

THE IMPACT OF RELIGION ON NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Religion has a profound social, political and economic impact on the socio-economic development of any nation like Nigeria. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the growing but gradual interface between religion and politics has largely shaped the political atmosphere in Nigeria: the impact is huge as many lives and properties worth millions of dollars have been lost to religious cum ethnic motivated crisis detailing real development. Sadly, with the dawn of democracy in 1999, many Nigerians believed that the spate of religious violence would be abated with the many reforms initiated by the successive government, instead, the menace of violence increased by the day via the mechanistic and unprecedented approach adopted by the killer herdsmen, Boko Haram and the Bandits terrorizing the country mostly in the northern region of Nigeria. Also, the eruption of separatist agitations in southern Nigeria is of no small consequence. The federal government's efforts through many robotics approaches geared towards reducing the spate of religious and ethnic violence in the country for the general purposes of attaining optimal sustainable development could not be attained because of the issues of corruption, bad governance, nepotism, poor management of resources and others. The paper adopts a historical approach to analysing the vexed issues and recommends a strong political will to ensure political stability for development.

Keywords: Development, Impact, Politics, and Religion

Introduction

The region has been said to be the opium of the masses. Religion in Nigeria (the most populous African country with a population of over 200 million in 2018) is diverse. Nigeria's Constitution ensures freedom of religion¹, and the country is home to some of the world's largest Muslim and Christian populations, simultaneously.² Religion as a tool,

is the only language the gullible, ignorant, insidious and unthinking masses understand. Since the 1960s, at the very juvenile state of Nigeria's statehood, the region started to set in, swelling across the board, wittingly down on political ideologies, redefining the country's political culture thereby, forcefully interrupting, intervening and impinging negatively on the country's political nomenclature as well as derail real development. However, since independence, Nigeria has traversed from a parliamentary to the current Presidential system of government; many divergent issues and challenges have been factorized into it, as reasons for the political instabilities in the country. Hence, Nigeria's political trajectories albeit religion have continued heinously in conspiring to deface true democracy, which is the government of the people by the people and for the people as opined by Abraham Lincoln. Many had hoped that with the coming of democracy in 1999, under President Olusegun Obasanjo's government, the country would have experienced or enjoyed the dividends of democracy and good governance.

Despite the government's robust reforms initiated to put the country on the part of real development, Yusufu Mohammed, the religious fundamentalist-led sect and others tolerated in the north corrupted and dashed the hopes of many Nigerians. Since then, the country has not known peace. The recent unprobed carnivorous killing of Miss Deborah Samuel, a Christian and a student of Alhaji Shehu Shagari College of Education Sokoto State in May 2022 for alleged blasphemy of Allah is a test case or a pointer to the spread of religious fundamentalism without conviction. Religion has continued to be a veritable tool in the hands of unscrupulous and selfish politicians. The government of Muhammed Buhari did nothing about it. So from the Fulani-led Boko Haram to the herdsmen, and to the bandits who have been ravaging and terrorizing the entire country, development is being derailed because of the destruction of lives and properties running into billions of naira caused by religion. Insecurity is anti-development. This paper adopts a historical approach and seeks to draw our attention to the negative impact of religion in Nigerian political space.

Conceptual Clarifications of Terms

Religion

Religion means different things to different people. Religion is a reality, though it is enigmatic and an elusive subject; hence, it defies a universally acceptable definition. In the hand of a villain, religion can be a cog in the wheel of progress and massaging of the ego and dehumanization of the people, while in the hand of a "saint," it becomes an instrument for humanization. The orientation of man is a function of religion⁴.

Man as an individual is subject to a God who has created him. For him, the content of religion shapes the individual's life in society, regulates his relationship with other human beings and is at the root of the political order in the fact that it gives legitimacy to civil law and forms of sovereignty⁵. Y. Nyuot, states that religion has several functions given that it can be a source of legitimizing the status quo, a source of change, a source of resistance or social transformation, or a source/agent of political socialization and participation⁶. In contrast, however, Candland, insists that the most crucial variable in determining the role that religion should play in any state - society relations are the degree of religious diversity⁷. To this end, therefore, there is numerous literature that, actually captures the failure of governance and the weakness of institutions of the state in terms of their ability and capacity to manage diversity, as one of the underlying causes of violent conflicts in Nigeria since the return to democratic rule in 1999⁸.

Politics

Politics is derived from the Greek root "polis" meaning city-state. Implicitly is the idea of governance in the word "polis". For Onyekpe, "politics is about the control and exercise of power⁹". J. Madu sees it as "an integral feature of man's social existence and interaction¹⁰". In the understanding, it is a dynamic process whereby human and other human resources are managed and directed after due mobilization to ensure the enforcement of public policy and decisions in the bid to regulate social order. Some scholars use the term politics in a congruous sense: the struggle for power and the actual exercise of authority and power. Broadly speaking, politics covers every phase and aspect of life in society, for it is essentially about governance¹¹.

