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SOCIAL AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY

GST 122 ASSIGNMENT

Write on a topic based on any perception of a problem in your environment

ETHNIC POLITICS: AN IMPEDIMENT TO NATION BUILDING

Ethnicity, ethnic rivalry, ethnic chauvinism, ethnic sentiment, ethnic consciousness, who knows when all this will be brought to an end? Ethnicity and ethnic consciousness is the reason why politics is now drawn along ethnic lines. But what exactly caused this ethnic consciousness and ethnic rivalry in Nigeria? Why is the political life of Nigeria now based on ethnicity rather than merits and skills? Why are most Nigerians so keen on knowing the ethnic identity of a new neighbour, a new roommate, a new colleague at work or even that of a candidate running for a political post? A lot of questions surround the problem of ethnicity and ethnic politics in the country, and I am as curious as you are to know the answers to these questions. This questions form the focus of this study.

Let’s begin by defining the key terms which are; ‘ethnicity’, ‘ethnic politics’ and ‘nation building’. Ethnicity can be seen in two ways; a state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition, or an expression of sentiment by a communal or traditional group to attract favour or certain advantages to them. Ethnic politics refers to a situation in which politics is based on ethnic ties ,or politicians gain support from people on the basis of an appeal to ethnic identity. Nation building is the process whereby a society of people with diverse origins and culture come together within the boundaries of a sovereign state to put aside their differences and foster unity amongst them.

Ethnic politics began with ethnic consciousness, which progressed to ethnic sentiment which then led to ethnic politics. The origin of ethnic politics can be traced to the colonial era. During the pre-colonial times, many ethnic groups were not aware of the existence of other ethnic groups. It was not until the British colonial masters arrived that the nationals became aware of the existence of other ethnic groups. Nigeria is a creation of the British, who while creating her did not consider the multi-ethnic nature of the country. They began to gather ethnic entities together. Although Nigeria was a single political entity, one cannot deny the fact that there was a division that existed within it. The colonial government adopted the divide and rule policy where they separated Nigerian groups from one another to prevent any united opposition to their authority. Both protectorates were ruled and treated differently, which created political tension among them. Simultaneously, regionalism was introduced, the first step to achieving federalism. This produced three regions; North, West and East regions; ethnic consciousness was born. The division became the basis for many political, administrative and economic policies in Nigeria. The colonial government was not the best at being accountable and responsive to the people; besides, they had other personal objectives to fulfill. The nationals began to form ethnic associations with the aim of pursuing their common interests and wooing favours from the government. These associations also served as a tool for political enlightenment. When the people were allowed to form political parties, the already formed associations became the political parties. Some include the Egbe Omo Oduduwa organization which became the Action Group(AG) and the Jamiya Jama’ar Arewa which became the Northern People’s Congress(NPC). Such parties were formed on the basis of attaining political power to achieve their common interest, rather than that of the nation. Therefore, ethnic politics and ethnicity are colonial legacies and were inherited by the post-colonial leaders in Nigeria.

There is a strong relationship between ethnic politics and nation building. Nation building is essential in a state especially a federal state, which Nigeria is. However, as a result of ethnicity and ethnic politics, nation building efforts have all been in vain. Ethnic politics has adversely affected the political life of the nation (which is evident if one should examine the political development of the country). The political parties were all formed based on ethnic lines, which pursued the ethnic groups’ interest. There have been political crisis at the expense of ethnic politics; like the federal election crisis of 1964 and the 1962/63 census crisis. The military government based their rule on ethnic politics, carrying out coups to revenge other ethnic groups (the 1966 military coup and the1966 counter-coup). Leaders are elected based on ethnic ties and not merits and skills. Civil unrests also occurred like the civil war. Minority groups are now calling on the government to create separate states for them as they feel that their opinions are not considered in the political affairs of the nation. Allocation of federal revenue has been unequal with the ruling ethnic group allocating larger revenue to their states. All these evils directly or indirectly have affected nation building.

The Nigerian leaders are fully aware of this plague and have set up projects in the past to promote nation building. Such include, the NYSC scheme and the establishment of unity schools. These projects still existed but have not stopped ethnic politics from harming nation building in Nigeria. A political reform is exactly what we need right now in the nation. It is up to the government and the people to restructure the political system of the country in other to promote nation building. One very crucial step to take is to encourage the people to pay more allegiance to their nation rather than to their ethnic group. This will pave the way to achieving nation building and create a sense of nationalism in the people.

In this study, we have registered that the colonial government caused this plague which we call ethnic politics. We have examined the different ways this ethnic politics has affected the society both in the past and in the present and how they have inhibited nation building. At this point change is very necessary but it will have to begin with the people. It is not our diversity that is the problem, it is the ethnic sentiment that exists within the country and this has to be changed.