Deconstructing Ethnic Politics: The Emergence of a Fourth Force in Nigerian Political Discourse

Tunga Lergo, Ph.D.
Professor
Santa Fe College
Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences (B07)
3000 NW 83rd Street
Gainesville, FL 32606
USA

Abstract

Ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria, especially in the north, are indicative of the quest by minorities for independence, empowerment, and identity construction. Until there are concessions made by the dominant cultural groups—Hausa Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba—and an opening up to ethnic minorities, Nigeria will be unable to move past the ethnic formats and difficulties that have stifled Nigeria's social evolution. The power of the three major ethnic groups and the disempowerment of all other ethnic minorities have created chaos in Nigerian politics and government. Ethnic minorities have long been shut out of electoral politics, but are now developing a collective consciousness—a fourth force—that shows signs of unifying them and acting as moderating force in Nigerian unity. Since amalgamation, the major ethnic groups have enjoyed a strong sense of regional unity at the cost of national unity. This article discusses the emerging influence of minorities and the need to develop a forth force that cuts across regions to unify the whole country. The assumption is that developing a fourth force is their attempt to move away from the ethno-regional centric consciousness of the Big Three to a national consciousness that unites all Nigerians.

Key words: Forth force, collective consciousness, political discourse, minorities empowerment, northernization, Hausanization, Nigerian-Biafra**.**

1. Introduction

Ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria are indicative of the quest by minorities for independence, empowerment, and identity construction, and the fear of the majority of losing economic power, political power, and cultural dominance. Currently, Nigeria is witnessing less ethnic clashes but more religious clashes, almost all of which occur in the north. It is estimated that the Nigerian government has reported up to fifty thousand deaths from religious violence since the mid-1990s (Kukah 2007). Paden (2007, p.1) has called Nigeria "the test case of the 'clash of civilizations'". After taking over the chairmanship of the African Union, Libyan ruler, Muammar al-Gaddafi, promised to create a continental government, but also suggested that Nigeria be split into two with a Christian south and a Muslim north. Nigeria does not have to be split. Reducing the marginalization of Nigeria's ethnic minorities in Nigeria's political and economic life will help to hold Nigeria together.

For a nation to progress there must be the opportunity for all people to participate fully in the social life of the country. For this to happen there must be a rule of law and a free and secured people. In the fifty one years since Nigeria's independence from British colonial rule, these three factors have never been fully met. Until there are concessions made by the dominant influences of the three largest cultural groups—Hausa Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba—and an opening up to minority consciousness as a fourth force in Nigeria, the country will be unable to move past the ethnic formats and difficulties that have stifled Nigeria's social evolution.

Nigeria is a sleeping giant in Africa. The power of the three major ethnic groups (the Big Three) and the disempowerment of all other ethnic minorities have created chaos in Nigerian politics and government. Ethnic minorities have long been shut out of electoral politics, but they are now developing a collective consciousness—a fourth force—that shows signs of unifying them. If this is possible, it has the power to change the face of Nigerian politics. Since amalgamation, each of the Big Three has enjoyed a strong sense of ethnic unity, and this is what the other minorities are hoping to emulate as a unified fourth force, but one that will transcend ethnicity, religion, and region. Developing a fourth force is minorities' attempt to move away from the ethno-regional centric of the Big Three to a national consciousness that unites all Nigerians.

This article is not intended to analyze minority conflicts or identities, but to suggest a conceptual model that seeks to centralize the place of minorities in national discourse and unity.

2. The Concept of Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to people with a shared cultural heritage: common ancestry, language, or religion which gives them a distinctive social identity (Macionis, 2010). Ethnicity is socially constructed, becoming important only because a society institutes a distinction. It is more fluid and broad in modern societies and less so in traditional societies. Both Barth (1969) and Osaghae (1991) suggest that ethnic boundaries are fluid and changing, but in a traditional society such as Nigeria, ethnic categories that have been constituted are highly exclusive and as Otite (1990) succinctly put it: "One of the most powerful assets of ethnic group is its exclusive heritage and manipulation of symbols" (p.19). Thus, for example, the cultures of Nigeria, including Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa Fulani, Tiv, Shuwa, Ham, and Edo, may interchange and co-exist; they do not embrace outsiders, even if outsiders speak their language. Ethnicity in Nigeria is reminiscent of the caste system in India: it is a closed classificatory system. It can be argued that ethnic classification in Nigeria is primarily based on mother tongue and common ancestry. Even if people no longer speak their mother tongue, they still hold on to their ethnic origin.

