

Politicisation of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: Implications for National Cohesion and Development

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Abstract

Ethno-religious conflicts have been prevalent in Nigeria for a long time. Most parts of the country have experienced them at one time or the other. These conflicts have arisen primarily as a result of Nigeria's heterogeneous nature, with over four hundred ethnic groups. The paper examines the politico-economic effects of these conflicts on the cohesion and development of the country. The methodology adopted for the study involved qualitative data that were gathered from secondary sources, like journals, official websites, and literary works. The adopted theoretical framework was the conflict trap theory which is understood to mean that once a fight starts, it seems to gain momentum on its own. The paper explores literature of other studies. The findings of the study reveal that development and national cohesion cannot be achieved in an environment where everyone believes that they are different from everyone else. It concludes by reinforcing the fact that ethnic and religious conflicts have, in fact, had a tremendous impact on Nigeria as a people. In its recommendation, the paper suggests that government should carefully adopt the idea of citizenship instead of indigeneity. With this in place, the focus of one's ethnic group would no longer be the yardstick for measuring whom opportunities should be opened to.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Religion, Conflicts, National Cohesion, Development, Nigeria.

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon in social setting. It is not peculiar to any particular group or nation. In Nigeria, the spate of ethno-religious conflict which have reached phobic dimensions, have resulted to the loss of nearly three million lives as well as material and psychological harm (Salawu, 2010; Bogoro, 2008). Recurring occurrences of religious and Inter-ethnic conflicts have become a major national issue in some parts of Nigeria. Nigeria is one of the countries in the world where the political landscape has been heavily impacted by a wide range of ongoing complex conflicts, including disputes over resources, politics, community issues, and ethno-religious conflicts (Jega, 2012).

With more than 400 ethnic groups that include both Muslims and Christians, discrimination based on race and religion has become prevalent. This is fuelled by a variety of community allegiances,

such as claims of linguistic supremacy, cultural autonomy, and theological superiority. Numerous ethno-religious conflicts have brought the nation dangerously close to collapse. Huge human casualties, internal displacements and refugee crises, lost investments, strained relations between communities or ethnic groups, and threats to internal security and public order have all resulted from it.

It appears that Nigeria is now displaying the symptom of a disintegrating state, whose members are permanently at war with one another, because of the high level of inter-ethnic and inter-religious hostility in the country (Imobighe, 2003a). As a result, the global community is very concerned about the ongoing ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria. On May 28, 2005, the United States National Council Intelligence Report predicted Nigeria's disintegration in 2020 due to the spate of security challenges bedevilling the country (Agbaje, 2004). This is apparent as "breakdown, breakaway, civil strife, civil war, minority nervousness, and violent clashes, all of which would typically be regarded unusual in normal states are common forces or actual occurrences in divided states" (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005, p.4).

Nigeria is one of the most insecure states in Africa due to a complex web of politically shrouded identities, as well as a history of prolonged and seemingly persistent conflict and instability. The fact that there has been a rise in the frequency of ethno-religious disputes in the nation makes it a topic that should be discussed in modern Nigeria and serves as a lesson for other nations across the world with multi-ethnic and multi-religious populations. In addition, ethnic and religious tensions are typically violent and manifest themselves as riots, sabotage, etc. Secession, armed conflict, guerrilla warfare, and assassinations in Nigeria undoubtedly have an impact on the political and economic development of the nation, making it a crucial topic for discussion. It is against this backdrop that this paper explores how the politicization of ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria affects national cohesion and national development.

Conceptual Clarification

Ethno-Religious Conflicts

Conflict is a type of behaviour among individuals, groups, or even nations that transcends the regular dispute and dispute that underlies much of the everyday social, economic, and competitive activity of society (Burton, 1990). What this implies is that conflict is a behaviour that has the potential to harm a person, a piece of property, or an entire system. The roots of conflict are firmly ingrained in human behaviour rather than being ideas, choices, preferences, or interests that are disputed and negotiated as part of socially normal functioning.

