The Scramble for Lugard House: Ethnic Identity Politics and Recurring Tensions in Kogi State, Nigeria

LA RUEE POUR LUGARD HOUSE: LES ETHNIQUES D'IDENTITY DE LA POLITICS ET RECURRENT LES TENSIONS CHEZ L'ETAT DE KOGI, AU NIGERIA

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Abstract

Successive Nigerian constitutions have always sought to legally prevent identities such as ethnic, religion, and regionalism from being the basis of political organisation and contest for state power. In Kogi state, Nigeria, the reality of the situation has been, however, far from its outward appearance. This is because, ethnic identity politics have not only proved to be resilient, but a in a wave of resurgence, have fast become a common feature in its body politics leading to incessant ethno-factionalism and tension in the state. This article explores the linkage between the nature of Nigerian democracy, ethnic identity politics, and escalating ethnic tensions in Kogi State. The central argument of this article is that, the political elites' notion of democracy, and the prevailing political culture of winner-takes-all, combined to exacerbate ethnic identity politics and the ethnic tensions in Kogi state. The article concludes that, ethno-identity politics and tensions are not particular to Kogi state, but a culture that is inherently in Nigerian body politics.

Key words: Ethnic; identity; Politic; Tension; State-building; Ebira; Igala; Okun; Kogi State; Nigeria

Résumé

Les constitutions successives nigérianes ont toujours cherché à empêcher légalement les identités comme ethnique, la religion, et le régionalisme d'être la base de l'organisation politique et lutte pour le pouvoir d'Etat. Dans l'Etat de Kogi, au Nigéria, la réalité de la situation a été, cependant, loin de son apparence extérieure. Ceci est parce que, la politique d'identité ethniques ont non seulement prouvé pour être résilients, mais une par une vague de résurgence, ont rapidement devenu une caractéristique commune dans sa politique du corps conduisant à l'ethno-factions incessante et la tension dans l'état. Cet article explore le lien entre la nature de la démocratie nigériane, la politique d'identité ethnique, et l'escalade des tensions ethniques dans l'Etat de Kogi. L'argument central de cet article est que, la notion des élites politiques de la démocratie, et la culture politique dominante du winner-take-all, combinée à exacerber la politique d'identité ethniques et les tensions ethniques dans l'Etat de Kogi. L'article conclut que, ethno-politique identitaire et les tensions ne sont pas particulière à l'Etat de Kogi, mais une culture qui est intrinsèquement dans le corps politique du Nigeria.

Mots-clés: Ethnique; Identité; Politique; Tension; Construction de l'État; Ebira; Igala; Okun; l'Etat de Kogi; Nigéria

INTRODUCTION

Kogi state is one of the states in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It was created on the 27th of August, 1991 along with other states such as Delta, Yobe, Jigawa, Taraba, Osun, Kebbi and Abia. Since this massive restructuring in Nigeria which amalgamated three major ethnic groups that consist of the Igalas, Ebiras and Okuns into a single political community, and the eventual division of the state into three senatorial zones, the politics of state-building

in Kogi state has always had a very strong ethnic identity character. For example, from 1992, when the military regime after a long bottomless transition programme opened the door for partisan democracy, politics in Kogi state has being firmly split along ethnic lines.

The issue at stake here is that, unlike in most federations where political parties have the important responsibility of building bridges, in the case of Kogi state and Nigeria in general, partisan democracy not only reflect extant cleavages, but they helped to shape and intensify them, and to make matter worse, in each of the three senatorial zones, ethnic minorities have being increasingly marginalised. It is in the above regard this article intends to argue that, Kogi political elites who developed within the contours of their senatorial zone sought to maintain their privileged domain by sanctifying ethnic artifice as a means to gain access to the Lugard House- the Kogi State Government House. Similarly, in line with the trenchant criticisms of Nigeria's democratic experience by Nolutshungu (1990, p.88), the Kogi political elites developed a common notion of democracy as:

> [T]he context within which competition was to be undertaken rather than the issue contested. Democracy was not championed or challenged with respect to its content of rights, but was the mechanism through which political power would be gained or distributed and with it economic power and status.

