ETHNIC PLURALISM AND POWER SHARING IN NIGERIA DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT 1999 – 2014: A CASE ANALYSIS OF AKWA IBOM STATE

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Abstract

The main institutional arrangement that has been put in place as the modality for regulating tensions and avoiding divisive politics in Nigeria is known as power-sharing. Power-sharing is the act of providing every significant identity group or segment a fair representation and decision making abilities on common issues and a degree of autonomy over issues of importance to the group such as federal and state character, equity based revenue collection etc. The study therefore, aims at examining ethnicity and power-sharing in Nigeria democratic development drawing from Akwa Ibom State experience from 1999 – 2014. The study adopted a Historical and Descriptive Research drawing data from secondary sources. The study therefore revealed among others that the adoption of power-sharing in political development has helped to enhance a stable democratic government in Akwa Ibom State. The study further revealed that once a person from any of the three major ethnic groups namely; Ibibio, Annang and Oron becomes the governor or deputy governor of the state, he or she tries to ensure that most people in the cabinet are from his ethnic group. It is believed that it power-sharing arrangement is properly followed, it will help Akwa Ibom people to foster unity in diversity instead of ethnic chavaunia. Based on the findings, the study recommended that power-sharing though healthy, should not be sacrificed on the altar of individual capability and performance which is a pillar of development of any society.

Keywords: Ethnic Pluralism, Power-sharing, Nigeria, Democratic development, Akwa Ibom State.

Introduction

Ethnic conflicts have long been recognised as one of the most fundamental threats to institutional stability, political order and state cohesion in the multi-ethnic societies of the Third World. In Nigeria, like other African societies communal contenders predominate political power at the entre, this is often based on shifting inter-group coalitions. These coalitions use a mix of concessions, co-optation and repression to maintain their dominant position (Joseph, 1995).

Nigeria is a country with over 400 ethnic groups and numerous sub-ethnic groups with different backgrounds. Although these ethnic groups and cleavages exist independently of each other, they had interacted with one another before the advent of colonial rule in the country. Colonial administration fostered ethnic consciousness among the people through the creation of artificial boundaries. Ethnicity was therefore brought to the fore in the political dispensation of the country (Ukiwo, 2005).

The main institutional arrangement that has been adopted as the modality for regulating tension in the public sphere and avoiding divisive politics in Nigeria is called power sharing. Power sharing is the act of providing every significant identity group or segment in a society representation and decision-making abilities on national issues and a degree of autonomy on issues of importance to the group. The goal of power sharing is to manage ethnic diversity, promote democratic development, ethno-regional equilibrium in resource distribution and most importantly, to mitigate the disadvantages effects of majority democracy on vulnerable ethnic minority groups. By this, it is hoped that individuals from different ethnic backgrounds would be constrained from acting in ways that would undermine our democratic development. The aim of this study is to analyse ethnic pluralism and power sharing in Nigeria democratic development with specific focus on Akwa Ibom State from 1999 – 2009.

Study Location

The study location is Akwa Ibom State. Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria was created on September 23, 1987 with the promulgation of Decree 24 of that year by the then president, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida.

Akwa Ibom State occupies a total land mass of 8,412 sq.kms, of Nigeria's wealth basin, the South zone or the Delta Region lying between latitude 4'33' North and longitudes 7'35 and 8'25 East, Akwa Ibom falls within the tropical zone with a dominant vegetation of green foliage of trees, shrubs and oil-palm tree belt which holds the highest density of the cash crops in the world including rubber, cocoa and rice etc. It has estimated population of nearly 3.8 million spread into 31 Local Government Areas. It is the tenth largest state in the country in terms of land mass (Ibok and Ekong, 2013).

The people of Akwa Ibom are cultural homogenous with a common identity and linguistic heritage. These are considered a set of potentially unifying factor. The three major intra-ethnic groups are Ibibio, Annang and Oron, and the main language Ibibio is widely understood throughout the state, despite some slight dialectical variations. The State is characterised with ethnic pluralism. This motivated our founding fathers to come out with power sharing formular to appease these groups. The formular is Ibibio 5, Annang 3 and Oron 2. This sharing arrangement is made possible with the division of the state into three senatorial districts namely; Uyo, Ikot Ekpene and Eket which Oron is subsumed. So sometimes appointment based on senatorial district may not really reflect a true power sharing as Ibibio span over Oron and Annang.

Conceptual Explication

According to Nnoli (1980), ethnicity is a social phenomenon associated with communal competition among members of different ethnic groups. An ethnic group, however, is not necessarily linguistically or culturally homogeneous, in so far as it often subsumes sub-cultural, linguistic, dialectic, occupational and class differences, depending on the prevailing level of socio economic development and cultural differentiation. Adebayo (2004) sees ethnicity as a sense of peoplehood that has its foundation in the combined remembrance of past experience and common aspiration. In the whole, ethnicity is conceptualized in terms of loyalty, love, obligation and the desire to propel group aspirations over and above opposing views and similar of such aspirations. The ideology of ethnicity therefore, finds expression in sectionalism, prebendalism, and a manifestation of outward show of support or lack of support for persons occupying places of authorities in a nation's national psyche (Ogundiya, 2010; Usaghae, 2001 and Osaghage, 1998).

