

THE PROMISES AND LIMITATIONS OF DEMOCRACY IN MANAGING ETHNIC CONFLICTS

***Oyekan, Adeolu Oluwaseyi**

Abstract

Most of the conflicts in the world today go on within states rather than between them. Oftentimes, dissimilarities emanating from ethnic and religious differences account for frictions between groups within the state. This creates obvious crises that threaten the peace and stability of the state. Democracy has been touted as a form of government most suited for ensuring peace and stability of the state, owing to its participatory nature. This paper examines in an analytic manner, the relevance of democracy to stability in plural and divided societies. It argues that while democracy, even at the minimum, is characterized by factors that enhance participatory and transparent governance, its understanding and usage needs to be broadened if it is to be effective in addressing the challenge of ethnic conflict in heterogeneous societies. With emphasis on its consociational variant, it argues further that the expanded notion of democracy entails, as a necessary condition, a social contract of the divergent groups within a plural society, within which

***Oyekan, Adeolu Oluwaseyi**
Department of Philosophy, Lagos State University

collective interests and aspirations are distilled and articulated. The paper concludes that a superficial recourse to the practice of democracy in such societies, devoid of a consensual grundnorm remains a tenuous attempt at attaining state stability and legitimacy in plural, conflict-prone societies.

Keywords: Democracy, ethnicity, conflict, consociational, heterogeneous.

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to examine democracy as a concept that has been theoretically advanced, and in many cases, practically deployed, to manage conflicts arising from the contests between identities within a given state. In the wake of crises emerging in states, which are characterized by ethno-religious and socio-cultural differences, scholars have continuously looked for ways of preventing, or at best managing such contestations in a bid to ensure order and stability. Continuous agitations and conflicts within such states, as we see in Syria, Iraq, Central African Republic, and even between blacks, Latinos and whites in the United States, Arab Muslims and whites in France, and Nigeria, among others, suggest that democracy has either not been deployed, wrongfully deployed, or possibly not effective. It could also mean that the level of conflict being witnessed though somewhat worrying, would have been worse had the practice of democracy not been effective to a certain point in containing frequent clashes arising from diversity.

Thus, the question that arises is whether democracy is indeed capable of mitigating the crises that arise out of ethnic contestations. Are there factors that make it suitable for a particular situation and not the other? What are the challenges emanating from the process of democratization, in a bid to further cement the legitimacy of the state, especially in the face of different sectional factors rivaling it for the loyalty of its citizens? These and more are the questions this paper attempts answer.

The paper is divided into four sections. It begins with an introduction, followed by a conceptual analysis of conflict. It then proceeds to examine the nature and dynamics of ethnic conflicts, highlighting the threats they

have come to constitute for stability and order, as the legitimacy of the state comes under constant challenge. The final section examines the challenges associated with democracy, with emphasis on its consociational variant, as a mechanism for the management of crises emanating from heterogeneity.

CONFLICT

Conflict can be described as a situation, in which two or more actors pursue incompatible yet from their individual perspectives, entirely just goals (Wolff, 2006, 2011). According to Robert Hinde (1997), “certain behavioral propensities, including the capacity for aggression, are common to virtually all humans. This does not mean that they are genetically determined ... humans have a capacity to be both aggressive and altruistic... the behavior shown depends on a host of developmental, experiential, social and circumstantial factors.”

Darwin is reputed to have brought to the fore “the competitive struggle for existence” and “the survival of the fittest.” He wrote, “All nature is at war, one organism with another, or with external nature. Seeing the contented face of nature, this may at first be well doubted; but reflection will inevitably prove it is too true” (Charles Darwin quoted in Hyman, 1963: 29).

However, the vulgarization of Darwin’s ideas in the form of “social Darwinism” provided an intellectual rationale for racism, sexism, class superiority, and war. Such ideas as “survival of the fittest,” “hereditary determinism” and “stages of evolution” were eagerly misapplied to the relations between human social groups—classes and nations, as well as social races—to rationalize imperialist policies (Deutsch, 2006: 14). The influence of pseudo-evolutionary thinking was so strong that it gave rise to a new imperialist beatitude: “blessed are the strong, for they shall prey upon the weak” (Banton, 1967: 48). Marx’s revolutionary approach identified class struggle as central to conflicts, averring that as the struggle proceeds, society breaks up more and more into two great hostile camps that are directly antagonistic classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat. He and Engels end their *Communist Manifesto* with an admonition to all workers to

enlist for the class struggle: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite.”

