‘A Mere Geographical Expression’: An In-depth Analysis of the Issues that Threaten Nigerian Federalism

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The state of West Africa is in peril today as its most populous country is plagued by internal strife threatening to divide the nation. The Federal Republic of Nigeria has come to a critical juncture in its short history: either deal with the unrest and problems that have divided both the people and the government, or face the probability of civil war and genocide. In an attempt to gain some insight into this pressing issue, one will have to address the three problems that face Nigeria if the federation is to avert certain collapse. First, by analyzing and comparing the lack of accountability that has troubled the First Republic and that is continuing to affect the current regime. Moreover, the frequent government's corruption and malfeasance has weakened the structure of the federal system and has had the dire result of creating a struggle between the State and the federal government. It is a struggle where the former has become utterly dependent on the latter and the State has become impotent in checking the coercive tendencies of the federal government.

Second, the rise of Muslim fundamentalism in the North and Christian fundamentalism in the South has polarized the nation across religious lines. Thus, persecution by extremists on both sides alike occur frequently and have served to further antagonize confrontations between the three dominant ethnic groups. This section will explore the deep divisions that exist and stand to harm any chance that a peaceful Nigerian federation will come to fruition.

Lastly, Nigeria's complete dependence on its oil exports has greatly undermined the legitimacy of

State's powers. As the federal government attempts to suppress popular dissent over environmental degradation and represent the interests of the oil companies alone, it has continually encroached upon the jurisdiction of the States and clashed with its citizens. This has left thirty-six States impotent and their people hostile thus undercutting any chance of stability in the federation. Through an in-depth analysis, "A Mere Geographical Expression," will assert that national corruption, ethnic and religious rivalries and the oil industry in the Niger Delta, all threaten to dismantle Nigeria's federation. For although there have been successes in the federal experiment, government leaders must take profound steps to halt the downward decline of Nigeria's federation by restoring the essential checks and balances that will rid the nation of the unequal power distribution that has hindered it for decades.

Lack of Accountability and Corruption

*"No single member group should have the power to override the expectations of other members. If a group had such power, it would dictate its will to all others, thus ending any effective federation in favor of single group dictatorship."*⁶

-John Stuart Mill, Philosopher/Political Economist

The most serious impediment to stability in Nigeria is the weak infrastructure of its federal system. In order to gain an understanding of the weaknesses of the current federal system, some of the issues that have plagued Nigeria in the years leading up to and

immediately following the triumph of Nigerian independence must be analyzed. Through this section, a parallel will be shown between the issues that faced the First Republic and the issues that currently face the Fourth Republic.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the arrival of Britain's Lord Lugard into the African Interior proved to change both the landscape and the future of West Africa forever. Lugard's appointment as British Governor in the region in 1914 can be characterized as a turbulent era, for it would be his capture of over two hundred nationalities in the borders of one nation, which would split the country along ethnic lines, and sew the seeds of Nigeria's future discontent.ⁱⁱ By the time the independence wave hit Nigeria in the fall of 1960, the beginning of ethnic tensions were visible as their common cause (of expelling the British) had become realized and the nation was polarizing its ethnic divisions. From the outset, Nigeria's federal experiment during the 1960s attempted to create a confederate nation by concentrating power in the States while relying on a weak federal government to tend to international issues. Essentially, the creation of the First Republic saw the division of Nigeria into three distinct regions that were controlled and maintained by governors of the three major ethnic groups. The Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yorubas in the Southwest and the Igbos in the Southeast were the three dominant groups who had the largest population (and thus a larger popular vote) and were expected to be the sole competitors for executive office.ⁱⁱⁱ The fact that the other half of the population, the so-called

"minority Nigerians", had neither adequate representation nor the ability to compete for the Prime Minister's Office, illustrates how weak the federal system was from the beginning, as it marginalized half the population and set the groundwork for the military coup of 1966.^{iv} In addition, as a result of the sharp divisions that existed between the different ethnic groups, suspicion from those who were not in power dominated the political landscape and antagonized already existing tensions.