Ethnic pluralism is a situation in which people of diverse ethnic, racial religious, or social group maintain and develop their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization. Ethnic cum cultural pluralism is used when smaller groups within a larger society, maintain their unique cultural identities, and their values and practices are accepted by the wider culture provided they are consistent with the laws and values of the wider society (www.merian-Webster.com/dictionary/pluralism, 2016).

In pluralist culture, group not only co-exists side by side, but also consider qualities of other groups as trait worth having in the dominant culture. So pluralistic societies place strong expectations of integration on members, rather than expectation of assimilation. The existence of such institution and practices is possible only if the cultural communities are accepted by the larger society in a pluralist culture and sometimes require the protection of law (William and Stent, 1973, William and Revlin, 1973, Haug, 1967).

On the other hand, Lijphart (1985) defines power sharing as a set of principles which, when carried out through practices and institutions, provide every relevant group in a society representation and decision-making abilities on common issues and a degree of autonomy over issues of importance to the group. In a real sense, power-sharing entails practices and institutions that result in wide-based governing coalitions generally inclusive of all major ethnic group. Commenting further, Lijphart (1990) opines that consociational democracy or the power-sharing approach is characterised by two primary attributes: (i) the participation of the representatives of all significant groups in the government of the country and (ii) a high degree of autonomy for these groups, and secondary properties namely proportionality in resource allocation, political representation and bureaucratic appointment.

In societies where power sharing is practised, the aim is to mitigate the disadvantageous effect of democratic competition within acceptable boundaries and to avoid intergroup violence between majoritarian

democracy on vulnerable ethnic minority group in Nigeria and by extension Akwa Ibom State, the goal of power sharing is to manage ethnic diversity and promote the Nigerian state projects by emphasising "unity in diversity" ethno-regional equilibrium in resource distribution and avoidance of ethnic politics (Olusegun and Owumi, 2013).

Ethnic Pluralism and Power Sharing in Democratic Development of Akwa Ibom State
As rightly observed by Barrango (2002), that the dominant characterisation of Nigerian politics are; intense ethnic and elite conflicts, the recurrent tendencies of crisis in governance and development, the trend towards centralization of power and the excessive use of political repression etc. Given the above background, Akwa Ibom Politics is primarily ethnic politics and certain primordial identities determines political affiliations and inter-group relations. There has therefore been inter-ethnic rivalrye to secure the domination of government by one ethnic group or combination of ethnic groups to the exclusion of others. So politics in the state is dominated by three main ethnic groups namely; the Ibibio, Annang and Oron. Of these three, the Ibibio remain the majority and have held sway to power since the creation of the state, until 2007 – 2015 when an Annang person became governor as a result of power-sharing arrangement (Joseph, 1999).

It is obvious that ethnic politics has negative impact on democracy development in the state. To support this (Aniefiok, 2013), observes that ethnic crises are not only felt but had become part of the prominent problem in the state. For example, Ibibio and Annang have continue to wrestle against each other. Not to be forgotten is the Oron people who have equally felt neglected and marginalised in the scheme of thing. The implication of this tussle among the three ethnic groups is that once any person from any of these tribes becomes the governor or hold any position of responsibility in the state, he or she would ensure that most people in his cabinet especially those holding sensitive position are from his ethnic group. Following this direction, Okon (2005) says that various leaders with ethnic bias over the years have only succeeded in improving the financial stand of his ethnic group through appointment into core value ministries and parastatals at the detriment of other ethnic groups in the state. This is indeed an endemic disease as it is not only applicable to Akwa Ibom State, but common among leaders in other states of the federation.

The adoption of power sharing by the political elite in the state with the emergence of democratic rule since 1999 was seen as an option to manage inter-group relations, avoid divisive politics with its negative effect and most importantly, to mitigate the disadvantage effects of majoritarian democracy on vulnerable ethnic minority group. This has helped to pacify these ethnic groups thereby promoting democratic development. The truth remains that in any appointment, be it in the executive arm, legislative arm or even board appointment in the state has always been done to reflect the three ethnic groups. This even includes the employment into the state public service.

Here are factual data showing the composition of legislative and executive council and the extent of the application of power-sharing formular.