Weber (1971) argues that conflict is any activity that is purposefully directed at achieving an actor's own goals in opposition to those of one or more other parties. When considering conflict in the context of economic, social, and political settings, Coser (1956) and William (1997) made the claim that contact between diverse ethnic groups does not entirely account for the emergence of ethnicity, but rather that the nature and extent of such contact are determined by socio-economic over attitudinal factors. In this situation, fierce socioeconomic competition breeds animosity and

ethnic-like identities. Economic links are thus a key factor in class conflict within a community. Nigeria is just one of many places throughout the world where people view conflict as aberrant, dysfunctional, and abhorrent.

Coser (1956) elaborates on his point by saying that conflict is a type of interaction, especially when there are resource shortages and competing interests based on socio-cultural, political, and economic variables. Conflicting parties want to harm or eliminate their adversaries in addition to pursuing their own values. Competition for economic resources among various ethnic groups is thought to have the potential to lead to disagreement and conflict in a community.

De Varennes (2003) asserts that ethnic group demands, particularly those aimed at securing basic rights for their group like demanding more effective political participation, equitable distribution of economic resources, education, and employment opportunities, are the root cause of all conflict that occurs within the global system. Political inequality and rivalry for economic resources are thus among the things that cause ethnic conflict and tension within a community, particularly in a poly state like Nigeria that is characterized by a variety of coexisting but dissimilar cultures and religions.

National Development

National development is a broad idea. According to Vaizey (2018), it is the combined impact of all citizens, forces, and additions to the stock of physical, human, knowledge, and skill resources. It suggests that progress happens when a country's social, cultural, and economic circumstances change. Business, economic, political, and sociological advancements are all included in the concept of national development. Given that it is relevant to public welfare, it has become a consideration for policymakers.

According to Nwali (2019), the consistent manifestation of individual talents, abilities, and creative ideas for self-fulfilment, contentment, ego, and national enhancement are the main goals of growth. Idike (2014) maintains that national development is the overall development of a nation-state. It means improvements in inequality levels as well as the material well-being of a hidden majority of the populace. Most importantly, national development entails ensuring the safety of people and their property within the nation state.

According to Bariledum and Serebe (2013), the term national development refers to a process that raises a nation's quality of living in order to liberate its population from a life of subsistence agriculture, to enhance health and health care, and to successfully integrate into the global marketplace. It signifies that people are the actual riches of a nation and the growth of people's freedoms to live long and creative to progress other aims. Naomi (1995) on the other hand, opined that development is typically understood to include not only economic growth but also some idea of equitable distribution, provision of health care, education, housing, and other essential services, all with the goal of enhancing both the individual and collective quality of life.

Meier (1988) defined development as the act of increasing the Gross National Product to its greatest value through the process of capital accumulation and industrialisation. A country's

potential to grow its static economy to the point where it can produce and sustain annual increases in its Gross National Product is another way to define development (GNP). Oghator and Okoobo (2000) pointed out that national development entails more than just an increase in per capita income or overall economic growth. It also involves sustaining improvements in peoples' quality of life, which are ensured by the availability of gainful employment along with other social and economic infrastructures.

According to Ajagun (2003), national development is a state of progress that increases the value of life in all of its facets, including the economic, administrative, political, social, cultural, and religious ones. This suggests that depending on the point of disagreement, development is not about a specific component but rather is comprehensive, better yet multidimensional. As Chrisman (1984) put it, development is a process of societal advancement in which strong relationships between all societal sectors, cooperative bodies, and other groups result in an improvement in people's well-being. It is acceptable to assume that development is more than just an economic endeavour; it also encompasses political and socio-economic challenges, and it affects every area of social life.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for the study involved qualitative data that were gathered from secondary sources, like journals, official websites, and literary works. It used documentary and newspapers as its instrument of data collection. Every single piece of information gathered for the study was pertinent to it. Content analysis was carried out to review the huge amount of data acquired and evaluate the study's originality.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the conflict trap theory as its framework of analysis. Collier, Elliott, Hegre, Hoeffler, Reynal-Querol and Sambanis (2003) are some of the proponents of this theory. They understand the term "conflict trap" to mean that once a fight starts, it seems to gain momentum on its own. Peace becomes difficult to maintain and illusive. Even if peace is established, it frequently does not last (Collier *et al*, 2003).

