

# A Mill-Kantian Ethical Evaluation of the Incessant Sociopolitical Violence in Nigeria

*Lasisi, Wasilat Opeoluwa*

## Abstract

*The issue of a multiethnic Nigeria, as well as its attendant sociopolitical crises, is largely responsible for the incessant killings and abductions the country is experiencing. The mass killing and kidnapping are, a colossal danger to the country, yet, it has not received needed attention from the states and federal governments. Violence in terms of attempted slaughter of people (mostly in the Northern part of the country), ethnoreligious violence and kidnappings experienced in parts of Nigeria are morally unacceptable. The coordinated attacks on commuters and the bombings carried out in different parts of the country are becoming one too many government over time has taken no proactive measures to mitigate against violence. Through critical evaluation, this paper debates on the sociopolitical underpinnings of the crises experienced in Nigerian and highlight the wrongness inherent in them, taking into action a blend of John Stuart Mill's account of liberty and a dose of Kant's categorical imperative of treating people as ends in themselves and not means to an end to show that the sociopolitical violence are not ethically justifiable. To this end, the paper adds to the existing literature on sociopolitical violence by proposing a Mill-Kantian ethics of acting on one's liberty but refraining from acts that not only treat people as ends but are also those that are against the infringement on the liberties of the others.*

*Keywords:* categorical imperative, crises, killing, kidnapping, liberty

## Introduction

Nigeria as a country was conceived and birthed by colonial masters who surmounted the country due her robust resources, through the economic control and exploitation of the country arising from their necessity to counteract the impediments to the accumulation of capital economy (Ake, 2002:20). After the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates, the political and geographical entity called Nigeria has been experiencing series of crises (Salawu, 2010:345). The British government, either due to their lack of imagination or indecisiveness, failed woefully to lay a more solid foundation for Nigeria's development, integration and progress especially during the so called amalgamation exercise in 1914 since there was hardly any consensus concerning the fundamental significance of amalgamation as well as how the rapidly growing individualism of the south with its cash crops, rapidly expanding

schools, growing wage-earnings, entrepreneurs and petty capitalists could be blended with Northern federal conservation (Flint, 1969:30),

It might be true to say that it is not in the interest of colonial government to promote national consciousness which was why their policies have laid the foundation for future conflicts and crises in the country (Karl, 2001; Toyin, 1991). The regions, I believe, are not comparable at whatever level of analyses. It thus appears that even after independence in 1960, things seem to be getting worse by the day, thereby raising pertinent questions about the kind of therapy Nigeria actually needs, to get out of the woods.

As if that was not enough, the cyber space has since the last decade been occupied with devastating news on the incessant killings and kidnapping of hundreds of people, and Interethnic violence between the Hausa indigenes and the so-called Fulani invaders, the “repentant” oil-theft militants of the Niger Delta and the ongoing rise in kidnappings and ritual killings happening in the western part. The government of Nigeria has been lackadaisical about these happenings as feasible action to mitigate against them has not been taken by the government, perhaps due to the robust fund set aside annually for security and the shares that the military officials in charge get from it. If this is not the case, feasible measures would have been made to put an end to the crises, considering the unending loss of lives and properties?

Invading people's privacies and taking what belongs to them have been viewed by some moral philosophers as infringing on the peace of the former and this is morally wrong and unacceptable. John Stuart Mill proposed a liberty-based utilitarian principle in respect to the actions performed by humans. Individuals in the society should perform actions that promote their happiness in as much as their actions would not debar the happiness of others for any action taken that has a negative impact on another person is wrong. Individuals ought to perform only actions whose ends promote pleasure and freedom from pain. In the same vein, According to Immanuel Kant one is to do to others what one wants to be done to oneself. Rather than treat humans as a means to achieving an end, they should be treated as an end themselves . On that note, there should be a universal maxims that ought to guide the actions of humans in order to have a morally upright society. Is it morally right for any group – political, religious or ethnic - to resort to violence in order to gain superiority?

I start this work by defining violence and introducing the conspicuous foundations of sociopolitical violence in Nigeria, I briefly did a literature review on Mill's concept of liberty and Kant's categorical imperative and went on to debate on the moral wrongness of the actions using a blend of Kant's categorical imperative and Mill's liberty-based ethical theories and I concluded the work by proposing way forward for Nigeria in the 21st century and beyond.

## **Leadership, Ethnicity and Religious Bigotry as the Causes of Sociopolitical Violence in Nigeria**

Violence has been a tool employed by oppressors and oppressed alike in their bids to either suppress a group or restrict oppression. Violence can be regarded as an action that violates another by infringing on, disregarding, abusing or denying that other, whether it involves physical harm or otherwise; invariably, it is an act that depersonalizes by transforming a person into a thing (Brown, 1987:7).

