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A reflection on ethnic militia in Nigeria

Adam Adem Anyebe *

Department of Public Administration, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria

Abstract

Nigeria embarked on a transition from military rule to democracy in May 1999 with hopes of establishing a peaceful democratic polity. Today, a number of indicators point to the overheating of the polity. Between May 31, 1999 and September 2017, the country experienced no less than seventy violent communal conflicts under a democratic setting. Why all these? This paper, therefore, attempts to reflect on the activities of ethnic militias in relation to the national security in the country. A conclusion is drawn that the activities of these militias pose a potent threat to national security and by extension foreign direct investment. In order to address security issues adequately we need to create a relatively equitable federal grid while measures to effectively reduce poverty and unemployment should be put in place.

Keywords: Ethnic-Militia; Democracy; Military Regime; National Security; Arewa Youth

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* Corresponding author. *E-mail address:* adamanyebe@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Behind ethnic conflicts are often structural issues transcending immediate grievances. These issues could be ethnic, religious, ethno-religious, or geo-ethnic in nature. Where people find no channels for expressing their grievances, they often pursue violent means of seeking justice.

After almost thirty (30) years of military rule, briefly punctuated by civilian regime, Nigeria embarked on a transition to democracy from May 29, 1999 with pomp and pageantry and with the hope of establishing a peaceful democratic polity. Today, a number of indicators point to the overheating of the polity geo-ethnic and religious identities have exploded into violence in the interaction amongst groups, the youth embark on violent behaviours: politicians display relatively high levels of intolerance amongst one another; some groups challenge existing mechanism for resource sharing as well as asking for restructuring of the federation while some others question the necessity for the existence of the Nigerian nation-state. Between May 31, 1999 and September, 2017 this country experienced no less than seventy violent conflicts, leaving thousands dead maimed, and homeless. For example, the Justices Niki Tobi Judicial Commission of Inquiry set up to investigate the September 7, 2001 ethno-religious crisis in Jos, submitted its report with disclosure that 915 lives were lost and properties estimated at 3.3 billion naira were destroyed in the disturbances (Termlong, 2002). Why is the country experiencing such violent conflicts in a democratic setting? At a point, some of us had thought that after many years of military (authoritarian) rule, Nigeria like a corked bottle of wine would pop open with effervescence (that is, the violent activities of groups suppressed under military rule) but that the bubbles would calm down within a short time. After over eighteen (18) years, this expectation has not been realized. Why?

This paper, therefore, attempts to reflect on the activities of ethnic militias in Nigeria between May 31, 1999 and September, 2017.

2. An overview of ethnic militia in Nigeria

Ethnic conflicts and consequently, the formation of ethnic militia can be conflicts ensuing from situation in which people from different ethnic groups decide to employ their ethnic differences in pursuing competing interests (Osaghae, 1994). From an array of alternative resources (Class, gender etc.), an actor may decide to adopt ethnic strategy for a variety of reasons, ranging from the strategy adopted by rival actors to the historical precedents of the conflict situations. Hence, when ethnicity comes into play, it is usually a conscious and purposive decision which flows, not from a naturally given of life (Geertz, 1963; Shils, 1957), but from the factor at play in the particular situation (McKay, 1982). This model does not, however, rule out the possibility of spontaneous ethnic outbursts which may follow threats to the collective well-being or survival of a group.

Following this model, therefore, ethnic militia may emerge to protect the identity, culture, and perceived interest of a group which they view threatened by strangers. They may also, out of frustration, take violent

route to demand appropriate share of the scarce but allocatable resources in the polity if the regular channel and redress mechanism are foreclosed. At other time, ethnic militia may be formed to respond aggressively to the action of government they regard as unfair. Yet, ethnic militia may emerge to defend the land bequeathed to them by their ancestors from encroachment from others, and there are other who claim to be fed up with threats to lives and properties of members of their group, and organize themselves into local vigilante. They deal with perceived threats from members of their communities and other ruthlessly, without recourse to due process. These are manifestation of lack of faith in law enforcement agencies (Elaigwu, 2002).

The following ethnic militias in Nigeria ;Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), the Bakassi Boys (BB), and the Ijaw National Youth Movement (INYN) are used as examples of ethnic militias in Nigeria.

