

CONCERNED IJAW STAKEHOLDERS

STATE CREATION AND IJAW MARGINALISATION

The Ijaw nation watched with bewilderment as the contentious and vexatious issues of state creation, derivation/revenue sharing formula and an iniquitous five per cent stabilization/intervention fund for the North almost deadlocked the National Conference.

Despite President Goodluck Jonathan's good intentions in convoking the national discourse, we are dismayed that some delegates from a section of the country jettisoned patriotism, national peaceful cohesion and co-existence, equity and justice but rather allowed primordial sentiments to becloud their sense of better judgment and reasoning. It is indeed befuddling that retrogressive elements in the country have not seen the wisdom in moving away from their backward past to embrace a present where planning, hard work and sustained focus can guarantee a viable future for their people in the 21st Century.

As stakeholders in the Nigeria project, of which our people, our ethnic nationality and our region are a critical component, the Ijaw nation and people cannot continue to wash our hands with spittle despite living by the riverside of wealth and natural abundance. It is no longer acceptable to be beggars in a commonwealth that we supply the lifeline. Of course, our reasons are not far-fetched.

On Thursday July 3, 2014, the National Conference adopted the report of its Committee on Political Restructuring and Forms of Government, which recommended the creation of additional 18 states in the country. It is however shocking that the committee and, indeed, the conference excluded the demand of the Ijaw people, the fourth ethnic nationality in Nigeria, for the creation of two states – Toru-Ebe (for the Ijaw in the Western axis of Ondo, Edo, Delta) and Oil Rivers (for our brethren in the Eastern axis of Rivers and Akwa Ibom) – while conceding to the request of the three other major ethnic groups.

AGE-LONG INJUSTICE TO IJAW NATION

The demand for creation of homogenous Ijaw states dates back to the pre-Independence era in Nigeria when Chief Harold Dappa-Biriye led other Ijaw

nationalists to complain about our marginalization. Even after the 1957/58 Willinks Commission Report that looked into the fears of the minorities, the Ijaw have not relented in the agitation against their marginalisation and exploitation.

For the sake of historical clarity, the Ijaw, who have been balkanised since 1939 under the colonial ruler, Sir Bernard Henry Bourdillon, were in the forefront of the clamour for state creation before Nigeria was granted political independence in 1960. It is on record that our father, Chief Dappa-Biriye, was the first Nigerian to open the clamour for the creation of states out of the then three regions in Nigeria.

Thus the desire of the Ijaw people to have states in which they can decide their own destiny was clearly expressed in their various submissions to the Willinks Commission. At the time the Ijaw were clamouring for state creation, the vast majority of other ethnic groups were fiercely opposed to the idea. The three major political parties in the country at the time that were controlled by the three major ethnic groups only paid lip service to the idea of state creation.

On the Ijaw demand for state creation, the Willinks Commission stated: "The area claimed for Rivers State consists of the whole of the Rivers Province, that is: the Division of Brass, Degema, Ogoni, Port Harcourt and Ahoada, together with the Western Ijaw Division from the western region, and two small sections in the Eastern Region from outside the Rivers Province, Opobo and Andoni being one, Ndoki the other."

But, curiously, the commission advised against the creation of this state, claiming that the Igbo will resent its creation. The Commission's report stated: "To include within a River State Ahoada and Port Harcourt would, we believe, create a problem as acute as that with which we were asked to deal at present and would be sharply resented by the Ibos of the central plateau."

From the above, it can be seen that the merit of our demand for state creation between 1957 and 1958 was weighed by the mood of others.

Yet when the Yakubu Gowon military administration created Rivers State in 1967, Ahoada and Port Harcourt were added to it. Out of the 12 states created by Gowon, the Ijaw were found in four, namely Rivers, Bendel, Cross River and Western State respectively. This only reinforced Bourdillon's division of Southern Nigeria into Western and Eastern regions, which made the Ijaw an excluded, expropriated and exploited minority in almost all the four states save Rivers State.

The Murtala Mohammed/Olusegun Obasanjo military regime created seven more states, out of which the Hausa-Fulani got two (2), Yoruba - two (2), Igbo - one (1), and the Middle Belt - two (2) more states. But none for the Ijaw! It is against this backdrop that the Ijaw have been demanding for more homogenous states. Our demand is based on justice, equity and fair play.

Beginning from when the four-region structure was dismantled in 1967 in preference for states by Gowon and successive military regimes, the reality is that the state structure for almost five decades since then has been funded and sustained by the oil resources derived from our area and region. It is therefore not an exaggeration that the current state structure cannot survive for long without oil revenue if the Niger Delta were to secede from Nigeria.

At the moment, the Ijaw are balkanised across six states: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers. This balkanization, regardless of the fact that there are several sub-groups (such as Okrika, Nembe, Brass, Arogbo, Apoi, Ibani, Kalabari, Ogbia, Ibeno, Obolo/Andoni) within its nationality, is the reason the Ijaw are under-counted, under-enumerated and under-estimated.