Since independence, Nigeria has been wading through the muddy waters of social, economic as well as political violence. Those who are voted to assume leadership of the country have compromised the trust the masses have in them. They mastered the oppressive character of their former masters and engage in series of corrupt practices by looting public funds at the detriment of the masses. This corrupt act is the most economic violence experienced in Nigeria. Through it, the economy of the nation has been shattered and nothing seems to function properly - tertiary education, health sector, security and production. Consequently, it has ushered in scarcity of basic human needs like food, rising unemployment rate, moral degradation, injustice, and abject impoverishment.

Another form of violence, ethnoreligious violence, is laden with religious extremism and intolerance. For instance, the Boko Haram menace which took its toll in the country since 2009 in Northern Nigeria, resulted in the loss of lives and properties, crumbling the economic activities of the region.

Corruption, political instability, ineffective governance, and poor violence preventive measures have contributed to the soaring level of violence because the responsibilities of a leader to provide adequate, uncompromising justice system and strong security system have undoubtedly been thrown into flames. This is the direct result of many variables ranging from diverse culture, language, religion and tribe (Olayemi, 2004). The country's quest for unity, political stability and progress is far from being achieved and this has continued to elude the system.

This is not to say that the country has not witnessed some growth and development since independence. Far from that, the country has witnessed some growth and development in areas such as technology and population. One may not be wrong to say however that political and religious crises are common features of Third World or developing countries, say Africa. In fact, some developed nations also witness some forms of political or supremacy conflicts, but for social changes to be achieved maximally, the crises have been reduced to the barest minimum in those nations. In trying to sum up these crises, I strongly believe that the very difficulties imposed on the Nigerian political society by

the inadequacies of programmes of political transition (that are replete with the dangers of Interethnic institution and Interbelief conflicts) posed some damaging challenges in the attempt at cohesion and eventual integration of our multiethnic country and the road to peace in the 21st century. To explain further, Nnamani wrote that the embers of differences are found in the actions or inactions of governments since the various ethnic groups were simply too interdependent (Nnamani, 2006:10).

To add to the already shambled political system, each of the geopolitical zones contains ethnic and religious minorities. Nationalism, ethnic identity and religion have marked this country in justifying oppression of minorities for invasions, kidnappings, and mass murder. It is true conflicts regarding ethnicity is not peculiar to Nigeria, as some other African countries have witnessed them at one point or another. This was noted by Olukotun that:

Ethnic and communal conflicts, whether in the guise of genocidal ethnic cleansing or of low-intensity conflict have become a staple feature of contemporary politics.... Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, and Liberia represent one notorious face of this phenomenon. In Africa, the resurgence of identity conflicts, the breakdown of the post colonial state into its constituent, feuding parts as well as the rise of sectarian and religious movements have become familiar to students of the continent (Olukotun, 2003: 7).

These grievances are sometimes expressed through bitter political complaints, sectarian crises and violent insurgencies. It seems evident that the problem of Nigeria rests squarely on the incompetence of her leadership. Or else, why do people still blame the same “whitemen,” whom we have chased away several decades ago for the adverse conditions hovering around our sociopolitical system? The answer to this is very simple: the same characteristics possessed by the whites have been literally transferred to the “black” Nigerian leaders. The many transitions either from military autocracy to civilian government, or those of the civilian-to-civilian contraption, have not shown any clear difference from the old order. The Nigerian politics is simply that of struggle for power and mass accumulation of public funds. This is a major obstacle facing the country’s development. It is a serious setback to morality, commitment, integration and national cohesion. The alarming rate at which the leadership of the country timidly sits back and allow the most appalling violations of human rights to lives and properties leaves much to be desired. Rather than engaging insecurity at the levels at which it is encountered, the leaders are too rapidly embracing foreign and international theories in an attempt to elude international isolation and a self-perceived, irrelevant “Giant of Africa” and to show how non-

chalant the leaders of Nigeria can be, the minister of transportation declared his interest in running for presidency few days after an unprecedented attacks on Kaduna airport and on Abuja-Kaduna rail where many kidnapped while some got killed (Imukudo, 2022), (Hassan-Wuyo, 2022). Nigeria deserves a better deal than mere political rhetorics. There is urgent need for a justifiable system manned by responsible men and women of high moral standard in order to guarantee an overall sustenance of our own dear country instead of passing the blame on imperialists that are virtually non-existent on the Nigerians soil at the moment. The intellectuals could do nothing rather than engage in constant state of critical dialogue with the state and government keeping the dialectics alive and vigorously debating politics and policy on national televisions and the cyber space but all proved abortive.

