ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISIS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Over the years ethno-religious crises has been a fundamental issue that has posed security challenges in Nigeria. The recent security challenges in the country are the torrent and tumultuous spate of bombing, maiming, killing and kidnapping by Boko Haram and other insurgents that have threatened the national unity and security. The paper examines the effect of ethno-religious crises on socio-economic development in Nigeria. The plural society approach was used to theorize the study. The political leaders have the responsibility to forestall this ominous trend by having the political will to deliver the dividend of democracy by fulfilling their social contract with the people. The study recommends that while government at all levels take proactive steps to curbing the state of insecurity in the country, they should improve the socio-economic wellbeing of the people.

Key words: Ethnicity, Religion, Crisis, Boko Haram, Economy.

Introduction

Nigeria in recent time has witnessed a lot of violent eruption and general insecurity in nearly all the states of the federation. Prominent among such is the Boko Haram insurgency in the North Eastern part of the country. Kidnapping and all forms of maladies, militia groups exist in all geopolitical zones. This has resulted in a lot of bloodsheds, senseless killings, destruction of property, social and economic dislocation and its attendant poverty, insecurity, unemployment etc. The economic and political situation in the country has disempowered both the urban and rural poor. According to Akhakpe, Fatile and Igbokwe-Ibeto (2012) no nation can really boast of having achieved development if a larger percentage of its inhabitants are still wallowing under abject poverty, want and adept in socio-economic penury. The failure of economic and political
leadership in the country to tackle and resolve the hydra-heated socio-political and economic crisis bedeviling the nation since independence has resulted into insecurity in the land.

Yet 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. Since then, the country has struggled to achieve unity in diversity. National integration has remained elusive, yet it is needed to achieve the universal goal of development, that is, the pursuit of people’s welfare and well-being.

Following these development, members of different ethnic nationalities have become aware of their separate identities because of the sporadic occurrence of episodic social interpretation of intergroup relations (See Sanda, 1999). The intense communal and religious conflict have led to the formation and operations of several militia groups prominent among them include, Bakassi Boys, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Oodua People Congress (OPC), Egbesu Boys, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Emancipation Niger Delta (MEND) and more recently Boko Haram. These Militia groups have become an enclave for the army of jobless youths.

Peace, security and protection of lives and properties is the primary responsibilities of government anywhere in the world be it military or civilian administration. The persistent ethno-religious crisis in the country and the enormous security challenges it poses has made the country a fragile state. A fragile state refers to state where the government cannot deliver its core function and responsibilities to its people (Albert, 2004). Nigeria is a plural and heterogeneous state with over 350 ethnic groups with the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbos making the majority tribes (The New York Times, 2012).

Since independence in 1960, the country has witnessed over three decades of military dictatorship. This period was not devoid of sectarian crises and other issues of insecurity. Statistics shows that most of the ethno-religious crises in Nigeria occurred in the Northern part of the country such as the recent Boko Haram onslaught in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe State since 2009, Maitatsini crisis of 1981 in Borno State, the Tiv and Jukun conflict in Benue State, the Birom and Hausa in Plateau and the Ife-Modakeke crisis in Osun State, South West Nigeria just to mention but few (Adebayo, 2010).

The restiveness in the Niger Delta occasioned by militant activities has some far-reaching economic implications, for example, the amount of barrel of crude oil the country produces has dropped significantly. However, the granting of amnesty initiated by former president Late Umar Yar’Adua nipped the problem in the bud and today there is relative peace in the Delta. The post-election violence in the 2011 general election was also a testimony of one of the orgies of violence in the country where lives and properties were lost especially in the Northern part of the country. Most of this violence is blamed on unemployment, poverty, corruption, wide income gap between the rich and the poor, social injustice among others. The incessant state of violence and social insecurity has scuttled the socio-economic development of the country. The situation is so
worrisome that even members of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) a scheme designed to foster unity and cross cultural learning in the country cannot be deployed to North Eastern states which have become hotbed for terrorist activities.

The paper therefore examines the effects of ethno-religious crisis on economic development with special emphasis on Boko Haram and also identifying the root causes of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria. To interrogate and address the fundamental issues central to the paper, the paper is structured as follows: the first section discuss the conceptual and theoretical orientation of the paper. The second section x-rays reasons behind ethno-religious crisis and proliferation of militia groups in Nigeria. The third section examined the interface between insecurity, national and development. The fourth analyzed the effect of ethno-religious crisis on socio-economic development. The fifth section suggests some steps which might take the country out of this quagmire and then conclusion.

Conceptual and Theoretical Approach
Generally, violence can be viewed from two perspectives, the micro and macro level violence. Macro level violence sees violence as a result of adjustment to the ethnic map while the micro level attributes violence to hostility between neighbours of different ethnic group (Weidmann, 2012). Yet as a social phenomenon, ethnicity can be regarded as a gloss of ethnic identity, sharing the same cultural and historical antecedents (Adebayo, 2010).

