

POLITICS OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION**Mgbonyebi Voke Charles (PhD)****Department of Public Administration, University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria.**voke.mgbonyebi@unidel.edu.ng**ABSTRACT**

Nigeria is a nation so ethnically divided and religiously polarized. Almost on a daily basis, Nigeria experiences ethnic or religious conflicts in one state or the other and shows that the questions of national integration remain a problem. The article examined why after fifty years of independence as a nation, Nigeria is still far from achieving national integration. Ethnic conflict and religious intolerance are identified as factors threatening national integration in Nigeria. In view of the severe consequences of conflicts and their overall implication for the corporate existence of Nigeria, the ethnic groups or nationalities should be integrated into one nation state regardless of their dissimilarities. Enlightenment campaigns should be encouraged and extended to both religious bodies and various ethnic groups in Nigeria on the need for peace at all times and why the rule of law must be observed in dealing with certain issues.

Keywords: *Nigeria; Ethnic conflict; Religious intolerance; National integration; Ethnic diversity; Religious polarization; Political instability; Conflict resolution; Peace building; Social cohesion*

INTRODUCTION

Politics of ethnic and religious rivalry are topmost issues that hamper national integration in Nigeria. (Akinola, 2018; Onapajo, 2020; Suberu, 2010). The multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of Nigeria is the source of disunity as characterized by the numerous ethnic and religious conflicts especially since 1970. (Ibrahim, 2006; Falola & Heaton, 2020; Akinola, 2018). In terms of size Nigeria occupy a land area of 923,772 square kilometers. (World Bank, 2023; CIA World Factbook, 2024). The current population of the country is estimated at one hundred and ninety million people – a figure that ranks her as the most populous country in Africa. (UN DESA, 2023; World Bank, 2024). The amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorate under British rule by Lord Lugard on 1914 made Nigeria a country with people of diverse cultures from the north and south. (Falola & Heaton, 2020; Suberu, 2010).

As a result of this, Nigeria has about 416 ethnic nationalities – each having its own distinct culture and language. (Ezirim, 2021; Mustapha, 2006). Islam and Christianity are the two dominant religions and each has a sizeable number of followers. (Pew Research Center, 2019; Falola, 2020). At present, there are thirty-six states and Abuja (The Federal Capital Territory) and about 774 recognized local governments in the country. (Nigerian Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Suberu, 2010). The above account presents Nigeria as a very large country with a very large population with concomitant immense cultural diversity. (Akinola, 2018; Onapajo, 2020). These, no doubt have always made the task of building the country into an integrated Nigeria a difficult task, since independence. (Ibrahim, 2006; Suberu, 2010; Akinola, 2018).

The cleavage, along which the boundary lines to hostility are drawn among age long cohabitant, has increasingly drawn along tribal, ethnic, religious, political and economic violent clashes across the country such as religious-ethnic, the religious-ethnic Southern Kaduna conflict, ethnic, Tiv-Jukun clashes, Yoruba–Hausa ethnic clashes of Lagos, Hausa/Igbo ethnic clashes in Onitsha, Umulere–Aguleri communal clash, Itsekiri–Okere-Urhobo warri ethnic clash, the recent Boko Haram crises to mention but just a few these sad events undermine the quest for national integration in Nigeria due to cultural diversity. (Onapajo, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021; Akinola, 2018; Human Rights

Watch, 2022). Section two gives concern to conceptual classification of key concept and underpins their importance to the study. (Young, 1993; Suberu, 2010). Section three discusses ethnic and religious conflict as they affect national integration. (Ibrahim, 2006; Falola & Heaton, 2020). It underscores the nation's fifty-five years of independence without unity to the effect of these conflicts. (Akinola, 2018; Onapajo, 2020)

POLITICS OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AS IMPEDENTS TO NATIONAL INTEGRATION

The major impediments towards achieving National Integration in Nigeria are ethnic and religious conflicts. (Akinola, 2018; Onapajo, 2020; Suberu, 2010). The character of conflict in Nigeria include ethno-cultural and religious among others. (Ibrahim, 2006; Falola & Heaton, 2020). Most violence revolves round issue effecting creed or religion as witnessed in the past in most Northern parts of Nigeria. (Human Rights Watch, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2021). Such conflicts bring people of opposing faith sharp conflicts with a view to influencing one another. (Onapajo, 2020; Akinola, 2018).