The first major setback to the federal system came in 1964 from the coercive and manipulative political campaign launched by the Yoruban dominated Action Group (AG) to regain office. After AG 'won' the rigged election, the federation began to waver as leaders of the opposition began to call on the military for a political intervention.^v A year later when the same corruptive tactics were used in a State election, citizens realized how fraudulent their system had become and demanded change. The fatal blow to the First Republic came on 16 January 1966 when the people got their wish and Major General J.T.U Aguiyi-Ironsi deposed the civilian government and instituted Nigeria's first military government.^{vi} The federation had let its people down. Widespread corruption derived from both patronage politics and rigged elections had rotted the republic in only six short years and spurred the rise of the military coup. In the eyes of the new leader, therefore, federalism was a failed experiment beset by the plethora of ethnic groups, the patrimonialism that limited minority representation

and the corruption that was responsible for the fraudulent elections.

Although federalism was re-instituted in a counter coup in the late months of 1966, Nigerian leader Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon struggled to maintain the legitimacy of the federal system as the Igbos threatened succession. Despite dividing the three regions into twelve states to diffuse existing regionalism, Igbo opposition leader Chukwuemeka Ojukwu refused to accept key provisions of the new federation and later pronounced that he was, “finished with the federation (and) it (was) all a matter of time”.^{vii} Consequently, what would follow was a twenty-seven month long civil war that would see Gowon’s federation disintegrate into a bloody onslaught, leading to the death and the displacement of millions. Ironically, the federal system had had the unintended effect of strengthening rivalries instead of uniting the nation.

Unfortunately, there are no lessons that can be learned from this carnage, nor any justified rationale that can offer solace to those who were involved. The horrendous era has become a model of how a federation deteriorated by corruption and under representation can lead to anarchy, hostile military takeovers and civil war. Without a doubt the Biafran succession truly unveiled to the world the deep fractures that have existed in the Nigerian federation since colonialization. These fractures were largely the result of a turbulent political climate that seemed to climax in the years following independence as the federal system was so inept, that its oppression of her

minorities inevitably led to a hostile military take over and a bloody civil war. President Olusegun Obasanjo later remarked in his memoirs that while Nigerian politicians were fervently trying to re-shape the newly independent nation, “at the same time the ugly embers of tribalism and the ignorance of the people to power [were present], at the expense of national unity and the nation.”^{viii}

When analyzing the current regime, it becomes apparent that many of the problems that haunted the First Republic remain to this day. Although nearly sixteen years of military rule has ended with the return of a civilian government, the Obasanjo administration has been cursed with the obligation of reforming the many problems that continue to plague Nigeria. Despite their efforts, there is a clear parallel between the two republics in the lack of accountability that seems to persist. For example, Nigeria’s federal system has been completely destabilized as a result of the new constitution. This constitution (similar to the US system – president, bicameral legislature, etc.) was implemented by the outgoing military regime and centralized power of the executive office. .^{ix} In essence, this gave him control over every facet of Nigerian life and handed him the authority to dictate what States were eligible to accept federal monies. Handing the president the power to allocate resources has heightened the rate of corruptive practices such as clientelism and patrimonialism (a system of governance that is preserved through patronage). In illustration, President Obasanjo who has distributed funds to States based on loyalty and support of his

rule, is forcing State governors to accept a patron-client relationship with the federal government, if they are to attain any resources. Scholar Larry Diamond coined the word *praetorianism* to explain the corrupt system that has enveloped the Nigerian political scene. According to Diamond, this term refers to Nigeria's "system in which raw power occupies the pursuits of political leaders and factions, and constitutional rules are manipulated for individual gain."^x The fact that the States are required to vie for federal resources has had the dire effect of further politicizing ethnic conflict and leaves the thirty-six States in a position of utter dependence.