What is clear from the above is that, the Kogi political elite' see democracy more as a means to an end, rather than an end itself. Thus, politics has been excessively personalised and connected to the all knowing wisdom and benevolence of the "big man" or political "godfather", whose word is law, and demands absolute loyalty from all. This notion of democracy created several problems, not least in the clan of "big men" all jostling for power (Obi, 2007, p.382). Thus, what emerged in the political scene of Kogi state analysed from within the notion of democracy described above was an intense zonal and not to be trusted ethno-political attitude, led by "juggernauts" representing the three major ethnic groupings in the state. For example, in the 1990s, late Dr. Stephen Achema, Prince Abubakar Audu, late Peter Achimugwu, Arch Gabriel Adukwu and Dr. Alex Kadiri and others for the Igala Kogi East, late Chief Samuel Awoniyi, late Chief Silas Daniyan, late Arch. Samuel Olorunfemi, Olusola Akanmode and others for the Okun Kogi West, and late Chief A.T Ahmed, late Mallam Salau Atima, Moses Okino and others for the Ebira Kogi Central. Each of these political elites wanted to succeed the willy-nilly departing Military Government, or to have a major say in the successor civilian administration in the state. The nature and notion of politics in Kogi state since 1999 has not changed. The only difference is that, most of the first generation politicians are late, but their approach to politics still reins supreme among their belligerent supporters, who employ all manners of undemocratic means including thugs to win election or consolidate themselves in power.

Given the political elites notion of democracy, and with the three dominant ethnic groups in place, it soon became obvious that, the broad political issue in Kogi state is control of political power and its instruments. Hence, preparatory to and within a short post-military political life in 1998/99, politics in Kogi state was riddled with cry of marginalisation. For instance, whenever opportunities for the political elites to access state power is created or forestalled, they would float the ethnic banner, and all the major groups in the state have resorted to the tactic at some point or the other (Mahmudat, 2010).

The central argument of this article is that, ethnic identity politics in Kogi State was nurtured by the military during the historic restructuring of Nigeria, leading to the creation of Kogi state in 1991. It was triggered by the prevailing political culture of winner-take-all in Nigeria. And finally, factional struggle for power by the political elites' of the dominant ethnic groups in Kogi state- Igala, Ebira, and Okun combined to make people to re-focus political participation and reassert their ethnic identity. Significantly therefore, the steady mobilisation of ethnic identity in Kogi state purportedly for state-building is one of the greatest threats not only to the ethno-political stability of Kogi state, but also a challenge to Nigeria's quest for peace and unity.

Overall, this article is an exploration of the linkage between the prevailing political culture in Nigeria, ethnic identity politics, and escalating ethnic tensions in Kogi State, Nigeria. For a coherent discourse, the following questions are pertinent. In what ways have the restructuring of Nigeria in 1991 influenced ethnic identity and tension in Kogi State? How does the political culture of winner-take-all combined to re-enforce ethnic identity politics leading to the ethnic tensions in Kogi state? How does the notion of politics and factional struggle for power by the political elites' of dominant ethnic groups facilitated identity politics in Kogi state? In the final analyses, within the context of the above questions, this article will at the end explain how the scramble for the Lugard House and ethnic identity politics has re-focused political participation, factional struggles and tensions in Kogi state.

In order to achieve the above objective, the paper is organised into the following sections. The first section introduces the article, the second section deals with the theoretical framework. The third section deals with the ethnography of Kogi State. The fourth undertakes a critical analysis of the linkages between ethnic identity politics, and escalating ethnic tensions in Kogi State. The final section is the summary and conclusion. The article hopes to conclude that, Identity politics and tensions in Kogi state is systemic in that, Kogi state is quintessentially Nigeria.

AN OVERVIEW OF IDENTITY, IDENTITY POLITICS, AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

There is being a growing global interest in study of the linkages of democracy, resurgence of identity politics and escalation of ethnic conflicts in the recent years. In this section, the concept of identity, identity transformation and identity politics which is the theoretical anchor of this article are reviewed in turn as follows.