Table 1: Legislative Arm Composition of Principal Officer, 1999

S/N	Ethnic Group	No. of Position
1	Ibibio	2
2	Annang	2
3	Oron	2
	Total	**5**

Source: Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, Diary (1999)

Table 2: Executive Arm: Composition of Commissioner and Special Advisers, 1999

S/N	Ethnic Group	No. of Position
1	Ibibio	10
2	Annang	5
3	Oron	2
4	Obolom	1

5	Ibeno	1
	Total	**19**

Source: Ministry of Information (1999)

Table 3: Legislative Arm: Composition of Principal officer, 2007

S/N	Ethnic Group	No. of Position
1	Ibibio	1
2	Annang	1
3	Oron	1
4	Obolom	1
	Total	**4**

Source: Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, Diary (2007)

Table 4: Executive Arm: Composition of Commissioner and Special Advisers (2007)

S/N	Ethnic Group	No. of Position
1	Ibibio	15
2	Annang	7
3	Oron	4
4	Obolom	1
	Total	**27**

Source: Ministry of Information and Social Orientation (2007)

Table 5: Assembly Servie Commission, 2004

S/N	Ethnic Group	No. of Position
1	Ibibio	3
2	Annang	2
3	Oron	1
	Total	**5**

Source: Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, Diary (2004)

Table 6: Assembly Service Commission, 2007

S/N	Ethnic Group	No. of Position
1	Ibibio	3
2	Annang	3
3	Oron	1
	Total	**7**

Source: Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, Diary (2007)

Table 7: Akwa Ibom State University Council Members, 2010

S/N	Ethnic Group	No. of Position
1	Ibibio	4
2	Annang	3
3	Oron	1
	Total	**8**

Source: Akwa Ibom State University (2010)

As seen in tables 1 and 2, it is glaring that between 1999 -2007 the then governor from Ibibio tried to accommodate all the three ethnic groups in line with the principle of power sharing. This trend continued even where there was a minor reshuffled or major shake up within the cabinet. All the three ethnic groups were given a sense of belonging. Also, the available data revealed that Ibibios which is the major ethnic tribe always have the majority positions in such arrangement. Power-sharing was not only evident in political appointment but also in the provision of socio-economic development in the state including the

employment opportunities into public sector. This was done on the basis of local government or at times three (3) Senatorial Districts covering the three ethnic groups. No section or local government was given upper hand over others. For example, the employment of 31 labour inspectors each from the 31 local governments in the state, the same was true of the administrative and education officers. All the local governments represented by the three major ethnic groups were given equal opportunities.

However, between 2007 – 2015 the government led by the governor from Annang tribe also honour this arrangement in his appointment of political offices/leaders as seen in tables 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. The governor also allowed power-sharing principle to guide his socio-economic development as well as employment into the state public service.

Power-sharing has positively affected the political and socio-economic development in the state. The implication is that it has helped to foster unity in diversity instead of ethnic chauvinism in the state. Most importantly, it has integrated all the three ethnic groups in the state and equally encourage participation of the representative of all significant groups in the government as well as a high degree of autonomy for these groups.

Conclusion

One of the contending issues bordering on Akwa Ibom politics is ethnic imbalance among the three major ethnic groups namely; Ibibio, Annang and Oron. To guard against mistrust, hatred, acrimony and outright civil disturbance, power sharing though not constitutional becomes an acceptable arrangement so that the Annang and Oron being ethnic minority can have a sense of belonging. Despite this, there continue to be agitation by these ethnic groups that their interests are not well taken care of in the scheme of thing.

Although politics in the state is seen as do-or-die affairs, but power sharing has helped to manage ethnic diversity by emphasising "unity in diversity", ethno-regional equilibrium in resource distribution and avoidance of ethnic politics, which ultimately has led to democratic as well as socio-economic development in the state.

The situation in the state presently supports what Odoko and Nnanna (2009) opine that though this kind of elite-level accommodation is helpful, it is not enough. The fact that a minor group of top persons agree on how to share offices and the attendant benefits does not necessarily account for the major reforms needed to address grassroot socio-economic grievances, and may perhaps alienate mass constituencies enough to rouse ethno-regional backlashes that separately or together would undercut the very stability that elite pacts are meant to secure. When this happens, conflict is likely reaction from the people of other ethnic groups. To avoid this, Akwa Ibom people must allow their social relations among the three ethnic groups to become their social value which will in-turn promote economic, political, social and democratic development in the state.

Recommendations

Power sharing is a modality put in place to regulate tension and avoid divisive politics within the three ethnic groups in the state. Suffice to say that this arrangement has helped to discourage ethnic politics to a higher degree with negative implication on both democratic and socio-economic development in the state. The study therefore, provides the following recommendations:

1.   That Akwa Ibom need a state leader irrespective of which tribe he or she comes from.
2.   That the people of Akwa Ibom should be sensitize to allow social relations become our social value irrespective of our tribes.
3.   That any body appointed or elected into position of authority should promote unity in diversity, ethno-regional equilibrium in resource distribution and avoidance of ethnic politics.
4.   That the state should be restructured and people reoriented toward a new direction namely statehood.
5.   That the three ethnic groups should be willing to tolerate one another for democratic development to thrive in the state.

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