



The Nigerian State and the Farmers-Herders Conflict: A Search for Peace in a Multi-ethnic Society

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Abstract

Attempts are made here to examine the effect of the way in which the Nigerian state has mediated the farmers-herders conflict that has simmered for several years against the backdrop of the general nature of the state system in a liberal democratic society. The State functions principally to achieve stability for itself and the polity. This stability is critical to the component units that constitute the polity as it allows for unfettered activities that in turn generate and sustain the capacity of the state to survive. The ability of the State to function effectively is then dependent upon its relative autonomy from the dominant groups. The possession of relative autonomy allows the State to mediate conflicts in a fair and unbiased manner for attainment of stability. Relying on documentary evidence it is established that the recurring brutal confrontations between farmers and herders since 2012 are indicative of instability and are underscored by the lack of relative autonomy of the Nigerian State having been encumbered by the most dominant ethnic groups such as the Fulani that are predominantly herders. Population pressures, environmental constraints and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons have also conspired to allow the conflict to simmer. Beyond these is the absence of neutrality in the intervention by the Nigerian State in the conflict that reveal tacit bent towards the herders. Going forward re-engineering the State security and political machineries towards neutrality in managing inter group relations within the context of the country's multi-ethnic state arrangement is vital to regaining the State capacity to survive and achieve peace.

Key words: Autonomy, Conflict, Stability, State, Peace

Introduction

Even though it is a decade long violent conflict, the farmers-herders vicious confrontations were largely considered to be concentrated in the middle belt region or what is known in contemporary Nigeria as North-Central geo-political zone during the period 2009-2014 (Genyi, 2014). This conflict has since the mid

2015 assumed a national character spreading to all parts of the Nigerian Federation. In Edo, Enugu and Ekiti states being in the South-South, South-East and West geo-political zones, the herders have at different times wreaked havoc on farming communities with deadly attacks. Again, from Bauchi to Zamfara and Kaduna states, repeated

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clashes between farmers and herders have occurred with thousands killed, community assets destroyed and thousands of farmers and other inhabitants rendered homeless. Across the middle belt are tens of internally displaced camps (IDCs). When casualty figures from these violent confrontations reached 1,200 in 2014, the Global Terrorism Index described the Fulani militants as the World's fourth deadliest group after ISIS, Al-Shabbab and Boko Haram (Mikailu, 2016). So far these attacks have remained predominant in the Middle Belt region. Even here, states of Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, Taraba and Kaduna are considered the epicenter of actions. The conflict has intensified over access and use of strategic resources such as farmland, grazing areas and water between farmers and herders. The conflict has been exacerbated by factors of climate change, desertification and population expansion (Abbas, 2014; Acaps, 2017). Weak demarcation of pasture and stock routes aggravated by farming activities; the breakdown of traditional relationships between farmers and herders' communities and the failure of grazing agreements between the groups have steepened and intensified the clashes (Mercy Corps, 2015). For example, the intensification of attacks by herders resulted in 800 deaths in Southern part of Kaduna state and 1,269 in Benue state in early 2016 alone (Mercy Corps, 2015, p.1). Within a two year period, (2015-2016) over 62,000 people were displaced in Southern part of Kaduna state since 2015. In February 2016 alone, some 300 people were killed in Benue and 40 others in Enugu State. The tragic ghost of killings moved to mid-2017 with over 200 deaths in Mambilla Plateau of Taraba state (Hunkuyi, Wakili,

Bamboye, Mudashir, and Jimoh, 2017). The cost of these conflicts is way beyond the loss of lives as Mercy Corps (2015) has shown that the Nigerian Economy lost \$14bn between 2013 and 2015 due to the crisis. The recurring conflict has undermined economic growth by destroying material assets, preventing and distorting trade, constraining investments and deepening the age long distrust between ethnic groups in Nigeria. This last factor far more than anything weakens the already existing fragile unity in Nigeria.

Three factors have turned out to make the farmers-herders conflict to be a strategic issue. It is destroying youth lives needed in the productive life of the country, it undermines the efforts to recovery and growth and also tampering with the security and very survival of the Federal architecture. Indeed, the intensification of the conflict and its expansion is blamed on the fragile arrangement that is the defining weak character of the Nigerian State that constrains its ability to promptly respond to the crisis with sharp policies and decisions to deal with the crisis on a permanent basis. It appears that some groups have held the Nigerian State in contempt by willfully manipulating it to their advantage against farmers. In this way impunity looms large permitting repeated violent attacks on unarmed farmers across the country with state security apparatus constantly looking the other way.

