

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA (2015-2021): IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary times, Nigeria faces more internal threats from ethnic and religious conflicts than it does from external sources. This study seeks to examine Ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria from 2015 to 2021, and its implication on National Security. The research was guided by six objectives. The theoretical frame-work adopted for this study is the Structural Conflict Theory, which provides adequate explanation, predictive justification for the frequent occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts and the tendency to provide necessary insight towards resolving them. The findings of study revealed that there is a strong relationship between Ethnicity, Religion, Conflicts and National Security, and that the ethno-religious conflicts experienced in Nigeria have gross implications to national security. The study recommends the need to restore and maintain the secularity of the Nigeria state, and that state of origin be removed and replaced with state of resident in all our national document as this will reduce ethnic identity which is in opposition to nationalism. Religious leaders, traditional rulers, the media and other stakeholders should support the government in the fight to curb ethno-religious conflicts by sensitizing their youths, preach unity and peaceful co-existence, and discourage the use of violence as means to settling disputes among groups and individuals.

KEYWORDS: Ethnicity, Religion, Conflict and National Security

Introduction

Conflict is inevitable in human interaction, arising from disagreement, controversy or quarrel between two or more people or groups of people. When such a disagreement, controversy or quarrel is not resolved or managed, it escalates to a disordered state where hostility and violent actions manifest. Mbachu (2009) opined that Conflict is a condition of disharmony or hostility in relations. Whenever two individuals opine in different ways, a conflict arises. Wright (1990) defines conflict as opposition among social entities directed against one another, it distinguished competition and defined it as opposition among social entities independently striving for something of which the resources are inadequate to satisfy all. In a layman's language, conflict is a disagreement either between two individuals or among group members. No two individuals can think alike and there is definitely a difference in their thinking process as well as their understanding.

Ethno-religious conflict on the other hand is a form of conflict produced on the basis of real or imagined distinction rooted in ethnic and religious identities, lines and lens. Ethno-religious conflicts refer to those involving groups where religion is an integral part of social and cultural life, and religious institutions are representative, possess moral legitimacy, and mobilization potential. Where conflicting groups define themselves along ethno-religious lines and lens, religious identity can create sharp distinctions between parties, and increase group mobilization.

The intense ethno-religious polarization and conflict in Nigeria has increased in recent years due to the politicization of religion and ethnic values. This has led to a rise in ferocity and scope of destruction of lives and property, and tension between different ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. Some effects of these conflicts are the increase in arms proliferation by various groups, armed banditry and kidnapping. The scale and prevalence of these conflicts in Nigeria remains a matter of concern and requires urgent attention from all stakeholders. As a result of these conflicts, social, economic and political progress in Nigeria has suffered, threatening National security.

There have been several measures put in place by successive governments at the State and national level to prevent or resolve ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. These measures range from the creation of additional states and local governments to the principles of federal character, quota system, equity representation in the national and state assemblies, among others. However, these measures have not adequately addressed the problems as the rate and intensity of ethno-religious crisis still persist. The effects and implications of ethno-religious conflicts constitute a threat to Nigeria's national security. It is against this background that this research seeks to examine Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria and the Implications to National Security, with a view to proffering plausible solutions towards resolving or preventing their future occurrence.

Conceptual discourse

For a better understanding of the concept Ethno-Religious Conflicts, it is important to know the definition of Ethnicity, Religion and Conflict, before fusing the word ethno-religious conflicts together.

Ethnicity: Various attempts have been made by scholars to define and analyze ethnicity, leading to the development of several concepts. Odeh, (2010) defined an ethnic group as a group of people who hold in common a set of traditions that differentiate them from others with whom they are in contact. These traditions include a common ancestry, place of origin, religious beliefs and practices, and language. Ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character (i.e., languages and culture) within their boundaries. Snyder states that ethnicity is consciousness of a shared identity within a group. The instrumentalist theory of Ethnicity views ethnicity as a device used by individuals and groups to unify populations. Ethnic identities played a major role in the Nigerian political process especially during the colonial period and post-colonial era. Almost half of Nigerians (48.2%) label themselves with an ethnic identity compared to 28.4% who identify with respect to class or religious group.

