PEACE BY PEACEFUL MEANS? A POST-HOC ANALYSIS OF THE ‘ABUJA PEACE ACCORD’ ON ELECTION VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The signing on Wednesday, 14 January, 2015 of the celebrated Abuja Peace Accord by the presidential candidates of the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and eleven others, including the major opposition party, All Progressives Congress (APC) signaled for the first time a conscious effort by Nigerian political gladiators to give peace a chance. Although unique in the sense that two retired foremost international diplomats were deeply involved in drafting and moderating the signing of the Peace Accord, a critical-analytical dissection of the spirit and content as well as the practical benefits and weaknesses of the agreement reveal a thin success in a post-hoc mode. This paper teases out the forces and factors that were responsible for the semi-success and semi-failure of the stated goals of the Accord.

1.0 Introduction

Violence has inhibited democratic development across the continent of Africa. As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, Nigeria has faced several challenges of diversity. Political violence has deep historical roots in Nigeria—the manifestations of which are still very prominent. For instance, since 1999, ethnic conflicts, religious crisis, and electoral violence, fueled by ethnic, religious or political affiliations and sentiments, have claimed thousands of lives in Nigeria. Violence has not only led to exclusion of many voters from the democratic process, it has contributed to political instability. With the opening of the democratic space in 1998/99 following the return of constitutional democracy, several ethno-political and socio-cultural groups rose up to make big demands on the Nigerian state. Ethnic minorities in the oil producing states, through regional associations such as the Ijaw National Congress, Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND, and the South-south Peoples’ Assembly continue to make demands for bigger share of the country’s revenue for the region because that is why the oil is exploited.

The struggle to gain attention of government and the multinational corporations to the developmental problems of the Niger Delta region soon turned to militancy.
Militants devised various strategies, including abducting oil workers, expatriate staff of oil companies and politicians and relatives of politicians in the region. Only recently have many of them begun to participate in the federal government-initiated amnesty programme by which the ‘commanders’ and their ‘creek soldiers’ laid down their arms. The Amnesty became more successful when Goodluck Jonathan, an Ijaw indigene, from the Niger Delta became the Acting President and was later elected President.

Prior to the violence caused by agitators in the Niger Delta, the country had witnessed interethnic and ethno-religious crisis. Between 1999 and 2000, hundreds of lives were lost as a result of inter-ethnic and inter-religious groups that were provoked by the introduction of Sharia (Islamic) penal code in some parts of the North. The crisis got worse in the form of counter-attacks in the South. This led to a resurgence of armed ethnic militias like the Oodua People’s Congress in the South West (Yoruba) zone, the Bakassi Boys in the East, and the Arewa People’s Congress in the North.

The tension that the Sharia controversy generated dragged the country backwards in democratic and developmental terms. Neither the presidency nor the National Assembly nor the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council, (NIREC), set up to maintain inter-faith understanding, was able to stop the carnage. The Sharia controversy indeed further raised questions about secularism in Nigeria. Although the country’s constitution takes a religiously neutral stance, contradictions and diversity locked in the multiplicity of ethnicity and socio-cultural settings have rather blurred the formal separation of religion from politics (Omotola 2009 and Suberu 2009)

Lately too, successive high casualty terrorist bombings (HCTB) by a sect called ‘Boko Haram’ (‘Western Education is Sin’) in parts of the North have claimed several lives and property. The Boko Haram has wreaked havoc especially in the Northern states of Borno, Bauchi, Kano, Kaduna, Kogi, Plateau, Adamawa and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja. The sect attracted global attention when it claimed responsibility for the bombing of the United Nations House in Nigeria’s Federal Capital Territory, Abuja on 26 August 2011. In short, the ‘Boko Haram insurgency has reopened the deep fissures in the polity’ exposing the deep-rooted differences between the North and the South despite almost 100 years of their ‘forced union’ by Britain (Sunday Punch 19 August 2012).

Similarly, post-presidential election violence has been recorded since the country adopted presidential system in 1979. According to the New York-based Human Rights Watch and the Nigeria-based Centre for Peace Building and Socio-Economic Resources Development, no fewer than 10, 000 people died as a result of electoral violence between 1999 and 2011 (The Punch 30 March 2011). As a consequence of the high level of violence experienced, Nigeria has been described as ‘a critically weak state’. Unlike in the parliamentary systems such as United
Kingdom and South Africa where the Prime Minister or President are not directly elected, popular election of presidents, fueled by tensed regional struggles for presidential power, have been sources of higher level violence in Nigeria.