2.1. The Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC)

The Oodua Peoples Congress which emerged after the annulment of June 12, 1993 elections had its first meeting on August 29, 1994 under the leadership of Dr. Fredrick Faheun's leadership and was challenged by Mr. Ganiyu Adams who later formed the Millitant wing of OPC.

The main objective of OPC was to defend the rights of all Yorubas in Nigeria, by propagating and projecting positions that would enhance the welfare and well-being of the Yoruba race. Its first combative outing was in 1994 when it escorted Chief M.K.O. Abiola to Ipetedo, Lagos, Nigeria to declare himself president. The militant wing of OPC vowed to liberate Yorubas from political marginalization, economic strangulation, cultural eruption, and social injustice. In attempts to carry out his objectives, OPC violently clashed with their perceived enemies –Hausa/Fulani, Igbo, and Ijaw communities in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, and Kwara States.

At other points, OPC was engaged in vigilante functions after writing off the police as an impotent domestic security agency. The group even went as far as challenging the Emir of Ilorin. When federal government got fed with the activities of OPC, it banned the organization. It is reliably learnt that OPC had the backing of Afenifere, National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), Yoruba politicians and some government officials. Is OPC a legitimate instrument of security in a democratic setting? – definitely, no.

2.2. The Bakassi Boys (BB)

This is a group of vigilante youths in some southeastern states who objective was to rid the zone of menace of robbery, ritual killings, and other social vices which had defied the ability of the Nigeria police. BB started in Abia State and spread to Imo and Anambra States where they were recognized by the governments.

The members of BB, usually armed with dangerous weapon and charm, searched for and executed their victims through extra-judicial killing. They believe in jungle and immediate justice and upheld the same. The group cleared Onitsha, a commercial town in the South-east geo-political zone of the country of criminals which had turned life into hell in the town. However, their style was brutish and cruel and some human rights groups criticised it. Is the manner of justice dispensed by Bakassi Boys in consonance with Nigeria's constitutional provision for the protection of human rights? Definitely, the answer is no.

2.3. The Ijaws National Youth Movement (INYM)

Old as the Niger-Delta crises, INYM was set up to protect the Ijaw-land and people. It claimed that in spite of the fact that Nigeria's petroleum wealth comes from Ijaw land, the lives of the people had not changed for the better over the years but what was evident was environmental degradation coupled with unemployed youths and abject poverty.

The group had, therefore, at various times threatened oil companies in the Niger-Delta region. Sometimes, these youths kidnapped expatriate oil workers and released them when ransom was paid. Perhaps, of the most notable incident was the arrest and killing of policemen by Ijaw Youths in a village which attracted military action – the village was razed down.

Again, in a democratic setting, should groups engage seeking redress through violence? The rule of law presupposes that no single individual is above the law, and that the machinery of state for the maintenance of law and order would ensure that justice is also done and seen to be done. Can the activities of the ethnic militias uphold this principle? Although some of the groups claim to give opportunity to their victims to be heard; is that process consonant with 'due process' as stipulated by law?

The activities of these ethnic militias present a potent threat to national security. It is an indisputable fact that provision of adequate security is the basic ingredient amongst other necessary factors in creating an enabling environment for huge inflows of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The then President, Olusegun Obasanjo undertook many trips abroad to sell the benefits of investing in Nigeria to the International community, such would not by themselves translate into actual inflows unless the security issue is properly addressed. No matter the kind of sermons or the number of trips the president makes out of the country, foreign investors may not come. A recent United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) report indicated that FDI worldwide between 1998 and 2000 placed Nigeria on the 103rd position out 140 (Termlong, 2002). This shows that foreign investment in this country is very low.

3. Data and methodology

The data were obtained from the following sources: 1999 Constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended (containing the laws by which the country is governed), and Nigerian National Newspapers (that is, the New Nigeria Newspaper, the Punch, the Nation and the Daily Trust). A background paper presented at the National Dialogue on Civil-Military Relations: Soldiers and Civilians in Quest For a Durable Democracy was also used.

