

IDENTITY POLITICS AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of identity-based politics on peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. The question is why do citizens often resort to identity politics in projecting aggression against their States? What also are factors responsible for the trend? Finding answers to the posers is the task undertaken in this study. Thus, data is collated from secondary sources while Psycho-Cultural Conflict Theory is adopted as theoretical framework. The study finds that ethnic politics impedes Nigeria's national cohesion and development. It also finds that the identity politics is energized by perceived cases of injustice and failure by citizens to outgrow ethnic suspicion. The study recommends stronger commitment to justice and equality in the administration of the State. It equally advocates for the development of a true democratic political system as well as strong commitment to the interests of the people through good governance.

KEYWORDS: *Identity politics, peace, conflict, development, society*

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts, undoubtedly, are one of the inherent features of every social system. Traditionally, they often arise from competing demands for scarce resources which in themselves have both economic and political inclination.

Accordingly, the nature of the conflicts is such that more often than not, the human actors in societies cleave to their various natural and social groups from which they make diverse demands from their respective states. In fact, as Otite (1999) rightly points out, natural membership of ethnic groups and occupational specializations, threatened by the expanding

interests of other multiple users in the same or adjoining ecological zones, provide grounds for the emergence of conflicts.

This phenomenon, which varies in degree and impact depending on the approach and promptness to their management, threatens and destabilizes peaceful co-existence as well as the very foundation of plural societies. As a consequence, the basic task has always remained how to manage the grievances and utilize identity miscellany to achieve sustainable peace in heterogeneous societies. That also is the major thrust of this paper.

To approach the task therefore, the paper undertakes conceptual reviews of conflict, peace and ethnicity which is the biggest source of identity-based conflicts. Incursion is also made into the causes of conflict in Nigeria as well as the way forward. But the first task is to establish the theoretical framework of the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In approaching the subject under discourse, the Psycho-Cultural Conflict Theory is apt as theoretical framework of analysis. As Ademola (2006) posits, this theory sees identity as the reason for social conflicts that take long to resolve. The theory, he notes, contends that even though there are different forms of identities, the one that is based on people's ethnic origin and the culture that is learned on the basis of that ethnic origin is one of the most important ways of explaining violent conflict.

According to him, despite their belief that ethnicity is the biggest source of identity-based conflicts, those who hold this view agree that this does not mean that conflict is unavailable wherever there are no ethnic differences. Thus, the theory reveals how enemy images are created from early stages of growth in the explanation of conflict (Ross, 1993).

Instructively, proponents of psycho-cultural conflict theory argue that possibility of enduring social conflicts becomes real when some groups are either discriminated against or deprived of their material and non-material needs based on their identity. To the theorists, recognition and protection of identity is a paramount need, even in the face of other needs which may range from physiological to self-actualization.

Thus, identity is an unshakable sense of self-worth which makes life meaningful and includes the feeling that one is physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually safe (Ademola, 2006) while events which threaten to remove the feelings of safety that are tied to different forms of identity usually lead to defensive reactions aimed at avoiding such spiritual and/or physical exposures (Northrup, 1989).

As such, identity is key, both in conflict between people and conflict between groups and as Ademola submits, the fears that individuals and groups experience compel them to suspect the motive of others around them and this tendency is mostly due to a past history of competition for scarce resources in which the opposition always comes out as winners.

To that extent, this theory is apt for the study. Its proposition lends credence to the fact that ethnicity is the biggest source of identity-based conflicts and this is true for Nigeria. Its argument that this fact does not, as well, mean that conflict is unavoidable wherever there are no ethnic differences offers recipe for Nigeria to the effect that in spite of the obvious ethnic differences, peaceful co-existence is possible.

However, there is need to examine the concept of conflict with a view to gaining useful insight into what it represents. It is in that light that it is apt to pose the question, what is conflict?

WHAT IS CONFLICT?

The very first challenge here is whether the concept is amenable to single definition. This stems from the fact that social science concepts are hardly. And in upholding this assertion, Ademola (2006) notes that conflict is a fluid and infinitely elastic concept which can be twisted into different shapes. He also notes that the concept has become an issue over which scholars find themselves in sharp disagreement with their colleagues.