Essentially, the case of Nigeria shows a link between party politics, ethno-religious conflicts and electoral violence. For instance, the political culture of violence in parts of the North was aggravated following the loss of presidential elections by Retired General Buhari of the Congress for Progressive Change. While it was obvious that the CPC candidate (a Muslim Northerner) lost to the PDP candidate (a Christian Southerner), on long-held regional, religious and ethnic grounds, it was the sharp struggle for the presidency that led to the wanton scale of violence in 2011. This was despite the fact that the election was seen and described by both the local and international observers as substantially free and fair.

Waves of violence have thus affected the socio-political stability and thus democratic growth in Nigeria. President Jonathan alluded to this at the 60th National Executive meeting of the PDP. Describing the insecurity, particularly the one posed by the Boko Haram sect in the North, as the most fundamental issue confronting his administration, the president said the challenges have prevented the fulfillment of the ruling party’s campaign promise to the people (The Nation 18 July 2012). Similarly, activities of the insurgents were prominently cited by the security chiefs thereby necessitating the postponement of the 2015 general elections earlier slated for February till March and April, 2015.

Consequently, the rampant nature of violence across the country can be explained in two main ways. Firstly, the country had been marked by a legacy of exclusionary rule in forms of militarism, which practically helped to militarize virtually all the facets of the Nigerian society, coupled with a high level of economic inequality. Up until 2009, Nigeria had never had an unbroken decade of multiparty democratic rule. Being in its second decade of democratization, the country faces the huge challenge of delivering social justice and public service to the majorities of the people. The social exclusion and poverty of the downtrodden (that is, the mass of the people) have made many citizens very vulnerable to violence and institutions of democratic politics prone to retrogression.

Secondly, the country’s problems are manifested not just in various conflicts but also in the approaches people deploy to prosecute their claims against one another, on the one hand, and against the state, on the other. The inability of the states to envisage and tackle the root causes of such violent crisis has only led to more of particular kinds of violence in both cases. Examples of such violent mass actions include rampant electoral and ethno-religious violent acts. Whereas more politically motivated violence in Nigeria is incentivized by the presidential nature of politics that centralizes powers and resources and make electoral contests more of inter-ethnic wars, the trend of violence has been more of regional power
struggles and structural poverty and inequality. In most of the cases, it is the historically entrenched rivalry between the North versus South, Muslims versus Christians and politically fragile relations that cause violence in Nigeria, even though much of this violence has been motivated by politically desperate elites who often use the youths as pawns.

2.0 Literature Review

At the conceptual level, what constitutes “Peace” is debatable. This is because while scholars such as Galtung (1969) called for an understanding of peace not necessarily being the opposite binary of structural violence, emphasizing the dichotomy between positive peace and negative peace, peace theorists including Schmid (1968) argued that much of peace research had focused on negative peace and that positive peace or what we may call ‘idealist peace’ was bound to fail. For Weber (1999), Galtung’s conception of binaries of positive peace and negative peace should be taken further to dissect the connection between structural violence and its elimination (namely, positive peace).

Furthermore, Galtung (1996) made a rigorous argument for a proposal of ‘peace by peaceful means, which in essence correlates with the ‘Accord’ style and approach being adopted by conflicting parties who want to prevent war or avoid or mitigate against structural violence or conflict, be it latent and apparent.

As it were, negative peace is the absence of physical violence which the State could maintain even if through repression. On the other hand, positive peace is maintained by consensus or accord by state or non-state actors. Related to electoral violence prevention, one would intuitively expect positive variant of peace to emanate from Peace Accord. Nevertheless, we argue that the ‘social cosmology’ (Galtung, 1981) of the Nigerian State does not bode well for consensual or positive peace, especially when high level politics or presidential power struggle is involved.

In essence, in conceptualizing peace, one should contextualize its cosmological ecology. In other words, the feasibility of peace is demonstrated in its ecological realities. Peace agreements, which are aimed at ‘civic democratization’ (Hemmer, Graham, Garb and Phillips, 2006), are more likely to succeed when the prevailing democratic, social, economic and political order are conducive to the very idea of peace-building.