The conflict trap's proponents attributed the conflict's protracted pattern to a variety of interconnected elements. Conflicts persist in multi-ethnic countries perhaps because of their openness to being rallied, manipulated, and mobilized by ethnic sentiments for both the opposing parties and the government. In addition, violence frequently turns into an efficient political tactic in plural societies, particularly when the populace has serious grievances to pursue. Consequently, even if the holders of power and authority in the society are ready to give in to the demands of the groups, it is uncommon for people to have confidence in them or believe that they possess effective ways to bring the rival factions to an understanding. The opposing sides may be concerned that once they extend an olive branch, the holders of power and authority would back out of any agreements (Collier *et al*, 2003).

It is also said that it is much more challenging for those in positions of power and authority to give in to requests from rival groups because doing so could foster the emergence, expansion, mushrooming, and radicalization of new groups, many of which frequently have competing goals. Furthermore, extremely unequal income distribution and a very low average income are significant predictors of protracted conflict, possibly because it is less expensive to maintain conflict when a large portion of the population is economically destitute and when security agencies are weak and unable to deter and capture lawbreakers. More so, maintaining conflict has gotten simpler due to the opposing parties' simple access to weapons for waging war (Collier *et al*, 2003).

The fact that a template is created after a fight has taken place, however, is crucial to the protracted pattern of conflict. It gets challenging to go back to the previous state. Conflict presumably fuels hatred and may tip the scales of powerful interests in favour of ongoing hostilities. Collier *et al* (2003) state that violence entrepreneurs, whether primarily political or primarily commercial, may profit to the point where they cannot be fairly compensated in order to accept peace. People who regard themselves as political leaders gain from conflict because it allows them to manage their organizations in a hierarchical, military manner with authority concentrated in their own hands, something that is much harder to justify in times of calm.

The lack of the rule of law in the areas they control is advantageous to those who consider themselves to be extortionists. However, they believe that by the time they commit to peace, their expensive military hardware will be obsolete. It might be a bit like asking a world champion swimmer to empty the pool to ask a rebel leader to accept peace.

Based on the aforementioned premises, the conflict trap theory is appropriate and pertinent for understanding the difficulties in managing ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria. It provides in-depth understanding of the complex factors that perpetuate conflict. It assumes that once a conflict breaks out, it will take longer and be more difficult to bring about peace due to a variety of factors, including ethnic diversity, the proliferation of weapons, the existence of income disparities, the existence of an expansive republic of hoodlums, and the actions of criminal entrepreneurs.

Ethnic Identity and Ethno-Religious Conflict in Nigeria

Ethnicity manifests as a social reality through interactions between members of different ethnic groups within a political system, where language and culture are the most noticeable traits. In Nigeria, one of the ways that ethnicity, both on a small and large scale, became pronounced was through the development of dialects within languages. In spite of the fact that Nigeria has over 400 different languages, only three are regarded as major languages. However, the distribution of these languages is inversely correlated with political and socio-economic power, therefore a person's status in society is determined by the linguistic group to which they belong (Çancı & Odukoya, 2016).

From historical perspective, identities have played a momentous role in the Nigerian political development both during the colonial era and in the post-colonial era. The colonial administration encouraged the development of the "we versus them" mentality, which put Muslims against

Christians, Northerners against Southerners, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo against one another, and so on (Okpanachi, 2010; Adefemi, 2003). Nigerians were indoctrinated to identify fundamentally and politically with their ethnic nationality against the state. This thesis is predicated on the idea that Nigerians frequently describe themselves in terms of ethnic affinities rather than other identities, both in competitive and non-competitive circumstances (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

The boundaries of identities and politics in Nigeria have changed as a result of recent socioeconomic and political upheavals. The first change is in the patterns of group mobilizations. The three major ethnic groups in Nigeria - the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo were in competition with one another under the traditional patterns of ethnic politics there. In political debates, the minority groups, which include over 250 smaller ethnic groups, are sometimes dismissed as unimportant. However, since 1999, the political landscape of Nigeria has changed as a result of the political activism of communities in the "middle belt" and the Niger Delta, who have grown more vociferous in matters of national politics and the economy (Soludo, 2007).