For example, someone may speak the language of another ethnic group but not his mother tongue, but still considers himself part of his ethnic group, and an outsider to the group whose language he now only speaks. Using the above conceptualization of ethnicity, 374 Nigerian ethnic groups (Otite, 1990) can be delineated; each having a core-spatial territory. It was not difficult for the British colonialists to divide Nigeria into regions, each with a regional majority based on language and several minorities. There were accidental ethnic minorities or what Ekeh (as cited in Osagah, 1991, p.240) termed "marginals" , who became minorities only by accident and artificiality of regional boundaries that cut them off from their ethnic majorities. Such marginal or accidental ethnic minorities, as I will call them, were the Ilorin and Kabba Yorubas in the Northern Region, and the western Igbos in the Western Region. When the Midwest Region was created by Nigerians in 1963, the Akoko-Edo Yorubas in this region were created (Osaghae, 1991).

2.1 The Concepts of Majority and Minority

The terms "majority" and "minority" are widely and commonly used in anthropological and sociological discourses, but their meanings are not always clear. I prefer the terms "dominant" and "subordinate" in which social power is the underlining factor in the social construction. When some scholars argue that ethnic boundaries are fluid (Barth, 1969), they may be viewing the concepts of majority or minority as interchangeable with ethnicity. Majority and minority boundaries are constantly changing, but those of ethnicity, especially in Nigeria, is not as fluid as some may think.

A dominant or majority group is one that is advantaged and has superior resources and rights in society; while a subordinate or minority group is any category of people whose members, because of physical or cultural characteristics, are disadvantaged and subjected to unequal treatment by the majority group and regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination (Chou & Feagin, 2008). The two groups can be based on race, ethnicity, or both. In Nigeria, the distinction is based on ethnicity. This paper will focus on ethnicity as the group identifier for a minority. Thus members of each Nigeria's ethnic minority share two common characteristics. First, they share a distinctive identity that is based on physical and/or cultural traits. Second, they have experienced or do experience subordination by the dominant ethnic majorities because of their ethnicity.

Two main indices are important in the majority/minority distinction. One, a group can enjoy dominant status because it has the population to influence social outcomes by using numbers effectively, especially in democratic societies. For example, in the United States of America whites have the largest population and are able to influence social, economic, and political decisions. Second, a group without a majority population can still become the dominant group, particularly in undemocratic societies. For example, in apartheid South Africa, blacks had a majority population, but whites were still considered the majority because of the power they held. Thus, South African blacks, though greater in number, were the minority, as they were subordinated by the numerical few whites. In pre-colonial Nigeria, the Fulani, though few in number, still subordinated, subjugated, and finally assimilated the Hausas. In both of these examples, the underlying factor was either race or ethnicity. In the case of Nigeria, it has always been ethnicity. In Nigeria, numerical strength has always translated into socio-political power, privilege, and dominance.

Because of the size of their ethnic populations in their respective regions, and using ethnicity as an organizing force, the Yorubas, the Hausa Fulanis, and the Igbos became dominant groups. The regionalization of Nigeria also created regional minorities that were ethnically heterogeneous and collectively less in number than the dominant group, and, therefore, with fewer than a controlling number of votes, which disadvantage them. While the dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria are monolithic, the subordinate groups are highly diverse. There are 374 ethnic groups in Nigeria (Otite, 1990) of which only three, the Yoruba, the Hausa Fulani, and the Igbos, are majority and dominant. The remaining 371 are minorities and have experienced or do experience subordination.