The concept of identity has long been used in the social and political studies, and has gained particular currency in the recent time. As a socio-political concept, identity has both an individualist and a collective meaning. Erickson (1968, p.57) defined it as "a person's sense of belonging to a group if (it) influences his political behaviour". Embedded in the above definition are attributes of identity which comprises among others, "commitment to a cause"; "love and trust for a group", "emotional tie to a group", as well as "obligations and responsibilities" relating to membership of a group with which a person identifies. (Jega) By implication, what the foregoing is saying is that, identities serve as rallying and organising principles of social action within the civil society, and in state-civil society relations. Therefore, identities inform and guide political behaviour, and they add dynamism to political conduct in the context of plural societies (Parry & Moran, 1994). Furthermore, identity is not only about individuality and self-awareness, but also and especially about identification with, and commitment to shared values and beliefs in a social group in which a person belongs. At any given time, a person may have multiple identities, each of which (may/always) have some bearing on his or her political conduct and social roles in society. However, the question of what kind of identity has the most significant impact or bearing on a person's behaviour is a critical issue, and a subject of theoretical speculation. But what is significant is that, while identities are more or less fixed, identity consciousness is dynamic and fluid. Hence, mobilisation, provocation and agitation are central to the formation of a requisite identity consciousness which, in turn, is critical to identity-based politics.

In competition or struggles over societal resources, especially in situations of scarcity, collective demands tend to be predicated and organised on shared interests, which in turn tend to be hinged on either physiological givens or, as is more often the case, on shared socio-cultural identities. Thus, what can be termed as identity politics is nothing more than, the mutually reinforcing interplay between identities and the pursuit of material benefits within the arena of competitive politics. In other words, identity politics is basically politics either starting from or aiming at claimed identities of their protagonists in national political struggles over access to the state and to the benefits associated with it (Calhoun, 1994).

From the foregoing, identity politics therefore involves the mobilisation of identity consciousness in order to create a mass base of support by the political elites in their factional struggles, and in the process of acquiring power and access to the resources of the state. Overall, identity politics connotes a relatively high degree of the "subjective" entering into politics.

Identity transformation on the other hand is conceived here, not as an end product, but rather as a continuous process. It is simply the change in the role of identities and the heightening or increasing magnitude and consequences of identity politics. In other words, the concept of identity transformation is different from a change in the nature of identities, which implies the creation of completely new forms of identities. In essence, identity transformation is the process and dynamics involved in the conversion of identity differences into political differences and the attendant mobilisation of identity for differing purposes in the society (Jega/Ibrahim).

What is significant from the foregoing discourse on the entering of identities in the politics of state-building with reference to Kogi state is that, identity politics is not limited to Kogi state alone; rather, identity political situation in Kogi state is comparable to many other states in Nigeria such as Benue, Kwara, Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba, Niger and Ondo among others. In these states, partisan politics were all based on identities (ethnic and religion). In the view of Eddie (2003, p.84), the reason why people embark on identity politics is simply because, "political dominance translate (d) into control of political offices and better access to jobs, housing, and other valued services. Competitions for increased access to such scarce resources favour mobilization and collective actions along ethnic lines". Furthermore, the winner-takes-all style of politics in Nigeria also encouraged collective actions based on identities, because political practice perpetuated economic deprivation among, or denied overall opportunity to, losers in election. In the political realm, this meant that only members of the ethnic-based regime controlled the best access to jobs, housing and other valued resources. In view of the above factors, identities have become a tool of mobilisation by the Nigerian elites to garner popular support for perceived political marginalisation and domination (Ikpe, 2009).