Freud’s view of psychosexual development was largely that of constant struggle between the biologically rooted infantile *id* and the socially determined, internalized parental surrogate, the superego. As Schachtel (1959) has noted, “the concepts and language used by Freud to describe the great metamorphosis from life in the womb to life in the world abound with images. These images are of war, coercion, reluctant compromise, unwelcome necessity, imposed sacrifices, uneasy truce under pressure, enforced detours and roundabout ways to return to the original peaceful state of absence of consciousness and stimulation” (Schachtel, 1959: 10).

Violent human conflict is one of the most, if not the most, complex social phenomenon that human beings experience. In violent human conflict, especially those involving ethnic groups or entire nations, participants often have deep convictions that frequently have bloody consequences in organized action concerning contested geographies, historical narratives, moral grievances, religious values, or sometimes even competing cosmologies and gods. (Galtung, 1996, Boudreau, 2003, Druckman, 2005). To this end, capturing the whole gamut of social conflicts in one breath is a herculean task to say the least. An emphasis on single-sourced cause and effect, cannot capture the complex realities, epistemic pluralism, and contested causes of violent human conflict. From this perspective, to “single source” the cause of a deadly human conflict and attribute it solely to “interests,” “needs,” or “identity” is almost always oversimplified (Boudreau, 2011:21).

For example, Hager (1956) argues that the effort to understand religious conflicts within the same framework as ethnic and racial conflicts, as recommended by Williams (1947) has failed because of certain peculiarities of religion and religious groups. Janowitz (1957) has equally argued that the effort to subsume the phenomena of war under a general theory of conflict is bound to fail, because several unique properties of nation-states and their military institutions require a detailed analysis of the sort lacking in a general theory of conflict. These specialist theories suggest that theories of conflict consist in fully understanding the unique properties peculiar to each phenomena, rather than subsuming them under general principles.

Boudreau recommends an Aristotelian approach to causal explanation as one effective means of understanding the nature and causes of conflicts. First is *The Material Cause*, which consists of the inevitable ecological and geographical embedding of the conflict. The purpose of this “cause” is to reveal or disclose the unique ecologies, contested geographies (localities), competing or contested maps and actual typologies (human perception of these localities) often involved in violent human conflict. Second is *The Efficient Cause or Human Agency*, consisting of competing or contested human behavior, needs, emotions, or agencies engaged in violent human conflicts. Emotional analyses of violent human conflicts, he says, are one of those often-missing causal constructs. Yet, deeply felt hurt or anger can contribute significantly to human conflict. The third is the *Epistemic Cause*, as the “formal cause” which Aristotle defines as the “ways in which we describe” the resulting structure.

Following his lead, the formal cause can be characterized as how those who make knowledge claims *describe and justify* their verbal assertions. Hence, it will be described here as the epistemic cause or causes. It includes the competing knowledge claims, contested histories, competing and socially defined identities, discourses, and narratives by all the epistemic communities involved in violent human conflict used to explain and justify their actions including, among other things, as well as dehumanizing and legitimating the killing of another human being. *The Final Cause* or goals of the participants in a lethal struggle can either be a win/lose Nietzschean “Will to Power” *or*, using the appropriate conflict resolution methods of intervention and transformation, the win/win “Will to Empower”, which benefits potentially all the participants in a violent human conflict. According to him, most violent human conflicts, especially in their escalatory or protracted periods, are characterized by a “will to power” in that each side wants to win.