3. *Pre-colonial Nigeria and Ethnic Independence*

There is no disagreement that the British forced the union of Nigeria. Some have argued that Nigeria should have been three countries carved from what are now the geographical north, east, and west of Nigeria. The British created regions became the Hausa Fulani north, the Igbo east, and the Yoruba west. But many of the minority ethnic groups were self-governing and independent from their regional majority ethnic group before the forced union by the British. Some, in their pre-colonial status, were majorities, and were descendants of empires (the Kanem-Borno, Nupe, Borgu, and Kwararfa in the north; the Benin in the west; and the Calabar in the east).

Some of the problems of Nigerian unity can be attributed to the forced amalgamation of the country and the creation of regions, even as Osaghae (1991) and Okpu (1977) agree that ethnic minorities as social constructions did not exist until the mid-1940s of British rule when regions were created. Osaghae (1991) did however emphasis the rise of regional nationalism as the main underlining force that brought about the marginalization of ethnic minorities, when he stated t that "Before this time, all the 250 or so ethnic groups in the country were 'equal' in the 'new' country notwithstanding the surbordinate-superordinate relationships that may have existed among some of them in the pre-colonial period" (p. 238). And that "The problem of minorities was not brought by the mere lumping together of major and minor groups but the rise of majority group ethnic nationalism and the threat that they would take complete control of power in the region and the center" (p. 240).

There had been self-governing and independent regional ethnic minorities prior to the British, but these minorities did not factor into the political needs of the British who rewarded those who were loyal and were amenable to resource exploitation. Thus, the British were lenient to the Yoruba kingdom, enabling the Yorubas to become a regional majority, and the emirate or caliphate system in the north, enabling, completing, and sustaining the Hausa Fulani domination of the north. They created a system of chiefs in the stateless Igbo eastern region, enabling the Igbos to become a regional majority. During this process, the colonialists had little interest in ethnic minority.

3.1. Forced Nation And Forced Regionalism: The Loss Of Minority Power And Privilege

On January 1, 1914, in what is referred to as the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates, three Nigerias became one political and economic entity for the convenience of the British administration. They were governed as two countries with three federated regions under the British Westminster system. With the establishment of the Richards constitution in 1946, and the subsequent Macpherson constitution in 1951, the Big Three ethnic groups were given legitimate expression in a British parliamentary system of government, and this allowed these groups to begin their struggle for national domination by first using the force of number to gain regional ascendency and domination. It was at this point that regional majorities began to mobilize and began to assert an ethnic nationalism or what Osaghae (1991) has termed as "big group chauvinism" (p. 240).

At independence, regionalism structured on ethnic and regional politics had become the organizing principle of Nigeria's political and electoral behavior. Thus, economic, administrative, and political resources were distributed, and ethnic and regional politics grounded in three main separate political parties, with purely regional character. There was the National Congress of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the Eastern Region led by Namdi Azikiwi, the National Peoples Congress (NPC) in the Northern Region led by Ahmadu Bello, and Action Group (AG) in the Western Region led by Obafemi Awolowo. These three parties dominated their regions and sought to control Nigeria at a federal or national level. Over time, national narrative and political discourse took on an increasingly regional format, undercutting the influence of minority ethnic groups. They were almost forgotten in the equation; so much so, that by formal independence on January 1, 1960, three competing consciousnesses had evolved in Nigerian national political and cultural discourse: westerner, easterner, and northerner. Regional minorities, by political expediency and economic self interests, were forced to line up behind their respective regional majority.

For example, it was common for northern minorities to see themselves as Hausa Fulani, and they were often referred to by non-northerners as Hausa Fulani. Experiential evidence shows that during the 1963 national population census, persons of northern minorities sometimes identified themselves as Hausa Fulani or were identified by southern census takers as such. There were also times when eastern minorities would pass for Igbos. When in 1966 ethnic cleansing of Igbos by northerners occurred in the north, many northerners did not differentiate eastern minorities from Igbos, even though the genocide was aimed only at the Igbos, whose elite officers had assassinated the Premier of Northern region.