Be that as it may, Otite (1999) observes that conflict is a recurring natural or even pathological fact inherent in all kinds of social, economic or political settings, and characterized by ethnic, religious and other forms of pluralism. A take-home of this perspective is that conflict remains a normal process of interaction, particularly in complex societies. Put differently, a plural society

is characterized by social institutions and distinct cultural diversities which compulsorily co-exist.

As advanced by Otite, conflicts arise from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and/or groups in defined social and physical environments. This point is very instructive and it enjoys the support of Isard (1992).

In his book, *Understanding Conflict and the Science of Peace*, Isard avers that conflict is a phenomenon that is an important part of human existence. This clearly backs our postulation that conflicts are one of the inherent features of every social system. And in further affirmation, Isard rightly suggests that conflict is not solely a negative phenomenon. This position is, however, an affront on the traditional perspective of conflict as struggle over values.

Commenting on this, Otite (1999) affirms that conflict may not be regarded only in a negative light of what he describes as dysfunctional or disjunctive process, and a breakdown of communication. The import of this, therefore, is that conflict has a positive dimension, just like every good coin. That is why the view that conflict is a way of settling problems originating from opposing interests and from the continuity of society is correct in every aspect. The bottomline, therefore, is that it is up to individuals and groups to define a situation of conflict based on what they regard as the objective of such a situation.

However, Coser (1968) quoted in Otite and Albert (1999) defines social conflict as a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources, in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values, but also to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals. As he notes, such conflicts may take place between individuals, between collectivities, or between individuals and collectivities.

This view represents the traditional perspective to conflict which we highlighted earlier. It is also supported by Francis (2006) who believes that conflict is pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by different groups. In fact, Ibeanu (2006) holds this view dearly. He goes further to introduce the concept of violence into the whole idea of conflict. Thus, as he holds, conflict

expresses a direct or indirect relation between two or more actors in which they attempt to undermine the interests of one another, often through the instrumentality of violence.

From the foregoing therefore, conflict is an offshoot of scarce or limited resources as well as a tool for resolving problems that are a creation of opposing interests. A striking point needs to be mentioned at this juncture. That point is to the effect that peace is the ultimate result of conflict, even though violence cannot be ruled out. The import therefore is that whatever that is the objective of a person or group in conflict may or may not necessarily be achieved. This presupposes that it may be subdued through the process of resolution.

Now, relating all of this to Nigeria, Otite (1999) admits that the country is a very complex one with the behaviour and relationships of individuals and groups determined by the imperatives of cultural symbols and strategic social institutions. What this means, therefore, is that the country's social structure is inherently built to engender conflicts from what he describes as diverse ethnic-cultural interests and goals, and from the political and economical necessities of survival as individuals and as identifiable autonomous social groups struggle for advantages.

This crucial fact is to be examined in more detail later. For now, it will suffice to examine the concept the peace.

CONCEPT OF PEACE

Defining peace is not an easy task and may involve philosophical, sociological, political and even process approaches as enunciated by Ibeanu (2006). Ikejiani-Clark and Ani (2009) also acknowledge this fact. They note that peace is one of humanity's highest values while there are many definitions of what peace is; its meaning multilateral and multi-disciplinary depending on which notion is central in the determination of peace as a concept.

To serve our contextual purpose however, we will begin by examining sociological definition of peace in which case peace refers to a condition of social harmony and absence of social antagonism. This implies lack of social conflict and as should be expected from such a condition,

individual and group components of the system are able to meet their aspirations unhindered by an untoward situation.

But what is considered as dialectical materialism under the sociological perspective associated with German philosopher, Karl Marx and highlighted by Ibeanu (2006) strikes attention. This, according to him, suggests that to understand society, what we should consider are processes through which society produces and distributes the means of its material existence and the struggles usually among social classes that are integral to the process.

The material essence here is the preponderance and openness of exploitative relation which appropriates reward to the dominant classes and which obviously do less work in a class-society to the detriment of the weak class. It is this situation that perpetuates poverty, inequality and even oppression; it gives rise to class struggle where the dominant class usurps the role of proponents of ideologies which the underprivileged class must assimilate. It also ultimately unleashes brute force to push the rules down the ladder after acquiring and maintaining a significant level of hegemony. What this presupposes, therefore, is that peace becomes elusive in societies with such antagonistic classes.