Theoretically, peace is neither elusive nor does it exist in a vacuum. Based on certain postulations, it is analytically feasible to trace the causes and consequences of certain social phenomena including peace. In this work, we choose to apply the liberal peace theory or what can be as well described as democratic peace theory. This theory hinges on the assumption that liberal societies usually democracies are more likely to be peaceful as a result of availability of socio-cultural norms associated with peacemaking. Such prevailing circumstances include democracy
promotion, the rule of law and good governance, promotion of human rights, economic reforms and privatization (Zakari, 2003; Franks and Richmond, 2008).

Nevertheless, while some of the conditions for liberal peace do enhance ‘social engineering’ and consensus – building, (Heathershaw, 2008), it is not usually the case that liberal peace will prevail only when a state proclaims the ingredients of liberal democracy. As in the case with Nigeria, and other developing liberal democracies, the role of political elites and their somewhat overbearing ‘illiberal’ tendencies inhibit sustainable peace-building mechanisms.

3.0 Design and Methodology

The research employs the descriptive-prescriptive case study analysis using documentary method of data collection. The combination of these frameworks amounts to a qualitative analysis which is most relevant to this inquiry. This allows for analytical-critical analysis of relevant literature as well as technical and media reports that are relevant to the Abuja Peace Accord. Specifically, documentary reports on election violence in Nigeria pre and post-election periods are teased out to make post-hoc event analysis. This design and method are most apt for the research at hand in two important ways. First, the Abuja Accord is itself a ‘document’ supplying the fundamentals of the analysis. In other words, it is only with the Accord document that we can appreciate the gap between the theory and practice of what is contained in the Accord. Second, with a descriptive-prescriptive framework, the analysis is able to engage a qualitative review of the post-hoc events that have shaped the reliability and validity or otherwise of the core elements of the Accord.

4.0 The Abuja Peace Accord: A Post-hoc Inquiry

The idea of an Accord is not new in Nigeria. The last time a popular Accord was signed was in 1967; it was an effort critically necessary to prevent a full blown civil war. That Aburi Accord (signed in Aburi, Ghana) between the leaders of the Federal Government and the Eastern Nigeria (breaking away as Biafra) later hit a cul de sac as a result of the lack of consensus on its form and content. Although entirely different in concept, both the Aburi and Abuja Accords were not entirely different in context because the idea remained to prevent conflict or violence. In Aburi, to avoid a war; in Abuja, to prevent electoral violence, of course, the end of which is hardly predictable. In the Abuja Peace Accord, signed by 12 presidential candidates in the presence of eminent personalities such as the former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Anan and former Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Emeka Anyaoku, all the presidential candidates pledged to from campaigns that could involve religious incitement, ethnic or tribal profiling and to get their agents to toe similar line.

Similarly, all the candidates of the various parties also agreed ‘to refrain from making, or causing to make our names or that of our party, any public statements,
pronouncements, declarations or speeches that have the capacity to incite any form of violence, before, during and after elections. Despite the ‘moralizing’ posture of this Accord, it was soon to be breached amidst the challenges of moral burden and political realism on the part of the politicians and their agents. The major set of challenges and causes of the breach or semi-failure of the Accord are the winner-takes-all presidential system, North-South confrontation, lack of tolerance, do-or-die politics or cut-throat politicking (as against the politics of tolerance or politics without bitterness), hate speech, negative propaganda and poverty. Let us take these factors one by one and relate them to the manifest forms of violence, including verbal, psychological and physical.

First, the winner-takes-all presidential system has incentivized politicians of all divides to desire power by all means. As van de Walle (2003) argued, presidentialism not only promoted clientelism in Africa’s emerging party systems, it also gagged truly competitive politics. According to the Nigerian constitution and electoral law, a party with a simple majority has the liberty to form a government without necessarily building a consensus with other losing parties. This is the most significant reason why political office holders see electoral contest as ‘do-or-die’, a posture that has elicited a counteractive but equally provocative threats of ‘rig and roast’. Of course, the winner-takes-all phenomenon is a structural thing; the Abuja Peace Accord would have probably benefited from a more relaxed, consensus-building constitutional arrangement that shares power according to the number of votes garnered by parties. The caveat however is that such an arrangement is more compatible with parliamentary systems, as is done in South Africa. Even in South Africa, this rule applies more to the legislative arm than the executive. Therefore, unbridled presidentialism was partly responsible for the semi-failure of the Abuja Accord.