It is therefore argued that the intensification of the farmers-herders conflict leverages the weak and fragile constitution of the Nigerian State that upholds the majority-minority dichotomy in its ethnic-configuration continuum that hurts minorities greatly. This tendency

has to be altered as it has reached a crescendo that has proven more deadly against the Nigerian project. Closely following these introductory remarks is a conceptualization of the Federal architecture and the characterization of the farmers-herders conflict since 2015. The Middle Belt region and the conflict will be discussed elaborately as the theatre of confrontations. The impact of the conflict on inter-ethnic relations and the nature of response by the Nigerian state will be contextualized in the federal political arrangement and the policy options tied in the conclusion.

Nigeria's Fragile Federal State

The Nigerian state was framed as a federal structure by colonial authorities for two reasons: Its social heterogeneity and seemingly economic disparity structured between the north and south of the country. In the economic sense of the colonial imperative, the south was more viable than the north. The geographical necessities of the country's stretch were then rather complementary such that agricultural and other mineral resources in the north could be moved to the ocean in the south for international commerce. There was therefore a sound economic logic to the crafting of the federal arrangement (Uzoigwe, 2001).

The social heterogeneity of the country was starkly defined along ethnic and religious lines. The ethnic complexity and sophistication was expressed in the numerity of different hundreds of clearly identifiable ethnicities that span across the entire polity. While numerically these ethnicities may fall between the majority-minority continuums, the majorities by accident of history crystallized in nearly contiguous regions of the country. The East, West and Northern regions of the

1946 constitutional fragmentation reflected the concentration of the Igbos, Yoruba's and Hausa-Fulani respectively. This seemingly delineated structure expresses the tribal or ethnic tripod upon which the federal state was framed (Ajene, 2001). In this context of economic and social considerations Nigeria was carved as a federation of natural, geographic and economic regions (Afigbo, 1991). As has been elaborately expressed by Nwabughuogu (2001) the federal idea inherent in the constitutional corpus by Governor Richards in 1946 was broadly accepted by all segments of the then Nigerian society. The then nationalists hailed it as a perfect arrangement that could fit the heterogeneous complexity that was Nigeria. For example, Chief Obafemi Awolowo had argued strongly for a federal arrangement that would allow the component units autonomous expression within the federal polity.

With elaboration of the federal idea in the Richards Constitution, giving voice and choice to the regions, ethnic nationalism was provided a fertile platform to flourish. This strong tendency emerged in the argument for regional and sectional security within the aching federation. Thus, the North noted the apparent comparative differences with the south in economic disparities, educational attainment accentuated by Christian missionary intervention in the south and the north's desire to preserve Islamic religion in the region. Even with these contrasting disparities in issues and intentions, the north believed it could operate conveniently with southerners in a federation (Nwaboghuogu, 2001).

Similarly, the Yoruba political elite soon perceived the Igbos of eastern Nigeria as a threat but believed that their regional security and interest could be guaranteed

in a federal arrangement. So were the Igbos who had a lead in education and many who had firm roots in the federal bureaucracy feared the sectional compression but were relieved that a strong central federal idea would be leveraged to enhance their interests. Ethnic rivalries were therefore resoundingly intensified with the introduction of the Richards Constitution in 1946.

The patch work of the succeeding Macpherson's Constitution of 1951 convinced the regional elites that their regional control was sufficient attractive bait as the general elections were to later show regional hegemony of the prevailing political parties. It was this rivalry among the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani that was at the centre stage of the struggle for the soul of Nigeria, a contestation that was to shape the political and constitutional development of the country (Omu, 2001; Genyi& Ada, 2015).

As political events unfolded, it became clear with the emergence of the 1954 Littleton's legal framework that the regions were a choking pot for ethnic minorities. From West to especially East and Northern regions, hundreds of minority ethnic groups existed and have remained so that have been politically suppressed or marginalized by regional politics dominated by elites from the majority groups that holds sway in those regions. At national level the tripod of elites from the majority ethnic groups also manipulate the distribution of resources in a manner skewed in their favour as if the minorities do not exist. Illustratively federal presence in Zaria Local government of Kaduna state far surpasses similar presence in the entire Benue State considered to be part of the north but home to minorities with a negligible

presence of the Hausa-Fulani (Aliqba, 2017).