KOGI STATE: GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND PEOPLE

Kogi state is one of the states in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It was created on the 27th of August, 1991 by the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida (Rtd) along with other states such as Delta, Yobe, Jigawa, Taraba, Osun, Kebbi and Abia. Geographically, it is located within the heart of Nigeria, or what is historically referred to as the Middle Belt of the country, but described in a

new political lexicon in the country as the North Central geo-political zone (Omotola, 2008) The capital of Kogi state is located on the confluence of Rivers Niger and Benue at Lokoja on Latitude 6° 44' North and Longitude 7° 44' East. On the north, it has boundary with the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Niger, and Plateau states; on the east, it has boundary with Anambra and Benue states; and finally on the west, it has boundary with Ondo, Kwara, Edo, and Enugu states.

During the colonial administration, the Ebira, Igala and Okun were grouped together under the defunct Kabba province and Northern region. Thus, when Kogi State was created in 1991, it was more or less the re-drawn map of the defunct Kabba Province. The Kabba Province was, with the creation of twelve states in 1967, under the then Kwara state. However, following the creation of the nineteen-state structure in 1976, a division polarised Kabba Province, keeping the Okun and Ebira in Kwara State, and merged the Igala and others across the river with Benue state. Thus, when Kogi State was created under the thirty-state structure, it was a reunification of sorts. For example, the Okun and Ebira of Kwara State were carved out and merged with the Igala and others across the river to form Kogi State. Going by the present composition of the state, Kogi State is quintessentially Nigeria, with three dominant ethnic groups and several minorities (Tenuche, et al, 2005; Omotola, 2008).

Kogi state is geo-politically made up of three Senatorial Districts namely the East, West, and Central. It is further sub-divided into 21 Local Government Areas. The Kogi East Senatorial District is predominantly Igala, and it comprise of Ankpa, Bassa, Dekina, Ibaji, Idah, Omala, Ofu, Odolu, and Olamaboro Local Government Areas. Within the Kogi east Senatorial District, there are other minority groups which include, Bassa Komo, Bassa Nge, Nupe (Onugba), and Agatu people. The Kogi Central Senatorial District on the other hand is predominantly Ebira, and it comprises of Adavi, Ajaokuta, Okehi, Okene, and Ogori-Magongo Local Government Areas. The Kogi Central Senatorial District is composed of other minority group such as Ogori and Magongo; and finally, the West Senatorial District is predominantly Okun, and it is made up of, Ijumu, Kabba Bunu, Kogi, Lokoja, Mopa Moro, Yagba East, and Yagba West Local Government Areas. It is also composed of other minority groups that include Oworo, Kakanda, Gana Gana, Koto, Nupe and Fulani/Fulani. On the basis of the 1991 Nigerian national population census, the total population of Kogi state was 2,141,756. The population broken down on the basis of the Senatorial District is as follows: the Eastern Senatorial District, 943,434; the West Senatorial District, 444,865; and the finally, the Central Senatorial District, 753,456 (Yusuf, 2006; Sani, 2003; Mvendaga, Simbine, and Galadima 2001). It must be emphasised here that, the population figures above remain very controversial and a

bone of contention in the state.

Kogi state just as many other states in Nigeria is blessed with natural resources. It has expansive fertile land for agriculture all over the state, huge deposits of iron ore at Ajaokuta in the Central Senatorial District (where the Iron and Steel Company is located), and limestone at Obajana in the Western Senatorial District, which is the fuel of what is currently considered the largest cement industry in Africa under the control of the Dangote Group of Companies (Omotola, 2008).

ETHNIC IDENTITY POLITICS AND TENSIONS IN KOGI STATE

It would be recalled that up to the early 1990s, Nigeria had been under the firm grip of military dictatorship for an uninterrupted period of sixteen years. During this period, the democratic public sphere was excessively constricted, barring interest groups and social and political formations from advancing their interests and expressing their grievance through democratic means (Adebanwi 2004, p.328). Thus, following the creation of Kogi state in 1991, and the partial lifting of partisan political activities by the military juntas, the political scene of Kogi state was flooded with political juggernauts representing the three major ethnic groups in the state. For example, late Dr. Stephen Achema, Prince Abubakar Audu and Dr. Alex Kadiri and others for the Igala Kogi East, late Chief Awoniyi, late chief Silas Daniyan, late Arch. Samuel Olorunfemi, Shola Akanmode and others for the Okun Kogi West, and late Chief A.T Ahmed, late Mallam Salau Atima, Moses Okino and others for the Ebira Kogi Central. Each of these political elites wanted to succeed the willy-nilly departing military government, or to have a major say in the successor civilian administration in the state. All of them relate to the struggle for relevance in the scheme of power politics through the manipulation of ethnic identity

