

Appendix 37:

National Political Reform Conference: A Realistic Agenda?

Dung L. Dung¹

What is and where is the Middle-Belt?

The Middle-Belt, within the geographical confines of Nigeria, is located in the centre, between the north and south of the country. It stretches horizontally like a belt in the middle, between the extreme west and east of central Nigeria. Demographically, the area harbours multiple minority ethnic nationalities with different languages. However, similarities abound in culture at varying degrees depending on the geo-ethnic location of proximate areas. The cultural affinities sometimes relate to linguistic similarities or neighbourliness, giving the whole Middle-Belt area a spice of variation with chain of tie of each of these nationalities to the other. This makes the geo-ethnic demography of the Middle-Belt distinct from those of major ethnic nationalities that form a greater part of Nigeria.

The Colonial and Post-Colonial status quo of the Middle-Belt

At the founding of Nigeria, the whole of these Middle-Belt ethnic nationalities were lumped into the Northern Region, where the Hausa-Fulani had political dominance being a single major ethnic group of the area. This very act of lumping by the British colonial administration threw the Middle-Belt into the political bondage of the Hausa-Fulani religious Sokoto Caliphate. Indeed, the distinct nature of its languages, culture and religious affiliations of the area was either unnoticed or disdained by the British and therefore was of no concern or consequence to them. Respect and preservation was not accorded the distinct nature of Middle-Belt area as was done to the Islamic culture of the Hausa-Fulani (with less emphasis on the two other major ethnic groups). The consideration of the colonial government was only that of its economic interest.

One can easily see why the Middle-Belt area was later to become a heated battle ground against the forceful imposition of Islamic religion and Hausa-Fulani culture. The result became a catastrophe to the whole of the Middle-Belt area.

One factor and two assumptions influenced the colonial administration's annexation of the Middle-Belt to the Northern Region. The

¹LB, July/2005, p. 3.

first factor was borne out of the British concern for the cost involvement of the security of the North. To this end, the British promised to maintain and protect the Islamic religious status quo of the northern emirates. This was because the vast expanse of the north could easily over-stretch the few British forces on the ground, in case of caliphate military revolt against the colonial administration. Tampering with Islam was a sensitive issue to the emirates and could trigger such an occasion. Britain would not risk any religious revolt (which it would be reluctant to contain at that time due to cost implication), which could eventually transform into jihad, likely shifting its colonial status quo within the North.

The British colonial assumptions

This leads to the second point, the assumption by Britain that the Islamic culture of the emirates was superior to the “primitive pagan” culture (even though Western missionaries had already reached many of these areas with Christianity, paving way for colonial explorers to reach the interior of the Sudan, part of which is now known as Nigeria) of the ethnic nationalities of the Middle-Belt area. For instance, Islamic political and administrative structure of the emirates under the Sokoto Caliphate perfectly fitted the British colonial concept of indirect rule. Since most of these minority ethnic nationalities had varying systems of political governance defined by tribal boundaries, the colonial government found it more convenient to politically and administratively align in the caliphate and subject these ethnic groups of the Middle-Belt to the emirates. This ensured the British a smooth and cost effective administration. Still, this was done in disregard to the varying cultural and political concepts of the Middle-Belt ethnic groups so lumped into the emirates, because their differences were neither respected nor given consideration for preservation. As minority nationalities, their differences were neither respected nor given consideration for preservation. As minority nationalities, their culture and political systems were disregarded, disrespected and therefore sought to be dismantled for “better and more superior” Islamic culture of the emirates. This forms the demise of Middle-Belt ethnic nationalities. Herein lays the root of the major conflict (that involves emirates’ attempts of religious and cultural imposition on the Middle-Belt) that has raged in the areas since the formation of Nigeria till date.

The aforementioned factor leads us to the second assumption, that the town or city based emirates were either thought by Britain to have influence beyond the scope of these cities that were originally conquered during the Dan Fodio Jihad campaigns or it was assumed that the emirates could easily

rule those “primitive pagans” (a derogatory reference to the Middle-Belt ethnic nationalities by Britain). The British actually saw far less than they assumed. They never looked beyond these emirate-governed towns and cities which scope of influence was limited within. Beyond these few scattered cities or towns controlled by Fulani emirs were vast unconquered lands surrounding them which were inhabited by multiple ethnic nationalities of the Middle-Belt who were much more numerical in proportion (to the city based emirates). Their cultures were totally different from that of the emirates. Many of these ethnic groups have experienced slave raids by proximate emirate cities. They have not only been raided, but also plundered, with some taken away into slavery. This precipitated natural hatred amongst these ethnic groups for Islam and the Hausa-Fulani emirates. Surprisingly, what they could not achieve for long (complete subjugation of the Middle-Belt area) the British had helped them achieve overnight.

With undue disregard for these Middle-Belt ethnic nationalities feelings by the British colonial administration, they were bundled into subjugation of various emirate cities proximate to them. These emirates from the beginning, assumed the political leadership of the Middle-Belt exhibiting racial, cultural and religious superiority. Thus began the oppression of minorities by the Hausa-Fulani caliphate. In this regard, these ethnic nationalities were required to adapt the “more acceptable” Hausa language, mode of dressing and eventually the Islamic religion. Psychologically, many groups of the Middle-Belt developed a cultural inferiority complex. The Hausa language became the trade language and other minority languages were adjudged inferior. With time in order to curry the favour of the political power that be, names were changed to either Hausa or English as a sign of “civilization.” In event, the identities of some Middle-Belt ethnic groups were gradually disappearing in view of the overbearing Hausa-Fulani “superior” Islamic religion and culture.

It is this development that made most southerners of Nigeria to regard the demography beyond the Niger and Benue rivers as Hausa. Till today, most southerners see it thus, except for those who are educated and widely traveled. The Hausa-Fulani have over the decades continued to sustain this faulty assumption to maintain the mega north impression in the Nigerian polity so as to keep the other two major ethnic groups from central government.

The development of resistance by Middle-Belters

In response, those within the Middle-Belt who had embraced Christianity under Western missionaries saw the imposition of another

religion as negating the principle of freedom of choice in a diverse multi ethnic society. Also, some of them who acquired Western education and have tasted the democratic freedom of thought and choice equally joined in the resistance of forceful Islamization and imposition of Hausa culture. In addition, those who have experienced the torture of the emirates' slave raids resisted this subjugation by the caliphate from the onset. In some few cases, the colonial administration succumbed to Western Christian missionaries' pressure against this subjugation policy. Consequently, a few chiefdoms were created independent of the emirates. Suffice it to give as an example the creation of the Gbong Gwom stool of Jos Chiefdom, independent of the proximate Bauchi emirate. Another example is the creation of Kagoro chiefdom independent of the proximate Jama'a emirate.

However, most of the Middle-Belt's ethnic nationalities remained under the emirates and the resistance continued.

Underneath this resistance has been a fundamental question in the mind these ethnic nationalities of the Middle-Belt. Will it be worthwhile being party to a polity in which the Hausa-Fulani seek to forcefully impose its culture and religion on smaller Middle-Belt ethnic nationalities? Here lays the root, or beginning of the injustices, imbalanced and inequities that have long permeated and bedeviled Nigeria. Can these be overlooked and wished away? Or can it be assumed that one day these problems would just disappear and Nigeria would take a humane face? These issues have to be taken up by the NPRC for serious discussions with a view of correcting these imbalances, injustices and iniquitous treatment of Middle-Belt ethnic nationalities by the Hausa-Fulani emirates at the instance of the Sokoto Caliphate.