The struggle for the fragmentation of the three regional blocks in the 1950s finds expression in the attempts to escape this majoritarian political suffocation. Thus, the creation of the Mid-West region was the product of the struggle for ethnic self-determination on the part of minorities (Omo, 2001). This struggle was however not successful for the minorities of the Middle Belt who were under heavy marginalization by the Hausa-Fulani as much as the Cross-River-Ogoja-Rivers minorities under the yoke of the Eastern region (Egwemi, 2014).

The integrating role of federations in complex plural societies has been noted as an attractive appeal for stability of the polity. For these reasons, federalism is a suitable political arrangement for managing diversities (Genyi, 2014). These appeals about federalism are not to be used to eliminate ethnic or religious diversities but to creatively live with them. Federalism notes emphatically that distinct identities of a population can be peacefully lived with without undue pressure or harassment from any of the constituent groups.

The construction of the Nigerian federation by colonialists was restructured by the military into a centralized political power and has since been controlled and manipulated in favour of the tripod of national majoritarian elites. The component units are systematically weakened and syndicated to the extent that are without little capacity to offer elementary security to their populations outside the realm of federal police even under identified emergencies while waiting for the arrival of federal authorities on the scene. Under the

contemporary context of the Nigerian State, ethnic minorities especially in the middle belt are under intense fear of violent elimination by the majority Hausa-Fulani under any pretext. Under this condition as has been their experience

When people are sufficiently afraid, they can do anything. There is one type of fear that is more devastating in its impact than any other, the systematic fear that arises when a state begins to collapse. Ethnic hatred is the result of the terror which arises when legitimate authority disintegrates

Though the Nigerian state is yet to collapse, the signs are there especially the multiple violent eruptions everywhere in the country. The farmers-herders conflict more than any other reflects this trend. The obvious consequence is the declining or collapse of state legitimacy which is central to the ability of the state to provide public goods (Ibrahim, 1994; Rotberg, 2004). In the distribution of public goods including security, the state must be seen as a neutral arbiter that guarantees the safety of all sections of society. As Ibrahim (1994, p.2) has unequivocally noted, “when the state is generally perceived as serving the particular interests of one group, it starts losing its legitimacy, and indeed its authority. As state capacity declines, fear of “the other” rises and people resort to other levels of solidarity religious, ethnic, regional etc. in search of security”. The manner in which the Nigerian state dispenses security especially regarding the prevailing farmers-herders conflict is lopsided and this is stoking fear and pushing for resort to other levels of solidarity and support in search of security by minority groups that are predominantly farmers in the Middle Belt.

Intensification of the conflict

After the fierce clashes between farmers and herders in Plateau and Benue in late 2014 through early 2015 (Genyi, 2015),

with the wanton killings of minority ethnic farmers by the majority Fulani Herders, the play out has fulfilled a historical wisdom succinctly captured by (Ignatieff 1993, p. 16) namely that;

the conflict has since spread to other parts of the country and also intensified. The expansion in scale of fatalities and space has berth in Delta, Oyo, Abia, Enugu, Ekiti, Zamfara, Kaduna and Taraba States (Mercy Corps, 2015). The scale of violence is expressed in the escalation of fatal victims which was in a few tens of casualties to over hundreds. The concentration that was in the Middle Belt region has since burst and expanded to the South-south, South-west and South-east geopolitical regions.

The expansion and intensification of the conflict is rooted in a confluence of factors; expansion of land under cultivation, environmental degradation in the Sahel region, the decline of traditional authority in farming communities and the rise in scale of cattle rustling (Baba, 2015). Over the years farming communities interfaced peacefully with herders in a seemingly complementary relationship. This mutually expressed itself in the provision of goods by herders and livestock manure that fertilize the fields especially when grazing took place once in a year. Herders also in turn obtained grains and other agricultural products from farmers. The intensification of farming activities has however reduced grazing land due to expansion in population of farming communities. For example the population of Benue State, a

typical farming state was at 2,753,079 million in 1991. This has more than doubled to 4,253,641 million in 2006. The National Population Commission put the figure of the state's population at 4,942,141 million in 2011 (NPC, 2015). Another farming state is Nasarawa which population rose from 1,869,377 million in 2006 to 2,171,908 million in 2011. That of Plateau state grew from 3,206,531 million in 2006 to 3,669,993 million in 2011. This phenomenal rise has compounded the competition for cultivable land leading to the take-over of lands that were usually available for grazing several decades ago. With the expansion of farming activities, grazing herds frequently encroach on farms resulting in the violent confrontations between farmers and herders.