Often, States must compete for resources with federal cronies who use the government as their personal bank. This notion appears to be true as 'big men' (a semi-competitive oligarchy) dominate the political arena and seek to further their economic interests much to the displeasure of the public. Proof of their corruptive practices, is demonstrated when Nigerian officials 'misplaced' \$2.3 billion in oil revenues after the Gulf War in 1991.^{xi} Following this event, many Nigerians began to notice "many of the ministers and commissioners in the Nigerian governments have become rich men that they weren't two years ago."^{xii} This patronage and corruption has remained so prevalent in the system that "most of the \$350 billion that the country has earned from oil exports in the past fifty years has been stolen by narrow politico-military elite."^{xiii} This has greatly contributed to reducing sixty percent of the population into absolute poverty (defined as living on less than \$2 per day).

Hence, the lack of federal funding has increased the inequality gap which has given Nigeria a score of 50.6 on the GINI scale and has pushed illiteracy rates up to nearly 70% (up from 50% while under the military regime).^{xiv}

While many of these problems can be attributed to Nigeria's oil enclave economy (discussed more below), there is no doubt that these problems have been fuelled by the weak federal system that has allowed backroom deals to persist.

Additionally, the lack of accountability and circumstances with which States remain reliant on the federal government completely undermines the notion of a federal system. This reliance breeds patronage to attain resources that States *should* already be entitled to but instead compete over at the peril of their political integrity. If the First Republic gave too much power to the States (as seen through the Biafra succession) then the Fourth Republic gives too much power to the federal government. To fight the rampant corruption and instill order into the system there needs to be a balance of power between the two tiers of government. Essentially, the federal government must relinquish some of its authority in order to give States the required power to check on the federal government and provide representation to the people. Although Nigerians have survived British imperialism, six military governments, a civil war and the collapse of its economy, it is the corruption and lack of accountability that has endured since independence that is by far the gravest threat facing the Nigerian federation.

Religious and Ethnic Divisions

"Nigeria is not a Nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no 'Nigerians' in the same sense as there are 'English' or 'Welsh' or 'French' Nigeria is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not."^{xv}

- Obafemi Awolowo, Yoruba chief and lawyer (1947)

When the United States "War on Terror" focused on Afghanistan and deployed its troops on October of 2001, the world community witnessed riots from embittered Muslims around the globe. However, nowhere in the world was it more pronounced than in Nigeria's northern states. During the anti-American demonstrations, hundreds of Christians and Muslims were killed or wounded, churches and mosques were burned to the ground and innocent homeowners fell victim to looting and acts of rape. What was truly interesting about this situation is the fact that although the rise of religious fundamentalism in Nigeria has been accruing for decades, these violent outbreaks appeared to catch the world by surprise.

According to Nikki R. Keddie, the recent rise of religion in Third World nations can largely be attributed to growing trends such as; the expansion of capitalism (which creates income distribution gaps and forced migration), economic stagnation and neglect from the secular federal governments in taking care of the people. As a result of these issues, Keddie argues, the populations have become alienated, made irritable and have the "tendency to turn to ideologies, both new

and familiar, whether right-wing nationalism or religiopolitics" in order to give them guidance.^{xvi}

Both religion and ethnicity in Nigeria, have come to dominate popular society and communalism (a strong devotion to the interests of one's own minority or ethnic group rather than those of society as a whole) in particular, stands in the way of a united Nigeria. The nation has become evenly divided between the Northern Muslims, the Southern Christians (mostly located in the Igbo dominated areas), and the various ethnic groups existing in the country. While tensions did exist under colonial rule, the post-independence era has seen many factors that have enhanced the influence of religion in the two regions, thus contributing to their hostile relationship. Moreover, on account of the communalist nature that has developed in the nation, people identify solely with their ethnic heritage and/or religion and do not feel any relationship to others living within Nigeria's borders. A poll taken in the early 1960s illustrates this point, because when Nigerians were asked to name which nationality they felt that they belonged to the survey indicated that over 60% of those polled had identified themselves not with the nation itself, but instead with their ethnicity.^{xvii} Furthermore, not only were the groups "identifying themselves in ethnic terms, rather than as Nigerians, they tended overwhelmingly to exclude members of Nigeria's other ethnic groups from their fellowship."^{xviii} Peter P. Ekeh has referred to this ethnic identification as 'primordialism' (the feelings of obligation that people feel to their ethnicity, language and religion over the

