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Conflicts and Violence in Nigeria: A Review of Causes and Prevention Strategies

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Abstract

Conflict and violence are phenomena that manifest in every society and its environment; whether it is developed or underdeveloped. They are not restricted to our country Nigeria alone but the entire world. Nigeria could be regarded as one of the most turbulent countries in Africa since the onset of the pre-post-independence era in which most Nigerian states were plagued with inter-tribal wars. The root causes, consequences and approach in finding lasting solutions in the management of the conflict and violence, differ from one community to another based on environmental differences, poverty, high level of illiteracy, coupled with unemployment. This paper will endeavour to find some lasting solutions to the causes of conflict and violence.

Keyword: conflict, violence, causes, environmental difference, illiteracy

Introduction

Conceptualisation of Conflict/Violence

The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, International Edition, defines violence as, "use of physical force so as damage or injure intense natural force or energy; or an abusive use of force, passion, fury..." The same dictionary defines conflict as, "armed fighting, a war, a struggle between opposing aims, a clash of feeling of interest,

to be at variance, clash, to struggle, contend..."

Like other social and behavioural concepts, conflict lacks a general acceptable definition. The word conflict could mean quarrel, fight, struggle, different idea, opposing aims. It could also be seen as a wide range of arguments, tensions and violent acts which occur both within the locality and between

different states within the context of a geographical entity.

Hampton (1978) asserts that conflict is a struggle over value or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the claims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals. In view of this assertion, conflict will be seen as the pursuit of incompatible or at least seemingly incompatible goals such that gains to one side come about at the expense of the other.

Generally, conflict emerges whenever a person or party perceives that one or more of his desires, purposes or preferences, or means of achieving such desired goals are being threatened or are hindered by the intention of such activities, conflict then comes in. Ikharehon (2003) asserts that conflict is a manifested behaviour which takes the form of internal disagreement, open fight, abuse, murder, blackmail, litigation or other sorts of negative act which tend to threaten a society, individual or group of persons and, thus, undermines the safety and stability of the members of the society.

Types of Conflicts

This paper examines some of the following types of conflict in Nigeria

- i. **Intra-Personal Conflict:** This is the conflict that occurs within an individual. A critical example of this type of conflict such is choice of marriage partner, moral issues – (i.e. ascertaining if one's intension is right or wrong), goals (i.e. pursue a goal at all cost, forgetting integrity aspiration (i.e. accept a career to earn a living or money at the detriment of one's family).
- ii. **Inter-Personal Conflict:** - This conflict occurs between two or more individuals in a society. e.g., if a child wants to attend a particular named school but his/her parents disagree with him and decide for the child to learn a trade. The ultimate desire of the child is to be educated to enable him/her achieve his/her ambition but the parents are opposed to the desire or decision of the child.
- iii. **Group Conflict:-** This could be an intra-group conflict (within members of the same group, members of the same club, the same age grade, resulting to rules and regulations governing the association) or it could occur between groups i.e. different clubs, associations or organizations having simple aims and objectives.

Conflicts can also be categorized into direct and structural, this include as follows:

- (a) **Direct Conflict:** - This is a situation where conflicts arise from riot, protest, demonstrations, disagreement, war etc. which leave serious wounds on some individuals.
- (b) **Structural Conflict:** - This type of conflict could occur as a result the high standard of living; untold hardship; suppression and oppression, abuse of office power e.g. End-to-Bad-Governance, End SARS in Nigeria etc.

Conflicts can be classified into three major types in terms of approaches: such as Approach Avoidance Conflict, Double-Approach Conflict and Double-Avoidance, Conflict.

Approach – Avoidance Conflict: - In this approach-avoidance conflict, the individual experiences both the desire to achieve the desire goal and also the desire to avoid the particular goal. For example, the ultimate desire of unmarried couple is to involve in sex, which may perhaps result to unwanted pregnancy. This is regarded as an approach-avoidance conflict for parties involved in this sexual behaviour.

