

Splitting a Nation: Lessons from History

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In the early 1900s, philosopher George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to relive it.” In the Nigerian context, we can learn from events in world history to consider solutions to problems we face today. Countries who successfully solved similar problems can be studied for positive solutions. Likewise, approaches to similar problems that failed must be carefully analyzed so Nigeria will not be condemned to relive those failures.

One issue that is currently being discussed in homes, in markets, and on the street is that of Nigeria separating into two distinct nations. A separation is believed to be a peaceful solution to the misunderstandings between a “north” and “south” joined by colonization. A brief examination of other countries that have split in the past twenty years can provide valuable information about whether a separation can indeed be a peaceful solution to Nigeria’s current problems.

The most recent split occurred just six months ago when Sudan divided into two countries: Republic of the Sudan and Republic of South Sudan. Because the north and south experienced five decades of civil war that killed over 2 million people, there was considerable fear that the separation would be marked by violence. However, much to the international community’s surprise, both the referendum in January 2011 and the independence day itself on 9 July 2011 were very peaceful.

However, despite a peaceful separation, the two new nations have not been able to sustain a lasting peace. Less than four months after the separation, a Human Rights Watch report stated, “Sudan’s wars have not ended. They have, in fact, multiplied.” Violent conflict remains, particularly along the border between the two new countries.

Two states directly north of the border are currently engaged in violent conflict, largely between Sudan government forces and armed opposition groups linked to southern rebels. Bombings, shellings, killings, and destruction of property have caused around 50,000 people to flee Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan states.

Within the new country of South Sudan, violent conflict also continues. Ongoing violent clashes related to cattle raids between the Lou Nuer and Murtle peoples have resulted in approximately 1,000 deaths since the country’s independence. A recent attack on 31 December 2011 caused over 20,000 Murtles to flee their homelands. On 2 January 2012, the United Nations warned other Southern Sudanese to flee their homes because six thousand Lou Nuer fighters continue to march through the countryside, burning homes and seizing livestock.

Prior to Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, commonly known as East Timor, separated from the Republic of Indonesia. East Timor shares an island with Indonesia in the Pacific. Over 100,000 deaths are attributed to the twenty-year conflict between East Timor and

Indonesia over its separation: 18,000 from violence and 84,000 from hunger and illness resulting from the conflict.

As a result of this long-term conflict, a referendum was held in 1999 to determine whether East Timor would split from Indonesia. About 79% voted for independence. Within hours of the election results announcement, violent protests broke out. Anti-independence militias killed about 1,400 Timorese and caused 300,000 to flee. Most of the country's infrastructure was destroyed in post-election violence. Because of the post-election violence, East Timor did not officially become independent until 2002.

Returning to Africa, Eritrea began its campaign for independence from Ethiopia in the early 1960s, which resulted in thirty years of war. As Eritrea was fighting against Ethiopia for independence, there were two civil wars amongst the Eritreans themselves as different rebel groups splintered and disagreed. As the result of peace talks in 1991, Eritreans overwhelmingly voted in favor of independence. The State of Eritrea was officially created on 27 April 1993.

Just five years later, a border dispute erupted between Eritrea and Ethiopia that lasted for two years. In this border dispute, two of the poorest countries in world spent millions of dollars on a war that led to only minor border changes. In addition to tens of thousands of deaths, the conflict also resulted in reduced economic development, food shortages, and a severe land mine problem. Tension remains high between Eritrea and Ethiopia, with a brief border skirmish reported in January 2010.

Although Eritrea ratified a constitution in 1997, the constitution has yet to be implemented. National elections have been scheduled periodically, but have always been canceled so no election has ever been held. Eritrea's human rights record has worsened since its independence from Ethiopia. Human Rights Watch reports, "Eritrea is one of the world's youngest countries and has rapidly become one of the most repressive. There is no freedom of speech, no freedom of movement, no freedom of worship, and much of the adult male and female population is conscripted into indefinite national service where they receive a token wage."

Finally, although Czechoslovakia in southeastern Europe did peacefully separate into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic in 1993, its near neighbor, the former country of Yugoslavia has not been so lucky. Beginning in 1991, Yugoslavia has repeatedly separated into smaller and smaller countries. Most recently, Kosovo declared independence in 2008. The former Yugoslavia is now divided into seven different nations, and many of these splits were associated with violent conflict.

A referendum for independence was held in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 29 February 1992. However, the people were divided on whether to stay with Yugoslavia or to seek independence. The referendum was boycotted by the Serb ethnic group that favored staying with Yugoslavia. However, despite low voter turnout, an independent state of Bosnia and Herzegovina was created on 3 March 1992.

Because many disagreed with the separation, a war began that lasted for three years. The Bosnian War was characterized by systematic mass rape, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and

indiscriminate shelling of cities and towns. About 100,000 people were killed in the conflict and over 2.2 million people were displaced.

There have been three other violent conflicts in parts of the former Yugoslavia that have tried to separate. The Croatian War of Independence between forces wanting independence and those wanting to stay with Yugoslavia resulted in about 20,000 deaths and cost \$37 billion in damaged infrastructure and refugee-related costs. A ten-day war followed the Slovenian declaration of independence in 1991. The Kosovo War (1998-1999) fought by a group wanting independence resulted in 12,000 deaths and over a million refugees. War crimes during the Kosovo War included kidnapping, ethnic cleansing, and use of child soldiers. It is also alleged that prisoners-of-war were killed so their organs could be sold on the black market.

While none of the separations described above are identical to the Nigerian context, history teaches us that the peaceful separation of a country is remarkably difficult to achieve. Dividing a nation is much more complicated than dividing a state, involving new currencies, new constitutions, new political structures, and new borders. Although we may resent the complications that colonial borders brought to Africa, the experiences of nation-division in other parts of Africa, as well as Asia and Europe, should provide a warning to Nigerians that what may appear to be a peaceful solution on the surface may not be the best solution to its internal problems.