civil state) and warns that these ties to one's ethnicity or religion is strong enough to divide a nation.^{xix} Perhaps one of the best examples can be drawn from the Northern states, where Muslim Imams have long declared their right to have Shari'a law instituted in their courts. And despite Nigeria being officially a secular nation, the government has allowed this practice to continue because of the deep primordial ties that have placed people's faith over their fellowship to civil authority. Ekeh surmises that "...while there is some expectation that the nation-state should be the final resort for one's (social) rights, there is a great deal of uncertainty in the matter of one's duties. If anything, the main focus of Nigerians' duties has tended to be the primordial order rather than the civil order."^{xx}

'Primordialism' is further proof of the great divisions that threaten both the people and the integrity of the nation. Ethnic loyalties have on many occasions taken precedence over national issues, which deteriorate the unity of the people. The above example has proven especially worrisome to Nigerian Christians (who worry that with the rise of Shari'a they will be tried under Muslim law) up to the point of rebellion over the idea of disbanding secularism. This is why it is so vital to Nigeria's future to maintain stability and equal representation. Because of its large population, its limited territory and vast array of culture and religion Nigeria is especially vulnerable to ethnic conflicts as witnessed in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and Zaire. Nigeria is unique in its disposition, which makes it an especially volatile nation, so if peace is to flourish in a region where

hundreds of ethnic and religious clans have been pushed together there must be a check on religion, adequate representation given to the ethnic minorities and issues must be solved solely through courts and legislature.

Alas, due to a weakened federal system, scarcity of resources and rise in ethno-religious politics, Nigeria is beginning to witness itself fall victim to a great wave of instability with the return of a civilian government, and the fatal clash of Muslims and Christians. Invariably, this has left thousands dead in their wake. Demonstrations of such instability was seen in the ethnic violence that erupted in Lagos in February of 2002, when Muslim Hausas clashed with Southern Yorubas. After evacuating thousands of residents, the conflict ended with a death toll of nearly 100 people.^{xxi} A more renowned instance came in December of that same year when Muslim rioting occurred in the streets of Kaduna over Nigeria hosting the Miss World beauty pageant. This after four days of violence and the deaths of 200 people, the pageant was quickly moved to Britain.^{xxii} It should be noted, however, that Nigerian Christians are just as guilty of committing these atrocious acts. In February of 2006, nearly one hundred people were slain by machetes in an anti-Muslim riot in Southeastern Nigeria. One resident described the scene as "major streets... littered with bodies of people killed today, most of them northerners."^{xxiii} The conflict was apparently a reprisal attack after thirty Christians were killed in Northern Muslim towns.

Lastly, Nigeria's status as a key member of *ECOWAS* (Economic Community of West African States) along with its oil industries and large population, makes ethnic conflict in the region not only damaging to Nigerian federalism, but also threatens the stability in the region. Essentially, any conflict in Nigeria will have a spillover effect that will have consequences for the economies, stability and people of surrounding nations.

Unfortunately there is no shortage of examples where ethnic violence has erupted in Nigeria but it appears as though it is becoming more prevalent under President Obasanjo's administration. These horrendous acts illustrate a nation that must make a critical decision about its future. On one side stands opportunity, unity and growth but it cannot be achieved without great reform, sacrifice and patience. This side requires that the nation's leaders weaken the role of the federal government and strengthen States' jurisdiction. Essentially, this would have the effect of diluting popular dissent and would increase the representation of the many religious and ethnic tribes. The other side however, illustrates a grim picture, one that the world community has become all too familiar with in the 1990s. If these acts continue and a sense of nationalism is not achieved, people will strengthen their primordial ties and wage war against those who do not subscribe to their beliefs. This has been witnessed before in the Biafra War and is being seen now with the clash between the north and the south. This conflict could come in the form of either a civil war between the north-south or even between separate

ethnicities, not only creating a great humanitarian crisis, but also completely devastating the rest of Africa as well. There is no doubt that there is a great divide in Nigeria, however, if managed efficiently, the federal system can be fixed to provide more representation and thus stave off a potential civil war as the survival of the Nigerian federation depends on it.

