REFLECTIONS ON THE CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN AFRICA: ETHNICITY OR FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP?

By

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Introduction

In 1994 in Rwanda, approximately 800,000 Tutsi men, women and children were brutally murdered in less than 100 days. Within four months, an estimated 1.75 million people, or a quarter of the country's pre-war population, had either died or fled the country. The escalation of the Rwandan Genocide in April 1994 resulted in the death of up to one million people. Agriculture, the main occupation of the population, was severely affected as civil strife heightened in the middle of the growing season. Overall harvest losses during this period were officially estimated by non-governmental organizations to be as high as 60%.

From the cases of Somalia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Angola, to Liberia, there have been over 9 million refugees and hundreds and thousands of other people slaughtered in Africa alone. If this magnitude of annihilation and hostility had occurred in Europe, it would in all probability have been referred to as World War III with countries from all parts of the world rushing to provide aid, mediate and otherwise try to diffuse the situation! Africa remains the most war-ravaged continent in the world. The most accepted if not the most upheld view on the cause of widespread conflict in Africa is that ethnicity is the origin of conflicts of Africa. At colonization African communities were expected to abandon their traditional values and adopt new identities, which were perceived to be modern. Modernization in this regard meant transforming the
communities from their barbaric nature and values into a new set of progressive or modern values. This situation was captured eloquently by Richard H. Robbins in, Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism,

“We must remember that the European agreements that had carved up Africa into states paid little attention to cultural and ethnic boundaries and ethnic groups had little opportunity or need to form political alliances or accommodations under repressive colonial rule.... Think of countries such as Canada, which has been trying for hundreds of years with mixed success to accommodate only two linguistic groups ...English and French ...and you get an idea of the problems of African states with far greater cultural and linguistic divisions.”

That ethnicity or tribalism constitutes a key element of internal conflicts in Africa is not in doubt. Indeed a historical account of creation of modern day African states shows certain innate conditions that have been said to influence the occurrence and characterize the nature of conflicts in the continent. This position is drawn from the fact that at independence, the African entity did not possess one coherent and functional unit. With the exception of Morocco, no other African states existed as self-entities before colonization. The African state comprised different ethnic groups, kingdoms and empires hence different political cultures. Some of these kingdoms and empires had been longstanding antagonists and this was not going to end by the creation of one state engulfing these entities under one umbrella. Each of these kingdoms had their own political and social organization and by creation of one unified state they were in the essence being compelled to tolerate each other and co-exist peacefully and in a flash forget their past relations. This could only have one natural consequence: civil strife. Thus, the underlying nature of ethnicity in African conflicts ought to be viewed as a reality imposed by history rather than the primary cause of conflicts in the continent.

1. Investigating The Cause Of Conflicts In Africa: Case Studies
Countless reasons have been advanced in an attempt to explain the reason why conflicts rant and rave in the African continent more than in any other continent in the world. From the stresses of modernization and the nation building process, to limited resources, lack of foreign exchange, and even the inadequacy of iodine in the African diet! The most commonly advanced reason as alluded to earlier is said to be ethnicity. But what exactly is ethnicity? It refers to a shared cultural identity involving similar practices, initiations, beliefs, and linguistic features passed over from one generation to another. Therefore many countries in Africa can be termed as being multi-ethnic for example Nigeria which has over 250 tribes, Kenya with over 40 and Tanzania with over 60. A majority of writers have identified ethnicity as the cause of political instability, chaos, and bloodshed that has rocked the African continent. Further that African conflicts are attributable to the multi-ethnic nature of the African state thereby rendering it inherently conflictual. The only end to instability is in this regard said to be through transcending ethnicity or tribalism through modernization.

It takes a careful examination of the situations prevailing in Africa to realize that the cause of conflict in Africa is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. The place of ethnicity in these conflicts is just but a means or mode through which African leaders seek to satisfy their own selfish whims and desires. Notions such as civilization and modernization cannot be institutionalized or imposed upon a people but are cultivated and nurtured until they blossom. This proposition is clearly illustrated by an examination of the cases of Liberia, Rwanda, and Somalia amongst others.