Yet, as the continuing costs of the conflict become more fully apparent, there is often a rethinking by one, both, or all parties to the conflict concerning how to resolve the contest in which they are engaged. If the goal is “unconditional surrender,” then the result can only be the physical destruction of the opposition. Thus, the outcome for many violent conflicts,

considering the extraordinary costs of “total victory,” is often conditional and incomplete. This reality requires that each side begin to think about what the other side wants, as the conflict reaches an apparent stalemate. At this point, both or all sides are trying to empower both themselves and the enemy in order to live peacefully together in the future. This juncture is the critical transition point of the conflict from a zero/sum, “win/lose,” to a positive sum, or “win/win (Boudreau, 2011: 19-25)

In the view of Conteh-Morgan, there are several factors responsible for conflict between and within states. These factors are numerous and sometimes interwoven. First, the control and distribution of resources underlie group structure and social arrangements within nation-states, and it is these social structural arrangements that constitute the foundation and outcome of power and inequality. Second, because of the realities of power and inequality, competition for and conflict over the control of resources become perennial issues reflected in all relationships and dynamics of social change among groups within the nation state. Resource control shapes behavior and social processes for all actors within the state ranging from the individual to specific groups often manifested in cleavages such as race, gender, class, or religion. Third, while capitalism has become the undisputed economic system in the world following the end of the Cold War, at the same time it produces gross inequalities and social problems such as ethnic discrimination, inflation, or environmental degradation that in turn aggravate tensions among groups in the society. Fourth, the primordial sentiments of presumed common ancestry, racial characteristics, or a common ethno-linguistic background, among others, often intensify and prolong the rivalry among groups thereby further aggravating levels of discrimination and raising the stakes in conflict situations. Fifth, there is an inherent duality in the international system: fragmentation/disintegration and integration/stabilizing forces.¹ International society is characterized by conflict within and among nations. Subgroups, the state, and other actors are in continuous competition and conflict, as well as in cooperation with each other (Conteh-Morgan, 2004:2).

ETHNIC CONFLICTS

Ethnic conflicts, owing to their frequent occurrence in contemporary times, have attracted a lot of scholarly attention, all geared towards a better understanding and curtailment of the phenomenon. Fearon and Laitin (2003) identify no less than 58 ethnic civil wars between 1945 and 1999, constituting 51% of the total number of civil wars. This account is not inclusive of conflicts that are non-violent in nature. Non-violent ethnic conflict can take various forms, such as ethnic groups competing for power through overtly ethnic parties, or a dominant group discriminating against and exploiting weaker groups or those in the minority. This often happens when such groups wield official authority, for as Esman (1994:229) puts it, when an ethnic group gains control of the state, important economic assets are soon transferred to the members of that community. Since the end of the cold war, civil wars have become more common than interstate wars and probably a fair proportion of these involve competing ethnic groups. (Sarkees et al, 2003). This seems contrary to the position of some scholars such as Gilley (2004) who dispute the existence or rise of ethnic conflict in recent times.

Ethnic conflict has been defined as political or social conflict involving one or more groups, which are identified by some marker of ethnic identity (King, 2001:165). Ethnic conflicts are a form of group conflict in which at least one of the parties involved interprets the conflict, its causes, and potential remedies along an actually existing or perceived discriminating ethnic divide (Wolff, 2006). It has also been said that conflict occurs when groups feel threatened with loss of previously acquired privilege, or conversely feel that it is a politically opportune moment to overcome a longstanding denial of privilege (Osinubi & Osinubi, 2006: 104).

While ethnic conflicts mostly occur in heterogeneous societies, they are by no means a universal feature of all such societies. In many heterogeneous nations, ethnic groups coexist peacefully. For instance, relationships between Estonians and Russians in Estonia and the complex interaction between the different linguistic groups in Canada, Belgium, and France are characterized by distinct ethnic identities and oftentimes different interests, yet their manifestations are less violent, and it is far less com-

mon to describe these situations as ethnic conflicts. Instead, terms such as ‘tension’, ‘dispute’, and ‘unease’ are used. Even in societies where they occur, ethnic conflicts are not necessarily permanent features. Many ethnically heterogeneous societies experience long (sometimes very long) periods of harmonious ethnic relations before or after periods of conflict (Caselli and Coleman 2013).