4. Results and discussion

A direct consequence of the increasing ethno-religious tension in the country is the formation of ethnic militia by various ethnic groups. For our purpose, let us define ethnic militia as the youth wing or the constabulary of an ethnic group, which has been mandated by their elders or has arrogated to themselves the

duty of protecting the ethnic group. Usually ethnic militia are psychologically predisposed to thinking that their cause is just, never mind even if other people suffer in the process.

Following the constitutional conference of 1994/95, Nigeria was, for political expediency, divided into six (6) geopolitical zones (North-east, North-central, North-west, South-east, South-south and South-west) for the purpose of development and resource sharing. The South-west zone, from 1994 or there about had pressed for a sovereign National Conference to discuss the restructuring of the country. The demand was partly predicated on the assumption that the federation was too centralized and that and that those who controlled the political power at the centre also controlled the resources and therefore, the zone opted for the old regional autonomy (1960-65) in order to control their resources.

Shortly after the transition from military to civil rule in May , 1999, the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) declared its desire to protect and defend Yoruba interests anywhere in Nigeria. The first eruption of crisis was in Shagamu between OPC and Hausa/Fulani settlers, during which many people were killed and maimed, properties worth millions of naira were destroyed. A retaliatory wave of violence was generated in Kano against the Yorubas when the corpse of Hausa men were brought from shagamu to the city. In response, Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) was formed by Northern Youths to challenge OPC violence.

Similarly, OPC violence in Lagos provoked the Ibos, who also formed the Igbo People Congress (IPC) to match force with force. Lagos became so unsafe that a declaration of state of emergency was threatened. The OPC Leaders who had been declared wanted were believed to have been shielded from the police and when they reappeared, their prosecution was poorly handled. In fact, the case was thrown out of court.

If OPC's demand for autonomy was not properly handled by the Obasanjo administration, what moral justification did the administration have to deal with the political manifestations of autonomy in other states? Some northern states then decided to use Sharia law to demand their federally desirable autonomy. The announcement of the introduction of Supreme Sharia in Zamfara State, brought a new factor of politics of federalism. Before then, state government had operated Sharia law as provided in the constitutions of 1979, and 1999- applicable only to civil proceedings involving Islamic personal law (such as in inheritance, divorce etc). The Supreme Sharia expanded the parameter of Sharia law to include criminal matters. Consequently, two thieves were amputated in Zamfara State, and a number of people were convicted for consuming alcoholic drinks and sentenced to varying number of strokes of the cane in Kano and Kaduna states. There was the conviction of Malama Amina Lawal for committing adultery and was sentenced to death by stoning.

Since its introduction in Zamfara state, Sharia Law has been adopted in eleven other northern states. News of the intention to introduce supreme Sharia in Kaduna was greeted in communal violence leaving many Nigerians dead, injured and homeless. The killing of Ibos in Kaduna attracted reciprocal killing of Hausa-Fulani Muslims in Abia and Imo States. The situation was so bad that the governors of the eastern states called for a confederal arrangement and this call was quickly backed by the then Yoruba Afenifere leader Chief Abraham Adesanya, who argued that there was hardly any difference between 'true federalism 'as demanded by Yorubas and 'confederacy' which the Igbos were demanding (Elaigwu, 2002). The then President, Olusegun Obasanjo described the call for a confederation as highly mischievous and extremely unpatriotic (the Source, 3-4-2000).

Following closely these developments, was the announced intention to declare a 'Republic of Biafra' by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) on May 27, 2000. The group was however, disowned by "Ohaneze' (the pan - Ibo organization) and Chief Ojukwu (ex-war Lord). Was the call for confederation and secession a political card? If it was, other zones were quick to put theirs on the political table.

The North - central geo-political zone reacted to the issue of Sharia law by declaring that they were no longer interested in being part of the old Northern geo-polity (Vanguard, March 17, 2000). Earlier, there had been reactions to what the zone regarded as Northern hypocrisy when the core north (consisting mainly of Hausa-Fulani) complained that the service chiefs appointed by the then President Obasanjo came from the Middle-Belt and not the North. There was the feeling that the core north only uses the Middle Belt when it is convenient for them to use it to fight its war and turns around to dump them when it is time to share the spoils. Consequently, Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) was formed largely for the purpose of reconciliation. The Forum sent emissaries to the Middle - Belt on reconciliatory trips.