Double-Approach Conflict: - In this conflict, the individual is torn between desire to gain two equally attractive but mutually exclusive goals. An example is the problem of a man who is happily married living in a comfortable environment, equally anxious to gain a promotion in his place of work. However getting the promotion could lead to transfer to another remote environment and he will be forced to move to a less desirable town or accommodation.

Double –Avoidance Conflict: - In this double-avoidance conflict, the individual is surrounded with non-satisfying conditions with little hope in achieving his desired goals. An example is if a person chooses between the boredom of job unemployment and the monotony of a pin-note job. This condition produces frustration which becomes barrier that blocks or prevents the man from achieving his goals, just like when lack of finance becomes a barrier to a student achieving his desired goal in education.

Onwe (2006) asserts that some scholars have classified conflict into open and suppressed conflicts. In his findings, he comes up with the following definitions:

- i. **Open Conflicts:** It is a free atmosphere where people are free to demonstrate their grievances in a true democratic situation, in some cases, public debate by way of referendum is allowed. Under this situation, violence is reduced to the barest minimum as grievances are always expressed which are quickly resolved, as against demonstrations.
- ii. **Suppressed Conflict:** - This is a case of an autocratic system of government where no official institutions or ways of managing conflicts are normally provided. In this suppressed conflict, grievances are usually resolved behind closed doors so that citizens are not allowed to know what happens in the government circle. This can result in suppression and deprivation and lead to violence and destruction of lives and property.

Violence

In examining violence, this paper restricts itself to two facets of violence that occur: social violence or violence with social facets.

In Nigeria, individual persons commonly commit this type of violence during the course of our social interaction. Most of this violence is associated with cultural background. According to Mushanga (1974) in his literature review gives an explanation that some types of violence such as those with social facet result from cultural definition of situations by individuals and groups. Thus, different cultural groups may react to various social situations differently.

Wolfgang and Fetracuti (1982) assert that different sub-groups with well-defined sub cultures react differently to various social situations, some of those situations are classified as “requiring” and others as “not requiring” violence in settling disagreement or differences. Different schools of thoughts agree that violence could be a result of criminal tendencies in

form of hereditary, and that “born criminals” could be identified by their physical characteristics which could be called stigmata.

Aghemelo (2007) asserts that “born criminals” were atavistic or a throw-back to an earlier more primitive species of humans. Igbo (2001) further analyzes that criminal violence involves the use of firearms, such as rifles, pistols, submachine guns as well as other dangerous weapons such as daggers and clubs to dispossess persons or corporate organizations of their money or property. He summed up that the targets are not only unarmed persons but also fairly well-defended individuals, banks and armored vehicles believed to contain large amounts of cash or other valuables. The post-civil war in Nigeria witnessed disturbing constant incidents of armed robbery or robbery with violence. Today, Nigeria as a nation witnesses various forms of violence such as kidnapping, ritual killing, insurgency, religious Boko haram, etc. Therefore, the Nigeria civil war can be seen as the watershed between ordinary robbery and armed robbery. The Nigerian military who are supposed to defend and also ensure that both social violence and violence with social facets are prevented from taking place are aiding and abetting the destruction of government properties. Recently, in Edo North, the headquarters of Etsako East Local Government, Agenebode, witnessed the burning of the Nigerian police station by angry mob because of the case of kidnapping and ritual killing.

Root of Conflict in Nigeria: - Conflict in Nigeria springs from two basic roots which cannot be eradicated and these are material scarcity and disagreement over value.

Material Scarcity: - No state or nation can provide its citizens with everything they need or meet her basic requirement. States in Nigeria vary greatly in the relative scarcity they experience; some witness flood disaster, persistent kidnapping, killings by ritualists, natural disaster, armed robbery, etc. For example, the capital of Borno state, Maiduguri, experienced natural flood disaster, the same affected Kogi State. Outside this, conflict can also be found in government establishment if the Nigerian government failed to meet up with her responsibility to the citizens.