The literature on ethnic conflict is so wide and diverse. For our purpose here however, it is sufficient to note two broad categories of factors that scholars have identified as being at the base of ethnic conflict which are: instrumentalist (sometimes also called rationalist) and primordialist (or consummatory). Instrumentalist explanations emphasize the fact that participants in conflict hope to derive some material benefit from the conflict, such as jobs, wealth, or power. Primordialist views focus on the visceral dimension of conflict, which they interpret as an eruption of mutual antipathy (Caselli and Coleman 2013). The primordialist account of conflict has become increasingly unpopular, as many literatures on collective violence have shown that they cannot be blamed on blood thirsty, sadistic, psychopathic perpetrators nor on some dark streak in human nature. The evidence supports the “ordinary man” notion expressed by Atran (2003), Staub (1989), and Mann (2005:5) that “under particular circumstances most people have the capacity for extreme violence and destruction of human life” and that “ordinary people are brought by normal social structures into committing murderous ethnic cleansing” (Oberschall, 2010).

Bates (1982) argues that ethnic conflict is conflict among rational agents over scarce resources. Yet, it is one fact worth noting that exclusivist accounts of ethnic conflict hardly capture the wide range of causes in a way that elicits holistic response. A proper understanding of the causes of ethnic political mobilization and conflict is crucial, and requires that we move beyond simplistic discussions to search for explanations that are more systematic.

Donald Horowitz (1985) attempts a combination of primordialist and instrumentalist elements in his analysis of ethnic conflicts. A central element of his analysis is the role of self-esteem that individuals derive, from seeing members of their ethnic group succeed in business and especially, in poli-

tics. This allows group leaders (who view ethnicity instrumentally) to galvanize ethnic support whether in the form of votes for ethnic parties or participation in violent confrontations. The stakes in ethnic conflicts are extremely diverse, ranging from legitimate political, social, cultural, and economic grievances of disadvantaged ethnic groups to predatory agendas of states and small cartels of elites, to so-called national security interests, among others (Wolff, 2006:3).

Bojana Blagojevic, in the same vein rejects the mono-causal account of ethnic conflicts. Rather, he argues, “that ethnic conflict occurs when a particular set of factors and conditions converge. These factors include a major structural crisis; presence of historical memories of inter-ethnic grievances; institutional factors that promote ethnic intolerance; manipulation of historical memories by political entrepreneurs to evoke emotions such as fear, resentment, and hate toward the “other”; and an inter-ethnic competition over resources and rights” (Blagojevic, 2009: 2).

Given the above, a pertinent question is that of how to manage the numerous factors that catalyze conflicts among different interests and groups within the society. While conflict may not necessarily be totally eradicated as long as there are interests, especially conflicting ones, addressing the obvious causes can go a long way in extinguishing the embers of strife in heterogeneous societies. In the opinion of some scholars, democracy represents the best approach to deal with ethnic conflicts in modern societies. In the next section, we shall examine the philosophical cogency of this approach to ethnic conflicts.

DEMOCRACY AND CONFLICT

The question of whether, and how, democracy can survive in heterogeneous societies has long been a source of controversy among scholars of politics. Some political thinkers have argued that stable democracy is possible only in relatively homogeneous societies. John Stuart Mill, for example, doubts the congruity of democracy with the structure of a multi-ethnic society, as ‘free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities’ (1861, 230). This view was strongly held by scholars until at least the 1960s, with the perils of ‘tribalism’ and ethnic division frequently

cited as causing the failure of democracy in the newly independent states of Africa and Asia in the post-war period (Low 1991, 272-3).

Much of this thinking regarded ethnic conflicts as primordial and irrational manifestations of traditional rivalries and passions, leaving little or no room for explanations based on the objectives and interests of those involved in such conflicts. When scholars did turn their attention towards such interests, many saw more reasons for the failure of democracy in heterogeneous societies than for its endurance. One notable instance is the rational actor arguments against the likelihood of stable democracy in divided societies put up by Rabushka and Shepsle (1972), who argue that would-be political leaders typically find the rewards of moving towards extremist rhetoric greater than moving towards those of moderation. Because ethnic identities tend to be invested with a great deal of symbolic and emotional meaning, aspiring politicians hungry for electoral success have strong incentives to harness these identities as a political force, and to use communal demands as the base instigator of constituency mobilisation.

