

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISIS: THE IMPACT ON NIGERIAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Since the emergence of the nascent democracy in 1999, Nigeria has become a permanent flashpoint of violent clashes. The State which had hitherto been one of the most relatively peaceful in West Africa has been deeply enmeshed and suffused in political and ethno-religious conflicts characterized by genocidal attacks, bombing, maiming and killings of several persons, loss of business investments, and properties worth several billions of Naira. Within the space of eleven years, several violent political ethno-religious conflicts have been reported in Nigeria and all effort to restore peace has not achieved the desired end. The paper examines the impact of ethno-religious crises on socio-economic development in Nigeria with a view to pinpointing its nature, form, causes and proffering solutions for Nigeria's democracy to thrive. It would seem that democracy has increased the culture of impunity in some people while political differences are believed to have fuelled some of the violence that has erupted. Democratic governance with the underlying emphasis on the activation of the citizenry to realize the 'common good' has not taken root in the popular consciousness of Nigerians. Everyone appears to be for himself.

KEY-WORDS: Crises, economy, Ethnicity, Conflict Resolution, Religion

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that over one hundred thousand Nigerians have lost their lives in ethno-religious crisis that have engulfed the country since the enthronement of democracy in 1979. The number of those injured triples the dead, while those displaced are put at millions. (Umar: 2009). Also Onabanjo (2011) observes that conflict have also hindered genuine national integration more than fifty years after Nigeria's independence thus raising serious concerns on the unity of the nation. In the words of Alegbeleye, (2014), the policy of bringing together by administrative fiat of British colonialist such a large number of heterogeneous people with their different cultural and political systems, languages, religion etc was bound to be inherently conflict and crisis prone.

According to Onodugo et. al. (2015), Ethno-religious crisis with their multi-dimensional consequences has been an obstacle to progress, economic prosperity, and political stability and over –all socio-economic development of Nigeria because of its destructive nature.

Many have attributed the recurring spate of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria to the structure and functioning of Nigerian federalism. This was amplified by Elaigwu (2005) when he writes:

...the violent protests in the Niger-Delta over perceived injustice in resource distribution; the Itsekiri-Ijaw violence in the Delta; the resumption of the Ife-Modakeke communal violence; the menace of Odu'a Peoples' Congress (OPC) and the accompanying violence in Lagos and Shagamu areas; the formation of the Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC) and the Igbo Peoples' Congress (IPC); the MASSOB feeble attempt to resuscitate Biafra; the Sharia crisis and the demands for a confederation; the South-South demand for the control of its resources; and all the recent interethnic/ religious conflicts in various states across the country are all part of the bubbles of the Nigerian federation. They are based on the historical structures of mutual fears and suspicions among Nigerian groups in a competitive process. They reflect dissatisfaction of Nigerian groups with the state of the federation (P. 12).

According to Adebayo (2010), attempts to check the shortcomings in the system of Federalism culminated in the birth of many principles, like the 'quota system' or rather 'proportional representation' and finally the Federal Character principle in 1979. A number of steps have also been taken to promote unity among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Such include establishment of federal institutions in some states of the federation, promotion of national sporting activities, and, more importantly, the National Youth Service Corps (N.Y.S.C) program, to mention a few. Although these steps have yielded some fruitful results in achieving national unity, the marriage of inconvenience of the ethnic groups is still begging for irrevocable divorce.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework to guide this study is the systems theory. The systems approach was originally in the biological and engineering sciences before it was adapted to social sciences. The systems theory sees phenomena as components of an interrelated whole.

The systems approach is primarily concerned with the analysis of a system in its entirety. As system here implies that:

Something consisting of a set (finite or infinite) of entities among which a set of relation is specified, so that deductions are possible from relations to others or from the relations to others or from the relations among the entities to the behaviour or the history of the system (Talcott Parsons; 1968:453).

From the above, a system can be seen as a set of independent parts or components of a given entity. As a process, it involves relating with one another in an interdependent manner. It also entails interaction with the environment.