The push for herder's migrations from across West Africa into Nigeria's Savannah has been accentuated by the deterioration of the environmental conditions in the Sahel aggravated by overgrazing in itself. In addition to overgrazing is the effect of climate change that has radically transformed hitherto lush agricultural land that was suitable for grazing with fresh foliage into vast deserts thereby sending pastoralists Southwards in droves (Baca, 2015). The new arrivals do not only put additional pressure on available land already stretched by competition between communities, lack of local knowledge on what may have remained of old stock routes, compounded by dense local populations accelerate the probability of violent clashes due to encroaching grazing by herds.

Pastoralist-farmer relations were hitherto cordial and where disagreements arose was peacefully mediated by local traditional authorities. These roles have

collapsed or declined due to changes in Nigeria's political economy that has exposed traditional rulers to the manipulation by local elites and successful criminals. In traditional farming communities, local elites and traditional rulers that eke their livelihood from agriculture and support from largely farmers have lost their neutrality that facilitated the successful mediation in the disputes over land between farmers and herders in the past (Baca, 2015; Amaza, 2016). In the face of the disappearance of mediation opportunities, herders have easily taken to violence as the only viable alternative in guaranteeing the safety of their herds and access to the grazing resources they desperately search for in central Nigeria. Closely related to this is the compromising attitude of traditional authorities who collect money from herders to grant access to land for grazing. Given the extensive farming activities and the expansion in households due to population increase, herds graze into farmlands and destroy crops. Farmers' response in defense of their farms inevitably resulted in violent confrontations. With the compromise by traditional authorities the opportunity for further peaceful and fair mediation has declined leaving both sides to take to violence as the only option to secure their livelihoods.

The intensification of the conflict is also rooted in the high prevalence of deadly weapons in the hands of nomadic populations. The Small Arms Survey in 2009 estimated that the number of illegal small arms and light weapons in Nigeria range from 1m – 3m (Amaza, 2016, p.2). While this may even be an underestimate at the time of the survey, the Boko Haram insurgency, the explosion of the Libyan and Malian crises and the armed

mobilization of thugs by politicians during elections in Nigeria have indisputably increased access to illegal weapons in the country. Over all therefore, the number of illegal but deadly weapons in the hands of armed gangs, militia groups and herdsmen have grown to a much higher level. For example in 2014, according to the United Nations Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa (UNREC) Nigeria was said to host 350 million or 70 per cent of the 500 million illegal arms in West Africa (Editorial, 2016). There is no doubt that the flow of these weapons reach the hands of ethnic militias that abound among farming communities in central Nigeria and herdsmen entering the region from the Sahel. This explains the presence of herdsmen with AK47 rifles with their herds in the region (Baca, 2015). These weapons are light, relatively cheap but unmistakably deadly.

Closely related to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons is the rising wave of cattle rustling. In 2013 alone, local thieves stole approximately 60,000 heads of cattle. This tendency seems to be rampant in Kaduna, Zamfara and Jigawa States. To protect their herds, pastoralists are armed with sophisticated weapons to orchestrate violence in the event of dispute over access to grazing resources with farmers. Indeed victimized pastoralists often blame adjoining agriculturalists' populations for their loss of livestock even in cases where the actual perpetrators were Fulani kinsmen (Baca, 2015). Under such conditions retaliatory attacks have been bloody affecting entire villages experiencing heavy devastation (Bala, 2014; Vines, 2005).