1.1 The Liberian Conflict

Historical insight is inexorable in analyzing and comprehending the character of the Liberian conflict. Liberia, which means ‘Land of the Free’, was founded by the American Colonization Society in the 19th century, a private group run in part by white slave owners which encouraged the emigration of free blacks to Africa from America. The
society considered blacks an economic burden and potential troublemakers. The first group of immigrants, 86 in number, formed the nucleus of the settler population (Americo-Liberians) of what has become known today as the Republic of Liberia. The formation of Liberia did not occur without difficulty. Owing to the settlers’ acquired enterprising skills, they inevitably became the new leaders of the Republic. Years of oppressive rule ensued and for about 133 years after independence, Liberia was a one party state ruled by the minority ‘Americo-Liberians’ who oppressed the locals to the extent of even denying them the right to vote under the constitution. Their conviction of cultural superiority despite being a minority and constant forceful acquisition of land piloted by their leaders in power led to continual friction and warfare with the indigenous groups. On April 12, 1980 the first, native Liberian Master Samuel K. Doe, came into power by way of a coup d’etat ousting the then Liberian president William R. Tolbert Jr. who was of Americo-Liberian descent, setting into motion the cycle of violence seen today.

From this brief account of the conflict it is lucid that the Liberian conflict is more attributable to the absence of democracy and democratic values in the leadership than in ethnic affiliation. The key rebel groups in Liberia, the Liberians United For Reconciliation And Democracy (LURD) is an insurgency group that has as its main objective to build and sustain a stable democracy in the Republic of Liberia. Although there have been some off shoots from LURD often said to be ethnically divided, leading to the creation of the United Liberation Movement (ULIMO) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), the two factions are united in one common objective; to restore democracy in Liberia and the conflict remains one aimed at realizing democratic governance rather than eliminating one ethnic group.

1.2 The Case of Rwanda
Commonly referred to as the land of a thousand hills, Rwanda’s population is made up of three ethnic groupings – 84 per cent Hutu, 15 percent Tutsi and 1 per cent Twa. Hutus have been mainly agricultural laborers while the Tutsi landowners. The genesis of civil unrest in Rwanda can be traced to the era of Belgian colonial rule that is to say from 1916-1962 which was characterized by poor or dissimilar divisions between the two principal ethnicities by the colonial administration. Tutsis were favored in terms of education and employment over the Hutus who were neglected. The administration introduced identity cards to distinguish one’s ethnic origin. These acts unsurprisingly led to tensions between the two groups. In 1959, civil war led to the overthrow of the then ruling Tutsi King, and the granting of independence three years later paved way for a Hutu-led government. Over the next several years, thousands of Tutsis were killed, and an estimated 150,000 were driven into exile in neighboring countries. The children of these exiles later formed the rebel group Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) which was predominantly Tutsi. In 1990 RPF invaded Rwanda demanding democracy, good governance and the right of refugees displaced from earlier violence to return to Rwanda. In a bid to quell this conflict, the 1993 the government and the RPF entered into Arusha Peace Accord and it provided for the creation of a transitional government led by Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana. On April 6th, 1994 a plane carrying Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down thereby killing him. That night has gone down in history as the night when the Genocide of an estimated one million people commenced. Immediately after the plane crash, which took place shortly after dark, roadblocks were erected all over Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, and Hutu extremist militias took to the streets. The murder of the President gave the Hutu extremists the possibility to take power in Rwanda and initiating systematic elimination of their political Hutu opponents and of the Tutsi minority. However in mid-1994 after millions had lost their lives, the RPF managed to take control of the country under the leadership of Major General Paul Kagame.
The Rwandan conflict derived from a legitimate want of democracy rather than a struggle for power between the Hutu and the Tutsi. The seed ethnic tension that characterized the whole conflict was sowed the colonial administration in favoring the Tutsi who were landowners over the Hutus who were agriculturalists. The colonial administration having been preoccupied with acquiring large tracts of land for incoming white settlers, found the Tutsi more useful to them. Besides, the Rwandan Patriotic Front which was itself comprised of opponents of the dictatorship of Hutu President Juvenal both Hutu and Tutsi and considered all those who remained in Rwanda following the civil war 1990, (irrespective of whether they were Tutsi or Hutu) collaborators of his totalitarian regime. Likewise, the RPF’s opponents, was composed of mainly Hutu militia sponsored by the government of President Juvenal. It is therefore apparent that, contrary to public opinion, ethnicity was just but a salient feature of the Rwandan Genocide. The principal factor that led the populous to conflict was want of non-discriminatory governance.