As Ibeanu aptly puts it, peace is only feasible in societies in which classes are non-existent because society produces enough to give to each according to his/her needs. The question, however is, how feasible is this? In fact, it has been rightly contended that actualizing this remains only an aspiration.

But beyond the sociological definition of peace lies the political perspective in which case peace entails political order entrenched in institutionalization of political structures. In the absence of institutionalization, there is a primacy of politics and in that condition, every group uses its unique endowments to pursue and enforce its interests – mobs riot, students demonstrate, workers strike and soldiers organize coups (Ibeanu, 2006). But there is another dimension to the political peace which upholds the relevance of contractual pact. Here, signatories offer to mutually respect the pact in order to make way for peace.

The import of these definition-attempts including the ones which tend to suggest peace as a condition in nature and idealistic is just to reveal approaches to the concept. But the benefit is that they assist to clearly understand what peace is all about: that peace is a process.

In offering support along this line of thought, Ibeanu (2006) maintains that peace is a process involving activities that are directly or indirectly linked to increasing development and reducing conflict both within specific societies and in the wider international community. This perspective is all encompassing as it marks a departure from the inadequate recognition of peace as a condition. It equally sees conflict as inherent in societies and presents peace as necessary for attainment of development, even as it introduces the concept as a dynamic and multifaceted process.

The question that, however, begs for an answer is, in what way is ethnicity a form of identity politics?

ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Ethnicity, although a complex phenomenon, offers veritable instance in the study of identity politics. It is a single factor that highly poses problem towards the realization of peaceful co-existence in a heterogeneous society. Understanding this concept and how it undermines and can, as well, promote peaceful co-existence in a plural society deserves contextual examination.

Thus, Nnoli (2008) defines ethnicity as a social phenomenon associated with identity of members of the largest possible competing communal groups (ethnic groups) seeking to protect and advance their interest in a political system. As he rightly points out, what is peculiar to ethnicity is that it involves a demand by one group on other competing groups which have certain characteristics that include cultural prejudice (sense of solidarity which predispose members of ethnic groups to look more favourably on their own group members than on neighbouring out-group members) – bias which often finds expression in inter-ethnic discrimination in jobs, housing, admission into schools, promotions, business deals and welfare services, accompanied by nepotism; socio-economic and political discrimination (tendency to

exclude out-group members from social and economic opportunities and welfare services); and sacrifices to pursue interests which may be inimical to the interest of other groups, among others. Table 1 illustrates the mid point above.

TABLE 1: CUT-OFF MARKS FOR ENTRANCE INTO NIGERIA’S FEDERAL UNITY SCHOOLS

S/N	STATE	MALE	FEMALE
NORTH			
1	Adamawa	62	62
2	Bauchi	35	35
3	Benue	111	111
4	Borno	45	45
5	Gombe	58	58
6	Jigawa	44	44
7	Kaduna	91	91
8	Kano	67	67
9	Katsina	60	60
10	Kebbi	9	20
11	Kogi	119	119
12	Nasarawa	58	58
13	Niger	93	93
14	Plateau	97	97
15	Sokoto	9	13
16	Taraba	3	11
17	Yobe	2	27
18	Zamfara	4	2
19	FCT	90	90
SOUTH EAST			
20	Abia	130	130
21	Anambra	139	139
22	Ebonyi	112	112
23	Enugu	134	134
24	Imo	138	138
SOUTH SOUTH			
25	Akwa-Ibom	123	123
26	Bayelsa	72	72
27	Cross River	97	97
28	Delta	131	131
29	Edo	127	127
30	Rivers	118	118
SOUTH WEST			
31	Ekiti	119	110
32	Kwara	123	123
33	Lagos	133	133
34	Ogun	131	131
35	Ondo	126	126
36	Osun	127	127
37	Oyo	127	127

Source: <http://dailypost.ng/2017/08/23/unity-schools-education-ministry-releases-20172018-admission-list>.