Thus, from day one, one threatening dimension to the politics in Kogi state was the manner in which the political elites were factionalised on the basis of ethnic identity. Given the political elites notion of democracy, and with the three dominant ethnic groups in place, sooner than later, it became obvious that, the broad political issue in Kogi state was, control of political power and its instruments. Hence within a short post-military political life, politics in Kogi state was riddled with cry of marginalisation. Thus, for instance, whenever opportunities for the political elites to access state power is created or forestalled, they would float the ethnic banner, and all the major political groups in the state have resorted to the tactic at some point or the other (Mahmudat, 2010).

The seeming inevitability of this trend is understandable, given the plural character of the state

in ways reminiscent of the composition of Nigeria. The struggle on both divides has drawn largely on related strategies. First is the proliferation of ethnic-based newspapers and magazines, serving as the propaganda arsenal of the contending forces. In Kogi West alone, notable ones include The Protector, Searchlight, Kogi Affairs, Confluence Mirror, and Okun Renaissance. Kogi Central has Ebicom News as the most notable.

Similarly, they have also resorted to media coverage and press conferences, the Igala National Solidarity Association (INSA) and the Igala Cultural and Development Association (ICDA) fought fiercely for Lawal's removal. On the other hand, the Ebira Youth Forum (EYF) of Kogi Central and Okun Consultative Forum (OCF) of Kogi West vehemently protested the agitations for Lawal's removal at various press conferences in Lokoja (Yusuf, 2006, p.49-57). Unfortunately, these peaceful approaches to ethnic struggle have not yielded desired results, leading to the inevitability of the violent option. Herein lays the failure of democratisation in accommodating and protecting the interests of other identities who are not in power.

The battle lines have been drawn between the Igala on the one hand, and the Ebira and Okun, on the other. This tendency is well captured by the political processes underpinning the 2007 succession politics. As noted earlier, the state has been polarised into two contending power blocs- power stay and power shift. The former, mostly drawn from Kogi East but not without limited following from Kogi West and Central, especially among those currently occupying political offices in the state, represents a movement of those who campaigned for a second term of office for Governor Ibrahim Idris. The latter, however, represents a movement of the anti-elements such as Dino Melaye, Smart Adeyemi and Olusola Akanmode among others, who insist that power must move from Kogi East to the other parts of the state (West or Central) from where it draws the bulk of its following. The power struggle between the two blocs has affected practically all levels of village life, such that even remote towns, villages, and hamlets, which have very little or nothing to show as dividends of democracy, have been engulfed in the debacle. And, given the vulnerability of people in these rural settings due largely to their low level of education and poverty, the task of manipulating them with little inducement seems easy.

In the ensuing struggle, on many occasions, there have been violent eruptions for reasons closely related to the struggle. For example, an armed group believed to be loyal to Senator A.T. Ahmed, the spearhead of power shift from Kogi Central, disrupted the celebration of Democracy Day on May 29, 2005, at the Kogi State stadium in Lokoja. Several people were seriously injured in the attack, which was widely believed to be ethnically motivated. It took the reinforcement of security operatives to rescue the state governor from the venue. On another occasion, the governor and his entourage to Okene, the heartland of the Ebiras, in the company of Philip Salawu, the deputy governor, were waylaid by militant Ebira youths, causing serious damage to their cars. This was repeated when the governor and his entourage wanted to attend the final funeral rites for Senator A.T. Ahmed in Okene. Embittered youths, angered by the effect of A.T. Ahmed's death on the struggle for power shift and insinuations linking his death to the state powers, refused to allow the governor entry into the venue of the ceremony. Notable individuals, like Prince Olusola Akanmode who is among the supporters of the struggle for power shift, had to intervene to break the impasse (Confluence Mirror, October 15, 2006, p.3).