1.3 The Case of Sudan

War has dominated life in Sudan since it’s independence in 1956. In the past 20 years, it has been reported by human rights organizations that at least two million people have died as a result of this fighting and at least four million have been forced to move from their homes. Sudan’s conflict is centered around control over strategic areas near the oilfields. Access to these benefits is concentrated in the hands of a small, wealthy elite based in the capital, Khartoum, in the north. Sudanese communities outside Khartoum, and the poor in Khartoum, are marginalized from decision-making and do not benefit from the country's wealth. This dissatisfaction is what has fuelled conflict, particularly between groups like the SPLM (Sudan People Liberation Movement) in the south and the Khartoum government in the North and also between the government and opposition groups in the west, north and east of the country. Smaller-scale conflicts have also been common between rival ethnic groups in the southern part of the
country. These conflicts and divisions have however been exploited by the Sudanese government in Khartoum and the SPLM to co-opt forces into the wider war hence the view that the Sudanese conflict like all other African conflicts has an ethnic undertone. Recently the Darfur region became the scene of a bloody rebellion against the Arab-dominated Sudanese government, with two local rebel groups the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) who accused the government of oppressing black Africans in favor of Arabs. In response, the government in Khartoum, mounted a campaign of aerial bombardment supporting ground attacks by an Arab militia, known as the Janjaweed. The government-supported Janjaweed have been accused of committing major human rights violations, including mass killing, looting, and rapes of the non-Arab population of Darfur. They have frequently burnt down whole villages, driving the surviving inhabitants to flee to refugee camps, mainly in Darfur and Chad. By the July this year, it was reported that approximately 50,000–80,000 people had been killed and at least a million had been driven from their homes. Once more, it is patently obvious from situation in Sudan that the need for good leadership is at the core of the conflict. Many writers have described the war between the Khartoum-based government and the SPLM rebel movement as a war between the Muslim north and the Christian south hence a religious conflict. This may however be considered a sweeping statement, as many Muslim groups in the north have opposed the northern government and the war has also included groups from areas outside of the geographical south, such as the Nuba Mountains, Abyei and Southern Blue Nile.

2. Conclusion

Ethnicity has been given as a reason to explain the cause of civil strife in Africa. Consequently, the word ethnic has come to evoke in the court of public opinion, a negative nuance associated with primitivism and barbarism which has been said to lead in nearly all cases to violence that can take and has taken horrible forms. Ethnicity on its own is not a negative concept. Indeed the peculiar ways of dress, types of food and
dance of a given group of people are in themselves not destructive. What is destructive is isolationist ethnicity carried out by those in authority and has been the cause of civil strife that characterizes Africa today. A leader is instrumental in creating the mood, ideals and general character that prevails in his or her country at any given time. Where a leader not only speaks of reconciliation and unity, but also practices the same, then such practice spills over to the local populous and a mood of peace and sense of unity take center stage. On the contrary where a leader engages in ethnic politics either by publicly denouncing an ethnic group or remaining silent upon such denunciation or condoning the practice of the same in institutions, he only creates an atmosphere of animosity between ethnic groups in his country and suspicion. This rather than ethnicity on its own, has been the cause of most of the conflicts that have haunted the African continent. Unpatriotic African leaders have used ethnicity to safeguard their own interests. This is evident from the account of the Rwandan genocide where a government supported and owned Radio Broadcasting station was used to urge members of the Hutu to rise up against the Tutsi stating that it was only through their elimination that peace would prevail. Similarly in the Liberian conflict, the government of Charles Taylor succeeded in splitting the LURD rebel group along ethnic lines so as to minimize opposition to his rule. It is imperative that the cause of conflict in Africa be understood. Conflict occurs when there is a lack of effective leadership. Misapprehension of this reality has led to the employment of ineffectual policies and approaches to reconciliation hence the failure of many peace efforts. In this regard, whereas ethnicity or tribalism is a prominent feature in African conflicts, the root cause of conflicts in the continent is multifaceted composing more than one factor. The principal factor behind these conflicts is simply and squarely a failure of leadership.
References


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