The relationship between democracy and ethnic conflict has been brought into sharper perspective by two countervailing themes that have dominated world politics over the past decade: the 'third wave' of democratisation, and the explosion of inter-communal ethnic violence around the globe (Reilly, 2004). Beginning with the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Spain and Portugal in 1974, and working its way through Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia, the 'third wave' of democratisation has seen a threefold increase in the number of democratic governments around the world (Huntington 1991). At the same time as this massive transformation, however, the world has witnessed a great upsurge in intra-state violence and ethnic conflict. Transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy have been accompanied, in many cases, by rising levels of internal conflict, particularly ethnic conflict (de Nevers 1993).

The role of public institutions and rules in shaping human interaction cannot be over-emphasized. They reduce uncertainty by establishing stable and predictable structures for interactions between people, either as individuals or as groups (North 1990). To this end, democracy depends not only on economic and social conditions but also on the design of political

institutions (March and Olsen 1984, 738). An influential opinion today is that institutions are of paramount importance for the longer-term prospects of democratic consolidation and sustainability (Diamond, Linz and Lipset 1995, 33), and that 'different institutional forms, rules, and practices can have major consequences both for the degree of democracy in a democratic system and for the operation of the system' (Lijphart 1991, ix). This recognition of the importance of institutions has been accompanied by an emerging concern with the importance of engineering political rules to improve the operation of political processes and institutions (Horowitz 1991, Ordeshook 1996). This is because institutions change outcomes, and changing formal political institutions can result in changes in political behaviour and political practice.

Centripetalism as an approach conceives democracy as a continual process of conflict management, a recurring cycle of dispute resolution through which contentious issues are resolved by means of negotiation and reciprocal cooperation. Centripetalism is skeptical of the view that disputes involving diverse interests are resolvable by majority decision. In plural societies split along several cleavage lines, the intermixture of ethnic identities with non-ethnic or crosscutting issues could create the potential for diverse coalitions of interest. However, the possibilities of such cross-ethnic dialogues are often undermined by the dominance of overarching group identities and loyalties.

On this score therefore, one prominent claim is that the key to regulating ethnic conflict is to change the conditions that encourage it, through alternative institutional designs. One strategy, as advocated by Donald Horowitz (1985, 1991), is to design electoral rules that make politicians reciprocally dependent on the votes of members of groups other than their own. To build support from other groups, candidates must act with tolerance and accommodation on core issues of general concern. In ethnically divided societies, this means that electoral incentives can promote broader changes in political behaviour, and small minorities have a value in terms of where their votes are directed, as small number of votes could always make the difference between victory and defeat for major candidates.

Further, some scholars are of the view that some forms of proportional representation are essential if democracy is to survive the strains of deep-rooted ethnic divisions. For example, Arthur Lewis's study of the failure of post-colonial democracy in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone in the late 1950s and 1960s prompted him to argue that divided societies need proportional representation to 'give minorities adequate representation, discourage parochialism, and force moderation on the political parties' (1965, 73). Such arguments foreshadowed, in part, consociational approaches to managing ethnic cleavages in divided societies. Consociationalism emphasises the need for divided societies to develop mechanisms for elite power sharing if democracy is to survive. These are encapsulated in four key features: a broad coalition government in which all significant groups are represented; proportional representation of different groups in the distribution of legislative seats and the civil service; segmental autonomy through power devolution; and a power of veto over key decisions by minority groups (Lijphart 1977). According to Lijphart, consociational democracy violates the principle of majority rule, but it does not deviate very much from normative democratic theory (Lijphart, 1969: 214). The basic argument for consociationalism, as opposed to a simple majority rule, is that it prevents the outbreak of open conflict in socially heterogeneous societies (Lijphart, A., 1984, Andeweg, R., 2000, Binningsbo, H. M., 2005).

Critics of consociational democracy range from liberals, feminists to socialists. One criticism central to most of their arguments is that consociational democracy promotes rather than deter conflict. They argue that this is why there are many cases of failed consociationalism (Schneckener, 2002, Samir Makdisi and Marcus Marktanner, 2008). In their shared opinion, Consociational democracy freezes and institutionally privileges (undesirable) collective identities at the expense of more emancipated and progressive identities. Consociationalism, rather than resolve conflicts, regulates a stalemate around the relevant identities (O' Leary, 2005: 5). Consociational democracy, it is said, is elitist and postpones rather than facilitate the democratization of multi-ethnic societies (Brass, 1991).