Farmers-herders' conflicts have also intensified due largely to the failure of security agencies to effectively checkmate

the attackers. The level of impunity in this regard is exceedingly high. Over the years the slow or non-response to attacks by security agencies have left farmers with the only option of self-arming for self-defense or initiating reprisal attacks that set up a cyclical chain of counter attacks with no end. It is important to note that these attacks largely occur in rural areas that are vast, largely un-policed and hence perpetrators of cyclical violence are not easily apprehended let alone prosecuted. It appears that these violence mongers exploit the failure of the state to maintain security, law and order to perpetrate horrendous destruction on farming communities. For example, it would take President Muhammadu Buhari more than six months to order a late investigation into the herders-farmers clashes that had reached intolerable levels with the devastating attack on Agatu community in Benue State in March, 2016 (Amaza, 2016). The presidential directive was issued more than a week after nearly 400 farmers were killed in the systematic attack on several villages in Agatu, a typical farming community located on the banks of the River Benue.

A combination of environmental and social push factors of climate change, desert encroachment, population expansion and the proliferation of illicit weapons across the West African region have therefore accentuated the intensification of the farmer-herder's vicious cycle of violence in Nigeria especially in the Middle Belt region. The fillip to this has however been the sustained degree of impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of violence following the ineffectiveness of law enforcement agencies to stanch the orgy of violence. When herdsmen move with arms (Mikailu, 2016) and are not arrested let alone

prosecuted, even after deadly attacks on seemingly innocent farming communities, one can only conclude that the attackers are being provided tacit support by the state to intensify decimation on hapless local inhabitants. This tendency has been witnessed in contemporary Nigeria especially in the Middle Belt region with deleterious socio-economic and security implications.

State Response and Crisis Impact

The intensification of the violent reprisal attacks between nomadic herdsmen and farmers especially in central Nigeria have left in their wake varying degrees of impact. From socio-economic consideration the crisis has been devastating. Nigeria is believed to have been losing \$14billion annually since the Fulani herdsmen and farmers 'confrontations began in 2011 (Amaza, 2016). This is largely due to the destruction of farmlands in Nigeria's most fertile agricultural belt. Mercy Corps (2015) a UK based humanitarian organization estimates that the combined states of Plateau, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Benue have lost an estimated average of 47% of tax revenue due to the crisis. This translates to an estimate of \$2.3m in 2010 only. The regions agricultural activities consist of crop farming and livestock rearing. When trade, a major non-farm activity is factored into the economy of the area, the conflict induced losses are phenomenal. Strategically, the conflict has "impeded market development" and indeed economic growth by the orchestrated destruction of productive assets, obstruction of trade, constraints on investments and the erosion of "trust between market actors" (Mercy Corps, 2015).

Another very profound impact of the crisis is in security concerns with reverberating consequences on the whole country. At one level, the loss of human resources is appalling and inexcusable. For instance, in scale, there had been 389 incidents of violent attacks between farmers and herders between 1997 and 2015 (ICG, 2017). It is noted that 371 of these occurred after 2011. An accurate figure of human casualties is difficult to get between 2011 and 2017 but the large number of attacks has unquestionably taken unbearable toll on human lives to the degree of gaining international attention. For instance it is estimated that 2, 500 people were killed in 2016 alone (ICG, 2017, p.1), 800 of which were in Southern Kaduna and another 1,269 in Benue state (Mercy Corps, 2017, p.1). Geographically, three locations; one in South East and two in the Middle Belt regions came under attacks with disproportionate casualties and destruction that aptly depicts the security impact of the crisis on the country. The widespread nature of the attacks notwithstanding, those in Benue, Enugu and Kaduna states between 2016 and 2017 reflect the intensity and extensive nature of the crisis with obvious and covert implications for security.

Whether in intensity or extensiveness, Benue state has borne the greater brunt of the Fulani herdsmen attacks. Between 2013 and 2016, fourteen of the twenty three local governments in the state have come under severe attacks for more than once. Of these, Guma, Buruku, Logo and Agatu LGAs remain the hardest hit given their proximity to the Rivers Benue and Katsina-Ala; being major sources of water supply throughout the year. Note must be made here that competition for water resources is at issue in the conflict