Second, there was a display of lack of tolerance on the parts of the parties, especially the major ones, namely the ruling PDP and the opposition APC. This is largely because the Abuja Accord came at a time that the country was experiencing, for the first time, a truly competitive two-party dominant system. The election of 1979 and 1983 were between multiple parties with more or less ethnically defined support bases, but the 1993 election was the closest to the 2015 election. And like the 1993 presidential election, the 2015 election involved two

1 ‘Do-or-die’: a phrase popularized by and identified with the former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, during the election campaigns in 2007. ‘Rig and Roast’: a verbal threat copiously made by the former Governor of Lagos and a national leader of the APC, Bola Tinubu, on the likely consequences of electoral rigging in the southwestern states of Osun and Ekiti in 2014
major candidates from North and South; the only difference being that the incumbent was a contestant in the latter. The lack of tolerance was manifesting in the way and manner the party leaders and agents engaged in hate speech, negative propaganda and mudslinging. For instance, a governor of one of the PDP states placed front page adverts relegating the personality of the APC presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, likening him to former heads of state that had died in office as a result of coup or failed health. This antic later became named as ‘death wish’ campaign (Vanguard 21 January, 2015). Although the PDP dissociated itself from the said negative advert, the Accord was already breached by one of his key members who incited ethnic and regional sentiments let alone a personal attack on a candidate with a massive following. The APC too, through its director general for Presidential campaign threatened to form a ‘parallel government’ in the case it lost election (The Tide Online 24 Nov. 2014). Although the verbal threat by the APC was pre-Accord, it was nevertheless being cited as an act of political desperation during counter-arguments by the PDP.

Third, compounding the issue of incitement and hate speech, reflecting the high level of intolerance on the part of the parties and their members are certain unprintable and sentimental statements credited to the director of publicity for PDP Presidential campaign council. In particular, the wife of the incumbent president, indirectly incited violence by saying at a campaign rally that whoever said ‘change’ (the slogan of the opposition APC) should be ‘stoned’ (PM News 4 March, 2015). The wounded party, the APC, consequently protested against the verbal violence by writing a petition at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

Fourth, the formation of the opposition APC, leading to, as it were, and the collapse of one-party dominance remains another major reason for the heated polity, and of course, contributed significantly to the breach of the Abuja Accord. As expected, a highly competitive two-party dominant system spurred up, more than ever before, a high level of cut-throat competition. The high wire politics that resulted from opposition politics and reactionary tactics of the party in power has further poisoned the political system. Unless the politicians, on both divides, wakes up to the reality and inevitability of a party winning and the other losing, political competition may continue to dwarf potential benefits of the said Accord, now and in the future.

Fifth and more importantly, is the issue of growing poverty and unemployment. This twin fact has remained a germane ground upon which the seeds of violence and discord have grown over time. It is observed that majority, if not all, of the persons being recruited to perpetrate and perpetuate political violence and conflict are the economically insecure young people. This suggests therefore that a structural approach to fighting violence must be routed through a systematic fight against poverty and want, especially among the young population; skilled, semi-skilled and non-skilled alike. To be sure, the disruption of campaign rallies. For
instance, in Rivers, several APC members were wounded at rallies and in Bauchi, the PDP convoy, including the president’s, were pelted with stones. In both cases, these violent actions were carried out by misguided youths, most of who are economically disempowered.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, it is revealed that, like any agreement of a political nature, the Abuja Peace Accord was largely elitist but not populist, consensual but not binding, proactive but not counteractive. It is argued that the breach of the Accord, leading to pockets of violence before the election, was due to a myriad of forces and factors including the winner-takes-all nature of presidential election, lack of political tolerance, the age-long North-South dichotomy, collapse of one-party dominance, hate speech, negative propaganda, cut-throat politicking and poverty. On a brighter note, however, while the hitherto forms of violence, including verbal, psychological and physical, were still perpetrated before the 2015 election, the signing of the Accord created an attempt at building an anti-violence consensus and a wake-up call to the institutions of security, electoral umpire, media and political parties. Hypothetically, the study finds a strong correlation between the disposition of the political elites towards competitive elections and the attendant options of violence often embarked upon by their followers. Part of our tentative observation is that political violence is correlated with electoral rigging; even though the relationship between the two variables could be either way. In other words, while electoral rigging could be a cause of political violence, it can as well be its consequence.

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