In contrast, centripetalists argue that the best way to mitigate the destructive effects of ethnicity in divided societies is not to simply replicate exist-

ing ethnic divisions in the legislature, but to utilize electoral systems, which encourage cooperation and accommodation between rival groups, and work to break down the salience of ethnicity rather than foster its relevance. The most powerful electoral systems for heterogeneous societies, flowing from the argument of Horowitz, are those, which actively attempt to transcend the political salience of ethnicity by promoting accommodation and bargaining across group lines. Preferential systems, by enabling electors to rank candidates in the order of their choice on the ballot, can provide parties and candidates in divided societies with an incentive to 'pool votes'. This can be done via the exchange of preferences between their supporters.

A possible consociationalist reply is that a key problem with the centripetalists' approach is that it does not have the remotest prospect of winning cross-community support, let alone delivering justice and stability. While it may be difficult to criticize social transformation or emancipation as a long-term objective, there is no significant evidence that it can be achieved, especially outside the context of a mutually acceptable political settlement (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006).

If this is granted, it becomes evident that democracy, if it is to bring maximum dividends in heterogeneous, conflict-prone societies, needs to be foregrounded by certain basic principles of mutual acquiescence. This is because without the resolution of issues bothering on core values and group interests, formal democracy becomes a cosmetic apparatus, which confers a semblance of legitimacy on the state even while the state remains a doubtful embodiment of the synthesized aspirations of the various groups that make it up. The foregrounding social contract, when put in place however, becomes an over-arching framework within which a plural, stable, and democratic state regulates its affairs for the sustenance of social order. While this process itself is democratic by virtue of its inclusiveness and participatory nature, it differs from the everyday usage and practice of the word as a system of government. In articulating a consensually agreeable contract of all the parties (different groups, which is) within the state, nothing, beyond the right of such groups to legitimize the process with their consent, is taken as given.

Within the context of Nigeria, as an instance of a post-colonial state where the issue of statehood has been taken for granted, a sustained period of democratic rule has not quite succeeded in addressing the national question. This borders on how the different nationalities ought to relate with one another as co-habitants of a single, sovereign state. It should be noted that the fault lines of a nation as plural as Nigeria is often utilised by the political class in the struggle for power and resources. The important question to ask is why such fault lines remain a veritable tool easily exploited and used as a bargaining tool. The answer, it seems, lies in the inevitability of negotiation. In place of a basic, group-based negotiation between the different nationalities, what have been in place are short-term deals between the political elites of each group, as opposed to an overarching, bottom-up negotiations. This tendency to micro-manage the core issues has meant that they continue to mutate and recur within the evolving contexts of local and global developments.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the nature of conflicts, especially within the prism of ethnicity in heterogeneous states. Given the recurrent and prevalent nature of ethnic-related conflicts in many parts of the world, effort has also been made to see whether democracy represents a sufficient panacea to this strand of identity politics. While not disputing the near-universal consensus of the relevance of democracy to sustainable stability and progress in a given society, it has been argued that enduring stability and state legitimacy in a plural society rests on the existence of ground rules. These rules should embody the values and aspirations of the diverse groups out of which a cohesive society is to be built. Transparent periodic elections, accountable leadership, separation of powers are necessary in order to sustain order within any polity, but they do not on their own address, in an in-depth manner, the question of differing group values, minority inclusion, and resource allocation among others.

In Africa, the post-colonial crisis of legitimacy remains a challenge being grappled with by many nations amalgamated prior to the departure of the colonialists. The shaky foundation upon which the states have been built has allowed for a festering of the contradictions within the process. These

contradictions continue to manifest in the form of corruption, bad leadership, and most significantly, inter-group conflicts that continue to threaten the legitimacy of the state. The crisis of underdevelopment is likely to become increasingly complex unless serious efforts are made to address the underlying issues through the articulation of a contractual charter to which the different groups within the affected states subscribe.

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