters of the End SARS movement have doubted the sincerity of the investigations and government willingness to implement Police Reform Recommendations (Premium Times, 9 November 2020). The reason for the distrust between the Nigeria's young population and the government is that SARS have been disbanded multiple times within the last five years, first in 2014,

then in 2015, and again in 2017. As such, its latest announcement on 11 October 2020 that the police unit has been disbanded was viewed with skepticism (BBC, 11 October 2020).

A critical analysis of the events that transpired with respect to reforming SARS shows that the members of general public have been complaining about SARS high-handedness and harassments of youths owing to their haircuts and dress code. Rather than address the issues, changing the nomenclature from Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) to Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad (F.SARS) was the best they could do, without actually curtailing their excesses reprimanding those guilty of extra judicial killings and other forms of abuse of power. Hence, one can rightly assert that aside the name, nothing changed in their code of conduct and mode of operation.

Secessionist Activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra

Over the years, there has been the prevalence of social exclusion and perceived sense of injustice by the people of South East Nigeria. This sense of marginalization and ethnic domination prevalent in the power sharing formula against the Igbos, has led to the thirty months of uninterrupted Nigeria – Biafra civil war, linked to the declaration of the sovereign state of Biafra. Despite the purported claims of “no victor, no vanquished”, one can rightly conclude that following the end of the war, the Igbos have lost their place in the political history of Nigeria. The creation of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement was more or less the idea of the British Nigerian – Nnamdi Kanu, to replace the defunct Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), with the former being more radical than the later.

Despite its existence prior to Buhari’s assumption of office as the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, IPOB’s agitation took a radical dimension shortly after the inauguration of the incumbent government. The alleged repeated killings of the people of Igbo extraction by security operatives, the mass genocide perpetuated in Igboland by the Fulani herdsmen, and the suggestive silence of the Buhari administration over reports bothering on such ruthless pogrom, propelled the acclaimed leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra to make periodic broadcasts on Radio Biafra, which quickly gained massive popularity, especially among the Igbos both in Nigeria and in diaspora. The above horrible experiences have a unique way of refreshing the minds of the separationists on the tragic historical events of the 1967 – 1970 in Nigeria. The continued massacre made Nnamdi Kanu to advocate for self-defense, as well as returning fire for fire. The voluntary resignation of some trained serving security operatives in the face of perceived sabotage to join the secessionist movement for fear of being slayed in the battlefield by terrorists who controlled superior weaponry, further strengthened the agitation. Kanu maintained that the only language which the Nigerian government understand is ‘war’, adding that he was going to regroup and surprise Nigerians.

According to International Crisis Group, Biafra does not currently exist as a distinct unit in Nigeria, and the separationists are not clear about how they see the territory of the “New Biafra” while some claimed it would include all areas inhabited by people of Igbo descent, including parts of the “oil-rich” Niger Delta to the South and Benue to the North, while other people of these are strongly opposed to the idea. Other separatists maintain that Biafra would be limited to the five core Igbo states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo – referred to administratively as “South East” zone. IPOB is a Biafra separationist movement in Nigeria. Its main aim is to restore an independent state of Biafra in the South East of Nigeria through an independent referendum. Its ideology is based on Biafra separatism, nationalism and nativism. The invasion disruption of IPOB meeting in Enugu by security operatives on August 2020, in which some members of IPOB as well as two police officers lost their lives, further stirred the tension. Responding to the incident, IPOB vowed to retaliate, calling on all her members to embark on self-defense. On the 12th of December 2020, Kanu officially announced the formation of the Eastern Security Network (ESN), as a regional security network.

Notable among the events that transpired amidst the escalating tension were:

- i. The mobilization and deployment of Nigerian soldiers to locate ESN camps
- ii. The invasion of Orlu by troops in search of ESN operatives
- iii. The emergence of unknown gunmen
- iv. The burning down of buildings and incessant killings
- v. The deployment of surveillance helicopters belonging to the Nigerian Air Force
- vi. Kanu's instruction to the operatives of Eastern Security Network to cease fire- marking the end of the crises
- vii. IPOB's 14 days ultimatum to South East Governors to ban open-grazing
- viii. Declaration of sit-at-home order by the Indigenous People of Biafra in honour of the fallen heroes.

The persistent failure of government to adopt a functional approach aimed at addressing injustice, human right abuses, social exclusion, imbalances in the political spheres, as well as the mass genocide against the citizens of Igbo extraction, has heightened the growing suspicion that following the displacement of Igbos in the political history of the country at the end of the civil war, over fifty years later, they still have not been properly integrated in the system. This is evident in the manner in which state powers has continued to move from Hausa-Fulani of the North to Yoruba's of the South West, and back in the Post-Civil war era. Lamenting the situation, Majeed Dahiru, a public affairs analyst writes in Premium Times that: "rather than address threats to the Nigerian nation, president Buhari's strategy seems to be a re-enactment of the 1967-1970 episode". Aside not being allowed to saddle the commanding heights of the Nigerian polity, they are rarely appointed to strategic positions. Furthermore, the failure of federal government to embark on adequate developmental projects in the south east, as it is obtainable in other regions of the country, leaves us with the question:

What is the place of the Igbos in the political history of Nigeria?