Oil pipelines had been vandalized at various times in protests over perceived injustice in resource distribution. Communities in Bayelsa State involved in illegal oil bunkering at one time suffered tragic consequences resulting from unexpected explosions and inferno. In a demonstration of anger, Bayelsa Youths in Odi captured policemen, ambushed and killed four soldiers, and in a quick reaction military action was ordered and the entire village was sacked. A similar situation took place in Zankibiam in Tiv land when the soldiers, who went in search of their missing colleagues killed many villagers and rendered many homeless. Brig.-Gen. Ben Akpunonu while calling on the people of Shendam-Yelwa community in Plateau State to release the weapon of the slain soldier who was a member of the area's internal security outfit declares (Elaigwu, 2002):

I have received orders from the Army Headquarters through the Chief of Army Staff that we have been given seven days for those weapons to be handed over... otherwise we shall go into this areas and deal with the situation decisively.

All these crises are part of the bubbles of the Nigeria Federation. Below are select cases of communal violence since May 1999.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a group led by Nnamdi Kanu started agitating for 'Republic of Biafra' with the Arewa youth, in retaliation, giving quit notice to the Igbos leaving in the North to leave the region on or before October 1, 2017. IPOB was accused of engaging in terrorist activities, vis-à-vis: setting up parallel Military and Para-military organisations, clashing with the National Army and attempting to seize rifles from soldiers, using weapons such as machetes, Molotov cocktails and sticks, amounting road blocks to extort money from people among others. Following this development, President Muhammadu Buhari approved the process of proscribing IPOB. The order proscribing the pro-separatist IPOB was granted by a federal high court, Abuja on September 20, 2017. The court also declared illegal all activities of the group, particularly in the South-east and South-south geo-political zones (Ehikioya, 2017).

Table 1. Select Cases of Communal Violence since May 1999

S/no.	Date	Location	Principal Actor
1.	May 31, 1999	Warri mayhem (Delta)	Violent clash between the Ijaw and Itsekiri Communities which has its roots in the grievances harboured by the Olu of Warri and his subjects over the recognition of new Kings in Warri by the Military Administration
2.	July 2, 1999	Sagamu crisis (Ogun)	A violent ethnic clash between the Yoruba residents and the Fulani residents. The News attributed the crisis to the OPC
3.	July 22, 1999	Kano reprisal Killing	Hausa/Fulani youth took vengeance on the killing of their kith and kin in Sagamu. Their target was the Yoruba Community."
4.	August 4, 1999	Arobo –Ijaws/Ilaje clash	(Ondo) A violent clash between two feuding communities, the Ijaw and Ilaje communities of Arobo, Ondo State.
5.	October 5, 1999	Eleme/Okirika (Rivers)	Violent clash between the Eleme and Okirika communities over traditional and legal titles to the stretch of land where Port Harcourt refinery is located.
6.	October 19, 1999	Ijaw/OPC (Ajegunle, Lagos)	It was reported to be an extension of the Arobo/Ijaw/Ilaje crisis which started with the kidnap of an Ijaw man.
7.	October 1999	Aguleri-Umuri (Anambra)	A violent communal clash between two neighbouring communities of Aguleri and Umuleri. It is linked to the April 4, clash which resulted from an orgy of hatred and vengeance.
8.	Nov 8, 1999	Odi Killing (Bayelsa)	Youth group associated with Egbesu youth kidnapped and killed policemen in revenge of the killing of their members. The Ajegunle Ijaw/OPC crisis also heightened the restive Ijaw community. The town received a shelling and bombardment with artillery from soldiers.
9.	Nov 8, 1999	Odi killing (Bayelsa)	A bloody communal clash between Olch and Olomuro over sharing of used pipes from Oleh-Olomuro flow station.
10.	Nov 26, 1999	Eleme/Okirika (Rivers)	An extension of hostility between the two neighbouring communities of Eleme and Okirika.