Other manifestation of conflicts between ethnics units include clashes from dispute over land ownership as exemplified by the Itsekiri, ijaw and urhabo people within the Warri area of the Niger-Delta. (Suberu, 2010; Ukiwo, 2011; Akinola, 2018). The Modakeke and Ife raging rivalry in Osun State is also similar to that of Itsekiri/Urhobo. (Ibrahim, 2006; Onapajo, 2020). The effect of the artificial creation of Nigeria ethnic units has also brought about rivalry match between the 'settlers' and natives. (Mustapha, 2006; Suberu, 2010). The issue had occasion violence in Nigeria In Yelwa, Shadan Local Council of Plateau State, the ethnic/religious conflicts led to the proclamation of emergency rule in the entire state by President Olusegun Obasanjo on 18th May 2004 is a case in point. (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Akinola, 2018)

Also in Kaduna, Benue and Kano State, the issue is very pronounced and it is threatening the stability of these States, neighboring areas and the nation at large. (International Crisis Group, 2021; Onapajo, 2020). In time of conflicts, all kinds of dangerous weapons such as cudgels, bottles, guns, bow and arrows are used indiscriminately (Akanni 1998 in Oti 2003:83). (Akanni 1998 in Oti 2003:83; Akinola, 2018)

The police have also been found incapable of managing these conflicts situations, hence the involvement of the army. (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Onapajo, 2020). This trend is not ideal as It could predispose the sinister motives that may jeopardize the security and stability of the nation. (Akinola, 2018; Suberu, 2010)

In the view of Akinseye (1994:41), the spate of religious conflicts in Nigeria may have been induced by post-colonial policy and indeed fully blown up under military administration, particularly since 1985 when it appeared that the military administration showed favor to one particular religious belief at the expense of the others. (Akinseye 1994:41; Falola & Heaton, 2020). Acknowledging social and religious sensibilities of ethnic group is vital as part of fundamental human rights. (Suberu, 2010; Onapajo, 2020). Denial or infringements of it in anyway would naturally trigger off negative reactions that may hamper with the integrations of a country. (Akinola, 2018; Ibrahim, 2006). It is generally observed that there is rise of violence, which has particularly become very high since the inception of the present democratic experiment. (Onapajo, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021). These conflicts are being sponsored by powerful elites made up of politicians, burecrats and military personnel who secretly prosecute these conflicts through the use of ethnic militia groups as their battles -axes. (Akinola, 2018; Ukiwo, 2011). The grouse of these elites may include loss of political patronage, influence as well as ethnic and religious factors. (Suberu, 2010; Onapajo, 2020). It should also be noted that these elites are not adequately punished for their crime hence the recurring phenomenon of violence (Oti, 2002:83). (Oti, 2002:83; Human Rights Watch, 2022)

A typical example is that of ZamaniLekwot who was found guilty of sponsoring and supplying arms to the Katafs people to enable them dislodge the Hausa Fulani Muslims whom were settlers in

ZangoKataf in Kaduna State in 1992. (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Akinola, 2018). Promotion and defense of ethnic agenda and nationalism by component unit in Nigeria is a serious, predisposing factor for violence. (Suberu, 2010; Onapajo, 2020). The use of such ethnic militia group as Odua People Congress (OPC) for (Yoruba interest) Arewa Progressive Campaign (APC), (Northern Interest), historical past ethnic and religious conflicts and underscored their impediment towards the achievement of National integration even after forty-nine years of Independence. (Akinola, 2018; Ukiwo, 2011; Onapajo, 2020).

We observed in this paper that the realization and sustainability of ethnic and religion harmony required the positive contribution and participation of all Nigerians. (Suberu, 2010; Falola & Heaton, 2020)

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Three basic concepts here require some explanations. (Young, 1993). They include: Ethnic, Religious National Integration. (Suberu, 2010). Young (1993) observed that the defining attributes of ethnic community may include: languages, territory, political unit or common cultural value or symbols. (Young, 1993; Akinola, 2018). The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of current English defines ethnics as "of involving a Nation race or tribe that has a common cultural tradition..." (Oxford University Press, 2020)