particularly during the months of December through April (Bagu and Smith, 2017). During this period water is scarce in northern Nigeria with the Middle Belt remaining the only area with sufficient water supply for human and animal consumption. Against this background, attacks on Agatu villages began on 7th May 2013 leaving 47 dead; and reoccurred on 14th May, 2013 leaving 40 dead. These deaths were the consequences of the attacks on a large community of several villages; *Ekwu-Okpanchenyi* during which attack was reportedly surrounded by over 200 heavily armed herdsmen. Again on 28 July and November 7, 2013, several Agatu villages were attacked leaving 15 villagers dead. As if that was not enough, barely two days later being November 9, 2013 the same villages witnessed another devastating attack that left 36 people dead. Scenes of other attacks occurred repeatedly on April 15, 2014 on Obagaji the headquarters of Agatu LGA, leaving 12 dead, and on 15 March, 2015 over 90 villagers were killed during the attack on Ogba Community. February, 29th 2016 was the black day in the life of the LGA when 500 people were killed and 700 massively displaced (Jibueze, 2016). The Police in Benue state would confirm the presence of hundreds of heavily armed herdsmen surrounding communities in Agatu Local Government during their tour of assessment acknowledging the complete desertion of the area by indigenous inhabitants (Abah, 2016). In all of these lack luster response perceived as a tacit support for the herders to wreak havoc on the Agatu farmers, only a mere promise that perpetrators would be made to face the law could be elicited from the police. No herder was arrested let alone prosecuted or made to appear in court

even for the symbolic gesture of seeking justice and sanctions for offenders to achieve a deterrent objective. This level of impunity enjoyed by violent entrepreneurs has been a source of worry to Nigerians. Armed herdsmen perpetrate atrocities on Nigerian communities in the full glare of security agencies without attracting any robust response. It is obvious that these herdsmen are illegally armed yet no one is arrested let alone prosecuted. What has remained common denominator is that the police would engage in disputation of casualty figures and offer the regular rhetoric that perpetrators would be brought to book.

In a similar dastardly manner, armed herdsmen visited Enugu state and in one attack left over 100 dead (Ogwuamanam, 2016). The attack took place on 25 April, 2016 and was carried out by nearly 500 armed Fulani herdsmen. The massacre affected seven villages in Uzo-Uwani LGA of Enugu State. A Catholic Church and 11 houses were razed to the ground during the attack (Marnah, Ndujihe, Nwokwopara and Ozor, 2016). About 50 herdsmen would again attack Ndiagu, a community in Nkanu LGA on 24 August 2016 killing 1 person, a Catholic Seminarian and injuring several others (Igata, 2016). These attacks are well organized, coordinated and well timed and last for hours or days with incomprehensible level of response from security agencies.

While sustained attacks in Benue appear horrifying and indefensible, it is clear that the failure of the state to act decisively against perpetrators of any previous attacks gave the impetus for the Enugu killings. These orchestrations clearly signaled the tacit support to the Fulani herdsmen to reopen the killing fields in Southern Kaduna another fertile

agricultural area and heavily contested by the Fulani herdsmen for decades. The territorial sphere of Southern Kaduna consists of eight LGAs. Five of these including Jema'ah, Kaura, Kafanchan, Chikun, Kajuru are severely affected by recent killings perpetrated by Fulani herdsmen. These areas have witnessed 41 attacks from the herdsmen from 2009 to 2016 leaving in their wake hundreds of death and destruction of livelihoods (Agbo, 2016). The October 2016 killings in Southern Kaduna affected Kaura, Sanga, and Jema'a LGAs extensively. For instance, more than 800 people were killed and 1,422 houses and 16 churches burnt during the attacks (Catholic Diocese of Kafanchan, 2016). Late deployment of security agencies however failed to halt the killing spree as 31 more were killed in an attack on 14th November, 2016. After a lull the attacks were repeated again on July 11, 2017 leaving in the wake death of tens of villagers (Comment, 2017). Characteristically, these attacks aim at not mere destabilization of the host communities or in defense of herds but to inflict massive damage to the human and material capacity of the local farmers thereby crippling attempts at revenge and thus securing unrestrained access to areas for grazing. While the killing spree lasts, security agencies feign ignorance or demonstrate lack of effective logistical support to respond. In bizarre moments, the police particularly would claim that orders to do so from higher authorities have not been received. The manipulation of political and logistic failures last long enough for extensive to be inflicted on hapless local farmers that put recovery in a much longer future should that be possible at all.

As the country wake up to the resumption of killings in Southern Kaduna, it was just

a reminder of the June killings on the Mambilla Plateau in Taraba state where nearly 200 Fulani herdsmen were feared dead by attacks from the farming communities. In the wake nearly 400 herds of cattle were either stolen or slaughtered (Sahara Reporters, 2017). Unlike the killings in Southern Kaduna and elsewhere in Nigeria, an extra-military battalion, police reinforcements and other security agencies were quickly deployed to the areas to restore order.