In this light, it is crucial to note that the majority of social disputes in Nigeria have always involved co-occurring religious and ethnic causes. The state's use of religion and ethnicity in political speech or action has been another factor contributing to conflicts. Therefore, it is evident that charges and allegations of neglect, oppression, and dominance are the main factors igniting ethno-religious disputes (Kura, 2010; Salawu, 2010; Ikelegbe, 2001).

Nigeria experienced a wide range of ethno religious conflicts before its current democratic experiment began. These crises include, among others, the Jimeta Yola religious disturbances (1984), the Zango Kataf crises in Kaduna State, and the Maitatsine religious disturbances in sections of Kano and Maiduguri in the early 1980s (1992). Other incidents include the Muslim-Christian riots at Kafanchan College of Education, Muslim-Christian clashes at Kaduna Polytechnic (1981–1982), and the cross vs. crescent dispute at the University of Ibadan (1981-1985). The Bulumkutu Christian-Muslim Riots (1982), the Usman Danfodio University Sokoto (1982), and the Muslim-Christian Clash during a Christian procession at Easter in Ilorin, Kwara State are just a few examples of early ethno-religious confrontations (1986).

Since a very long time ago, numerous regions of Nigeria have turned into battlegrounds, marked by a rising number of ethnic and religious conflicts. The scourge of ethno-religious strife in Nigeria has nevertheless, escalated with the emergence of Fourth Republic. Due to the freedom offered by democratic governance, ethno-religious conflicts have increased in frequency with the advent of democracy. According to Salawu (2010):

A Hausa woman was accused by some Oro cultists in Sagamu, Ogun State, of leaving as the cultists were outside with their gnome, sparking the first leg of recent ethnic and religious disturbances in Nigeria. Conflict arose as a result, which eventually exploded into a crisis. Many individuals died, mostly from the Hausa and Yoruba tribes. However, the notoriety was only momentarily restrained when a nightfall to dawn curfew was enforced on the tranquil village of Sagamu.

Unfortunately, since the infamy was delayed in Sagamu, retaliatory killings began in Kano, a significant Hausa metropolis. As a result, numerous individuals perished and billions of Naira's worth of property was destroyed. Southern-born Kano natives who had spent their entire adult lives in the historic city of Kano were forced to travel home to weigh their losses. When Kano City was preparing for peace, Lagos burst into another outbreak of violence, clearly in retaliation for the mass murder of Yoruba tribe men in Kano. This time, the O'dua People Congress took action against the Hausa/Fulani vendors in the well-known mile 12 market, and the region was used as a killing field for two days (p. 346).

The country's efforts to achieve national cohesion, democratic stability, and economic developments have been hampered by the bloodshed (Omaka, 2014; Agbiboa, 2013). Çancı and Odukoya (2016) elaborated this when they observed that Nigerian politics are shaped in some way to appease religious sentiments. As a result, religion reaches a degree of deification that is challenging to oppose or overcome. The elites constantly alter patterns of political dominance in their effort to seize power and state assets. Fears and concerns that fuel an increase in conflict and intolerance are generated in this pattern of dominance that is always shifting (Okpanachi, 2010; Ibrahim & Kazah-Toure, 2003). Some of the major crises that have slowed down the attainment of national cohesion have been briefly elaborated below:

The Conflict of Maitatsine

The Maitatsine crisis erupted in the northern region of Nigeria, Kano to be specific, in 1980 and persisted there until 1985, when Nigerian military troops put an end to them. The faithful followers of Maitatsine's main objective was to spread the Islamic faith throughout Northern Nigeria while preaching against modernization, including the use of cars, televisions, radios, and other modern conveniences.