Ethnicity can be defined as a social formation predicated on culturally specific practices and unique symbols (Osaghae, 1992). 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 persist differently influencing the well-being of ethnic groups. From the foregoing, ethnicity can be summarized as the discrimination by members of a particular ethnic group against the other in the process of competition of certain values in the society (Oyediran, Nwosu, Takaya and Agbaje, 1991).

Religion is a kind of belief centered on what people take as purity and add value to. Religion can be termed by reference to what is known as extent of purity and impurity (Shabiam and Awe, 2001). Religion is a cultural institution and like other institutions, it is a means and instrument for the satisfaction of needs. They are belief system and may be charged by emotions (Oyediran, Nwosu, Takaya and Agbaje, 1991). This means that all religions are human institution which can be differentiated from other social institutions of the sacred or supernatural forces embedded in it. Mbati (1999) emphasized that religion is a strong element in the traditional backgrounds and exerts the greatest influence upon the thinking and feelings of the people concerned. Religion as an institution cannot stand as a thing or unto itself; it is part of the society. It has been argued that one’s
religion is what makes one a complete whole, this assertion may not be correct because not all people practicing a religion would agree that they depend on their religion to complete them as a whole. This may be true of most religions but not of all religions. Religion has two distinct functions. The first is the comprehensive system of symbolic meaning for understanding the nature of reality, while the other function is the system of value to enforce complete devotion. Basically the two major religious practice in Nigeria are Islam and Christianity. While Christians believe in one God, the Muslims believe in Allah, yet we have Africa Traditional Religion. These differences in beliefs have given rise to the religious conflict we are experiencing worldwide.

Conflict can be described as a situation or condition of disharmony in an interactional process. Conflict is when two or more values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory in nature and have not been aligned or agreed upon yet (See Bagaji, 2012). In order to understand the concept of socio-economic development, it is imperative we define development. Generally, development is defined as a state where something moves from an unpalatable situation to palatable situation. Development also could mean the improvement in people’s lifestyle through improved education, incomes, skills development and employment (Adeniyi, 1993). It is the process of economic and social transformation based on cultural and environmental factors. Socio-economic development, therefore is the process of social and economic development in a society. It is measured with indicators, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), life expectancy, literacy and levels of employment (Okonjo-Iweala and Osafo-Kwaako, 2007). The need for a religious tolerance among the different religious adherents is and remains relevant in the sustenance of the socio-economic development of the country. Without peace there could be no any meaningful development that is why government at all levels should make concerted effort to abate the level of crises in the country to its barest. The fact remains that good governance and accountability are sacrosanct as it engender the country socio-economic development.

The plural society approach is found relevant in analyzing the issues of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria. This approach was founded in the 17th century by John Smith Mills and was developed by British economist J.S Furnivall. This approach argued that in an ethnic fragmented society where different groups live in close proximity, but separately from each other, inter communal relations are characterized by unchecked economic competition. It went further to explain that because the relationship between the various groups remained confined to the market place, these societies failed to develop a sense of common loyalty that would overcome the cultural and ethnic differences between the various groups. Unstrained competition and competing nationalism between different cultural groups that follow cause society to fragment (Raymond and Rajat, 2002). The Nigerian state is a multiplicity of different ethnic group made up of over 350 ethnic nationalities with diverse cultural leaning, norms and religious difference (Shabi and Awe 2001). The notion of communal relations is not rooted among most of the communities in Nigeria. The plural nature of the country has planted seeds of mistrust, discord and the fear of domination of one ethnic or religious group over the other.
Trend of Ethno-Religious Crisis in Nigeria
During British colonial administration in Nigeria, the colonial masters introduce some measure of order by amalgamating the various ethnic and social groups in Nigeria under one umbrella. Before this period however, the various socio-ethnic groups in Nigeria were organized in one form of exchange facilitated by interaction. After independence in 1960, the country operated a regional and quasi-parliamentary system before the civil war in 1967 which almost tore the country apart. Thereafter, crisis witnessed in the country include the maitatsine crisis of 1981 in Borno state and Kano state, the Tiv and Jukun communal clashes in 1991, the Zango kataf and the Hausa-Fulani in the 1990s, the Kafanchan riot of 1987 where mosques and churches were burnt and lives were lost (Lateju and Adebayo, 2006). In 1990 the city of Kano burst into sectarian violence following the visitation of the German Christian preacher Reinard Bonnke where the Muslim community opposed the mission of the preacher owing to previous denial of Uztas Ahmed Deebat, a Muslim cleric from South Africa to come to the country for the same purpose (Adebayo, 2010). In a related development, in 2001 a serious crisis broke out in Jos, Plateau state which hitherto use to be one of the most peaceful cities in the country. The Ife-Modakeke conflict of January 2000 in the Western part of the country which led to wanton destruction of properties and loss of human lives was also one of numerous crises witnessed. Of all the ethno-religious crises in Nigeria, that of Boko Haram is outstanding.