Religion: Religion is a social and spiritual phenomenon, which involves the grouping of people based on faith. Wikipedia defines religion as "a social-cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, morals, beliefs, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual elements". Growing religious intolerance has become a burden to various governments, making peace elusive in the world. Religion guides our daily lives and should not be based solely on the virtues of individuals. In essence, religion is more than what we assume it to be. It is paramount, well above material, governments and policies.

Conflict: A conflict is a clash of interest. The basis of conflict may vary but it is always a part of society. Although, we are familiar with those inexhaustible things that cause conflicts, but in this context, they can be categorized into four namely: Conflicts over resources, Conflicts over psychological needs, Conflicts involving values, Conflicts over inadequate information. Disagreements among individuals lead to conflicts and fights. Junega (2020) states that "Conflict arises whenever individuals have different values, opinions, needs, interests and are unable to find a middle way".

In classifying conflicts, Ted Robert Gurr, in his article "A Comparative of Civil Strife" and Wright (2017) in his paper "The Nature of Conflict" rightly argue that the level of violence rather than its absence or presence is a better criterion for classifying conflicts. People have different value system, interest, needs and opinions, and most times selfishly guides them thus leading to conflicts. Conflicts usually occur as a result of clash of these values, needs, interests between societies, groups or states that are pursuing common but opposing goals (Okon, 2003).

National security: The concept of national security encompasses the total sum of what a nation does in order to safeguard itself as a sovereign entity. This could be in areas such as 'defense of territorial integrity, promotion of socio-economic and political potentials, military strategy, diplomatic interests and whatever a country might consider as its vital national interests'. The definition of national security is hardly precise and there is yet to be a consensus

by scholars on its definition. One focuses on strategic definition, while the other emphasizes socio-economic factors. There are two essential views on the definition - one which goes beyond military preparedness to include political, economic and social development of a nation.

Accordingly, national security is seen from the internal and external perspectives. The internal perspective is concerned with the security of the individual against hunger, absence of threat to life and property and ensuring that he/she is gainfully employed. National security is thus the extent to which a nation safeguards itself from internal or external threats. Going by Nigeria's threat profile, Nigeria faces more internal threats emanating from ethnic and religious crises than it does from external sources.

Theoretical Framework of Analysis

There are several theories that provide theoretical explanation as to why conflicts occur. In their attempts to explain the nature, causes, and effects of events in their society's social scientists have always devised theories. To this end therefore, the theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Structural Conflict Theory. The theory provides adequate explanation, predictive justification for the frequent occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts and the tendency to provide necessary insight for the ways resolving them (Alao, 2015). Parson (1960) an American Sociologist champions the course of this theory after the World War II. In this theory he opined that "individuals will adjust to a given structure in an organization, institution or society. Any change in the structure of the organization or institution causes conflict and it destabilizes the society. The Structural Conflict theory comprises of two branches, the radical structuralists and liberal structuralists. According to Faleti (2006), the radical structuralisms are mostly from Marxist dialectical school comprising the likes of Marx, Engel and Lenin. The liberal structuralisms include Ross (1993) Scarborough (1998), and Galtung (1990).

The main argument of the structural theory is that social conflicts arise due to the ways societies are structured and organized. The theory views social problems like political and

economic exclusion, injustice, poverty, exploitation, inequality, as sources of conflict (Faleti, 2006). This has strong leaning on Marxist's theory of historical materialism. The structuralist opined that, societies with unjust and exploitative organization that makes one class to dominate another, especially when the dominated classes constitute the majority are prone to conflicts (Faleti, 2006). The liberal Structuralist call for the removal of structural defects through new policies with human face.