This blurring of the lines of majority/minority does not erase the fact that regional minorities have been struggling since before independence to be relevant. For instance, as Nigerian nationalists were clamoring for independence, leaders of regional minorities were agitating for the creation of regions for minority ethnic groups. However, the minority groups were not able to unite, and they were not successful. Numerous fragmented pre-independence minority movements (Uwechu, 1991) are testimony to the concerns and fears of minority ethnic groups and their struggle for self-independence since regionalization began. In the north, the Middle-Belt People's Party (MBPP), the United Middle-Belt Congress (UMBC), the Tiv Progressive Union (TPU), and the Idoma State Union (ISU) called for the creation of a Middle-Belt state for the minority groups in Adamawa, Benue, Plateau, Kebba, and Niger provinces. Another northern minority movement, the Ilorin Talaka Parapo Party (ITPP), wanted a Kwara state. In the Western Region, the Out Edo (OE) and the Midwest State Movement (MSM) called for a Midwest state for the Benin Delta provinces.

The Eastern Region also had several minority ethnic groups demanding a state. The Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers State Movement (CORSM) called for a Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers State for Calabar, Ogoja, and Rivers provinces. There were also the Rivers People's Movement (RPM), the Rivers People's Congress (RPC), and the Conference of Rivers Chiefs and Peoples (CRCP) who wanted a state for the Rivers province. The early minority fears of domination by the majority ethnic groups would prove to be justified when the British left. They were forced into the federal structure of Independent Nigeria even though they had no history of, or desire for, centralized forms of government. In the north, for example, minorities have been uniting under the identity of the Middle-Belt peoples, sharing, "by and large, a common heritage of resistance to the Muslim religion and authoritarian state structure" (Diamond, 1988, p.24).

4. Independence and Ethnic Minorities Empowerment

The conditions for today's Nigeria were created during British colonial rule. The British favored the northern establishment and its institutions, including Islam and the caliphate system. The colonial government produced and sustained the hegemony of the Hausa Fulani caliphate over the northern minorities, and Christian missionaries were then allowed access to the northern minorities, commonly termed the Middle-Belt. Between 1950 and 1966, however, under the Premier of Northern region, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the task that the Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio failed to accomplish in the early nineteenth century, partly due to British colonization, was revived: the Islamization and Hausanization of the Middle-Belt ethnic groups. The Premier did this, in the pretext of northernization, by purging the civil service of non-northerner civil servants, by political patronage, and by appointing chiefs among northern minorities on condition they convert to Islam.

During this time when northern minorities were losing their ethnic identities, a similar situation was affecting the eastern minorities. The western minorities, however, found expression and freedom in the creation of the Midwestern state in 1963. The northern and eastern minorities would have to wait until 1967 for the creation of states that would accommodate their ethnic groups. Despite the second class citizen status of minorities since independence in 1960, there has been a steady increase in the influence and empowerment of minorities as Nigeria has seen a reduction in regionalism and a reduction of the influence of regional ethnic majority groups. Three main forces contributed to this development: the civil war, the creation of states, and constitutional and electoral reforms.

4.1 The Civil War or Nigerian-Biafra War

The Nigerian civil war was fought from 1967 to 1970. It arose out of the mutual suspicion between the Igbos and the Hausa Fulani. Each asserted that the other was promoting an ethnic dominance. When the premier of the Northern Region, Sir Ahmadu Bello, was assassinated in January 1966 by a group of Igbo soldiers, it was seen as cause to purge Igbos from the north where they had controlled most of the economic activities as well as the civil service. The war made two contributions to the development of minority consciousness.

First, the war set up a chain reaction of events that weakened the influence of the Hausa Fulani in the Northern Region and halted- at least for some years- the complete marginalization of minorities by the Premier of the region. The premier believed he was descended from the family of Usman dan Fodio (founder of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1809), and as a Fulani Muslim, he was obligated not only to Islamize his region, but to spread Islam throughout Nigeria. In this, he was carrying on the jihad that Usman Dan Fodio started in the early nineteenth century.

The Islamization of the north was in full force during Ahmadu Bello's rule as Premier of Northern Nigeria between 1954 and 1966. The evidence of Islamization was in education, political, and administrative appointments, and in infrastructure and institutional development. As a result, Christian and non-Muslim minorities benefited little from northernization.