Disagreement over Values: - Conflict is inevitable in that human beings are insatiable, people disagree over the kind of society they want for themselves- and their fellow citizen. It is expected that civilization is to produce a political community whose members are expected to share the same values, principles and beliefs. The Nigerian Civil war of 1967 – 1970 was a result of the disagreement over the killing of the Northern elite etc., where the Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa and others were killed. In April 2003, over 1,000 residents of Uruan local govt. area in Akwa Ibom state were rendered homeless as a century old land dispute resurfaced. There was political crisis in Nasarawa state which claimed the life of the commissioner for women affairs on 19th May, 2003.

This paper examines some aspects of both internal and external causes of conflicts and violence. In the internal causes of conflicts and violence in Nigeria, some factors are identified: style of leadership, social consciousness of citizens, anti-union actions, breach of collective agreement by government etc., while in external causes are Government policies, bad leadership/mismanagement, labour, legislation, ethnicity, religion, etc.

Internal Causes of Conflicts and Violence

- (a) Style of leadership: - If the style of leadership is unfavorable and uncompromising; tension could rise leading to conflict and violence. Nigerian citizens easily react to any sharp situation which could lead to violence when the style of leadership is not favorable and approachable for example End-bad-government protest, End-SARS protest where lives were lost.
- (b) Social Consciousness of citizens: - This may arise when the three tiers of government fail to provide basic social and welfare amenities needed by the citizens.
- (c) Breach of collective agreement by government: - The Nigerian workers under the auspices of the Nigerian Labour Congress and the Nigerian Trade Union will react adversely if the conditions which are collectively signed are breached by government; such situation will infuriate workers to resort to violence/protest for instance ASUU and Federal government disagreement in 2001.
- (d) Anti-Union Actions: - This can occur when employers and governments refuses to recognize workers' union or trade associations, or where members are punished because of union activities. Conflicts and violence could occur because an average Nigeria worker demands recognition and failure can lead to resistance.

External causes of Conflict and Violence

- i. Government Policies: - Various forms of policies introduced by government in running the administration of the country sometimes can be a source of conflict. In Nigeria, government economic or educational policies are often so adverse that majority of the Nigerian populace become hypertensive, disillusioned thereby losing confidence in the government. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of early 1980's, current removal of fuel subsidy of the present administration in (May 29, 2023), increase of electricity tariff etc. which created high rise of petroleum products, increase in building materials, increase of transportation and essential food materials in the market.
- ii. Bad Leadership/Mismanagement: - Misplacement of priorities, stealing and money laundering, mismanagement of the economic resources by leaders, failure of the government to have listening ear to out-cry of the people, etc. could breed conflict and violence where lives and properties are destroyed and lost.
- iii. Odoh (2001) asserts that leaders in Africa are known to be corrupt, selfish and only promote ethnic and sectional loyalties. He further asserts that, by their selfish and divide-and-rule behavior, they encourage people to neglect national interest and to resort to fighting one another.
- iv. Ethnicity: - Nigeria is made up of different ethnic groups. The heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian state is not peculiar to Nigeria but also applicable to most African countries. The diversification in culture, religious beliefs, customs, tradition, valued norms, interest and orientation could sometimes lead to conflicts and violence as each group would want attention of the federal government, especially in political appointments.

This paper also examines some conditions that could trigger conflict and violence within the content of our examination. Nweke (2006) identifies the following as some basic conditions that could trigger conflict and violence, these include: uncompromising desire for political power, lack of respect for the rule of law and due process, use of religion and ethnicity to achieve political gains, increase of poverty and unemployment, land disputes etc.