Ethno-Religious Conflicts and National Security

We can trace ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria to the Maitatsine Revolt in 1980, when Mohamad Marwa made attempts to force the 'sui-generis' religion on other religious groups in the country. The military later became involved in the conflict which claimed over 5000 lives and destroyed properties worth hundreds of millions. Nigeria is the most populous black nation in the world, and the most crowded African country with a population of about 182 million by 2015 (World Population Prospects 2015). A survey conducted in Nigeria by Lewis and Bratton found that almost half of Nigerians (48.2%) label themselves with an ethnic identity compared to 28.4% who label themselves with respect to class and 21% who identified with a religious group (Lewis and Bratton 2000; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). This means that over 66% of Nigerians view themselves as members of an ethnic or religious group. What is even more interesting is the fact that religious and ethnic identities are more salient than class identities (Lewis and Bratton 2000; Osaghae and Suberu 2005).

Nigeria's national security has recently been threatened by latent ethnic and religious struggles which often resulted in conflicts. This situation indicates a direct relationship between ethnic and religious conflicts and national security. The effects of these conflicts threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria due to reprisal attacks carried out within states where the conflicts occurred and in other parts of the country. Ethnic and religious conflicts have led to the creation of various militant groups like Boko Haram/ISWAP, Banditry, Niger Delta Militants and others who carry out acts of aggression against the Government and people

of Nigeria. These acts of aggression have affected national unity and integration, which are essential components of national security

Implications of Ethno-Religious Conflicts on National Security

The major concerns of national security are the preservation and maintenance of a nation's interests. Any development that threatens the stability of a nation or its socio-economic and political order would thus be considered a threat to national security (Otite, Albert, 1999). Ethno-religious conflicts have long been identified as a fundamental threat to stability, political order and state cohesion in Nigeria. There are further implications of ethno-religious conflicts namely:

Social implications: Social implications of ethno-religious conflicts often transcend the boundaries of the contending religious and ethnic groups. A social implication of ethnic and religious conflicts on national security is the humanitarian problems associated with each conflict.

For example, the Sharia crises that started in Kaduna metropolis spilled over to Zaria and Kano. Another instance was the 2009 Boko Haram crises that spilled over to Bauchi and Yobe States and presently all the north east states. The effect of these conflicts generated sentiments that resulted in reprisal killings in different parts of the country. This situation also destabilized stable communal and relationships and led to unfriendly communal living across many parts of the country.

Economic implications: The economic implications of ethno-religious crises, like the social implications, are multi-dimensional. The disruption of economic life due to ethnic and religious conflicts negatively impact on the national economy. Individuals, corporate organizations and governments have business interests in various parts of the country and the outbreak of such conflicts usually necessitates the closure of business activities, an example is the ENDSARS protest. The closure of businesses results in heavy losses for individuals, cooperate bodies and government. Consequently, several businesses have either shut down or

relocated from Nigeria due to ethno-religious conflict and the prevailing insecurity, causing a decline in the economy.

Political implication: The political implication of ethno-religious conflicts on national security is often viewed from the perspective of the stability of the state. The failure of government to prevent successive acts of ethnic and religious violence in Nigeria has heightened the feeling of insecurity and hostility. This has led to the erosion of cohesion and harmonious co-existence amongst different ethnic groups and religions in the country. It has also created a sense of ethnic and religious inclination, rather than national inclination among Nigerians. In defense of their actions, religious and ethnic groups often complain of the inability of government to protect their interests and guarantee their security.

The result of the aforementioned has led to agitations for political autonomy based on ethnic or religious beliefs in some parts of the country. An example of this agitation is the clamor by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). This group has persistently agitated for secession based on the perception of marginalization by the Nigerian State. The impact of this cessation on the existence of the nation would be negative, causing further strained relations and loss of a vibrant part of the Nigerian society. The various tiers of government in Nigeria could therefore take deliberate steps with the right political will to allay the fears of marginalization by various ethnic and religious groups. A more transparent approach by the government, which accommodates every group, could facilitate this process.

