Ethnic Conflicts Versus Development in Africa: Causes and Remedies

Omari H. Kokole

INTRODUCTION

Most countries across the globe are ethnically pluralistic societies. While ethnic diversity by itself need not generate ethnic conflict, it is evident that ethnicity can be exploited and manipulated enough to generate social conflict, especially in the developing world. Indeed, ethnic conflict is definitely a major hindrance to national stability and cohesion, and to the quest for socio-economic development, in many Asian and African countries. However, ethnic conflicts are not a monopoly of the South, as events in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and former Yugoslavia in the 1990s clearly demonstrate.

Ethnicity is basically ascribable collective identity and is related to cultural affinity, a shared myth of origin or belief in a unique past, and a belief in being distinctive as a collectivity. To quote Donald Horowitz, ethnicity, like nationalism to some extent, can be based on ‘colour, appearance, language, religion, some other indicator of common origin, or some combination thereof’.1

In many developing countries, ethnic consciousness and loyalties tend to be particularly strong and lend themselves to easy manipulation, partly because other identities and loyalties are either weak or altogether absent. Peace and stability may not be sufficient conditions for socio-economic development, but both are indisputably necessary elements for any society to grow, develop, and prosper. For our purposes development is essentially defined as a process of modernizing society minus the demon of dependency. African societies that have experienced serious and armed ethnic conflicts internally in the post-colonial era – like Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and Liberia – have been devastated as a result and are further behind developmentally than they were at the time of independence some 30 years ago.

This chapter addresses social conflict generated by ethnic competition, especially ethnicity reinforced by religion and language and how this impacts
on socio-economic development, with special reference to Africa. In particular, the republic of Uganda will loom large in the illustrations provided.

As affirmed by recent horrors in Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia and elsewhere, Africa is ethnically a conflict-ridden continent. This analysis attempts to identify the multiple sources of these conflicts. At the minimum, the conflicts can be categorized in two ways: a) political; and b) non-political. The implications and consequences of these conflicts for socio-economic development in Africa are also examined, and the article concludes by advancing some tentative recommendations pertinent to conflict-prevention, conflict-management and conflict-resolution in Africa.

Needless to say, many of Africa’s conflicts are of domestic or internal origin, but Africa is not an island entire unto itself. Some of its conflicts are, at least partly, imported into Africa rather than generated internally, so the interplay of domestic and external sources of conflict shall also be addressed. 2

Apart from a handful of exceptions, the rest of the African countries are multi-ethnic in composition. 3 Africa also has countries that are ethnically or racially dual – the so-called ‘dual societies’ (for example, Rwanda, Burundi, Zimbabwe, and, in a sense, the Sudan and Algeria). What is more, the boundaries in which Africa’s more than 50 post-colonial countries are individually enclosed were arbitrarily drawn by Europeans towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Most African countries comprise a plurality of ethnic groups and have little historically common or shared experiences and cultural values to cement them internally. True, the colonial experience was widely shared across ethnic lines, but then that historical experience, averaging less than a century, was neither long enough, nor deep enough, to forge a solid sense of shared identity. 4 Indeed, some European imperial policies, especially that of British indirect rule practised in Uganda and Nigeria, tended to divide rather than unite Africans.

Additionally, the anti-colonial struggle, though unifying to some extent, was even briefer, averaging a decade or two at the most. Once the colonial master departed, the nascent nationalism that was mobilized during the decolonization struggle atrophied, so that, for example, even the liberation and anti-apartheid struggles in the Republic of South Africa and Namibia have basically failed to unite all Africans in the two countries.

National integration remains woefully lacking in most of Africa. Ethnic conflict is a disease afflicting many African countries; instability and violence are the symptoms, while the cure is national integration.

Most African countries experienced a kind of nationalism directed against colonial rule, without necessarily developing nationhood internally