The most notable impact of this (especially on the out-group—that is, the Ebira and Okun currently out of power) is the schism that has come to grip them, which has severely undermined their solidarity and strength. Not unexpectedly, however, this trend eventually affected the election campaign in the state's 2007 general elections. As it turned out, electoral mobilisation and supports were ethnically driven, and electoral violence ethnicised. The reason is that each group saw the 2007 elections as crucial to its struggle. For the Igalas, it offered another opportunity to demonstrate their "superiority" over "others" in the state. For the "others" it represented the last card in their struggle for power shift and access to the "state cake." In the struggle, due process was discarded and substituted by the rule by law, as against the rule of law. During the 2007 general elections, particularly the gubernatorial election in the state, the spate of electoral violence and corruption was unprecedented. The elections were marred by widespread irregularities, including the use of guns, cutlasses, and other instrument of violence and force. In the process, several voters were killed, injured, assaulted, and/or disenfranchised. The worst thing was the fact that the violence was ethnicised. However, the power-stay camp seemed to gain the upper hand because of the power of incumbency that enabled them to take advantage of state resources- including the military, police, and the treasury- to destabilise the opposition. The election result was eventually nullified by the election petition tribunal, calling for a rerun, a decision upheld by the appeal court. But in the rerun, the PDP government was returned, meaning that the agitators for power shift lived to fight another day.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the linkages between democracy, ethnic identity politics and escalating tensions in Kogi state Nigeria's body politics in a period of over two decades. It specifically examined the overlapping and cross-cutting linkages of democracy and identity politics, and observed that state-building in Kogi state have

been characterised by heightened identity politics. The article also noted the massive restructuring in Nigeria in 1991 leading to the amalgamation of three dominant ethnic groups in Kogi State. The article also observed that, although diverse identities may not ordinarily lead to identity politics, it was discovered however that, the transformation and mobilisation of ethnic identity in the politics of state-building in Kogi state was circumstantially due to notion of democracy by the Kogi political elites, prevalence of mutual fears of domination and marginalisation of one geo-political/senatorial zone over the others, and the perhaps, the fear of winner-takes-all saga in the Nigerian body politics.

From the foregoing, fearful of being outwitted by ethnic rivals, more often than not, the Kogi political elites have had to employ or rely heavily on particularistic and exclusionary claims. As a consequence, fear and the prevailing political culture heightened the sense of ethnic identity politics, consciousness and tension in the body politics in Kogi state. Examples of the heightened sense of ethnic identity politics that have threatened or are threatening peace and unity were given. For instance, there has been a surge and proliferation of non-state actors known as thugs in virtually all the senatorial zones of the state.

What is clear from the crass competition for power have been that, inter-ethnic relations tends to be fragile and the Kogi state remain unstable, because, there are fewer points of convergence and consensus among the constituent ethnic groups. Nonetheless, despite the many pathologies and ethnic identity politics and perhaps, tensions that is plaguing Kogi state, there exists what one can describe as "real ambivalence" among the political elites in Kogi state on their attitude to the question of Kogi statehood. For instance, whenever they are dissatisfied or feel marginalised by the government in power, they would retreat into their primordial shells to mobilise support against the government. But most frequently, when they are in appointment/power and they realise that they need the state to survive in order keep their positions intact; they soon begin to sing a different tune.

Finally, on the basis of the discourse of identity politics in Kogi state, one may not be wrong to make a general observation that, in a number of fundamental respects, the prevailing political culture of winner-takes-all the Nigerian state is to blame for the mobilisation of ethnic identity for differing political purposes. Overall, it is hoped that, Kogi state may one day also benefit from the emerging power shift and diffused nature of Nigerian partisan politics in which, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, a South-Eastern zone minority, was democratically elected the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria during the April 2011 Nigerian national election, that was keenly contested with Major General Muhamadu Buhari (Rtd), a North-Western zone, Hausa-Fulani candidate along with other powerful presidential candidates from the major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

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