Causes of ethno-religious conflicts

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society and has recorded numerous cases of conflicts that were ethnic and religious in nature. Kano, Jos, Kaduna and Maiduguri, Benue, Lagos, Niger, Taraba, among others are areas that have witnessed ethno-religious crises in the country. Several factors have been attributed as the causes of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria, some of these include:

Ethnic and religious intolerance: One of the causes of conflict in Nigeria is lack of tolerance between people of different religious or ethnic groups. Religious intolerance is the failure to recognize and accommodate views and opinions of other is one of the major sources of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Lack of tolerance is usually caused by a lack of trust between ethnic or religious groups, especially if there has been conflict between them in the past. Extremists usually take advantage of this situation to further polarize the society. Nigeria religious adherents, especially the Muslims and the Christians have demonstrated intolerance attitudes which have resulted to violence outburst that spill over the political and economic lives of the citizens (Alanamu, 2005). Despite Nigeria's potential for development, the distrust and intolerance among her people create an atmosphere of near-constant tension in the country (Dumoye, 2010).

Poverty: Poverty coupled with economic deprivation has been identified as one of the causes of ethno-religious conflicts, this result to problems, like unemployment, Inadequate housing, physical and social infrastructures (Obateru, 1994). The present unequal distribution of scarce resources in Nigeria Societies has created the problem of poverty which is partly responsible for ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

Illiteracy: Most conflicts which occur in Nigeria are attributed to the low literacy level among the people involved. This has left many young people with inadequate education and as a result, does not gain meaningful employment. This low literacy level and unemployment impairs their ability to dispassionately process thoughts and make informed decisions, thus creating a pool of willing foot soldiers for any conflict that may occur irrespective of its religion or ethnic dimension.

Corruption: Corruption is the enrichment of an individual or a section of society against the greatest happiness of the greater number of people. Corruption is so rampant in the country that the Transparency International in its perception index currently awards Nigeria 25 points out of a maximum of 100 points. She is also rated 149 out of the 180 nations that were evaluated in the world (Transparency International Corruption Perception Index 2020). The

level of corruption has its attendant effect of increasing poverty and unemployment in the country. Consequently, the idle population created is highly frustrated and could easily vent that frustration through crisis and other forms of destructive behavior.

Competition for scarce resources: Competition for scarce resources has been identified as one the causes of crises in societies. These resources could be human or material and may lead to conflicts when they are seen to be unfairly distributed or insufficient. For example, land has been a recurring problem between communities in Nigeria, leading to conflicts. The struggle for the exclusive or predominant control of land has been a basic pattern of inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria (Eliagwu, 2015). As a result, some conflict in the country border on land and boundary issues. When land disagreements occur between neighboring tribes or communities, it is likely to result in ethno-religious conflict. This is because indigenes of the affected communities' resort to conflict and base their struggle along ethnic/religious lines. The pattern is also evident in clashes between farmers and herdsmen over land for farming and grazing respectively.

Competition for political recognition: The present democratic system in Nigeria requires a balanced representation from all geo-political zones, at all tiers and levels of government as enshrined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999. In situations where two or more communities are in the same electoral constituency, representation often causes conflicts. This could be more acute when the communities belong to different ethnic groups. Political representation has been observed over the years to be directly linked with the access to resources, employment, social infrastructure and political appointments.

Indigene and settler disputes: A major cause of ethnic conflict in Nigeria is between 'hosts' and 'settlers' (Olawale, 2015). Different ethnic groups lay claim to 'indigenous statuses on the basis of history of migration, early patterns of settlement or local history among others. Those who claim to be 'indigenes' seek to exclude 'settlers' thus seeking to maximize their own access to resources at the expense of the settlers. Those excluded as 'settlers' resist their exclusion on the grounds of long residency in the area.

Causes of ethno-religious conflicts have been examined, and the consequences of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria have been identified as agitation for self-determination and wastage of enormous human and material resources. These conflicts also result in increasing gaps in social relations among ethnic groups, antagonism towards one another and religious prejudice. Other consequences range from threat to security of life and property to loss of foreign investment in the economy and ultimate a threat to National Security.