In terms of economic viability and sustainability of the new Ijaw states, available data show that 60 per cent of all the oil wells and exploration activities take place on lands and waterways belonging to the Ijaw. In clear terms, what this means is that there is more wealth and riches on Ijaw lands than anywhere else in Nigeria.

Besides, these proposed states fall within traditional and historical boundaries and would also contribute to resolving some boundary disputes and conflicts that have led to the loss of lives and oil revenues. We therefore insist on two more contiguous Ijaw states following natural boundaries and in line with the yearnings of our people.

POPULATION

Some of the criteria listed by the National Assembly for the creation of more states include adequate population, justice and fairness, and practicality of new states. The National Conference however stated that “for any new state to be created, such a new state must have a minimum population of one million persons.”

If population is therefore a major yardstick, the Ijaw in the western flank (proposed Toru-Ebe State) are more than the population of Ebonyi, Taraba or Nasarawa states respectively.

The same applies to the proposed Oil Rivers State. The official census figure for Rivers State is 5,580,894 (and that is only behind Kano, Lagos, Katsina, Oyo and Kaduna states). Of the almost six million people in Rivers State, the Ijaw are more than 1.5 million. In terms of population, therefore, the proposed Oil Rivers and Toru-Ebe states meet the minimum qualification.

Currently, the Yoruba ethnic nationality has six (6) states; the Igbo have five (5) while the Hausa-Fulani have seven (7). But none of these ethnic groups is six or 10 times bigger than the Ijaw ethnic nationality, as the Ijaw currently consist of 10% of Nigeria's population, according to the CIA Fact Book. So if the Hausa/Fulani, who are roughly 29% of the national population, have seven states, then the Ijaw should have at least three states, since 29% is 2.9 or three times bigger than 10%.

TRUE FEDERALISM/RESOURCE CONTROL

The National Conference would have done a great disservice to Nigerians if it does not seek an end to the present lopsided federal structure cum unitary system being practised. Factually, no federal system worth the name can operate without adherence to the principle of fiscal federalism. We insist on the return to the structure that obtained in the pre and post-independence period where the regions controlled their resources a 100% and paid appropriate taxes to the Federal Government. Nothing more nothing less!

On the issue of derivation, we stand on a 100% Resource Control. We demand true fiscal federalism.

In line with this, we reject attempts to intimidate the Ijaw and Niger Delta people with threats to dissolve federal agencies such as the Ministry of Niger Delta, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) for former agitators in the Niger Delta. Our position remains that these agencies as well as those in other geo-political zones of the country are being funded by budgetary allocations accruing from resources in the Niger Delta. So, we remind those kicking against these agencies that if the Ijaw/Niger Delta people are

allowed to fully control their resources, we will decide the fate of these agencies ourselves and sustain them beyond the paltry allocations they receive at the moment.

Due to the balkanization of the Ijaw, the impact of these so-called interventionist agencies have not been fully felt by the Ijaw people, who produce 60% of the oil revenue for the country. Developmentally, we are still where we were since the Willinks Commission submitted its report in 1958.

The NDDC has been starved of funds for the most part and even when it is funded, it has to spread projects in nine states thereby watering down its impact. The Niger Delta, which is supposed to be a specific geographical expression, is now a free-for-all deliberately imposed by the Olusegun Obasanjo administration. So we now have an Obasanjo-created Niger Delta of nine states. The Ijaw issues, due to our terrain, are not the same with most of these other states.

The Niger Delta Ministry is also under-funded. It is a ministry with a budget that cannot even fund the main artery of the Niger Delta, the East-West Road. A ministry forced to source funds for major projects cannot have any meaningful developmental impact.

The Presidential Amnesty Programme is meant to rehabilitate 30,000 former agitators out of a population of more than 30 million in the Niger Delta. Is that not a drop in the ocean? Even then, the programme has been a resounding success.

Nevertheless, let the Federal Government take all these agencies and give us fiscal federalism.

On the issue of 5% stabilization fund being demanded by the North for states ravaged by insurgency and internal conflict, this is totally unacceptable and insulting if not provocative to the Ijaw people, who have been and are still waiting after 50 years of oil exploration for a stabilization fund despite the callous destruction of our ecosystems.

We therefore align our position with that of other leaders and stakeholders in the South-South that have called on delegates from our region to stage a walk-out at the next sitting of the conference if it fails to adopt true federalism. Any attempt to implement proposals that are alien to constitutional and fundamental guarantees of democracy, social justice and protection for minorities, would be vigorously

opposed by measures also alien to constitutional arrangements. And in that connection, we may consider the legitimate and natural law of self-determination endorsed by the United Nations.

SIGNED

IJAW YOUTH COUNCIL (IYC)

IJAW NATION FORUM (INF)

(ON BEHALF OF CONCERNED IJAW STAKEHOLDERS)

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