As part of measures to forestall the impending catastrophe, an arm of the acclaimed apex Igbo socio cultural organization – Ohaneze Ndigbo Youths, advised the federal government of what to do to arrest the situation, in a statement dated 8 November, 2020: "*The federal government should look at what brought about the agitation in the first place; if you end up treating just symptoms of a sickness, the ailment will still be there. Ndigbo have never suffered this level of marginalization in Nigeria- total exclusion, total abandonment*".

However, what president Muhammadu Buhari may not realize is that unlike in 1967, when the rest of Nigeria united to wage a war of re-unification against the rebel Republic of Biafra, there is no such united Nigeria in 2021 to fight a second Nigeria – Biafra war in which he will have the opportunity to treat the Igbos in the language they will understand. Decrying the inherent lopsided appointments, Majeed Dahiru rightly argues that Buhari's 97 percent and 5 percent political miscalculation which have seen him elevate sectionalism to a near state policy and consequent marginalization of the Igbo people of Nigeria is directly responsible for the resurrection of the spirit, not obeying the federal character principle.

Effects of post-Pandemic Crisis on the Sustainable Development of Nigeria

The untimely intervention of the president Muhammadu Buhari led administration amidst the escalating violence resulted in series of inter-connected social problems with adverse effects on the economy and sustainable development of the country. For instance, the destruction of lives and properties caused the relocation of a good number of foreign companies hitherto operating in Nigeria. However, aside constituting a major source of revenue loss to the fragile economy, it also resulted to loss of means of livelihood to many Nigerians in the face of rising unemployment rate, thereby, further plunging the country into deep economic recession. The implication of loss of job on the

Nigerian society ranges from more number of out of school children, leading to higher level of illiteracy, as well as increasing crime rate, as the affected victims strive to make ends meet.

Similarly, the sporadic shootings and the destruction of state architecture among other publicly owned facilities further threw the vulnerable Nigerians into the cacophony of security/insecurity dilemma, confining people to their homes against their wish. The need for declaration of self-defense by the acclaimed leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) was in response to the failure of the Nigerian government to live up to her constitutional mandate of the protection of lives and properties of her citizens. Again, the exorbitant cost of food items in the commodity market is not unconnected to the twin problem of farmers who are occasionally murdered in cold blood, on the one hand, and transporters who risk plying the routes under siege by unknown gunmen, on the other.

Finally, as part of measures aimed the renovation and replacement of vandalized public properties, the government continues to borrow from international financial institutions and other countries of the world, with neither plans of servicing the debts nor anything tangible to show for it. Hence, the Human Development Index (HDI) of life expectancy, access to basic health care, security, income per capita and access to basic education as the globally accepted measure sustainable development are persistently on the decline in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Nigeria has witnessed an overwhelming increase in violent related cases specifically targeted at the civilians by security operatives in the past few years. Conflicts linked to #EndSARS movement seemed to have been more violent than other forms of demonstration. A significant number of the total events characterized by excessive use of force were also recorded during the #EndSARS movement. Hence, conflict management is strategically designed to achieve a positive outcome and resolution amongst the parties involved in conflict related issues. Essentially, the various methods of conflict management are geared towards mutual resolution and peaceful co-existence, which in turn brings about harmony in the society. In the post-pandemic era of Nigerian history, the government's use of force, rather than a call for has resulted in fuelling the already burning furnace which it had hitherto set out to extinguish. This is more so, as the agitators firmly believe that they are fighting a just cause. The escalation of recent conflicts in the country was as a result of the untimely intervention of government to meet the demands of #EndSARS protesters, as well as the perceived injustice, insecurity and marginalization of the people of South East Nigeria. Arising from the current trend of events in the country, there are predictions that if the current administration fails to do the needful, it may result to a complete reversal of the 1914 historical mistake of the erstwhile colonial masters.

Recommendations

Having identified the nature and causes of major conflicts facing Nigeria in the post-pandemic era, as well as the implication of not managing them properly, the paper posits the following recommendations:

- i. Government and Security operatives at all levels, pursuant to the Social Contract, should respect the rule of law, and uphold the fundamental rights and liberties of the Nigerian citizens in the discharge of their constitutional duties.
- ii. Ensure social justice, equal and fair treatment of all regions of the country, irrespective of state, geo-political zones, social, political and cultural affiliations, as a prerequisite to peaceful co-existence and sustainable development in Nigeria.
- iii. The need for fair hearing, mutual dialogue and negotiations to forestall subsequent outbreak of conflicts.

- iv. A people oriented approach to democratic governance such that inputs from patriotic citizens, key stakeholders and civil society organizations form part of public policies and programmes.
- v. The need to avoid abuse of state powers in all its forms and ramification. Public offices should be viewed from the right perspective, not as a position of honour, rather, a clarion call for selfless service and sacrifice.

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