In line with Okwueze (2003), the Islamic preacher Mohammed Marwa Maitatsine, who had his own kingdom in the heart of Kano with a fanatical gang of more than 10,000 followers, was the instigator of the Maitatsine crises. The Maitatsine group was well-known for its displays of religious intolerance toward those who had other beliefs. Due to its religious intolerance, the group battled against the Nigerian government and the Nigerian state. The group's name was derived from the name of the leader Maitatsine, which is a Hausa word meaning "the one who curses" because of his cursing-filled public speeches (Aghedo, 2014). As a result, the gang engaged in combat with and eventually slaughtered those who held views contrary to their own, branding them as infidels and unbelievers. Over 10,000 people died in the crisis, which was one of the country's most serious religious crises (Falola cited in Aghedo, 2014).

The Kaduna/Enugu Riots

The primary cause of this particular riot is the implementation of the Islamic Legal Code (Sharia) by some governors of the northern states of Nigeria. The Islamic Legal Code was first introduced by Zamfara State Governor, Ahmed Yerima, in October 1999, to scatter people with a different

position. At first, there weren't many negative consequences from the demonstrations against the establishment of the Sharia law. However, when Kaduna State Governor, Mohammed Makarfi, implemented it in February 2000, the previously contained fire ignited. Due to the long-standing hostilities between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna State in general and the state capital in particular, as well as the fact that both groups are almost equal in population, the two went at it in cold blood, and many people were killed.

The Igbo tribe, which is a predominately Christian ethnic group, was severely impacted by the Kaduna riots. But just like the Sagamu event, rioting broke out in Enugu and other Igbo cities when many Igbo people were killed and others who survived the attacks returned to tell their bitter stories. It's vital to notice that the ethnic and religious unrest in Kaduna and Enugu had some characteristics that resemble the Nigerian civil war of 1967–1970. In other words, as law and order broke down in the two districts, the riots created enough force to trigger a civil war.

It is noteworthy that this group primarily consisted of people who were impoverished, illiterate, and unemployed and who were socially, politically, and economically marginalized. Ikenga-Metuh (1994), who acknowledges that the social, political, and economic components of the Maitatsine can be related to marginalization because the people participated were primarily from marginalized groups, concurs with this school of thought.

The Kano Riot of 1991

The Maitatsine religious violence, which included destroying mosques and churches and killing Christians, marked the beginning of the religious conflicts in Kano State. This rebellion was caused by the violent response of Muslim youth against the staging of a Christian crusade, when a renowned German Evangelist, Reinhard Bonnke, and some American preachers were to visit Kano. This uprising occurred just half a decade after the Maitatsine riots which took place from 1980 to 1985. Attacks on churches, shops, and homes in Sabon -Gari town, Kano State, began as a Muslim protest against the planned crusade's hosting, but eventually turned into violence (Best & Rakodi, 2011). Both lives and property were lost in the attack.

Lagos-Kano Conflicts

Another ethno-religious dispute broke out in October 2000. The Lagos-(IdiAraba/Oko-Oba) Kano mayhems were at play here. This was caused by miscommunication between Hausa and Yoruba residents of Idi-Araba, Lagos, about a Hausa resident's usage of a convenience; as a result of this miscommunication, numerous Yoruba people of the region were massacred with bows, arrows, and machetes. In response, the Yoruba militia known as the O'dua People Congress (OPC) entered the picture, making matters worse. Later, Oko-Oba, a Lagos suburb with a sizable Hausa/Fulani community, joined the chaos. Later, the violence moved to Kano, and as was to be expected, the victims predominately came from the south.

Effects of Politicizing Ethnic Conflict on National Development

Some forty years ago, Baum, Hamm and Nikels (1975, p.15) noted that “bad political atmosphere promotes structures of domination in human history.” It is impossible to ignore the subsequent human rights violations that resulted from these socioeconomic tensions and ethnic politics. Speech, life, association, religion, and movement freedoms are no longer upheld. The political unrest that has resulted from these conflicts has caused the Southerners and Easterners of Nigeria to lose their sense of security in the Northern half of the country out of fear for their lives and property, and vice versa. Nwachukwu (2001) cautiously observed that:

Politics in Nigeria is defined by ethnic cleavages; policies are borne by emotive sentiments rooted in ethnicity. The masses are preyed upon and used as a satellite by the political elites (class) to further their socio-political and economic goals.

This is accomplished through orientation, indoctrination, or violence against their political rivals by utilizing the populace and pre-existing preconceptions. All political processes, including party formation, campaigning, and voting, are influenced by ethnicity. As a result, Nigerian politics are known for their violence and intolerance (p. 212).

