

Former militia leader Mujahid Dokubo-Asari attempted to run for governor of Rivers state while in prison on a charge of treason. On June 14, 2007, he was released by Nigeria's new president, Umaru Yar'Adua, who is seeking to bring peace to the Niger Delta region.



REUTERS/AUSTIN EKENDE

Diversity has also spawned clan-based militias

# Nigeria's federal framework dampens ethnic conflicts

BY ISAWA ELAIGWU

**D**IVERSITY IS OFTEN SEEN AS DETRIMENTAL TO NATION-building. Yet diversity can also lead to much greater accommodation in a multinational state. In Nigeria, federalism has been adopted as a mechanism for accommodating diversity and managing potential conflict.

An extraordinarily heterogeneous society, Nigeria has a population of about 140 million according to the 2006 census, more than 400 linguistic groups and some 300 ethnic groups. Under British colonial rule from 1914 to 1960, Nigeria used English as the single common language. The most important aspects of diversity in Nigeria are language, ethnic identity, religion, majority/minority cleavages and regionalism or geo-ethnicity.

It is not uncommon to hear 10 different languages within a radius of 20 kilometres, as you can in Plateau State. Language is a key indicator of ethnic group. Often, ethnic identity coincides with residential territory. At times, administrative boundaries

overlap with regional boundaries, within which there is a dominant ethnic group, such as the Hausa/Fulani in the North, the Yorubas in the West and the Ibos in the Eastern region. However, in each region, there are also numerous minority groups, with their own specific identities.

There are three basic religions in Nigeria – African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. While Islam was introduced in Nigeria by Arabs along their northern trading routes, Christianity came with European missionaries from the South.

## Little contact under British rule

While diversity in Nigeria has been a source of administrative concern, the nature of colonial administration, which regionalized Nigeria in 1939, meant that Nigerian groups coexisted but had little contact with one another. The 1946 Richards Constitution brought Nigerian leaders together in the Legislative Council (1947) for the first time.

Yet, by 1951, as the British colonial umbrella was gradually folding, nationalists began to compete to inherit political power from the British, withdrawing to their familiar ethnic and ethno-regional bases to organize for the struggle. Thus, between 1951 and 1959, major ethnic groups in many regions were mobilizing against other regions. Finally, suspicion and fear among Nigeria's groups led to the adoption of federalism in 1954 in order to manage the conflict. Still, the colonial authority found it necessary to set up the Willink Commission to investigate the fears of minority ethnic groups in the regions, and opted to allay them by including a human rights clause in the Independence Constitution of 1960.

SPECIAL SECTION

Unity in Diversity

INDIA 2007



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But various regional politicians and groups continued to be alarmed. The South feared the tyranny of the Northern groups who represented 54 per cent of the population. On the other hand, the North feared the Southern tyranny of skills, as the region was more advanced in Western education and therefore had more jobs in the developing government and business sectors. Such suspicions and resentments significantly affected a number of political developments, particularly the census exercises of 1962-1963, the federal elections of 1964, and the Western regional elections of 1965, and ultimately led to the military coup of 1966 and the aborted secessionist bid of the Eastern Region – the Biafran War – between 1967 and 1970.

### An unbalanced federation

As the leader of a military coup in 1966, Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi's government inherited the ongoing problems of an unbalanced federation, in which the regions were more powerful than the centre. It therefore opted to alter the structure of the federation, creating 12 states out of the existing four regions in 1967. This grew to 19 states in 1976, 21 states in 1987, 30 states in 1991 and 36 states in 1996. The revised federal structure provided a useful medium for the central government to compartmentalize conflict areas among the old regions and to reduce their intensity. But, as new states emerged, erstwhile minorities became new majorities, often more vicious than the old. Ethnicity and regionalism did not die with the creation of states, and often standing issues crept back through other avenues, such as recruitment into public office and resource distribution.