The Emergence of Boko Haram
The origin of Boko Haram is traceable to the blistering preaching of Mallam Abubakar Kilakam an indigene of Niger Republic resident in Maiduguri, Borno state. He propagated the anti-government message that led to his arrest and eventually deported to Niger Republic. The idea (Boko Haram) activity has been operating covertly for several years even before the emergence of late Mohammed Yusuf. Who it seems only met a fertile ground and capitalized on it to spread his gospel. Towards the end of 2008, Borno State Government banned the sect from preaching anti-government messages. Boko Haram sect derives its message largely from the ideology of one of the world terrorist groups Al-qaida (Omipidan, 2013). The agitation by Boko Haram for the imposition of Shariah Penal code in the 36 states of the federation is primitive and unconstitutional as Nigeria is a secular state. The sect strongly advocate for the abrogation of any form of western education and culture generally.

The faceless group first clashed with government security forces in a sectarian violence which flared up in Wadil, Maiduguri, Potiskum and Bauchi, all in the North Eastern Nigeria. No fewer than 700 lives were lost in the clash in July 2009 (Afinotan, 2010). The sect has continued to claim responsibility for the multiple bombings and some kidnapping going on in the country such as the Christmas bombing of a catholic church in Madala, Niger State in 2010 and the bombing of the United Nations house in Abuja, attacks on prisons, police stations and military formation in Jaji, Kaduna state. The kidnapping of French family of seven, the Shettima of Borno and a host of others too numerous to mention has brought socio-economic activities almost to a halt in the region which has worsened the already weakened economy of the North as well as psychological trauma amongst the people in the region.
The nefarious activities of Boko Haram have received both local and international condemnation. More than 10,000 lives have been lost since the Boko Haram onslaught in 2009 (Omipidan, 2013). Government have treated the cases in the past with kid gloves as most of the culprits caught which include high profile personalities connected to the dreadful sect were left of the hook and allowed to continue roaming the streets. In spite of the amnesty committee set up by government, the activities of Boko Haram continue to grow in lips and bounds from mere sectarian activism to full scale terrorism. The refusal of the faceless group to embrace dialogue with government necessitated the declaration of state of emergency in May 2013 in the three North Eastern states of Adamawa Borno and Yobe without altering the states’ democratic institutions. The emergency rule which has been elongated for the third time has not really addressed the situation as there are still a number of attacks and abductions now and then. For example, 24 secondary school students and a teacher were recently murdered in Yobe last year, attacks of military base and formations, killings in Brama, abduction of over 200 girls of Government secondary school Chibok in Borno State these among several attacks.

Causes and Challenges of Ethno-Religious Crisis in Nigeria

The Nigeria state is despotic in nature as a result is unaccountable and irresponsible to the needs and aspiration of the citizens. It is instructive to say that the needs of the various groups in the country are not recognized or addressed by successive governments. Federalism is arguably the suitable framework for addressing ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism in a complex society like Nigeria. In such system, each region or state is allowed to control its resources and develop at its own pace. However, Nigeria who claims to run a federal system of government operates the opposite and does not recognize the identities, interest and needs of the people especially the minorities. The nation’s constitution does not reflect the wishes of the people, most government policies are anti-people and do not engender national integration and cohesion.

Failure of the government to pay adequate attention to trigger-factors and early warning signals of crises and conflicts are some of the causes of political violence. For instance, when Boko Haram activity started in Borno, the state government did not give it much attention before it degenerated to what it is today. The proliferation of small and light weapons in the country occasioned by the non-surrendering of these weapons by soldiers who took part in ECOMOG and other Peace Support Operations found their ways into the hands of the militants and terrorists. Yet the porosity of the nation’s borders has made it a safe haven for indiscriminate importation and smuggling of arms and ammunitions into the country.

Prolong military rule in the country has deeply affected the psyche of both politicians and the masses who have been so militarized. Politics today in Nigeria is a ‘do or die’ affair. The struggle for political power and control at the centre has over-heated the nation’s polity and created unnecessary tension which has resulted to bigotry between and among regions. Political thugs are recruited and armed by these same politicians who at the end of the day loose grip of these thugs and these arms are used on defenseless citizens.

The high rate of unemployment in the country coupled with social injustice and inequality are also causes of these conflicts. A situation where more than 65% of the population are youth that
are idle and unemployed/underemployed, seem to potent grave consequence in the country. This social ill the country is bedeviled with highly prevalent in the Northern part of the country which could be linked to educational backwardness.