From the Middle belt zone of the country to Ekiti, Oyo and Osun states in the South-west and Enugu and Rivers in the South East and South-south respectively, the armed herdsmen have wreaked havoc on farming communities leaving in their wake hundreds of death and destruction of entire villages and livelihood. It appears that the intensity and extensive nature of these attacks have been buoyed by the particularistic way in which the Nigerian state has responded to these attacks. A closer look at this manner of state response is necessary.

State Response to Herders-Farmers Attacks

One of the primary purpose of the state since the Hobbesian thesis is the preservation of order and the guarantee of security to members of the state (Fukuyama, 2000). Citizens require and demand this from the state and treat security of life and property as a cardinal responsibility of the state to its citizens. In distribution of this public good the state is obliged to be fair to all citizens and groups. A sense of justice is embedded in the equitable provision of security, a measure that enhances the legitimacy of any government in charge of a state at any given time.

Discernable trends and patterns of the Nigerian state response to attacks between Fulani herdsmen and farmers have emerged that are egregious to inter-group relations in a plural society like Nigeria with a complex ethnic mix. These trends affect state stability and development. Government and security forces appear to be unresponsive or reluctant in responding to warning signs and reports of attacks by herdsmen on farming communities. In extreme cases security agencies' responses to attacks are systematically delayed and often arrive long after attacks have ceased (Bagu and Smith, 2017). When security agencies arrive long after attacks, the perpetrators never got arrested or prosecuted. The February 2016 attacks that left 500 dead in Agatu in Benue state occurred for four consecutive days without response from security agencies. No meaningful police presence was seen in the area until well after the targeted villages in the area were razed down. All those villages under attack were burnt including social infrastructure like schools and churches and health centers. The Inspector General of Police (IGP) arrived the scene two weeks after the carnage and stands to be remembered famously for devoting time and energy to disputing the casualty figures of either 300 or 500 projected by community leaders and the press. The Minister of Internal Affairs responsible for internal security of the country would also only reach the scene a week after the Inspector General of Police's visit (Undertow, 2016). Even when the villages were deserted by indigenes and were taken over by over 200 armed herdsmen, the Minister merely promised investigation and prosecution of perpetrators that reflected an established pattern of state rhetoric on similar matters

and remained so by Mid-2017. What is clear here is again veiled state support to armed herdsmen to perpetrate violence against unarmed farming communities. By failing to arrest, disarm and prosecute illegally armed herdsmen for illicit possession of arms and for indefensible perpetration of violence, state protection is granted that underscores the impunity that seem to characterize criminal behaviour in Nigeria. In the case of farmers-herder conflict state support to armed Fulani groups is conspicuous. But farmers too deserve the protection by government under the Nigerian constitution as citizens of the country. Given the failure or compromised position of the state, farming communities are indirectly being encouraged to seek self-help an option dangerous to the corporate existence of Nigeria.

The partisan attitude of the Nigerian state and its security agencies in the management of intergroup relations has also played out graphically in the Kaduna killings. The mayhem in October 2016 lasted for four days before any meaningful response from the state through its security agencies or political leaders was heard including from the Kaduna state government in which state the killings took place. Disappointingly, the response rather incriminated the state governor for offering compensation to the Fulani to stop the killings of local farmers in revenge for the losses incurred in the post-election violence of 2011 (Agbo, 2016) instead of ordering for the arrest of the perpetrators. The Arch Diocese of Kafanchan alluded to the biasness from the state government and noted that this may be as a result of "a well-planned Jihad against our people with the sole aim of conquering our people and occupying

land. We have been disappointed in the way the soldiers have manipulated or railroaded to favour the Muslims. In most of these attacks, the military stand aloof and watch (sic) while our people are being massacred” (Godstime, 2016, p.1). The church leaders quickly made reference to government’s quick response to protect the Fulanis in Birnin Gwari where they had come under attack as the federal government had quickly deployed military helicopters to track down the perpetrators. What a contrast in a multi-ethnic and religious society to be treated unfairly and inequitably. The terrorists or cattle rustlers were pursued and killed or arrested and hundreds of cattle rescued. How important the Fulani and their cattle are! It is reasonably clear that government at the centre and state levels have not only failed woefully in protecting all citizens through a demonstrated partisanship in favour of herdsmen.