Development

Pantaleon Ireogbu sees religion as a concrete unfolding of personal, natural and cultural data from one point A to another point B. He further described it as the unfolding of latent qualities¹². In general terms, "development" means an "event constituting a new stage in a changing situation" or the process of change *per se*¹³. If not qualified, "development" is implicitly intended as something positive or desirable. When referring to a society or a socio-economic system, "development" usually means improvement, either in the general situation of the system or in some of its constituent elements. Development may occur due to some deliberate action carried out by single agents or by some authority pre-ordered to achieve improvement, to favourable circumstances in both. Development policies and private investment, in all their forms, are examples of such actions.

Theoretical Framework

In most developing countries, the interplay or intervention of religion with politics is the root cause of many violent conflicts. This view corresponds with the Pew Forum (2006) observation that, religion is one of the factors that interact with modern political institutions to produce conflict in many forms¹⁴. Religion on the wrong hand can have both positive and grave negative socio-economic implications¹⁵. Religion from a psychological perspective, M. Gopin argues, is a vital tool in understanding the trends of violence inherent in tradition and cultures¹⁶. In this wise, D.U. William, argues that these cultures have a way of expressing or responding to issues that affect them or that try to undermine their status quo¹⁷. D.U. William further, acknowledges the fact that there are inherent factors that influence religion and cause conflict such as; texts, myths, metaphors, laws, values and traditions that can readily promote trends that engender conflict and in some cases also provide inroads to peacemaking¹⁸.

He further argued that in many human societies religion forms and determines people's human activities and their social behaviour. Again, in some climes, religion is wrongly used to instigate, promote and achieve a certain political cause and which at times could lead to upheaval, unrest and civic commotion. His debate on the importance of understanding religious sub-cultures and conflict also takes into account the role the elite play in using religious metaphors, myths and symbolism to legitimize their agenda¹⁹. The relevance of M. Gopin's ideas to this article lies in the fact that it provides a theoretical framework within which we can analyse the Nigerian situation which is indicative of how socio-economic and political factors have resulted in the formulation of religious identity and also how it has been manipulated to promote political crisis. Religion in Nigeria has served as a uniting factor in a lot of communities but has also, especially in recent times, been a site for the violent contestation of identity in the country²⁰.

In consideration of Nigeria's cultural and linguistic diversities which are phenomenal, and one that makes the country a highly heterogeneous and complex country, its pluralistic and secularized features have never been in doubt. These distinguishing features make the country to be unique. In recognition of this inherent diversities, Chapter IV Section 38 of the Nigerian Constitution stipulates that; "Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in a community with others, and in public or private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worshipping, teaching, practice and observance". This stipulates that people's religion "must" and "should" be respected. The three tiers of government must ensure and be assured that every Nigerian citizen is allowed to practice

any religion of his or her choice as long as it does not interfere with the country's sovereignty and people's freedom of worship, practice and observance²¹.

The un-negotiated amalgamation of the various ethnic nationalities by the British colonial authority into one political unit had since 1914 conjured up several unsolicited arguments, vituperations, and vexed issues bothering the unity and progress of the new state-Nigeria. Many scholars of repute have described this contraption as a misnomer, an unholy marriage, and an unscrupulous creation of the West via the instrumentality of the West, for the West. The West had continued to conspire with these inherent forces in the country's complex and complicated heterogeneity not only to determine but to control Nigeria, despite its cultural diversities. Religious conflicts which emanate from the country's cultural diversities as an independent country have continued to dot the lines of the political history of Nigeria.

Nigeria under the 1999 constitution was defined as a secular state due to its processes of evolution and its political trends since independence in 1960, blessed with an abundance of human and material resources, the most populous and diverse country in Africa with over 200 million people in 2018²², with a total landmass of 923,770km²³. To the CIA World Facebook, a breakdown of the population show that the Muslims in Nigeria are about 53.5 per cent, the Christians 45.9 per cent whereas, the other indigenous religion is estimated to be about 0.6 per cent. This portrays Nigeria as a home to many diverse cultures and religions struggling through evangelism to outwit the other 24. Unfortunately, the reverse is the case in Nigeria since 1960, the politics of Nigeria had continued to be determined negatively by the forces of religion which have had a humungous impact on the country's development.

Succinctly put, Mustapha (as cited by William, 2018), opined that Nigeria is a religiously heterogeneous nation with principal religions such as Islam, Christianity and African Traditional religions. Christianity and Islam are two major religions that determine and define the character and nature of politics in Nigeria and unarguably the sources of conflicts in Nigeria²⁵. With over 374 ethnic groups, the identities of Nigeria's three majority groups (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) were consolidated in the context of the creation of the three (3) regions in 1946 resulting in each majority ethnic group consolidating and constituting a 'core' ethnopolitical group in their respective regions with strong political holds: the Hausa-Fulani in the Northern Region, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East²⁶. The struggle for regional supremacy among the contending regions threatened Nigeria's statehood by negatively impinging on the country's development.