An approach is relevant to this study and understanding of democracy and the problems of ethno-religious crisis in Nigerian democracy. The environment constitutes the Nigerian state. And further the nature of these consequences conversely, we will be able to understand how events in the environment affect and, even, condition the determination of the problems of the electoral act in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnicity can be defined as a social formation predicated on culturally specific practices and unique symbols (Osaghae, 1992). According to Alegbeleye (2014), What this means is that ethnicity is a situation in which individuals in a particular ethnic group consider themselves or are considered by others to have common affinity which distinct them from other groups in the society. Furthermore, distinct cultural behaviours are usually developed; all groups can be identifiable through religion, politics, occupation or language. Ethnicity could be linked with an affiliation resulting from racial or cultural ties; ethnicity has a strong influence on community status. Ford (in Aleyomi, 2012) opined that ethnicity is a complex social construct that influences personal identity and group social relations. Even in the United States of America, social stratification persists differently influencing the well-being of ethnic groups.

In Nigeria, it is interesting to note according to Salawu, (2010) that ethnicity and religious bigotry has become a fulcrum of various forms of nationalism ranging from assertion of language, cultural autonomy and religious superiority to demands for local political autonomy and self-determination. All these sometimes lead to some forms of contextual discrimination of members of one ethnic or religious group against another on the basis of differentiated systems of socio-cultural symbols and religion.

Therefore, in a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse society like Nigeria, with some forms of contextual discrimination, relationships between people may be characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear as it is the case among the ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria.

CAUSES OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISIS IN NIGERIA

Omotosho (2003), highlighted four major factors that causes ethno-religious crisis which are the following:

- 1. The lack of recognition of one another:* Muslims in particular believe that Christianity does not recognize Islam as a religion that is entitled to exist and consequently it does not recognize their (Muslims) other rights. They maintain that if there is any recognition of Islam by the Christians in Nigeria, it is simply because the Muslims have refused to be ignored.
- 2. Campaigns of hatred and blackmail:* Both Christians and Muslims are actively involved in campaigns of hatred against each other. This is manifested in various forms including: incitement, distortion of fact about each other, blocking each other's chances as demonstrated in the issues of *Shari'ah* and Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Besides that, blackmailing and the distortion of facts caused the famous Kafanchan riot, according to Bashir Isyaku and Imo8. It was reported that one religious leader, the Revd Abubakar Bako, publicly misinterpreted and falsified some verses of the Qur'an and made uncomplimentary remarks about the Prophet Mohammad to the hearing of Muslims.
- 3. The lack of genuine desire to understand each other's belief and culture:* It is true that institutions of higher learning here and there offer some courses under various names but a careful study of such programmes has shown that they were not intended to foster understanding and respect. Instead they are used as a means of blackmailing and incitement, under the cover of academic freedom and dialogue.
- 4. Extremism:* Extremism from both sides is another important reason behind religious violence in Nigeria. As indicated above, in most cases this extremism is based on poor knowledge of the teaching of the religion being defended by the group involved.

It is very unlikely that Christianity taught the Revd Abubakar Bako to provoke adherent of other faiths as a means of propagating his religion.

To Nwaomah (2011), religion is a poignant issue in Nigeria, possibly because of the fundamental quest for dominance between the Northern and Southern parts that for contingent historical reasons are dominated by Islam and Christianity, respectively. There is also the incessant protest of marginalization by the Northern minorities who profess Christianity in contrast to the Hausa/Fulanis who are largely Muslims and hold political dominance.

According to Onwuma (2014), there are a number of reasons why differences in ethnicity and religion will sometimes result into violent crisis with far reaching and profound consequences on national development. One of such reasons is religious intolerance arising out of the belief that one religion is superior to the other.