As can be seen in the table above, the cut-off marks for each of the regions in the country for entrance into federal government-owned unity schools shows lopsidedness and reinforces the belief by the south east zone that policies of the government are designed to either exclude or punish people from the zone. Obviously, states in the region represented by Anambra, Imo and Enugu have the highest cut-off requirement. Going by the policy of government, prospective students from the three states must score 139, 138 and 134 respectively before they can gain admission into the government-owned schools. This is in a country where students from other regions, particularly the north are favoured to score less. In fact, for states like Yobe, Taraba and Zamfara, their male applicants are required to score mere two, three and four points to gain admission. Also for a South South state of Bayelsa, candidates from there are just required to score 72 points to get admitted into the schools. The obvious implication, therefore, is that a lot of students from the south east region aspiring to gain admission into the schools are denied the chance even when they score far above their counterparts from other zones.

In terms of governance, to what extent have people from the south east zone of Nigeria had opportunity of emerging as national leaders of the country? Table 2 provides an answer.

Table 2: NIGERIA'S LEADERSHIP IN TERMS OF ETHNIC TENURE 1960-2018

S/N	Name	Title	State	Ethnicity	Zone	Period	Ethnic Tenure
1	Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe	President (Ceremonial)	Anambra	Igbo	South East	1/10/1960-15/1/1966	5 years, 5 months and 8 days
2	Alh. Abubakar Tafawa Balewa	Prime Minister	Bauchi	Jarawa	North East	1/10/1960-15/1/1966	5 years, 5 months and 8 days
3	Maj.Gen. J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi	Head of State	Abia	Igbo	South East	16/1/1966-29/7/1966	6 months and 13 days
4	General Yakubu Gowon	Head of State	Plateau	Angas/Beron	North Central	29/7/1966-29/7/1975	9 years
5	Gen. Murtala Muhammed	Head of State	Kano	Hausa	North West	29/7/1975-13/2/1976	6 months and 15 days
6	General Olusegun Obasanjo	Head of State	Ogun	Yoruba	South West	13/2/1976-30/9/1979	3 years, 7 months and 17 days
7	Alh. Shehu Shagari	President	Sokoto	Fulani	North West	1/10/1979-31/12/1983	4 years, 2 months and

							30 days
8	Maj. General Muhammadu Buhari	Head of State	Katsina	Fulani	North West	31/12/1983-27/8/1985	1 year, 7 months and 26 days
9	General Ibrahim Babangida	Head of State	Niger	Gwari	North Central	27/8/1985-26/8/1993	8 years
10	Chief Ernest Shonekan	Head of State	Ogun	Yoruba	South West	26/8/1993-17/11/1993	2 months and 23 days
11	General Sani Abacha	Head of State	Kano	Kanuri	North West	17/11/1993-8/6/1998	4 years, 6 months and 22 days
12	Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar	Head of State	Niger	Nupe	North Central	8/6/1998-29/05/1999	11 months and 21 days
13	Chief Olusegun Obasanjo	Executive President	Ogun	Yoruba	South West	29/05/1999-29/05/2007	8 years
14	Musa Yar'Adua	Executive President	Katsina	Fulani	North West	29/05/2007-05/05/2010	2 years, 11 months and 6 days
15	Dr. Goodluck Jonathan	Acting Executive President	Bayelsa	Ijaw	South South	6/05/2010-29/05/2011	1 year and 23 days
16	Dr. Goodluck Jonathan	Executive President	Bayelsa	Ijaw	South South	29/05/2011-29/05/2015	4 years
17	Muhammadu Buhari	Executive President	Katsina	Fulani	North West	29/05/2015-Date	2 years, 10 months and 18 days (As at 16/04/2018)

Source: Ohaneze (2002). The violations of human and civil rights of Ndi Igbo in the federation of Nigeria (1966-1999). A petition to the Human Rights Violation Investigating Committee. Enugu: Snaap Press, p.47. Adjustment by the researcher.