The issue of language often rose to the surface. In the Second Republic, from 1979-1983, the House of Representatives found, as had the Constituent Assembly of 1978-1979, that it was convenient to continue to use English as the official language. In addition, however, it approved the use of the Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba languages, a move that was sharply opposed by representatives of minorities who saw it as "cultural slavery." This controversy subsided with the adoption of English as the official language at federal and state levels.

### Religious conflict emerges

Religion had not been a serious source of conflict until the late 1970s. At the Constitution Drafting Committee in 1976 and 1977, and during the Constituent Assembly sessions of 1978 and 1979, the *Sharia* law debate opened sectarian schisms. Suddenly, religion took a front seat in political discourse. The attempt by Muslims to extend *Sharia* beyond personal and inheritance matters, and to establish a federal *Sharia* Court of Appeal, was resisted by Christians. As a compromise, *Sharia* and customary courts were to be introduced only in states that so desired. At the federal level, the Court of Appeal was to have three judges learned in *Sharia* and customary law sitting with common-law judges. Such a compromise would have been more difficult in a unitary system.

Yet in 1986, the news of Nigeria's joining the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) stirred up another religious crisis, especially between Christians and Muslims. While reassurances were given, there was no withdrawal from OIC. Between 1980 and 2005, there were over 45 violent religious conflicts in which lives and property were lost, conflict intensified in par-

ticular when Zamfara state extended *Sharia* law to include criminal matters in 2000. Twelve northern states quickly followed in adopting *Sharia*. The violence resulting from the introduction of the *Sharia* in Kaduna State triggered reciprocal killings in the southeastern part of Nigeria. The *Sharia* fire did not spill over to other states because of Nigeria's federal structure and the autonomy of component units.

### Struggle over resources

Another source of conflict is resource distribution. Most of the proceeds from petroleum and gas, upon which Nigeria depends, come from a predominately minority area, the Niger Delta, which includes Delta, Edo, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Rivers and Bayelsa States. Feeling cheated and neglected over the years, these states accused the central government of using their resources to develop other areas and threatened to take control of them. They had walked out of the National Political Reform Conference in 2005 because the conference had rejected a sharing formula of 25 per cent of oil revenues by derivation. The federal government has tried to deal with the problem of neglect by establishing the Niger-Delta Development Commission, devoted to the development of the area. However, former president Olusegun Obasanjo's master plan was met with skepticism. The Yar'Adua/Jonathan administration is currently trying to resolve the issue.

A final instance of diversity is the emergence of ethnic militias. After May 1999, when the military dictators handed over power to civilians, latent subnationalism exploded into violence. The O'dua Peoples' Congress, the Arewa Peoples' Congress, the Ibo Peoples' Congress, The Bakassi Boys, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State Biafra, the Egbesu and the Ijaw Youth Congress – were all subnational militia groups that challenged the state with violence. As the Nigeria Police Force grew less effective in maintaining law and order, subnational militia groups grew stronger. Their goals, as they – and certainly not others – saw them were to:

- Protect their identity, culture and values.
- Demand what they considered an appropriate share of resources.
- Respond aggressively to actions regarded as unfair.
- Act as a vigilante group to protect lives and property.
- Defend the land of their ancestors against strangers.

In the Niger Delta, some leaders created militias as military wings of political groups. After the 2003 elections, these politicians lost control over their militias. Violence spread among young people, who challenged state control. The Niger Delta imbroglio continues. It is to be hoped that new measures by President Yar'Adua can resolve the issue.

Federalism tries to establish legal and other forms of compromise among diverse interests. In Nigeria, the federal framework has enabled leaders to compartmentalize conflicts over ethnicity and regionalism, thus reducing – though not eliminating – conflicts. It has made it possible for Nigerians to cope with religious conflicts and to contain aggressive subnationalism. Diversity can enrich the process of nation-building, and, in troubled times, provide the promise of renewed inter-group relations, as the pendulum continues to swing between federalism and centralism. 