The same pattern of partisanship played out in the Mambilla attacks in Taraba state too. No sooner had the crisis erupted that the Minister of Interior were in the state to contend with the state government on the matter. An army battalion was immediately deployed to the Plateau to halt the killings and restore order. This showed that those for whom the state exists had to be defended and lived up to that responsibility in a swift and timely manner. The military was to protect the Fulani and restore order and was heavily supported by the police and Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps. To further demonstrate how determined the federal government was to defend the Fulani ethnic group in addition to the heavy military presence in Taraba state, the Governor was summoned to an emergency meeting in Abuja with top

government officials over the attacks (Hunkuyi, 2017).

It has been established that state security agencies have often displayed double standards in response to attacks from either herders or farmers or rustlers. In addition there are varying shades of relationships between different security agencies and the herders or farming communities across the country. Generally the police seem to have better relations with farmers and would turn a blind eye when farmers rise up against herders. The military are rather seen to favour armed Fulani herdsmen. These tendencies foster a widespread culture of impunity, a trend that exacerbate feelings of persecution and provoking social divisions as well as reinforcing mistrust of security agencies and government itself (Bagu and Smith, 2017). The sustenance and intensification of attacks in Benue are characterized by these practices on the excuses that bother on late arrival of overstretched security agencies and poor logistics given the vast rural areas of the state. While such excuses fly in the face of reality, security agencies turn to perpetrate unwarranted attacks on farming and herding communities suspected to be responsible for violent attacks. Federal troops and the police have been caught in this situation in Benue and Plateau states without investigation let alone prosecution. These practices again exacerbate mistrust between security agencies and citizens.

It is appalling that it would take more than a year of massive blood betting in Benue, Enugu and Kaduna for President Muhammadu Buhari to order investigation, arrest and prosecution of people who bear arms illegally in late November, 2016 (Akosile and Adeniyi, 2016). This order was issued by the Vice

President who represented the President at the graduation ceremony of the Senior Executive Course (SEC) 38 of the National Institute for Strategic Studies (NIPSS). And it would take more than two months of gruesome murder of 800 people in Southern Kaduna for a battalion of the army to be established in the area. But killings would continue long afterwards as the communities continued to come under attacks in February and July 2017. Citizen's perception of state response is partisan, unfair and tended to institutionalized impunity. These practices have eroded citizen's trust in security agencies and have also waned public confidence in government capacity and legitimacy. State neutrality, a basic feature meant to earn citizens' trust is under threat and with this is political stability in a multi-ethnic state in desperate search for peace that is elusive due to the state partisan attitude.

Conclusion

The way and manner in which the Nigerian state has handled the cycle of killings orchestrated through herders-farmers conflict points to an entrenchment of a culture of impunity and a drive to anarchy. From Benue to Enugu and Southern Kaduna, the Nigerian state has failed its citizens. The primary purpose for which the state and its government exist is to guarantee security, law and order (Kolawole, 2017). When government cannot secure this or does so for some and not the entire society then anarchy is founded as groups resort to self-help. State neutrality is critical to maintenance of law and order and protection of all, a responsibility when fairly and effectively discharged enhances state legitimacy and peace.

The impact of the herder-farmers conflict are largely socio-economic and security discernable. Livelihoods are lost as human resources are depleting. But far and above this are security concerns with far reaching implications on inter-ethnic relations at the core of the federal polity. If there is anything the Nigerian state would do without compromise is the guarantee of security to all groups because this is the primary duty of the state. The intensity and extensiveness of the conflict point to the failure of the state in its profound responsibility and the ominous signs to anarchy are glaring. It is time to reverse the tragedy by punishing impunity through fair enforcement of laws and guaranteeing security to all segments of the Nigerian society. Security sector accountability is pivotal to stability and enhancement of citizen-state trust and state legitimacy.

Recommendations

1. It is important for the Nigerian state to position itself for all groups in an apparent neutrality to reduce the tendency for resorting to self help which has assumed a major character of the conflict.
2. The Nigerian state must use the instrument of public policy to create conditions for private ranching to flourish by investing in requisite infrastructure to enhance its sustainability especially by subsidizing investment by herders.

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