

WEST AFRICA REGIONAL WORKSHOP: SESSION NOTES

III. CURRENT CRISE RESEARCH: Ethnicity, decentralisation and federalism

Chair: Raufu Mustapha

1. Rotimi Suberu: Managing ethno-religious inequality and conflict in Nigeria: a study of the Sharia crisis since 1999

In his paper, Suberu argued that in Nigeria, northerners pushing for Sharia wanted to implement the Sharia code within the framework of a liberal democratic constitution, not to impose it on the rest of the federation as in Sudan. The federal context makes a difference to the way that Sharia has been dealt with in Nigeria, because Sharia could be implemented in some states but not in others, and states that adopted it could do so in different ways. For example, Zamfara state adopts a relatively hardline position on Sharia compared to Kano state, which has a more moderate position. Suberu argued that the federal government is inclusive, which means it should be able to manage the Sharia issue. In the debates within Muslim society, some of the interpretations are critical but sympathetic, some Islamic scholars have pushed for a more liberal interpretation than the prevailing hardline interpretation.

2. Dzodzi Tsikata and Wayo Seini: Decentralisation, inequalities and conflict in Ghana: an exploration of some interconnections

In discussing their paper, Tsikata explained what factors or policies may have accounted for conflicts and whether a link could be made between decentralisation and local conflicts. There have been three decentralisation attempts in Ghana's history:

- an initial effort by Nkrumah, which was unsuccessful;
- a second in the 1970s; and
- the present programme, unveiled by Rawlings in the 1980s; but there have been shifts during this time, especially in the post-Rawlings era.

Now officials of district assemblies are demanding remuneration – competition for posts has grown because people are being paid for what they are doing. The autonomy and power of district chief executives is lower than it was in the past.

There have been very few decentralisation-related conflicts in Ghana. There is no difference in the ethnic homogeneity of conflict districts, but ethnic diversity is not typical of many of the districts. Areas of in-migration had more conflicts than areas of out-migration.

Chieftaincy can be effective in the resolution of political disputes but it can also strengthen ethnic politics – and chiefs are part of the decentralisation process.

Decentralisation conflicts have hampered development programmes and have been difficult to resolve.

3. Ukoha Ukiwo: Decentralisation in Nigeria

Most conflicts in Nigeria since the 1990s have been linked to decentralisation: the issue of control of politics at the local level. But Ukiwo argued that these are not 'decentralisation conflicts' *per se*, but have emerged as a result of the politicisation of decentralisation as groups have used local governments to settle historical scores.

In the colonial period, there was competition at the local level for inclusion in or exclusion from the native administration. But the obligations of tax collection to ensure viability tended to moderate demands for the creation of new local government authorities.

The 1976 local government reform removed the question of viability in local government because local governments were assured funding from the Federation Account as a third tier of government. By creating so many new local governments the federal government created another source of conflict, as groups compete to access resources at the local level. Conflicts also arise over the perception that some groups have more local government areas than others. For instance, the argument that is being made from the Niger Delta area is that their resources are being used to create new local governments for northerners, and to perpetuate northern domination. Regions/ethnic groups that have more local governments also have more parliamentarians. Since the northern groups have more local government areas, and therefore more representatives, they were able to kill the natural resource bill, which addressed the issue of revenue allocation for oil-producing areas.

Now, as well as wanting more local governments in their area, the southern states want substantial resources given to them on the basis of derivation. But there are also divisions within states so that in Delta state, ethnic groups like the Itsekiri feel they are being dominated by their neighbours and therefore want their own local government. So-called decentralisation conflicts are to do with people who want to use the machinery of local government to advance their struggles.

4. Discussion

Discussant: Kwesi Jonah

On Ukiwo's paper, he questioned the extent to which the conflicts identified are actually decentralisation conflicts. Some of the conflicts may exist without decentralisation and may have existed before decentralisation. In the Niger Delta, conflicts over resources would be there anyway; the conflicts are not inherent, as such, in the decentralisation process.