Mismanagement of national resources and misrule by multiethnic and multi-religious coalitions of successive rulers since independence, I believe, have impoverished and denied opportunities to the majority of Nigerians. As a result, religious rhetoric blaming members of other religious communities and proposals for religious reform as a solution to society's ills have found purchase among the masses. This genuine, if misplaced, quest for a religious utopia has given some opportunistic political gladiators an excuse to curry legitimacy through politicized appeals to piety and religious fervor. For instance, the desperate advancement of religious solutions to socioeconomic and political problems has deepened social fissures and spawned extremist and violent insurgencies such as the Boko Haram Islamist terrorist campaign, ISWAP, etc, which have killed and maimed Christians and Muslims alike.

Subsequently, religion became a major topic of national political debates, with each religious community pushing increasingly adversarial agendas. In the North-Central, clashes between Muslim groups — mainly ethnic Hausa and Fulani — and Christian and traditionalist communities have become a daily affair, with devastating consequences. In this charged environment where religion functions as the primary idiom of political identity, conflicts over resources, cattle, land, and political offices have often taken on a religious coloration, with Muslims pitted against Christians and vice versa.

### **On the Principle of Liberty, Killing and Kidnapping**

On what reason or principle will killing innocent people and kidnapping be judged moral or immoral? Could it be on the basis of moral uprightness or on the basis of interest? If on moral uprightness, then the so-called incessant killings and kidnapping will be morally condemnable, but if it were on interest, then the acts may not be seen as a bad moral sign since the perpetrators claimed that their interests is to kill or kidnap people for ransom. It should be noted that

there are ways humans ought to model their behaviour against which they are said to be murderers, but the discontent lies in the questions: Whose model is that? And what makes it sanctimonious? It is at this point that philosophical theories are germane. The objectivists argue that the rightness and wrongness of actions are objectively known (Popkin & Stroll, 1971: 53) which means that without much ado, we are all aware that these evil acts are unacceptable, but emotivism as an ethical theory will hold that the so-called moral judgment merely expresses individual feelings. Moral judgements do not are not statements of facts but are rather expressions of the actor's feelings. To say that "killing is bad" for instance is to express one's discontent towards it. Emotive emoral judgement do not represent any content but are only motivational. If this is the case, then one's condemnation of the terrorist attacks lack any content since one is only expressing one's negative feelings about it and thus might not have done anything bad (Ozumba, 2001:108).

The liberty doctrine of Mill is contingent on society and the moral implications therein. Mill accepted Bentham's utilitarian principle which underscore happiness as the end which every action must attain. Happiness in this context is intended pleasure and the absence of pain, while by unhappiness he means, pain and the privation of pleasure. (Sparknotes Editors, 2005). He however disagrees with Bentham by insisting that pleasure cannot be quantified accurately. He saw liberty as the greatest utility superior to all other kinds. For him, liberty and equality go hand in hand. All adults are equal and they do not only have the right to liberty but also have the opportunity to enjoy it, so long as this enjoyment does not interfere with the liberties of others. As opposed to the utilitarian principle that will support interference when necessary for the common good, J.S. Mill insists that the enjoyment of the individual's liberty forbids this. He examines the question of whether one or more people should be able to curtail another person's freedom to express a divergent point of view. Mill held that such activity is illegitimate, no matter that individual's viewpoint (Sparknotes Editors, 2005). His principle of liberty can thus be summarized as follows: (i) that everybody should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct towards the rest. (ii) that this conduct should not harm the interests of one another (Ogunkoya, 2011: 520).

Genocide, kidnapping, banditry and all other forms of sociopolitical violence are evil, because they involve destructiveness (Staub, 1989). By the above criteria, killing a whole group of people in genocide, which invariably includes killing people who have done no harm - young children - against whom no defense is required and against whom retaliation (if one considers that moral) is not appropriate, would always be judged immoral.

Unfortunately, conflict between groups can defy resolution, it can become

intractable and violent and it can lead to violence reaching the level of destruction of properties and mass killing, in which many people are killed indiscriminately. Mill discusses whether people who hold unpopular views should be allowed to act on them without being made social outcasts or facing a legal penalty. He posited that actions cannot be as free as ideas or viewpoints, and the law must limit all actions whose implementation would harm others or be an outright nuisance. He contends that:

Protection therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough: there need be protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means, than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent formation, of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves up the model of its own (Mill, 1947: 4- 4).