11.	Feb 28, 2000	Kaduna (Kaduna)	Mayhem	Kaduna city exploded into violence as Muslim and Christian extremists and other hoodlums clashed over the proposal to introduce Sharia.
12.	Feb 28, 2000	Aba reprisal riot		The riot which began in Aba, Abia State as a reprisal to that of Kaduna, later spread to other eastern states. It was reported that the Aba riot was a fall-out of Kaduna violence.
13.	March 10, 2002	Ife-Modakeke (Osun)	crisis	Communal killings between Ife and Modakeke communities of Ijesha. This was a fresh hostility after along truce. It was believed to have a history of ancestral rivalry which became heightened by local government creation and the tussle over the location of Headquarters of the new Local Government Council.
14.	March 18, 2000	Okirika-Eleme (River)	crisis	A communal hostility between the Eleme and the Okirika communities which degenerated claiming several lives.
15.	April 2000	Gokana communal (Rivers)	crisis	A bloody encounter involving six communities in Golana Local Government Area of Rivers State.
16.	April 14, 2000	Agyragu (Nasarawa)	crisis	Communal clash that started with a protest against the location of local government headquarters. The militant youth group started the riot and later took the streets killing and destroying.
17.	May 4, 2000	Ife-Modakeke (Osun)		Another round of hostilities between the two warring communities.
18.	May 16, 2000	Akaasa-Igwana (Bayelsa)		A bloody ethnic encounter between the Akasasa and Igwama communities.
19.	June 5, 2000	Olowo stool crisis		A violent clash between supporters of two Lineage groups over the accession of the Owo stool. The tomb of Pa Ajasin was destroyed in the conflict.
20.	July 2000	Tsagari crisis, (Kwara)		Clash between Tsagari and share communities of Kwarastae which claimed several lives.
21.	Sept 8, 2000	Kaltungo religious (Gombe)	crisis	A religious violence that was sparked off by the presence of the state's Sharia implementation committee.
22.	Oct 17, 2000	OPC-Hausa/Fulani (Kwara)		A face off between the militant members of OPC and Hausa/Fulani community over supremacy of Emirate system in the state.

23.	Oct. 18, 2000	OPC–Hausa/Fulani (Lagos)	Violent clashes between the militant OPC and Hausa resident in Ajegunle which escalated and spread to other parts of the city recording heavy casualties. It was gathered that the clash might have been a spill over Ilorin crisis.
24.	Oct 21, 2000	Minna reprisal (Niger)	Violent crisis erupted after the OPC assaults in Kwara and Lagos state.
25.	Oct 22, 2000	Owaale-Olukare crisis (Ondo)	Hostilities between Owaale and Olukare of Ikare (Ondo State) over Obaship.
26.	Dec 2, 2000	Ihadejia crisis (Jigawa)	A secretarial disturbance that was caused by debate between Muslims and Christians in Hadejia (Jigawa) .There was a wanton destruction of worship places.
27.	June 28, 2001	Azara crisis (Nazarawa)	An ethnic conflict between the Tiv and the Azara indigenes. It started with gruesome killing of an Azara Traditional Leader, and later spread to the Tiv Village, with the Tiv community on the defence.
28.	Sept 7, 2001	Jos crisis	A violent ethnic religious crisis between the Muslim/Hausa and Fulani Christian/ indigenes. The subject of discord between the jasawa Development Association and Plateau youth council, was over political appointment in jos North.
29.	Sept15, 2001	Onisha Reprisal	A reprisal killing of Northerners, in Onisha after the Jos crisis in which several Igbos fell victim.
30.	Oct 2001	Okirika crisis	Chieftaincy crisis which snowballed into (clan) violent encounter that claimed several lives and destruction of properties.
31.	Oct 12, 2001	Kano riot	A peaceful anti- American protest over the bombing of Afghanistan turned violent, taking ethnic and religious tone. It degenerated into uncontrollable violence which claimed lives and damaged properties and place of worship
32.	Oct 29, 2001	Tiv-Jukunn/Fulani conflict	An ethnic clash between Tivs and Jujunn/Fulani which was extension of the May 2001 clash and could be linked with the protracted dispute between both sides. New swatch reported that 16 soldiers were killed which later lead to the gruesome revenge on the Tivs, by the Nigerian army.