Nwaomah (2010) argues that this predicament of "indigeneship" is used to rationalize agitations such as access to land, "animal grazing rights, quest for or sustenance of political position or local rulership, commonly referred to as chieftdom in the Northern part of Nigeria and even the location of social amenities and industries by the governing authorities". Consequently, religion in Nigeria is a mobilization and manipulative tool for socio-political and/or economic disagreements.

One of the major causes of religious violence in Nigeria is the methods of proselytising used by the two dominant religions. Although Islam and Christianity deprecate the use of threat and coercion as a means of proselytising (Omosho 2003),⁷ their approaches to preaching have remained mentally and sometimes physically coercive. Unfortunately, the most visible approach to Islamic conversion campaigns, particularly in northern Nigeria, is that of Jihad.

This is epitomised by the Boko Haram declaration that Western culture, as represented by Christianity, is polluting and worthy of spiritual purging. Muslim fundamentalists view adherents of other faiths, and sometimes moderate Muslims, as corrupted stock worthy of Islamic conversion or regeneration as the case may be. Thus the extremist disposition to enlisting conformity by brute force has created serious religious tensions in Nigeria.

According to Salawu (2010), a major cause of what we now see as ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria has to do with the accusations and allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation, victimization, discrimination, marginalization, nepotism and bigotry. In every nation (Nigeria inclusive), there is no complete agreement on how wealth, power and status are to be shared among individuals and groups.

There is also no agreement on how to effect necessary changes and reforms. This is because, different groups and individuals have diverse interests in which case, some groups will have their aims met, while others will not. What this means is that conflict (ethno religious ones inclusive) usually occur when deprived groups and individuals attempt to increase their share of power and wealth or to modify the dominant values, norms, beliefs or ideology. Thus, in Nigeria and going by the various examples of ethno-religious conflicts cited earlier in this paper, there seems to be a divisive interplay of politics, ethnicism and religions, which has consequently led to the rising nationalism and militancy of various ethnic and religious movements. It is interesting to note that the overall consequence of this is the escalation of various ethno-religious conflicts that are witnessed all over the country today which are meant to correct any perceived form of marginalization, oppression or domination.

In the words of Adebayo (2010), One cannot rule out the assumed economic marginalization of some ethnic groups as a cause of ethno-religious conflicts.

This according to him is true of the reactions of the Ijaws and the Ogonis in the Niger-Delta to the economic exploitation of the foreign multi-national oil companies in the area with little or no compensation to the environmental degradation of the area. In spite of the hanging of the leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Ken-Saro Wiwa in 1995, the Ogoni people

continued with their request through violence means by kidnapping of many expatriates of the Shell Company. For economic reasons, the Ijaws, Itsekiris, and Urhobos have always confronted one another violently. The abundance of crude oil deposits in Warri Township had made them to fight and claim ownership and political dominance of the area. The May 1997 crisis, which erupted from the zone, was highly pathetic and devastating.

THE EFFECTS OF THE CONFLICTS/CRISES

ON FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT: Ethno-religious crisis will affect the foreign direct investment (FDI) flow into Nigeria. FDI has positive relationship with economic growth as the more FDI flows into the country the more jobs are created, the per capita income and the higher the standard of living. This was buttressed by Onwumah (2014) when he posited that in economic terms, ethno-religious crisis damages resources and facilities which took time to acquire. No foreign investor will like to invest funds in a country that is divided by communal and ethno religious conflicts (Ayinla: 2003). There are fears at two levels. Firstly, the basic aim of foreign investment is to make profit which is not possible in an environment of crisis. Secondly, the resources invested already will definitely go down the drains.

ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND REPUTATION: Another major consequence of ethno-religious crisis on the socio-economic development of Nigeria is on the reputation of Nigeria in the international community. Many countries have started seeing Nigeria as a terrorist country which affects our business men that travel round the world to do business. Onwumah (2014) also affirms that ethno-religious crisis portrays Nigeria in a very bad light internationally. It depicts our leaders, at all levels and in different facets of life as weak, naïve, selfish and self centred. In an environment of strong, dedicated and selfless leadership, the diversity and complexity of the Nigerian society would have been harnessed and channelled into national development efforts.