By 1966, northern minorities, who were increasingly seeing themselves collectively as Middle-Belt people, were resentful of the Hausa Fulani domination and marginalization. A hierarchy of ethnic groups developed in the north with the Hausa Fulani Muslim as the most powerful group. The second most powerful group was Muslims of any background, followed by persons from the southern majority groups, and then persons from the northern minorities. In the north, the northern minorities were seen as having power only over persons from the southern minority groups. The result of this ladder of power and respect meant that northern minority ethnic groups became resentful not only of the northern majority, but also of the southern majority ethnic groups.

When Ahmadu Bello, the Premier of the region, his protégée- the Prime Minister of Nigeria (Sir Tafawa Belewa), a northerner- and several other important politicians (mainly of northern origin) were killed in a coup by a group of young Igbo soldiers living in the north, northern elites and city dwellers of all northern ethnic groups were mobilized by the Hausa Fulani to participate in the ethnic cleansing of Igbos. Under the banner of "One North, One Destiny," the Igbo became the common enemy.

The end result of this was an unfortunate civil war- a war that was led and executed, mainly by military officers of minority origin. Notably, many of the military officers were from northern minorities. Among them was General Yakubu Gowon, who came to rule Nigeria after a coup as Head of the Federal Military Government (1966-1975). Gowon became instrumental in the reawakening of northern minorities, and creating the opportunity for eastern minorities to decouple themselves from Igbo domination by the creation of 12 states in 1967. This began the process of de-regionalization, and de-regionalization weakened the power of the major ethnic groups.

The second effect of the civil war on minorities was the enrichment of military officers from ethnic minorities in all regions, but mostly in the north. Quite simply, economic empowerment translated into political power and ethnic minorities' independence.

4.2 Creation of States

There is no consensus that state creation improves ethnic relations. Some believe that creating more states leads to more ethnic conflict. Others believe that more states leads to less ethnic conflict. In terms of giving ethnic minorities the opportunity to be relevant in Nigerian politics, the states seem to have made a difference. As long as minorities continue to exist as 371 ethnic nationalities dominated by regional majority ethnic groups, they can accomplish nothing. They need to form a cohesive social and political force in the form of a collective consciousness- a fourth force- that overcomes their ethnic and religious differences. The creation of states enables the minorities to self-govern, and is a necessary condition for creating a fourth force.

What began as the 1914 Southern and Northern protectorates became three regions at independence in 1960. By 1996, Nigeria had been subdivided into 36 federated republic states, with a possibility for more. By stipulation, of the 36 states, only 16 have comfortable ethnic majority populations; while 20 have comfortable ethnic minority populations; that is, sufficient numbers to affect the balance of power and elections. Coupled with the constitutional provision for the election of the president, it is a new dawn for minorities, and the domination by ethnic majorities of their respective regions is coming to an end.

Nigeria is not simply a "geographical expression" (Awolowo, 1947, p.47), but a nation with more than one hundred years of common historical experience. State creation should be celebrated, not just for minorities but all ethnic groups:

> When Nigeria was divided into regions, ethnic identification and ethnic mobilization took the form of regionalism. The 374 ethnic groups (Otite 1984) in Nigeria were subsumed into three regional ethnic groups which assumed power from the British: Hausa Fulani (North), Yoruba (West), and Ibo (East). The various regional minorities were rendered politically ineffective in competing for the country's resources. This power structure began to change upon the creation of 12 states by Yakubu Gowon in 1967, 21 states in 1987, 30 states in 1992, and 36 states in 1996. The result of this territorial division was the emergence of minority ethnic groups' consciousness and the increased participation in regional and national politics. Coupled with this, each state by law sends three senators to the National Assembly. Therefore, state creation added another particularistic [sic] factor (minority influence) into the power equation of the country. (Lergo, 1996, p.93).