33.	Nov 2, 2001	Gwaintu Crisis	A clash that started on a political ground (over the relocation of LG Headquarters) later took an ethno-religious dimension in which places of worship were destroyed.
34.	Dec 30, 2001	Vwang Crisis	A violent communal conflict in Vwang district between the indigenes and non-indigenes, exploded in to the backdrop of the Sept. 7 Jos crisis. It started when an illegal group 40 men attacked the District Head of Vwang. It also had religious colouration.
35.	Jan 18, 2002	Awe crisis	A renewed communal clash between two indigenous communities in Awe Local Government of Nasarawa State. The cause was not certain but two people were killed and several other injured.
36.	Feb 12 2002	Idi Araba Mayhem	An inter-ethnic violent between the Hausa resident community and the Yoruba resident in Idi Araba (Lagos) It started on the trivial accusation of the Yoruba man being manhandled but later escalated and took on ethnic line.
37.	March 25, 2002	Ikom crisis	A fresh hostility erupted at Ikom, Cross-Rivers State. When Ofara Natives launched a revenge attack against their Nselle neighbors, killing ten people in the process.
38	March 2002	Ika communal clash	The punch reported an inter –communal war in Ika Local Government of Akwa-Ibom state –Hundreds of lives were said to have perished.
39.	March 2002	Ebira youth crisis	Markets, business premises and local Government Council secretariats in central senatorial district of Kogi state were shut down on 25\2\2002 in solidarity with the peaceful protest against the signing into law the controversial Local Government Creation Bill by Governor AbubakarAudu on Tuesday February, 2002. (EBICOMNEWS,2002)
40.	May 2 ,2002	Jos mayhem	Another mayhem that followed PDP congress but later took an ethno-religious colouration.
41	May 13, 2002	Bori crisis	A communal clash in Ogoni land over the ownership of Bori town between Yghe people and the Zappa community.
42.	May 27 , 2002	Fulani-Irigwe crisis	An ethnic clash between the Hausa/Fulani and the Irigwe indigenes in Bassa. Plateau, which was said

			to be a reprisal attack.
43.	June 2002	Isoko crisis	A clash between youth of Ozoro and Okpaile communities in Isoko, Delta Stae. The Punch reported that five (5) people were found dead and more injured
44.	June 2002	Yelwa- Shandam Mayhem (Plateau)	A religious-cum-ethnic fracas between the native people (predominantly Christians) and violence extended to about 12 local government areas in southern Plateau.
45.	July 2002	Wase (plateau)	The Yelwa-Shendam riots spilled over to Wase.
46.	June 6, 2017	Kaduna	The coalition of arewa youths, after a meeting in Kaduna announced the quit order to the Igbos residing in the north to leave the region on or before October 1, 2017 in what they called Kaduna Declaration in reaction to the shutting down of major towns in the South – east on May 30, as part of the campaign by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) for the actualization of Biafra Republic
47.	July 31, 2017	Ekwulobia and Ihiala	Members of the IPOB disrupted a church service in Ekwulobia in Aguta Local Government Area of Anambra State and also interrupted the burial of a civil war veteran in Ihiala Local Government Area with the intention to attack Governor Obiano

Source: Nigerian National Newspapers

These are some of the cases of violent activities of ethnic militias in Nigeria between 1999 and 2017 with the period between May, 1999 and December, 2002 accounting for most of the activities. This could be attributed to the fact that the country just emerged from military regime which suppressed freedom of expression and association but the constitutional democracy restarted in 1999 gave room for various groups to express their grievances.

5. Conclusions

The emergence of democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999 made room for grievances suppressed under military rule to find outlet. Expression of these grievances has largely led to the formation of ethnic militias. These Militias have contributed in no measure, to general insecurity and violent communal conflicts in the country, and the situation has been scaring foreign investors.

If the federal government is really desirous about attracting appreciable foreign investments into the country, more effort should be made to improve the poor security situation. In this regard, the police force should be well-trained and equipped to perform their security duties. An effective and constructive response to the issue of ethnic militia may lie within the creation of relatively fair and equitable federal arrangement, where every Nigerian will have a stake. When people are able to prosper based on their individual drive and resolve to improve themselves without unnecessary inhibitions, they will have a greater stake in the progress and well-being of the society, and this will in turn motivate to contribute to the preservation of its peace and security.

The government should also put in place measures that will adequately address the issues of poverty and unemployment in the society because poverty and massive unemployment have a tendency of sharpening ethnic consciousness which can be used as an expedient resource for dealing with hard times

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