By Henrik Angerbrandt

A Fair Electoral Process Can Ease Divisions in Nigeria

Decentralised Politics Brought On a New Set of Challenges in the North

Decentralisation is regarded as a way of reducing political competition between people. However, studies in Nigeria show that decentralised politics actually can fuel conflicts and ethnic divisions as community identities become basis for representation.

The February 2015 elections have – if the electoral process is free and fair – a potential to ease some of the divisions that decentralisation has fuelled in northern Nigeria.

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The 2011 presidential elections resulted in widespread post-election violence in Nigeria.

Decentralisation, it is argued, brings government closer to the people, supposedly resulting in more of us participating in the political process and influencing the outcome. Decentralisation is also said to increase responsiveness and accountability. It is, moreover, common to suggest decentralisation as a way to mitigate ethnic and religious conflicts, in that the decentralised state can arguably respond better to people's diverse aspirations and needs. Holding power in a local or regional government is said to assure minority groups that their rights and interests will be protected.

Empirical studies of decentralisation and conflict show that it can reduce national competition, but that it also encourages local conflict and ethnic mobilisation.

Ethnic and religious conflicts have been frequent in Nigeria since the 1980s and various approaches have been employed to reduce them. These include a growing number of federal states and local governments, electoral rules that ensure national support for the government, and the "federal character" principle, which requires that all parts of the country are represented in, for example, government and educational institutions. Yet Nigerian society has become increasingly polarised along religious and ethnic lines.

Feeling of marginalisation

In Kaduna State, there have been outbreaks of violence between Hausa-Fulani Muslims and Christian ethnic groups since the 1980s. However, the conflict did not diminish with the shift from military to civil rule in 1999 and the decentralisation associated with it. Rather, increased local political space seemed to fuel the conflict.

The conflict in Kaduna is fanned by perceptions of being marginalised – of not having equal access to state resources and lack of representation. Grievances and demands are articulated in terms of community identity, in that ethnic and religious differences are mobilised in the struggle.

Christian ethnic groups have long complained about marginalisation by the Muslim Hausa. They see themselves as deprived of their rights and disadvantaged in terms of development projects and appointments in areas where they are in the majority. Muslim groups, on the other hand, blame the leaders of other communities for any underdevelopment in those areas.

Community rivalry

The Kaduna case illustrates that the boundaries of community do not necessarily correspond with the boundaries of the state,
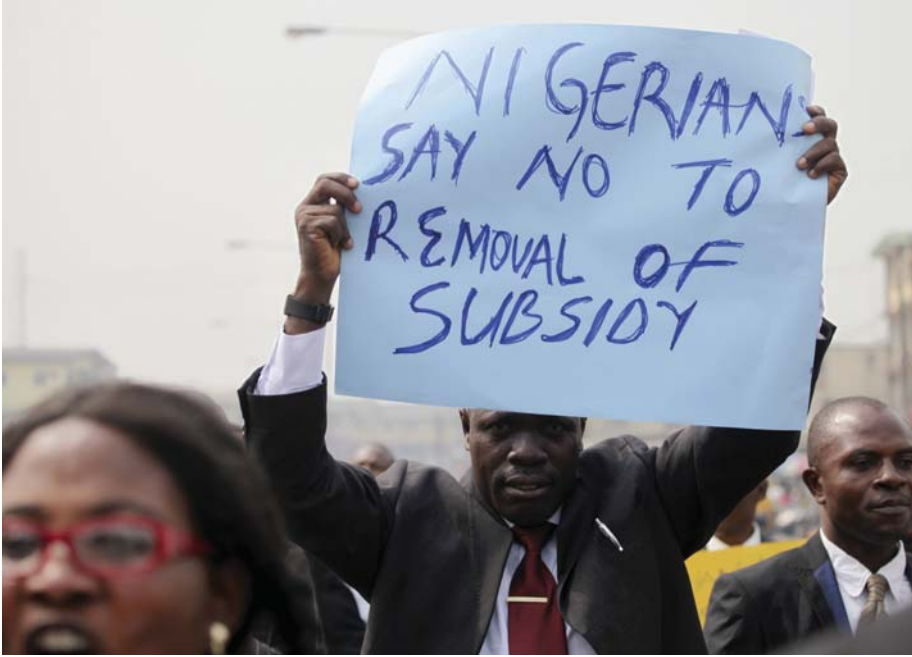
The removal of the fuel subsidy saw fuel prices rocket, resulting in "pan-Nigeria" mass protests that were directed at corruption and political mismanagement in general.

and neither can community be regarded as a locality. Different communities may very well share space. In such cases, increased competition can be expected when state policies make community identities the basis for representation.