From the table, persons from the south east zone have been in power for only five years, 11 months and 21 days. Those were during the tenures of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Major General J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi. Even at that, Azikiwe who was in office for five years, five months and eight days was only a ceremonial president without executive powers. Be that as it may, ever since the regime of Ironsi was terminated on July 29, 1966, no other person from the region has ever governed the country again. Even as 2019 general election draws closer, there is little chance that someone from the region would be elected as president. This is because the ruling party, All Progressives Congress (APC) and the main opposition party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) zoned their Presidential slots to the north. The rest of the political parties as they are

currently constituted seem to lack necessary political structure and electoral value to win the presidency.

Perhaps another issue that shows ethnic bias and which fan the embers of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria has to do with the states and local government distributions. The figure is shown in table 3.

TABLE 3: STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA DISTRIBUTION IN NIGERIA

S/N	ZONE	NO. OF STATES	NO. OF LOCAL GOVERNEMNTS
1	North-Central	6 (16.67%)	116 (15.19%)
2	North-East	6 (16.67%)	110 (14.36%)
3	North-West	7 (19.44%)	181 (23.69%)
4	South-West	6 (16.67%)	138 (18.01%)
5	South-South	6 (16.67%)	127 (16.58%)
6	South-East	5 (13.89%)	94 (12.27%)
	Total	36	766

Source: Ohaneze (2002). The violations of human and civil rights of Ndi Igbo in the federation of Nigeria (1966-1999). A petition to the Human Rights Violation Investigating Committee. Enugu: Snaap Press, p.47

What the table above obviously shows is that the south east zone has the lowest number of states and local government areas in the country with five states and 94 local government areas, out of 36 states and then 766 local government areas. This condition breeds what the region regards as injustice and orchestrated through geo-political maneuvers and demographic manipulations. This is understood from the standpoint of the fact that number of states and local government is a strong determining factor in what accrues to each zone from federal allocations. The implication, therefore, is that less is voted for the region from national resources. In turn, this means that less impact is felt in same region in terms of federal government’s intervention.

ETHNICITY AS RALLYING POINT

From the foregoing, it is clear that ethnicity promotes one’s appreciation of his social roots and enables the creation of the kind of social network which provides the basis for an all-round support for its members. In fact, Akpuru-Aja (2009) observes that in multi-linguistic societies, ethnicity finds its way into a myriad of issues such as control of state power, development plans, educational controversies, resource-control struggles, religious intolerance, land disputes and

indigene-settler syndrome. Certainly, this is why he notes with emphasis too that conflict is a frustration-based attitude or protest against lack of opportunities for development and against lack of recognition and identity. To him, it involves two or more parties that have, or perceive incompatibility in either interests and values, or in strategy of achieving the ends desired. However, he was quick to add that conflict can be a corrective signal, an integrative process or development driven.

But the worry over role which ethnicity plays in conflicts remains. This is better understood when persistence of such conflicts is taken into account. That is why Nnoli (2003) laments that unitarism, regionalism, the creation and proliferation of states, ethnic “arithmetic”, ethnic balancing, federal character, National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), federal unity colleges, various formulas for revenue allocation, secession, the imposition of a two-party system, the proliferation of local government areas, government by grand coalition (power sharing), the policy of WAZOBIA, multi-party democracy, various forms of military rule, relocation of the federal capital, numerous constitutional conferences and official and non-official exhortations for national unity and inter-ethnic tolerance have all failed to improve the Nigerian situation.

With all of the failed antidotes in perspective, he asks out of frustration: why has ethnicity continued to pose serious problems for Nigerian politics and society in spite of various efforts to eradicate it or at least attenuate it? Of course, this poser remains relevant even today as the situation has even turned out a big concern with ethnic agitations becoming loudest, audacious and continuous.

Obviously, this worrying trend in Nigeria raises clear concern. Scholars and peace experts, on their own, remain united in interrogating the cause of the conflict. Equally of much interest is the necessary efforts should serve as the way forward. This, definitely, explains our next concern which is premised on the causes of conflicts in Nigeria and way forward.