Management of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria

The careful management of the causative factors of crises is the panacea to solving ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. The prevalence of crises in Nigeria is eroding the unity upon which any meaningful development could take place. Since the effects of ethno-religious crises borders on national security, it is imperative that governments evolve such measures that would protect lives and property of the Nigerian people. In the past, the greatest challenge faced by the government has been to ensure that various religious and ethnic groups harmoniously co-exist.

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 makes provision for any Nigerian who has resided in a state for at least 5 years to have the right of being an indigene (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). These right permits such a person to seek for elective posts in the state of residence. However, the domineering effects of ethnicity have hindered the full implementation and respect for this section of the constitution. It is therefore imperative that the implementation of this section of the Constitution is enforced. This would provide Nigerians with the opportunity to identify with and be part of any state in the country.

The provision of adequate information is an important tool in conflict management. Creating awareness and enlightening people is necessary for the eradication of ethnic and religious violence. The youths could be educated on the need to tolerate all religions and respect the cultural values of one another. Government could effectively use the print and electronic media to sensitize the youths in this regard. Additionally, the services of religious

and community leaders could be used to enlighten the public in mosques, churches and during village or community meetings. The consciousness created by such enlightenment campaigns is likely to persuade people to shun violence and embrace non-violent means of resolving conflicts. In this regard, it is necessary for the government to educate the large number of unemployed and illiterate youths in the country.

The management of ethno-religious crises is essential for the protection of Nigeria's national security. The prevalence of crises in Nigeria is eroding the unity upon which any meaningful development could take place. Since the effects of ethno-religious crises borders on national security, it is imperative that governments evolve such measures that would protect lives and property of the Nigerian people. These measures include resolving the settler/indigene controversy in line with the constitution and public awareness/enlightenment on the negative implications of ethno-religious crises. Other measures are the provision of effective leadership, socio-economic infrastructure and sanctions for perpetrators of ethno-religious violence or conflicts. These measures would guarantee the reduction of ethno-religious crises and uphold the security of the Nigerian State.

Some major ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria

In order to examine the implication of Ethnic Religious Conflicts in Nigeria, there is need to highlight some major conflicts in Nigeria, especially within the period in study which 2015 to 2021.

Kaduna State

On the 19th of October, 2018 Christian's in Adara community and Hausa Muslim youths. A dispute in the market led to the death of two people from the Adara community. In retaliation a communal conflict erupted, the Adaras attacked the hausa community killing dozens of people. The conflict resulted in the death of 55 persons.

Zamfara State Conflict

On the 9th of June, 2019, 16 people celebrating Eid al-Fitr were killed by unidentified bandits in Kanoma Community of Maru LGA.

Benue State

On 2nd of March 2019, herdsmen killed 16 persons in an attack on Gwer West LGA. The government blamed the attack on allegations of theft of cows by livestock guards made by the military. Residents said the herdsmen brought along many cattle and took over their lands for grazing.

Kogi State

On the 7th of March 2019, in Bassa LGA, Kwomu community twenty residents were killed in an attack by an Egburra Mozum militia in Bassa LGA, Kogi State.

Rivers State

On the 19th of March 2019, in Khana LGA Five people were confirmed to have been killed by suspected Iceland group members in a cult attack on KonoBoue in Khana LGA. The cause is suspected to be retaliation for killing of their member.

Borno State

The Koshebe conflict in Borno state took place on 28th November 2020 in the village of Koshebe, Nigeria, in Borno, when as many as 110 civilians and peasant farmers were killed and six were wounded as they worked in rice fields in Koshebe village, near the northeast Nigerian city of Maiduguri. The attack was thought to be carried out by the Boko Haram insurgency. About 15 women were also kidnapped.