The conflict in Kaduna involves struggles over how the local, regional and national scales are defined and privileged in relation to one another. Decentralisation theories assume that local and regional relations and projects correspond to sub-national boundaries. However, different views on what the scope and content of what "Kaduna" is and should be are partly what the conflict is about.

In the conflict, actors mobilise around different scalar connections. Muslim actors tend to stress northern Nigeria as a point of reference in issues and for legitimacy, while Christian actors base their claims on references to more limited territories in southern Kaduna.

The example of sharia penal code

This issue was highlighted when political decentralisation was used to introduce sharia penal codes in some northern Nigeria states in the early 2000s. When the proposal

Indigeneity creates a dual citizenship in which ethnicity takes priority over nationality.

was instituted in Zamfara State, it quickly spread to other states in the north, illustrating the interconnections among states. In some states, including Kaduna, the proposal was fiercely contested. While proponents saw it as restoring precolonial values and rules, many non-Muslims saw it is as an attempt to impose an Islamic order. Advocates made reference to largely Muslim and largely Hausa northern Nigeria as an entity, while the numerous smaller, non-Muslim ethnic groups in the area connected with norms and traditions in their localities.

Thus, political issues and projects were framed in relation to different scalar reference points. Prioritising a particular scale simultaneously implies giving credibility to certain projects. By stressing specific "local" characteristics, as decentralisation discourse implies, ethnicity and religious differences are assigned a political role. In Kaduna, the sharia proposal resulted in violent clashes between Christians and Muslims.

A sharia penal code was eventually implemented. In non-Muslim areas, customary courts were simultaneously strengthened, on the grounds that people should be governed according to their own norms and traditions. Soon after, additional chiefdoms

were created for different groups in an attempt to "bring government closer to the people," in the words of the state's governor.

The traditional institutions do not have a constitutionally assigned role but are supposed to be "custodians of culture." However, connections with the political sphere are often close, and the more powerful traditional rulers also have political leverage.

Ethnicity vs. nationality

Ethnic conflicts in Nigeria often involve struggles between so-called indigenes and settlers. "Indigeneity" denotes a notion of being connected to an identity "rooted in the soil." Thus some citizens claim privileged rights in certain places, including how they are to be governed and the conditions applying to other people residing there. This principle is notable in many sub-Saharan countries. Decentralisation in the 1990s raised the question of who can claim to "really" belong to the community that decentralisation is to benefit. This indicates that a community is the "owner" of certain places, based on its claims to be the first community to settle an area and subsequently allowing others to settle.

Recognition as an indigene brings privileges in the form of scholarships, civil service employment and national appointments. It is also an eligibility requirement for standing for election for state and local assemblies.

In effect, indigeneity creates a dual citizenship in which ethnicity takes priority over nationality. Citizenship based on identity relations can also lead to exclusion from the state. This type of political decentralisation means that grievances revolve around how one group is seen as having access to resources the aggrieved feel entitled to, even though in practice only a minority of the group enjoys some of the benefits. In short, sub-national units tend to express the predispositions of an assumed constituency, which in practice is not homogeneous.

When traditional institutions are strengthened, authority rooted in conceptions of the past is reinforced. This makes accountability and representation problematic, as legitimacy is not based on actions and achievements, but on tradition. State authorities intervene in conflicts in ways

that underpin the very competing identities: traditional institutions are strengthened, interfaith dialogue is promoted, and laws are formulated that divide the citizenry into different cultural categories with the idea that this will bring "government closer to people."

Different types of representation

In Kaduna, the struggle is over representation. Given the emphasis on ethnicity and religion, symbolic representation has become more important than substantive representation.

Symbolic representation means that an actor is perceived by those s/he represents to stand for them on the basis of a shared culture or identity, while substantive representation means the representative acts on the basis of shared interests. Symbolic representation does not, however, reflect predefined social groups. Rather, these groups are (re)constructed in the political process. When government acknowledges certain actors as representatives of a group on a religious or ethnic basis, these categories are also recognised by the people as grounds for inclusion or exclusion.