The social unrest and ethnic politics in Nigeria have weakened the country's ethnic groups' ability to engage harmoniously and cooperatively. These ethnic groups don't trust people, especially politicians or other leaders who don't share their ethnicity yet strive to gain their support for elected office or an efficient administration. We must add here that all attempts at national cohesiveness and development in Nigeria have been thwarted by the division caused by ethnicity.

Its power has contaminated, upended, and unsettled the political and economic systems. In Nigeria, ethnic differences impair the democratic values of justice and equity. In an immoral effort to demonstrate group solidarity with the co-ethnic in question, members of the national elite are willing to turn a blind eye and deaf ears to incidents of injustice done by members of their own ethnic groups against others. Similar to how they want parity for themselves, group members refuse to accept equity for members of other ethnic groups if doing so would allow those groups to enjoy dominance over them.

In essence, Nigeria's political underdevelopment is a product of ethnic politics and socioeconomic conflicts. Political instability mostly brought on by ethnic politics has had a lot of ramifications for the nation as a whole. In certain cases, the environment was unfavourable for the leaders to make wise decisions and take appropriate action. In an unstable environment, the populace and its leaders are preoccupied with pursuing their own selfish goals and stealing the national cake and its resources.

In Nigeria, policies and programs have been inconsistent due to the political unrest brought on by ethnic marginalization. The country's attempts to achieve socioeconomic growth have been successfully hampered by the numerous policy inconsistencies that have been recorded there. According to Easterly (2001), ethnic conflict results in inadequate government leadership and services, and Nigeria, which is a part of Africa, is an example of this factor.

In addition to the economy, ethnic politics and social unrest in the nation have led to a peak in government corruption, and each ethnic group has a tendency to cover up for its members who engaged in such corruption. Ethnic clashes have frequently occurred in the nation as a result of efforts to catch and convict criminals. The speed of Nigeria's economic progress has been significantly impacted by this ethno-corruption scandal. The effects of societal disputes, particularly those that are ethnically and religiously motivated, have led to threats to the security of people and property, ongoing capital flight from domestic and foreign investors, and a loss of faith in the economy (Babangida, 2002). In the end, all of these have contributed to rising poverty, subpar infrastructure, and unemployment in the nation.

Conclusion

Ethnic and religious conflicts have been prevalent in Nigeria for a long time. Many of the different regions have, in one time or another, had a taste of crisis. These conflicts have arisen primarily as a result of Nigeria's heterogeneous nature, with over four hundred ethnic groups. As a result, most of the conflicts are politicized as the root cause of them are mostly politically or economically motivated. In many cases, religion too has been a motivation.

The continuous occurrences of these conflicts have had tremendous negative impact on Nigeria's national cohesion and development. It is still practically impossible to live in oneness as Nigerians identify themselves based on the ethnic groups they belong, instead of as Nigerians. If the trend continues, it will be difficult for cohesion and national development to be encouraged.

Recommendation

With the apparent effects of the ethno-religious conflicts that have taken place in Nigeria, with the few mentioned in this paper, and with the negative effects they have had on the cohesion and development of the nation, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Government should carefully adopt the idea of citizenship instead of indigeneity. With this in place, the focus of one's ethnic group will no longer be the yardstick for measuring whom opportunities should be opened to.
- ii. Community leaders should implement laws that will make indigenes accommodate fellow Nigerians irrespective of which ethnicity they belong.
- iii. Since Nigeria is considered a secular state, the political space should accommodate a balance of both religion in order to eliminate the idea of one particular religion being favoured over the other.
- iv. Political leaders should seek to enforce justice even if the perpetrators are from their own ethnic group. If this is done, there will be no case where one ethnic group is feeling marginalized.
- v. Government at all levels should de-emphasize the use of phrases such as state of origin, tribe or religion as articles to be filled on job application or student registration forms and others.

- vi. Equality education should not only be made available and affordable at all levels, but also compulsory as a check on the high rate of illiteracy which is a veritable tool for the hatching of most ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria

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