Subdividing Nigeria into states is a positive development, not only for minorities, but also for the country as a whole. It reduces the power of the central government. It helps to demystify the political invisibility of regional ethnic majorities and encourages cross-regional coalitions, not only between minorities but also between majority and minority ethnic groups, as is evident in the voting patterns since 1999. The creation of states has also helped to prevent the emergence of tribal or ethnic heroes. Instead, politicians are forced to transcend ethnicity and region, religion, and be national heroes. It is a positive outcome of state development that Nigeria can no longer produce tribal leaders such as Sarduna of Sokoto, Obafemi Awolowo, and Namdi Azikiwe.

4.3 Constitutional and Electoral Reforms

Nigerians have constructed a constitution for the country that is helping to deconstruct regionalism and empower minorities. The process has been a testimony to the ingenuity of Nigerians, their determination to live together, and their inherent belief in a democratic system. Fashioned after the U.S. constitution as a representative republic, with a provision for amendments, Nigeria's constitution embraces Nigeria's heterogeneity and gives minorities the opportunity for full political participation and representation in the political process of the country. The provision for electing the president as enshrined in section 134 of the 1999 constitution is of particular importance to minorities. In addition to gaining a majority of the total votes cast in a national election, a candidate must also have "not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the States in the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja" (Federal Government of Nigeria [FGN], 1999). This provision helps to discourage political party formations on strict religious, regional, or ethnic lines, and encourages political discourse and participation on ideology. This development has had an empowering effect on minority ethnic groups as can be seen in election reforms and results since 1979.

It was in 1979 that the Second Republic was born. After 13 years of military rule, Nigerians were granted democratic participation by the election of a civilian government. Six registered political parties participated in the 1979 general elections and five were eligible to participate in 1983. In both the 1979 and 1983 elections, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) won. President Shehu Shagari, however, was overthrown by the Buhari military on December 31, 1983, stalling the developing of democracy in the country. Despite the efforts for electoral reforms to decouple elections from particularistic cleavages, three of the five political parties with national stature—the National People's Party (NPP), the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN)—essentially coalesced into regional and ethnic identities; while two parties—the Greater Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP) and the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) were perceived as northern renegades representing northern minorities (Kanuris and Talakawas, respectively) (Eleazu, 1988). Thus, the political forces and patterns of the First Republic were being reproduced in the Second Republic. An analysis of party formation and voting patterns in the elections of 1979, 1983, and 1993 revealed a gradual shift in power away from region and ethnicity; minority ethnic groups were moving closer to the political table as they began to use protest votes against their regional majority ethnic "oppressors" (Lergo, 1996, p.180). By 1983, some political observers were optimistic that a fourth force, or contemporary minority consciousness which cut across regional boundaries was emerging in Nigerian politics (Matthews & Dosuna, 1983). Akagu (1983) wrote:

> The impending 1983 elections have so galvanized minority opinion that today ideas are being mooted to explore how the minorities can unite to form what has been referred to as the "fourth force," and that this time, they are not only becoming more vocal in stating their case, but are realistic enough to admit that the magic can only be done in grouping together as one bloc. (p. 4)

The galvanization of minorities into a fourth force was far from realized, but there was promise in the minority protest votes in the 1979, 1983, and 1993 presidential elections.

In all three elections, the presidential candidates came from majority ethnic groups; however, states with predominant minority populations voted against candidates of their regional majority ethnic groups (Lergo, 1996). The military regime of Ibrahim Babangida seized power in 1984 and established two political parties for Nigerians, in what turned out to be an aborted Third Republic. In forming the parties, Babangida said that "one [party] is a little to the right and the other a little to the left" (Uwechue,1991, p.1486). The Social Democratic Party (SDP) was the one a little to the left, and the National Republican Convention (NRC) was the one a little to the right. The Babangida government thought that by having only two political parties available to the Big Three, voting might focus on ideologies rather than ethnicity and regionalism.