The 'Oil-First' Economy

"It must be clear that the Nigerian government cannot protect your workers or assets. Leave our land while you can, or die in it. Our aim is to totally destroy the capacity of the Nigerian government to export oil."^{xiv}
-A declaration by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) to oil companies.

The last great issue at the crux of the Nigerian quagmire revolves around the nation's economy, specifically the issue of oil. Nigeria controls one of the largest oil reserves outside the Middle East which makes it the sixth leading oil producer in the world. Most of the reserves reside in the Niger Delta, a small region in the southern portion of the country that is largely dominated by the Ijaw and Ogoni minorities.^{xv} It is here that almost two million barrels are produced daily, which produces the vast revenues that line the pockets of Nigerian autocrats.^{xvi}

While this mono-crop economy continues to acquire large amounts of international investments, key problems associated with the industry threaten the integrity of the federation. First, the industry has had profound affects on the environment. Streams and

lakes are polluted, fish and wildlife are contaminated and acid rain occurs so frequently that it is affecting the quality of the soil.^{xxvii} Without the States' ability to check the interests of the federal government, the growing environmental degradation that exists in the area threatens Ijaw and Ogoni way of life. Second, despite it being the heart of the economy, those living in the Niger Delta see no revenues or benefits coming from either the industry or the government. Moreover, few jobs are created in the process for those living in the area because Nigeria only exports raw petroleum and does not refine it.^{xxviii} Furthermore, very little federal money gets reinvested back into the local economy, which leaves residents in the most affluent part of the country living in absolute poverty.

The fact that the economy has become so dependent on its petroleum industry has made the federal government more aggressive in the steps it has taken to ensure its protection. Once a leading agriculture exporter, in twenty-two years Nigeria's oil revenue as a percent of total revenues rose from 4.1% in 1963 to 84% in 1985 (the figure is currently around 90%).^{xxix} What this means is that Nigeria's dependency on oil as a means of national revenue has taken precedence over the interests of the citizens. Government intervention in the area has often been violent which has led to the deaths of countless Ijaw and Ogoni who, according to the federal government, threaten the stability of the region. More importantly, even when a conflict does not relate to the oil industry, government officials have often cited oil as the root cause of the incident (stating it as an issue of national

security). Kenneth Omeje has referred to this trend as 'oilification' and argues that the government will often tie non-oil conflicts in the region to actual oil conflicts, which government officials then use to justify their use of violent intervention in the area.^{xxx} Not only does this tactic quell the civil unrest, but it is an attempt to show the oil companies that the government will not tolerate any instability in the region. A key example that Omeje uses to illustrate his idea of 'oilification' comes from the town of Odi. After youth gangs captured and murdered seven police officers in the town of Odi, newly elected President Obasanjo dispatched his military to the region. Using this incident as an opportunity to show his strength, Obasanjo stated that these murders were an attack on stability in the region and thus an attack on the oil industry itself. What followed was a murderous campaign that left the town decimated and over two-thousand people murdered in cold blood.^{xxxi}

Sadly, it appears as though there is no end in sight to these abuses and this is a fact that the citizens have not taken lightly.. Angered over environmental degradation, poor representation, lack of financial compensation and government aggression, the Ijaw and Ogoni peoples have clashed with the government on several occasions. These clashes have occasionally proven to be peaceful, such as the case in 2002 when Nigerian women peacefully boarded an oil platform and disrobed in order to shame the police, soldiers and oil workers from continuing their work.^{xxxii} Additionally many Ijaw militias have begun stealing oil (known as 'bunkering') and have sold it on the black

market to defy the federal government and garner some much needed revenue. Aware of this practice the oil companies and the government have allowed it to persist, therefore avoiding any direct confrontations with the gangs. Nevertheless, the majority of these clashes have not been as peaceful. In 2003, several police, soldiers and oil workers were killed in the Warri region when an angry mob took to the streets in protest.^{xxxiii} In recent years, the conflict has only gotten more organized: "Since mid-December of 2006, two major pipelines have been blown up in the Niger Delta, home to all of Nigeria's oil. Nine people were killed in an attack on the Italian oil company Agip. Four foreigners were kidnapped from an offshore rig (and later released, presumably on payment of a large ransom). And at least seventeen people died in a motorboat raid on a Shell flow station in the swamps around Warri."^{xxxiv}