CAUSES OF CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA AND WAY FORWARD

According to Njoku (2009), Nigeria is not the only place where different nations are merged together, albeit we criticize the bad intention and economic motive with which Britain brought it

about. This assertion is especially instructive when one considers states like Italy, Germany, Britain, Switzerland and the United States of America. Interestingly, positive results pertaining to the achieved peaceful co-existence in the aforementioned countries even in the face of the diversities are a pointer to the fact that peaceful co-existence is a possibility in Nigeria. In essence and nonetheless, Njoku highlights some of what he perceives as causes of conflicts in Nigeria.

Examining these, he conceptualizes them to include the British manipulation of the Nigerian state, introduction of political thuggery in the Nigeria's politics, the civil war, the long ineptitude of the Nigerian leadership and the inability to outgrow ethnic suspicion in the Nigerian social milieu. Others are divisive religious attitudes, social prejudice, youth unemployment and the Niger Delta problem.

Since as Njoku (2009) admonishes that there is no point bewailing the merging of the various nations into a united Nigerian State, there seems to be hope in the options he offers. Accordingly, social pact which expresses the commitment of the citizens as a people looks apt in the view of the fact that the State is a product of diversity. Thus, in line with his suggestion, people should allow the law to enforce their rights and revenge on their behalf. However, achieving this requires that the law makes itself capable and credible. Be that as it may, he advocates that people must learn to listen to one another if what the other one says hurts, while the government should find out what caused the 1967-1970 civil war in the country and address such issues to avert future recurrences.

Perhaps, admonition by Nnoli (2003) serves here. Insisting that the ethnic phenomenon cannot be adequately tackled since it is obvious that it has not been properly understood, he advocates that a different perspective on ethnicity than is presently prevalent needs to be formulated as a basis for further action. This seems the right option for many reasons. The foremost is the notion that associates ethnicity with conflict.

In tandem with this, Nnoli observes that the latest stage of ethnic conflict is informed by the success of violence in drawing attention to the injustice and environmental destruction that

characterized the lot of the minorities of the oil-rich Niger Delta. According to him, the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) not only succeeded in focusing national attention on the Ogoni and their problems, it also focused world attention on Ogonis in particular and the Niger Delta in general, noting that this would not have happened without the violence, repression and resistance associated with that struggle.

However, it does appear that the most recent is the renewed secessionist agitation for the State of Biafra championed by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) group, an organization based in south east region of Nigeria. The height of the latest agitation culminated in deadly confrontation between the group and the military. The crisis forced the five governors of the region to swiftly proscribe the group. The national defence headquarters consequently branded same group as a terrorist organization.

In the final analysis and as Nnoli (2003) notes, only a truly democratic political system in which policy formulation and implementation are governed by an unwavering concern and search for dialogue, consensus building as well as commitment to the interests of the people in the individuality and collectivity is capable of resolving the ethnic question. Certainly, something positive needs to begin to happen and be deepened regarding good governance. However, this needs to be rooted in traditional belief of the people and encapsulated in their acceptance and encouragement of their political participation, translated into empowerment for the citizens.

As was experienced with the Biafra secession agitation in Nigeria, lack of basic tenets of democracy - justice and equality - no doubt heightens threats to peaceful co-existence in the country. This is why giving all citizens or at least majority of the citizens a positive sense of belonging in the Nigeria-project will, certainly, turn the identity question into pure national asset.

CONCLUSION

Certain factors account for the numerous identity-based conflicts in Nigeria. These range from manipulation of the Nigerian State by her erstwhile colonial conquistador to ineptitude of the country's successive national leadership and the obvious failure by citizens to outgrow ethnic

suspicion in the social environment. Obviously, the numerous cases of injustices take central place in this regard and result in the people disallowing the law to enforce their rights, address their grievances and decisively revenge on their behalf.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that conflicts are hallmarks of pluralist states. The phenomenon is undoubtedly not peculiar with Nigeria. To overcome this, however, requires clear departure from the shackles of injustices and other avalanches of insensitivity to regional outcries.

There is no doubt that consensus-building, sincere dialogues as well as unwavering commitment to citizens' interest remain part of the panaceas for peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. This definitely finds its roots in good governance and concomitant empowerment for the citizens. The conviction therefore is that the desired social harmony can be achieved when the citizens develop a positive sense of belongingness in the Nigerian project.

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