The Nigerian state is endowed with abundant human and natural resources which are spread all over the six geo-political zones in the country. The over dependence on oil has led to the neglect of other viable sectors of the economy (Akhape, 2007). It is amazing that Nigeria as the largest economy in Africa through the rebasing of its Gross Domestic Output by Federal Bureau of Statistics is plagued with mass illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, insecurity, infrastructural decay and bureaucratic corruption (Omole and Omotosho, 2010).

Additionally, the deeply entrenched corruption within the political system also contributes to the fiscal irresponsibility of the Nigerian government. In many parts of the country, the government is unable to ensure the provision of adequate security, sound infrastructure, a proper healthcare system, or a reliable and vibrant education system. The inability of the government to provide basic resources has alienated many Nigerians who are then attracted to “self-help” ethnic and religious groups.

The rate of poverty in the North is quite enunciating than other regions in the country. This could be linked to poor educational enrolment among the youths especially the girl-child. The distribution chain of the nation’s wealth shows a wide income gap between the rich and the poor. Ogbulafor (2000) argued that the number of people in Nigeria bitten by poverty is over 70%. It is only in Nigeria you find political leaders, military chiefs who are clueless, visionless and lack the necessary ingredients to stirring a good socio-economic and political environment, some of them and their cohorts have become sponsors to most crises and conflicts rather than seeing themselves as apostles of peace and national development.

The current democratic dispensation since inception has been besieged with unprecedented civil disturbance and social insecurity resulting in massive destruction of property and loss of lives. The religious and ethnic dimension to these upheavals makes them a serious threat to national security. The tension and uncertainties in the country is not conducive for democratic process and sustained socio-economic development. The wanton display of ill-gotten wealth and misappropriation of public funds by politicians and public office holders has engendered disillusionment and disenchantment among citizens.

The military tactic government is adopting has only but helped in fuelling the violence. The high military command has been fingered to be behind some of this violence especially in the North East. This is not unconnected to the fact that the military must overcome entrenched corruption and incompetence for it to win the war against Boko because Nigerian military is not doing enough to check the insurgency in the country because they are politicized (Ameh and Oladimeji, 2014).

Ethno-Religious Crises in Nigeria: The Way Forward
The current wave of political violence in the country has kept everybody male and female, old and youngat the edge of their seat. Boko Haram sect which has taken international dimension is
dispersed across Nigeria, Cameroon, and Niger, with leaders in specific locales. The insurgency is not likely to be repressed unless the Nigerian government properly addresses the grievances of the people who support the group. This would require formulation and implementation of some political reforms that address such issues as bad governance, corruption, and poverty. It is also in the interest of Nigeria’s political elite to concentrate on finding solutions to the problem of insurgency as this becomes necessary because further violence will only undermine the legitimacy of the forthcoming 2015 general elections as well as that of the current government.

All over the world the youths are vital and important segment of the society, the youths in Nigeria constitutes over 65% of the population. If these youths are not productively engaged could be used as instrument for ethno-religious crisis. Therefore, government at all levels should meaningfully engage them and bring out the best in them. A disciplined and law-abiding youth can create a brighter future for Nigeria, while a lawless, violent and indulgent youth potent grave threat to national security and socio-economic development.

Government at the federal level should rejig the high military/police offensive methods that risk encouraging violence and extremism; address the issues of bad governance and systemic corruption; address sustained economic hardship, rising income gap, and social frustration by strengthening anti-corruption agencies, and ensure their efficiency at state and local levels; address the causes of radical Islamic and ethnic militancy by developing and implementing a commission with a mandate that coordinates anti-desertification campaigns, develops large-scale irrigation, agriculture, power, and road projects, and promotes small businesses that create jobs for youths.

The various states in the country should co-operate with northern political, traditional, and religious leaders for the de-radicalization and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of Islamist extremists. Quranic education system should be reformed by introducing a dual curriculum. The school for the Almenjeris should be sustained in the northern states.

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**

This paper examined the effect of ethno-religious crisis on the socio-economic development of Nigeria. The state of insecurity in the country has become so enormous and has attracted the attention of international community. The nation has continued to come under series of violence, thousands of human lives are lost and properties destroyed on daily basis. The paper argued that there is high level of religious intolerance in the country especially in the Northern part due to high level of illiteracy and poverty. Yet, unemployment, poverty and social injustice among
others account for the continuous spate of violence and insurgencies in the country. There is urgent need for the government to be proactive and promote good governance, while there should be avenue for dialogue with the insurgents and other militia groups than apply force. The carrot and stick approach which is mixture of dialogue and force is a welcome idea to tackle the problem of the Boko Haram activities because to them there is no sanctity of human life.

Reference


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