ON FORIEGN EXCHANGE AND EARNINGS: In an atmosphere of peace the economy tends to grow more as more foreign investment and earnings are attracted via FDI and tourism. Nigeria would have been a tourist haven, but the frequent occurrence of conflicts and crises in different parts of the country at different points in time will definitely discourage foreign tourists (Onwumah: 2010). The effect of it is that, foreign exchange needed to drive development, that could have been brought in by foreigners is lost.

Though Nigeria is richly endowed in terms of tourism and resources, it is said that, by African standards, her performance is an abysmal failure. Places like Kenya, Ghana, Egypt and others have more people coming into their countries than Nigeria. The reason for this is not farfetched. Nigeria is perceived as unsafe and indeed not conducive in terms of security caused mainly by communal and ethno-religious crises.

ON MAN POWER DEVELOPMENT: The resultant effects of religious conflicts in Nigeria are enormous. It pervades all the sectors of the economy. Generally, conflicts breed insecurity, discrimination, mutual distrust and slow economic and educational development. This is the case in Nigeria where in addition to the gratuitous killings and maiming of thousands of persons, properties worth billions of naira have been destroyed. Certainly, these huge losses have deprived the nation of needed manpower and services for the growth of its wobbling economy.

ON PRIVATE SECTOR DEVELOPMENT: Another area where ethno-religious crisis affects the socio-economic development of Nigeria is on the private development. Whenever there is this nature of crisis in Nigeria, the religious fanatics descends on business investment of the non indigenes and those of the opposite religions and burn them down. This is discouraging many people from investing in the country as these men are killed like fowls along with the destruction of their business investments. According to Adebayo (2010), apart from the fact that many virile men of the nation are seriously affected in the crises which consequently led to their death, the country's source of revenue is equally affected. Crises in the Niger Delta, for example, had shaken the country to her root, as the source of the 'goose' of the country was greatly affected. Virtually all steps taken to check crises are not economic friendly.

For instance, imposition of curfew brings every economic activity to a halt as it becomes difficult to move freely from place to place. The whole area of crisis, therefore, becomes desolated and remains a ghost city until normalcy is reinstated. Since no economic development could take place in an atmosphere of fear, anarchy, and insecurity, it, therefore, implies that ethno-religious crises are bane to economic sustainability.

According to Nwaomah (2011), religious conflicts in Nigeria have also left its effect on investment options in the crises ridden areas. The political instability, arising from the insecurity and uncertainty that pervades the region, does not inspire the confidence of foreign investors and thereby deprives the nation of the economic gains. In some instances, the enterprising Southerners who had established thriving businesses in the troubled areas in the North have relocated to other and safer places. He also maintains that, religious conflicts in Nigeria have left in its trail a broken society: communities that hitherto co-existed peacefully now treat each other with mistrust and latent or open aggression. Consequently, settlement patterns begin to follow the boundaries of religion in these areas so that adherents can be swiftly mobilized in the event of future riots. The disrupted social harmony is sometimes felt in places far from the crisis scene and thus account for the reprisal riots in other parts of Nigeria.

ON EDUCATION: Ethno-religious crisis has had devastating effect on Nigerian educational standards ranging from incessant closure of schools, destruction of school facilities to abduction and raping of school children which has seriously affected the psychologies of school children in the nation. This assertion was supported by Adebayo (2010), as according to him education is very vital in any sustainable developmental program. The nation is striving to put in place amenities for the purpose of elevating the education standard of the country. This is, however, hampered by incessant closure of schools and institutions in places where ethno-religious crises are holding. Apart from this, schools are not spared in the destructive tendencies of those participating in crises of any nature. Many schools had been burnt down while many were forced to close down for months. The education of innocent youths was equally disrupted under tumultuous situations created by ethno-religious crises, as many were forced to emigrate from the crisis area.