But the 1993 elections won by Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola, a Yoruba and SDP candidate, were annulled by the very regime that had formed the two parties, coerced Nigerians to register to vote, and had organized and supervised the elections. Abiola's election seemed to have succeeded in reducing voting along ethnic and regional lines, as he was a Muslim from the south who had won where northerners had dominated before him. In fact, with the exception of the predominant Igbo states, Abiola won states from all regions and ethnic groups in the country; he had even won in Kano state where his rival presidential candidate hailed from (Lergo, 1996). Disregarding the outcome, the 1993 election suggested that the solution to regional and ethnic sentiments in Nigerian politics could come in a two-party system. With a two-party system, it would be impossible for all three of the major ethnic groups to dominate a political party and there would have to be alliances. And to win national elections, parties and candidates would have to fight for the votes of minorities.

On May 29, 1999, the military under the leadership of Abdulsalami Abubakar handed over rule to an elected civilian president, Olusagun Obansajo of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). He was reelected to a second term in 2003. There was another successful election in 2007, won by a northerner, Yaadua of the PDP. From1999 to present, Nigeria is witnessing the longest civilian rule since independence, and a new picture of ethnic politics is now emerging. The country is witnessing the crumbling of ethnic and regional politics and the emergence of a political arena that goes beyond ethnic and religious particularism. What Babangida tried to accomplish in 1993 with his two-party system is now naturally emerging through a democratic multi-party system process, where two parties, Peoples Democratic Party, and the Congress for Progressive Change(CPC) as of 2011 elections, are emerging as dominant parties. This development is beneficial for minorities and for the whole country.

The multi-party system has affected the parochial tendencies of the Big Three and enabled minorities to construct their own political future. Winning elections is no longer a guarantee for any of the major ethnic groups. All ethnic groups, majority and minority, must be considered. The current political party in power, the PDP, which has won all four recent elections, is aware of this fact, and its adoption of zoning to rotate presidential candidates among six political zones supports this assertion. Zoning was the dominant discourse in Nigerian politics for the 2011 election. Some see it as regressive, but zoning is an internal party affair and has no effect on Nigeria's constitution or electoral rules. Parties are within their constitutional rights to devise methods of nominating their candidates in order to win elections so long as they conform to election laws and regulations. Those who oppose the practice had more than ten other political parties to join and vote for.

It is the zoning principle that made it possible for the current president, Mr. Jonathan Ebele Goodluck, to succeed Yar'Adua after his death. The zoning made it possible for Mr. Goodluck to win his party nomination, culminating in his election as President in April, 2011. President Goodluck is from an ethnic minority, but won in all the southern states, but one. He also won in 7 of the 19 states in the north, including Abuja, the capital of the country (Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC],2011). His election as President, though too soon to definitely conclude, is a test of how far Nigerian ethnic minorities have come in Nigerian politics and the willingness for ethnic majorities to vote for a candidate from an ethnic minority. Ethnic minorities need to consolidate their political capital by constructing a collective consciousness—a fourth force—that will thrust them onto the center of Nigerian political discourse and power. The conditions to do so are already in place.

5. *Conditions For A Fourth Force Emergence*

The conditions that will develop the fourth force are evident: the common history that ethnic minority groups share of being marginalized by their regional majorities; the creation of states; electoral and constitutional reforms; and the growing political influence of minority ethnic groups. But, even with all of this, will ethnic minorities unite into a political bloc that will have the power to de-emphasize the particularistic ethnic and regional political behavior of Nigerians around the influences of the Big Three?

Current conversations on zoning are instructive. Today, the northern minorities, who have experienced more marginalization than any of the other regional minorities, seem determined to carve out an identity separate from their northern majority. The term "Middle-Belt" is a unifying identity that is more codified than ever. The question of who is a northerner is now the prevailing discourse among northern minorities. It has become a relevant conversation because of the persistent religious crisis in the Northern Region. Northern minorities are predominantly Christians and have, since Sir Ahmadu Bello reign as Premier of the North, resented the de facto Islamization of their ethnic groups. Because of state creation, many of the northern minorities now have controlling population strength in many states. It is just a matter of time before northern minorities develop an understanding of their political power. There have been powerful and influential individuals from northern minority ethnic groups before, but under the banner of "One North, One Destiny," or in the name of protecting "Northern interest", they have been used by the northern majority to further its interests.