- (a) **Uncompromising Desire for Political Power:** - Politics is about rendering a selfless service to humanity. In Nigeria, politics is a self-service not a selfless service to humanity. Therefore, Nigerian politicians have insatiable appetite for power for the purpose of realizing economic power, religious and ethnic influence. In Nigeria, these desires cannot be achieved without power; the use of force is applied to have access to state power for self-interest. This circumstance explains the self-succession of do-or-die election witnessed in Nigeria. Series of election violence has been witnessed in the history of the country since independence in 1960, Edo State Government Election of 2024, 1979 presidential elections, 1983 Ondo State governorship elections where lives and property were destroyed; 2007 third-term bid of president Olusegun Obasanjo, the 2023 general election which brought in president Tinubu are few examples of election violence.
- (b) **Military Nostalgias:** - Many members of the political class who benefited from military regimes remain as clogs to democracy, they stems the fact that, they shaped the public looting of the treasury and displayed blatant disregard for democratic principles. Those who find themselves in power engage in destructive politics which often leads to military intervention; these they do by sponsoring phenomena as ethno-religious conflict and violence. According to Okoye (2002), they are the ones claiming that their ethnic nationality is marginalized because they are not in power. These groups of persons are well connected, have money or use their stolen wealth to terrorize democracy.
- (c) **Absence of Rule of Law and Due Process:** - Today in Nigeria, the attitude of political class at all levels of politics shows disregard for the rule of law. Public office holders, politicians, business people disregard and treat court rulings with contempt. The disrespect for the rule of law means that might is right, even when the rule of law is invoked; its application is very discriminatory like the impeachment of the Edo State Deputy Governor in 2024 without due process by the House of Assembly even when there was court ruling.
- (d) **Poverty and unemployment:-** The fact remains that Nigeria is among the under developed countries where unemployment constitutes about 75% of the country population; that the young ones, graduates of various disciplines are vulnerable to political conflicts due to poverty and the absence of meaningful source of livelihood.

In seeking for means of livelihood, the Nigerian youths become restless, thereby giving themselves as willing tools ready for use for all forms of negative political ends as thugs and assassins. This situation gives concern to every Nigerian but the government seems unshaken

by the present economic hardship; they are comfortable since they control the judiciary which supposed to be the last hope of the common man. Therefore Nigerian youths are prepared to involve in all forms of violence and conflicts when any situation arises.

Conclusion

This paper tries to examine root causes of conflict and violence in Nigeria. To prevent conflicts and violence, to evolve and nurture a culture of peace in our country Nigeria, what is needed is the promotion of self-understanding, restructuring the mind-set of every Nigerian citizen towards positive attitudinal orientation that will make peace, development and social stability its basis.

Suggestions/Recommendations

This paper makes the following recommendations as a means to find solutions to conflicts, violence and causes in Nigeria.

1. Various ethnic groups should be encouraged to form an umbrella group/organization under which they can articulate their demands and be presented.
2. The Federal government of Nigeria should set up a powerful developmental commission to address issues that could cause conflicts and violence and issued white paper reports on the matter.
3. Traditional rulers at the grass-root level should be empowered by the Federal, State and Local government to step-in to resolve and find lasting solution to some of the immediate root causes of conflicts and violence before they get out of control.
4. The Federal, State, Local governments including individuals, should adhere to the use of law and follow due process in dealing with all situations to avoid break down of law.
5. The Federal and State governments should have a listening ear to the people they govern and endeavour to meet the demand of the people.
6. Employment should be provided for Nigerian youths.
7. Activities of unions should be encouraged and various forms of demands made by union leaders should be looked into by the government to avoid break-down of law and order.
8. The Federal government should be pro-active to curb the menace the country is facing in terms of insurgency, Boko haram, kidnapping, ritual killing and finally the various militant groups that can cause violence in the country.
9. It is the belief that the federal government can discourage conflicts and violence by the adoption of fair-play and equity in the allocation of national resources and positions encourage groups to form an umbrella organization under which they can articulate their demands instead of taking to violence.

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