The ways in which these categories are associated with geographical scale is part of how claims to representation are legi-

Policy Recommendations

1 Recognise that ethnic and religious identities can become even more important in sub-national politics when decentralisation is promoted to improve the representation of different communities.

2 Acknowledge that the way actors in a conflict frame local, regional, and national scales may not correspond to the political organisation of the state. Different views on what is considered e.g. local are often intertwined in struggles over authority.

3 Endorse issue-based political initiatives that cut across ethnic and religious identities regardless of scale, e.g. campaigns for welfare benefits regardless of place.

timised. While Southern Kaduna groups stress local territorial connections, Muslim groups attach Kaduna to a wider region with specific ideological roots. However, because the conflict is framed in religious terms, Christian groups draw support from other groups and individuals that structure the nation in compatible ways, thereby reaffirming "north" and "south" as political categories with religious references.

New kinds of initiatives emerge

There are organisations and coalitions that seek to pursue an issues-based agenda, not least against a corrupt and deceitful government.

Nationwide protests were organised when the removal of the fuel subsidy saw fuel prices rocket from 65 to 141 naira overnight. A general strike by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and street protests from Kano to Lagos ensued. The protests soon went beyond the fuel subsidy issue and were directed at corruption and political mismanagement in general in a "pan-Nigeria" mass protest. These protests united civil society and transcended divisions of age, occupation, religion and wealth.

Tensions ran high and ethno-regional forces attempted to hijack the protests. However, efforts to keep them inclusive proved successful. Such violence as occurred was quickly denounced by a coalition of youths drawn from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Although the protests were national, they were also given local expression.

In Kaduna this meant that inter-religious coordination was prioritised, for example,

The #bringbackourgirls campaign against the government's handling of the kidnapping drew together people of different religions and ethnicities from different parts of Nigeria.

by the groups symbolically protecting each other while praying. Following negotiations between government and the NLC, the increase in the fuel price was limited to 50 per cent. Many demonstrators were dissatisfied with this agreement and the protests continued, especially in Kano. These, however, came to an abrupt halt when Boko Haram launched a major attack on the city in which close to 200 people died.

Another example is when the kidnapping of 273 school girls in Borno State in April 2014 triggered not only a global social media campaign, but also protests by people throughout Nigeria over the government's handling of the issue. There were calls for further action. The #bringbackourgirls campaign drew together people of different religions and ethnicities from different part of the country, and also included people from the highest echelons of society, with a former minister as leader. The government's response was, however, hostile: efforts were made to discredit the movement and thugs were hired to assault the protesters. Even though the scale of movement has declined, the government failed to break it, and demonstrations continue on a daily basis.

These initiatives have been rooted in a common citizenship that takes a shared position in relation to the state and transcends community identities. They have been organised as coalitions between different organisations and NGOs throughout the country.

Critical elections ahead

The 2011 presidential elections resulted in widespread violence in Nigeria, with Kaduna State hardest hit. Tellingly, it was the presidential election rather than the gubernatorial election scheduled for a week later that triggered the violence. The coalescence of local and national issues in part underlay the conflict in Kaduna. Protests against the election result in Kaduna city by supporters of Muhammadu Buhari, Goodluck Jonathan's main opponent, triggered counter reactions among Christians in southern Kaduna against Muslims, who were assumed to support Buhari. National election results were thus interpreted in a local context and local forces were seen as representing wider social and political relations.

The political rhetoric ahead of the February 2015 elections and allusions to religious beliefs contribute to the pre-election tension and may trigger a re-run of the post-election violence of 2011. There is a risk that the violence will again become intertwined in pre-existing ethnic and religious conflicts in Kaduna. The activities of Boko Haram in the north obviously heighten the insecurity, and may make election violence more likely.

However, elections also provide the opportunity for nation-wide coalitions with a common agenda to press for compliance with electoral regulations and to monitor the elections. One such coalition is the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), comprising more than 450 groups across the country. Compliance, monitoring as well as mobilising voters are issues that transcend ethnic and religious identities, and can help build new alliances across communities and localities. The electoral process is therefore as critical as the result, for elections conducted in a free and fair manner and without violence can mitigate national and local divisions.

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Henrik Angerbrandt has researched at the Nordic Africa Institute since autumn 2014. He is writing a dissertation in political science at Stockholm University about ethnic and religious conflict in northern Nigeria, with special focus on Kaduna State. Material for the thesis has been collected through field work in the region.

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