While it may be damaging to the federation, the people's reactions to the government's insolence is completely understandable. The Ijaws and Ogoni of the Niger Delta are victims of an unrepresentative government that has killed and pillaged the region for decades. The above atrocities clearly stand in the way of a united federation. Anti-government organizations, guerilla fighters and crime syndicates are on the rise and their influence over the public is growing by the day. As government leaders continue their abuses on the polity and deny their requests, the structure of federalism is quickly breaking down and there appears to be no reconciliation between the two sides. Although it is unlikely under the current regime,

representation and adequate compensation for the oil extraction may quell the unrest in the area. This is truly a troubling time for both democracy and federalism in Nigeria and hopes for a return to order continue to diminish by the day.

However, while many problems may exist in the Federation of Nigeria, all is not lost – yet. While the federal regime controls most levers of the government, there are some independent organizations which show potential in instilling accountability in the country. Since 1999, there has been an attempt by Nigerian officials to reformulate the judicial branch of the government, making it more independent and thus more just in its decisions.^{xxxv} Furthermore, while its members are often persecuted, the media has been an asset to the federation by keeping Nigerians informed about national issues. By exposing government corruption to the public, the media has the potential of being the much needed check on the federal government (especially around election time). Lastly, Nigeria has become a vital part of ECOWAS which aims to stabilize the economy in Western Africa and plans to form a monetary coalition similar to that of the European Union.^{xxxvi} An example where Nigeria was influential to the ECOWAS institution was when they sent peace-keeping troops to maintain stability in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ivory Coast.^{xxxvii}

In conclusion, the lack of accountability, rampant corruption, ethnic and religious conflict and the nation's handling of its oil industry has completely undermined the Nigerian federation, making it clear that the federation is under severe threat from internal

sources. As a result of the enhanced powers given to the president by the 1999 constitution, the state has turned from a federation into a popularly elected dictatorship where the national government controls the country unimpeded. This transition has become one of the greatest problems facing Nigeria today as patronage and patrimonialism ensure Nigeria's stature as one of the most corrupt nations in the world. Second, while many nations ethnic and religious diversity has been checked by a federal system this is The last unaddressed problem that could bring down the Fourth Republic is Nigeria's oil industry. Civil unrest and government massacres have become all too common in the Niger Delta as citizens clash with the government over the deplorable state of the environment and lack of compensation for oil extraction. While the conflict is largely confined to the Southern region of the nation, it has shown that the integrity of the federation has largely been compromised by national officials who care more about the oil companies than their constituents. As the various regions become more virulent and suspicious of one another, the efficiency of the system is slowly deteriorating. If civil war is to be averted, a major reform must take place to get back to the roots of federalism. Government officials must instill checks and balances on the federal government, give equal representation to the public and finance social issues to alleviate some of the nation's poverty. Without these reforms, the collapse of the Nigerian federation is imminent and the fate of 130 million Nigerians will hang in the balance.

not the case for Nigeria. The rise of both Christian and Muslim fundamentalism, along with the deep ethnic cleavages that exist throughout the country threaten to plunge the nation into civil war. Recent uprisings throughout the nation have left hundreds dead which has helped strengthen peoples' primordial ties and has dissolved Nigerian nationalism. The lack of nationalism is especially worrisome to federalism because without a common vision, the nation is likely to splinter off into hostile factions..

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^{vii} Ibid, p. 11.

^{viii} Ibid, p. 3.

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