While the northern minorities are still fighting to carve out an identity and find freedom from their major ethnic group, western and eastern minorities have made progress. In the Western Region, the minorities were granted a region in 1963 and now several states, and have since become equal to the Yorubas in political influence. In the Eastern Region, the ethnic minorities had states created for them in 1967 with the creation of 12 states during the civil war and have long been liberated from Igbo dominance. Having developed ethnic minority consciousness and identity within their respective regions, it is only a matter of time before Nigerian minorities develop a fourth force that cuts across minority and regional boundaries to influence political discourse and behavior in the country. If the 371 ethnic minorities can mobilize themselves into a political force; the face of Nigerian politics would be greatly affected.

6. Conclusion

Nigeria celebrated its semi- centennial independence on October 1st, last year. If ethnic minorities are empowered, the country can look forward to the next fifty years of independence without a Sir Ahmadu Bello for the Hausa Fulani, or an Obafemi Awolowo for the Yorubas, or a Namdi Azikiwi for the Igbos. Nigeria now has the structure and the institutions to produce a mythic, national figure to unite all its ethnic groups. Nigeria's ethnic minorities will play an instrumental part in this development and in helping Nigeria continue to develop. In the words of Mathew Kukah (2007): "The unity of Nigeria is like a Catholic marriage. It may not be happy but it doesn't break up" (p.1) A fourth force may well be the glue that will hold this marriage together.

References

Akagu, A. (1983), April 20). The minority factor as a third force in the forthcoming elections. *New Nigerian*, pp.3-6.

Awolowo O. (1947). Path to Nigerian Freedom. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.

Barh, F. (1969). *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference.* Boston: Little, Brown.

Chou, R.S. & Feagin, J. (2008). *Myth of the model minority: Asian Americans facing racism.* Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Diamond, L. (1982). Cleavage, conflict, and authority in the second republic. *Journal of modern African Studies, 20,* 4.

Diamond L. (1988). *Class, ethnicity and democracy in Nigeria: The failure of the First republic*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: The Macmillan Press.

Eleazu, U.D. (1988). *History and geography of Nigeria*, pp.1-10. In U.D. Eleazu (ED), *Nigeria: The First Twenty-Five Years (pp1-10).* Lagos: Infodata Limited.

Federal Government of Nigeria. (1999). The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.[Online] Available: http://www.nigerialaw.org/ConstitutionOfTheFederalRepublicOfNigeria.htm

Independent National Electoral Commission. (2011). Summary of the 2011 Presidential election results.[Online] Available : http://www.inecnigeria.org/results/presidential/states.php

Kukah , M. (2007, May 8). Religious Conflict in Nigeria: Contemporary Religious Dynamics in Nigeria – Session 2. *Council on Foreign Relations Lecture Series*. Retrieved August 27, 2010.[Online] Available: http://www.cfr.org/project/1312/religious_conflict_in_nigeria_symposium.html

Lergo, T. (1996): *Paticularism in Voting behavior in Nigeria: The Post –Independence Electorate*. (Doctoral dissertation, Florida State Unversity, 1996)

Macionis J. J. (2010). *Sociology* (13 ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Matthews, H., & Dosunu, F. (1983). Political and economic climate of Nigeria. *Africa today (Special Book Review Issue), 68* ,12.

Okpu, U. (1977). *Ethnic minority problems in Nigerian politics*. Uppsula: Acta Universitalis Uppsaliensis.

Osa Otite, O. (1990). *Ethnic pluralism and ethnicity in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Shaneson C.I. Limited.

Osaghae, E.E.(1991). Ethnic minorities and federalism in Nigeria .*African Affairs, 90,* 237-258

Paden, J.N. (2007, May 8). Religious Conflict in Nigeria: Contemporary Religious Dynamics in Nigeria - Session 2. *Council on Foreign Relations Lecture Series.*[Online]Available: http://www.cfr.org/project/1312/religious_conflict_in_nigeria_symposium.html

Paden, J.N. (1986). *Ahmadu Bello, Sarduna of Sokoto: Values and Leadership in Nigeria.* London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Uwechu, R. (Ed.). (1991). *Africa today* (2nd ed.). London: Africa Books Ltd.