ON PSYCHOLOGY OF MAN: Nwomah (2014) asserts that a time of crisis and conflict is a time that brings out the worst instincts and impulses in man. It is a time when social relationship is at its worst. No one would want to relate happily to a group of people, who have or perceived to have killed or maimed one's relations. It is difficult, if not impossible to associate and be at home with persons who are hostile to you or people from your ethnic group. Beyond these are the socio-cultural consequences. It is also a time when the promotion of culture cannot take place. At such times, cultural activities such as festivals, folktales, moonlight games, and others cannot take place. Even cultural industries such as pottery, ceramics, blacksmithing, tie and dye will all come to a halt for as long as the crises last. According to him

it also breeds fear, hatred, acrimony and suspicion. A psychologically depressed, fearful, and suspicious person or group of persons cannot contribute meaningfully to the national development drive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our first recommendation is to support the proposal of Sampson (2012) that called for the reform of the current curriculum on religious study in Nigeria. He posits that the desirable scenario of religious harmony can be achieved in Nigeria only through the establishment and sustenance of a neo-religious educational praxis that would generate a culture and orientation of multi-religiosity in our children and youth, as well as a commensurate programme of re-orientation of the adult population. Hitherto, the dominant model of religious education in Nigeria has been faith-oriented and overwhelmed by religious indoctrination and dogma. Religious education is used to get people to embrace Christianity or Islam, rather than as a process or formation for religious tolerance and dialogue.

There is, therefore, the need to reform the current curriculum on religious studies – which hitherto privileged the exclusive teaching of dogmatic Christian and Islamic doctrines – to a new praxis that would build in comparative religious studies, and expose students and pupils to basic principles of Christianity, Islam and traditional religion – religious harmony and moral instructions. All religious communities must understand that there is no alternative to inter-faith dialogue, as there can never be a universal religion or an exclusive society for adherents of a particular religion.

Secondly is also in support of the recommendations of Onodugo et.al (2015). They maintains that collaborations and negotiations has to be adopted in resolving many issues and perceptions that always lad to ethno-religious crisis. People, religious leaders and tribal leaders and stakeholders must be encouraged to always come together to dialogue, negotiate and reach compromises on how to solve common problems or perceived crisis. This view has been advocated by some researchers. According to Arinze (1999), inter-religious dialogue is a meeting of hearts and minds across religious frontiers. He notes that this kind of dialogue can promote mutual enrichment from the religious point of view and also enhance peaceful co-existence among the people of different religion.

Our third recommendation is for the country to establish a federal ministry of Religion whose duty will be educating the populace on the principles of equity, freedom of religion, religious tolerance and the power of unity and love for one another. The Commission should also be charged to find out the primary root causes of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria and ways of eliminating them. They should watch out for any likely issue the will breed crisis and ensure they lip it on board.

Again, Government and institutional leaders should take the views of Alegbeleye (2014) very seriously. He asserts that the government with collaborative efforts with its development partners should continue to build bilateral and multinational security networks in the region. They should embark on robust patrols at Nigeria's borders to restrict the movement of armed groups and criminals. Increase the exchange of intelligence information. Support programmes and policies at all levels of government that address poverty, youth unemployment, and gender inequality. Encourage the Nigerian federal government to have a policy of zero tolerance for corruption.

CONCLUSION

It has always been said that one of the biggest mistakes of the Nigerian ruling class has been its failure to build strong and stable social system to provide the kind of atmosphere that development needs to thrive and flourish. The political class has deliberately promoted the social fragmentation that creates, feeds, and reinforces religious and ethnic identities to the exclusion of civic and national identities.

To change this evil on the nation's socio-economic development, we as Nigerians must rise to the challenge, all hands must be on deck, we must understand our differences, resolve to respect one another and live together as one regardless of tribe and religion the government should become transparent, responsive, proactive and equitable in their allocation of national resources and political powers.

When the issue of ethno-religious crisis is solved in Nigeria, we shall see a Nigeria that is truly the giant not only of Africa but a world economic giant.

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