Plateau State

On 3rd May 2020 an ethno-religious conflict erupted in a Christian school. The Messiah College High School in Plateau state was closed down due to COVID-19, but the perpetrators stormed the on-campus home of the school's principal, Rev. Bayo James Famonure. He was shot in the head, while his wife was shot in the back and his two children were shot in the feet. The conflict further led to the death of four Christians who were later ambushed by same attackers and were killed in Adu village.

Findings and Conclusion

This study finds that there is a strong relationship between Ethnicity, Religion, Conflicts and National Security, and that the ethno-religious conflicts experienced in Nigeria have gross implications to national security. This is evidenced to the fact that ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria often take a violent approach, attacks are often made on social places like churches, parks, mosques, schools, including homes and farmlands resulting to loss of lives and properties.

Religious extremism, poor leadership and marginalization have been identified as the major causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Nigeria religious adherents and leaders, especially the Muslims and Christians have demonstrated intolerance attitude towards each other resulting in religious fanaticism, confrontations and conflict of interest between members of this various religious group. Nigerians today tends to define themselves more in terms of ethnic and religious affinities as opposed to their national identity thus increasing the gaps in social relations among ethnic and religious groups.

The study concludes that there's a need to restore and maintain the secularity of the Nigeria state, as this will reduce the existing religious conflict. Nigeria is a secular state but the identification of Christianity and Islam to the exclusion of other religion further deepens exclusion in Nigeria. Also state of origin should be removed and replaced with state of resident in all our national document as this will reduce ethnic identity which is in opposition to nationalism.

Finally, just as the former secretary to the state government of Nigeria Anyim Pius Anyim, stated in his open letter to the president, "it is important to note that every violent agitation originates from a non-violent agitation that was not attended to." Today, Nigeria is bedeviled with violent and non-violent agitations. It is also a fact that the current ethno-religious conflict and violent agitations in the country originated from non-violent conflicts and agitations that were not attended to. Therefore, the President of Nigeria should empanel a commission of inquiry to inquire into the ethno-religious conflicts, the violent and non-violent

agitations in Nigeria and make recommendations on the immediate-, short- and long-term solutions as a way of first de-escalating the rising tension in the land and a process for the renewal of our march to nationhood.

Like Anyim Pius Anyim said once said “in a democracy, no action is deemed successful or completed until the buy-in-of the people is secured through a democratic process. As long as the people are not part of the process of finding solutions to the conflicts, a permanent solution will be a mirage. Therefore, the need for a national discourse/conference is made more important and long over do.” This buy-in- is an imperative that is yet to be pursued in the search for a plausible solution towards resolving, managing and preventing ethno-religious conflicts and violent agitations that have threaten Nigeria’s national security and sovereignty.

Recommendations

Based on the findings reported in this research work, the followings are recommended:

- Restructure/amend the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria to include a buy-in and input of all the ethnic groups in Nigeria.
- Nigeria is a secular state, therefore the secularity of the Nigeria should be restored and maintained.
- De-emphasize on religion and ethnicity by first replacing removing state of origin and replacing with state of resident in all our national documents and identities.
- Re-orientation and education of the citizenry to encourage religious and ethnic tolerance and respect among ourselves.
- The president of the country must be a detribalized Nigerian with candour, whose words, actions and inaction resonates as comfort especially to the minority ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria.
- There should be religious tolerance, respect, justice and equity for all religious and ethnic groups in Nigeria.

- Religious leaders, traditional rulers and chiefs, the media and other stakeholders should lend their supports to the government and the Armed Forces in the fight to curb ethno-religious conflicts by sensitizing their youths, giving out useful information that will help solve misunderstandings, preach unity and peaceful co-existence, and discourage the use of violence as means to settling disputes among groups and individuals.
- Politics in Nigeria should not be played along ethnic and religious lines, rather credibility, accountability and leadership should be given priority.
- Government should tackle the problem of poverty and illiteracy in Nigeria. Jobs should be created for the youths. This is because the unemployed youths are more prone to being used to perpetuate ethno-religious conflicts.

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