The term ethnic group is derived from a Greek Word; *ethnos*- A meaning "a people". (Mustapha, 2006; Suberu, 2010). According to Azide (2000) in Udeiya, (2002:52), ethnic group denotes an organized group or related people in a national population that has distinct identity, cultural heritage, common language and social traits. (Azide, 2000 in Udeiya, 2002; Ezirim, 2021). Ethnicity also has to do with the way in which people think of themselves and others to make sense of the world around them. (Akinola, 2018; Onapajo, 2020). Also ethnicity refers to the set of social relations within which social grouping such as Men, Women, Poor, Rich, Young, Old and so on relate to each other. (Suberu, 2010; Ezirim, 2021)

It refers to specific power relations. (Ibrahim, 2006). At the same time, it refers to cultural relations. (Falola, 2020). In Nigeria, Janguage and religion are the main defining characteristic of cultural amalgam. (Akinola, 2018).

Out of this, amalgam have emerge two categories of ethnic categorization: the major ethnic groups namely - Hausa / Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo the minority ethnic groups made of the numerous groupings who easily find cohesion in the assumed threat of marginalization by the major groups. (Suberu, 2010; Mustapha, 2006; Akinola, 2018). It is the restiveness of these groups whose voraciousness is relative to their perception of their disadvantaged position in the distribution of the "national cake" that has given spontaneity and consistency to the sporadic ethnic conflicts across the country. (Onapajo, 2020; Akinola, 2018). It also pertinent to note that even majority ethnic groups are today beating the drums of marginalization with each major group placing its plight on the door step of the other. (Ibrahim, 2006; Falola & Heaton, 2020)

It has become a bargaining tool for economic and political patronage. (Suberu, 2010). On religion, the concept is broad, complex and dynamic in terms of the experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider divine" it is also important to recognize that the beliefs and practices that are identifies as religious are so varied that they do not easily lend themselves to iny simple characterization (Chiney, 1961:315). (Chiney, 1961; Falola, 2020)

The oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of urrent English defines religion as "the belief in the existence of a God or gods, and the activities sat are connected with worship of them". (Oxford University Press, 2020). However, some basic conceptions are found in every eligion. (Pew Research Center, 2019). They are inter-ali, belief in a supernatural power, which instances take many forms e.g varying numbers and character; ghost and spirits or some abstract impersonal force. (Falola,

2020). Religion denotes the service and worship of unknown spirit beings which have had influenced over the activities of man. (Ibrahim, 2006)

This in fact has been derived from the knowledge that man himself is a spirit being. (Akinola, 2018). In other words, man in one way, or the other experienced his spirituality in one direction or the other. (Onapajo, 2020). In whichever way this is done or in whatever direction it takes, to satisfy this spirituality, it is known as religion. (Falola, 2020). For Okorodudu, (1996: 224) "the contact with God by man after creation and how to create relate with him in the invisible world is known as religion". (Okorodudu, 1996; Suberu, 2010). However, there are many types of religion since the time of creation. (Falola, 2020). Today various people profess one form religion or the other. (Pew Research Center, 2019). Hence we have all over the world religion such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Voodooism, African Traditional religion (ATR), etc. (Falola, 2020). Each of them claims association in some mode of worship with the Almighty creator but this may not be true. (Onapajo, 2020). In Nigeria, the Muslims, Christian, African Traditional religion (ATR) etc have been commonly practiced. (Akinola, 2018). In an ideal nation, there should be freedom in religions worship. (Suberu, 2010). And if every man who purports to worship in through whatever way he considers to be ideal and genuine; then religion should have been free to assist man in having a discipline society. (Falola, 2020).

It is from this dimension that Mallam Issah Waziri the Murtala Mohammed Mosque Kano, insist that "if a disciplined society is one of religious activities, then brothels, hotels, beer parlour and other immoral places should not exist". (Waziri, cited in Ibrahim, 2006). Fortunately, this has not been realized because of very many hypocritical worship systems among in the entire process of expressing spirituality in Nigeria. (Onapajo, 2020). In other words, instead of a disciplined society, religious intolerance has been promoted. (Akinola, 2018). There is therefore, religious harmony in Nigeria, which is in itself an index of discipline society. (Suberu, 2010). Such disharmony cannot help to integrate society. (Ibrahim, 2006)

Religious tolerance allows every man to express his spiritual beliefs and activities anywhere at any time. (Falola, 2020). It equally allows him to propagate it without molestation. (Onapajo, 2020), before, a society in which religious tolerance is a value should be able to promote individual's right to equally change his or her religious belief at anytime and propagate it without molestation. (Akinola, 2018). Therefore, the frequent religious conflicts experienced often in Jos-Plateau State, Kano, Kaduna, Sokoto, Katsina and the recent Bauchi crisis etc in the former Northern Nigeria between Muslims and Christians are uncalled for, they cannot help to achieve National Integration that Nigerians has been searching for since Independence. (International Crisis Group, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022; Onapajo, 2020). It is this operational aspect of religion that is of interest to this paper. (Suberu, 2010).