He stated that Tsikata's paper did not touch on the fact that local government in Ghana is not based on political parties. Local elections are supposed to be contested on the basis of candidates' own merit; the moment you take political parties out of local government it means there is no mechanism for managing or moderating the conflicts. District elections are not contested on a political party basis, but national parliamentary elections are. This creates big problems between national executives who are elected to parliament from local constituencies and district heads. But conflicts are often worse when the opponents belong to the same party than if they belong to different parties. He also argued that elements of conflict *and* cooperation should be brought out at the local level – i.e. different political configurations that lead to conflict or cooperation

On Suberu's paper, he asked what allowed conflicts arising from Sharia to be maintained and was this likely to continue into the future?

Other questions from the floor:

Sam Egwu's comments on Ukiwo's paper:

Local governments were created by civilian governments not by military ones, but it would be useful to discuss this in the context of the hand-over to military rule. There also needs to be a comparison of the experiences of different communities in Nigeria; the argument is correct that once one has more local governments one has more representatives in parliament, irrespective of population size. For example, Lagos has 24 local governments whereas Kano has 48.

In Plateau and Kogi states, you find that ethnically homogeneous areas have fewer local governments than minority areas of those states – this is related to the configuration of political power.

It was also pointed out that in Ghana, since 1996, there has been a strong trend towards district plans, with a share of district revenue going towards a common fund. These district plans provide a framework in which resources can be shared and help in the allocation of resources.

In Nigeria, which factors allow decentralisation to be contained, and to what extent can it be disintegrative?

Frances Stewart argued that we need to know the counterfactuals to decentralisation. The theory of decentralisation presents it in a positive light, but what is the net situation? This could be done by considering:

- 1) Areas which were not decentralised. What has the relative effect been compared to decentralised areas?
- 2) If there was not decentralisation, would there still be development or would there be less development?

Yvan Guichaoua pointed out that the different aspects of decentralisation need to be considered. It is a triangular issue, with political, economic and social aspects.

Yusuf Bangura was surprised that nobody raised the issue of indigeneity in this panel. When you decentralise it may be that some individuals find themselves trapped in the local polity and therefore indigenisation issues become more prominent.

Raufu Mustapha stated that the sharia experience in Nigeria seems to contradict the basic principles of citizenship outlined by Bangura in the previous session. It represents the aspirations and interests of one community rather than the whole.

Mustapha was also surprised that Ukiwo identified the 1976 local government reform as critical with respect to the argument that he put forward. Local government reform as seen in northern Nigeria is very different to the southern view Ukiwo presented. In the north, the creation of local government areas after the 1976 reform was seen as an opportunity to dismantle the emirate structures and increase the influence and power of the military. The 1976 reform increased people's alienation from local government in the north.

Responses of the speakers:

Dzodzi Tsikata responded to Kwesi Jonah's comments by pointing out the limits of political neutrality at the local government level in Ghana. Despite the fact that political parties are not supposed to be recognised at the district level, when a political head is appointed his political colours are well known and this helps to generate conflicts. Tsikata also questioned Jonah's assertion about district plans – it is technocrats who draw them up and many district officers say that they have nothing to do with them, and none of these plans enter into national discussions.

Rotimi Suberu addressed the counterfactuals to the Nigerian federal structure. He agreed with the point in Mustapha's paper that the adjustments made within the Nigerian federal structure have made the country resilient. The combination of federal character and the multiplicity of similar sized states – there are now 36 – makes the disintegration of the federation less likely. Decentralisation has made Sharia possible and allowed the federation to accommodate it. Suberu also argued that indigeneity is seen as protecting the rights of the non-Muslim population, excluding non-Muslims from the Sharia.

Ukoha Ukiwo responded to comments on his paper by saying that both the central government that is decentralising and those that are calling for decentralisation have their own agenda that they want to achieve. In the military period, decentralisation allowed military despots to extend their power, to buy states off through patronage. When a local government was created at the request of a minority group, its headquarters would be sited in the area of the dominant group. This is seen when one looks at decentralisation conflicts between indigenes and non-indigenes: indigenes gather to ensure that the non-indigenes don't contest elections in what they claim as their local government area.

Ukiwo insisted on the centrality of the 1976 reform, because if one looks at the northern region, the number of local governments was static up to that point. After 1976 the number of local government areas in the north multiplied, but the north did not see it as useful to allow there to be more local governments created in the south. Why is it that since the derivation of oil became important the north saw to it that it creates new local government areas but that the south should make do with fewer?