He stated that human beings are fallible, and thus, they need to experiment with different ways of living. It should be noted that one of the most awful crimes any person can commit is murder. It would be completely wrong to morally and/or legally allow not just a murder, but a mass systematic murder of individuals. Thus, it is pertinent that the government of the country ensure that security chiefs work in correcting the already shambled security system by apprehending and punishing bandits, religious extremists and terrorists. Mill's two-faced argument holds that first, individuals are not accountable to society for behaviour and actions that affect only them, but that a person is answerable for any type of behaviour or action that harms others, and in such cases it is the responsibility of society to punish and curtail such behaviour and action.

### **Kant's Categorical Imperative: A Case Against Sociopolitical Violence.**

Immanuel Kant, a moral philosopher, gives primacy to the sanctity of human life. He believes that humans should be treated not as means to achieving an end but as end in themselves. Tormenting and killing of any sort are morally rejected by Kant. He postulated a universalizability, law-based ethical theory by arguing that one should only act on maxims. According to him, there is only one categorical imperative which has two formulations:

- i. Act only according to that maxim by which one can at the same time will that it should become a universal law
- ii. Act as to treat humanity whether in one's person or in another, always as an end and never as a means

Power, affluence, courage, etc may be good, but they can become extremely bad if they lack the goodwill to put them into proper perspective (Kant: 1978:10). To Kant, the way to find out what our duties are is to apply a principle termed categorical imperative - acting only on maxims by which one can at the same time will that it become a universal law (Kant 1978:39). This connects with the idea that you should not act in any way in which you would be unwilling to allow everyone else to act (which reminds us that if we think it is wrong for others to behave in a certain way, we cannot consistently claim that it is morally acceptable for us to behave in that way in exactly the same circumstances). Those who engage in murder or those contemplating on committing atrocities must ask: Can I rationally and without inconsistency will that others act in this way? Kant believes that the consequences of killing cannot justify the act itself and that we ought to act so that we treat humanity, whether in our own person or in that of others, as an end and not as a means only (Kant 1978:47). Thus, the insurgencies carried out by the herdsmen treat humanity as means to an end only (quenching their anger or ways of survival) and it has no moral worth.

### **A Mill-Kantian Evaluative Approach: Way Forward**

In this section, a blend of Mill-Kantian perspective for mitigating against violence is my focus. Importantly is the need to combine the two models for moral inclination and the production of peace, growth and development. As a staunch advocate of law and order, Kant's universal maxim places strong admonitions against coercion, sabotaging social order through kidnapping and killing, destruction of property, having an expendable orientation towards fellow humans, and reckless siphoning of public funds. Since humans would be treated as persons with dignity and invaluable worth, and as ends, trading them off would be prohibited. In Mill's view, one is at liberty to act as one wills and is free to indulge in any act or behavior insofar as doing so will not harm others. Therefore, morality is a social practice, not generally an autonomous as it appears, like the Kantian universal maxim.

To explain this, Stephen stated that everyman can please himself without hurting his neighbour but every moral system which aimed otherwise whether it is to obtain benefits for the society or to do good to the persons affected, would be wrong in principle (Stephen, 1966: 43).

For both Mill and Kant moral deliberations are those actions we perform by avoiding harm to others. Avoidance of harm to others implies respecting them as humans. So, a Mill-Kantian disposition would be that of:

- i. I have the freedom to engage in kidnapping because it pleases me, but engaging in such act will surely harm others and may lead to societal disorder



- ii. I have the moral obligation to treat others as ends but kidnapping them will only treat them as means
- iii. Therefore, I ought to desist from kidnapping because it causes social disorder and treats people as means.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that Nigeria has gone through different crises since 1960 and that unfortunately, the post independence administrations—civil and military—have not been able to resolve the numerous conflicts that have challenged the existence of this country. It is conspicuous that in many cases especially recently, these administrations themselves have escalated the crises by ignoring some of the reported cases, for instance, the lynching of Deborah Yakubu by some mobs (Sunday, 2022) with justice being secluded till date. The present state of affairs under which the federal government is the prime mover and constituting units i.e. states and local governments, dependent on it for survival, does not augur well for the stability of the country. It gives room for mischievous elites to continue to manipulate ethnic, religious and other sensibilities of the several primordial groups in order to remain in power for their selfish interests rather than that for the generality of Nigerians. To this end, this paper has proposed an approach worth deliberation that may help foster national development eradicate sociopolitical violence.

Over and above all, moral ideologies on the right of individual liberty that will not lead to the denial of the happiness of others should be enacted, and the sanctity of human lives should be addressed by the government. This is perhaps a sure way to realizing the country's dreams for a virile democratic consolidation and national integration.

But then, rather than jumping to an automatic and unthinking conclusion, it is pertinent to note that for sociopolitical violence to be described as morally unjustifiable, the targets must be entirely innocent. However, there will inevitably be covetous and irrational individuals in every society and if care is not taken, one might run the risk of murder in the quest for justice for the innocents.

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