On national integration, Adung and Ike(2002) observed the national integration means national unity. (Adung & Ike, 2002; Akinola, 2018). It means unifying all the forces in the country so as to give the idea of one nation. (Suberu, 2010). Hall (1978:4) defines national integration a process of developing psychology of nationhood from internal heterogeneous elements. (Hall, 1978; Akinola, 2018)

Agbese (1985) sees it as a process of integrating the various ethnic groups into the new nation state that they will willingly strive towards its national unity and aspirations as well as support her rapid economic development" (Agbese, 1985; Onapajo, 2020).

In the context of this article, integration can be defined as peaceful co-existence and interdependence among people either from the same or different ethnic groups or religions. (Suberu, 2010; Akinola, 2018). National integration has since independent eluded Nigeria due to certain factors, such as religion, Illiteracy, ethnicity and the attitudes of our political leaders among others. (Ibrahim, 2006; Falola & Heaton, 2020). In this paper, emphasis is more on ethnicity and religion as they threaten National Integration in Nigeria. (Akinola, 2018; Onapajo, 2020)

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the persistent challenge of ethnic and religious conflicts as major impediments to national integration in Nigeria. It establishes that Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition, though a potential source of strength, has instead become a recurring trigger of violent conflict, political instability, and social fragmentation. From historical antecedents to contemporary manifestations, ethnic rivalry, religious intolerance, land disputes, and politicized identity struggles continue to undermine peaceful coexistence and weaken the foundation of national unity. The analysis further demonstrates that conflicts across different regions of the country ranging from the Niger Delta crises to communal clashes in the Southwest and ethno-religious violence in Northern Nigeria reflect deeper structural problems such as inequality, perceived marginalization, elite manipulation, and weak institutional governance. These factors have consistently reinforced divisions among groups and hindered the emergence of a cohesive national identity. Moreover, the study highlights that state responses to these conflicts, including the deployment of security forces, have often been reactive rather than preventive, thereby failing to address root causes. The involvement of political, bureaucratic, and military elites in sponsoring or sustaining ethnic militias further complicates the conflict landscape and perpetuates cycles of violence. This underscores the urgent need for accountability, justice, and strengthened democratic institutions capable of managing diversity effectively. In conclusion, achieving national integration in Nigeria requires deliberate and sustained efforts aimed at promoting tolerance, equity, and inclusiveness across all ethnic and religious groups. Enlightenment campaigns, civic education, and intergroup dialogue remain essential tools for fostering mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. Equally important is the consistent enforcement of the rule of law and the development of governance structures that discourage ethnic and religious manipulation for political gain. Ultimately, Nigeria's stability and unity depend on the collective commitment of all citizens and institutions to transcend divisions and embrace a shared national identity grounded in justice, equality, and respect for diversity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the severe consequence of conflicts and their overall implications on the existence of Nigeria, the following suggestions are put forward. The ethnic groups of nationalities in Nigeria should be integrated into one nation regardless of their sharp dissimilarities. Enlightenment campaigns should be encouraged and extended to both religious bodies and various ethnic groups in Nigeria on the need for peace at all times and why the rule of law must be observed in dealing with certain issues. All Nigerian citizens through representatives should sit together and fashion out a country where there can be common citizenship, and a shared value in the context of our diversity. Concerted efforts towards these objectives should be evolved and encouraged through the emergence of new nationalism, radical civic education and re-orientation of the entire system. Existence of stability is also necessary as managing ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. Government must show sense of responsibility via transparency and purposeful leadership. This is to inspire collective participation from the citizens. Political apathy should be looked into. Finally the major religions (Islam and Christianity) should be made part of the general studies in tertiary institutions so that, whatever faith you belong, understanding of the other faith would serve as guide toward your relations.

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