The Impact of Religion on Nigeria's Development

There is no gainsaying the fact that the issue of religion in Nigerian political space has been mind-rendering, mind-boggling and obstructionist. Its obtrusiveness cannot be undermined. The huge human and material resources the country is endowed with are potential for economic development, and can also be equally a threat to good governance, in any developing country like Nigeria because of its lack of effective and strong leadership. Religious crises are a direct consequence of weak leadership in Nigeria. The absence of the needed political will has made it difficult for successive governments in Nigeria to effectively manage Nigeria's cultural diversities for national development. The unwary leadership class has continued to use religion as a tool to destabilize the country politically. This above view finds expression in the postulations of Augustus Adebayo as he argues thus:

When a weak personality of limited intelligence suddenly appears by accident in history at the summit of human affairs, the consequences are often disastrous. It became tragic when such an individual is clothed with autocratic powers to assume responsibility for the government in his person alone²⁷.

This leadership weakness is reflected in the inability, indecisiveness or the sheer insensitivity of President Muhammed Buhari's led administration since 2011, to squash, and tame the rising sectarian conflicts and violent terrorist attacks ravaging the entire North because of his religious inclination, unlike President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2000, that took decisive action by ordering for the death of Muhammed Yusufu the leader of Boko Haram sect in the North.

Religion and Politics in Nigeria

The interface between religion and politics is phenomenal. It is as complex and complicated as the Nigerian state if it is rightly deplored, managed and checkmated. Since the Nigeria-Biafra war, the encroachment of religion in politics has been more visible in the country's political space and is effectively derailing real development. Hence, M. Dukor argues thus;

To understand a people, one usually focuses on their culture. Culture is exclusively a human phenomenon, quite complex, uniting and dividing human groups, as different peoples perceive life and reality differently. Culture is the totality of a people's beliefs, more so, arts, customs, etc learned, shared and equally transmitted from generation to generation in short; it embodies the manipulation of forces in their environment for better²⁸.

This brings to view, the assertion of Williams, U. Dodeye, that, the pervasiveness of religion as a source of communal and political conflict has become a constant preoccupation in Nigeria. The post-election violence that followed in several states appears to show the influence of religious polarization in the country's politics. In a culturally diverse country like Nigeria, the leadership class has woefully failed to downplay or show zero tolerance for religion²⁹. The lack of respect and tolerance for other religious perceptions depict the inability of the government to harmonize our religious difference to create wealth. There should be respect for the religious views of others in a secular society such as Nigeria.

In this context, Achunike was apt to opine that, faulty perception or orientation of other religions or faith (which results in fundamentalism, extremism and intolerance), the low literacy level of religious adherents, the parochialism of religious personalities, pervasive poverty and government interference in religious matters, are among the major causes of conflict in Nigeria³⁰. To S.B. Mala, Religious intolerance reflects total antagonism towards other religions, and difficulty for adherents to harmonize between the theoretical and the practical aspect of their religion³¹. This argument is similar to the views of A.N.O. Ekwunife, as she states that, In Nigeria, the government and her citizens are yet to accept fully both in theory and practice the stark realities of pluralism of religious beliefs and practices. The waves of religious crisis and violence in recent years seem to confirm this observation. It is the unfriendly disposition of our religious and political leaders towards one another's religion that breeds conflicts which have continued to stagnate the country's economic development³².

Since the dawn of democracy in 1999, the rate of religious intolerants and conflicts has been on the rise in Nigeria. From 1999 to 2022, the country had undergone several horrifying experiences ranging from the Boko Haram terrorist group to the Fulani Herdsmen vis-à-vis the Bandits ravaging and spreading terror in the entire country, especially in Northern Nigeria, the Niger Delta militant and to the separatist agitations in the Southeast, the list is endless so the destruction to the nation's economy that accompanies it. Nigeria's economic woes since the rise of religious conflicts are humungous. The introduction of Sharia, an agenda to Islamize Nigeria, and the increasing rate of vandalization of oil wells and installations in the Niger Delta have continued to worsen the country's economic prospects over recent years. There is no doubt that there are problems in the Nigerian polity concerning religion and politics such as cosmological exclusivism, epistemological bias, myopia, leadership problem, misrule, lack of political culture, and the like³⁴.

Impact on National Development

National development entails all-round developmental changes from one level to the other, in all sectors and spheres of the economy of any nation aspiring to develop. National development is overarching and is one that demands a holistic approach to achieve. It cannot be attained in a state of insecurity. Socio-economic cum political stability is a sine qua non for national development. For instance, Nigeria's cultural diversity and rich human and material resources should be seen by its leadership class as a huge deposit of potential for growth and development in all ramifications rather than being used as a weapon to fuel insecurity and destruction of lives and properties. It is on this bases that, Obi Jerry and Osu Smart opined that;

The fecund ground for the (national) development of a country is national integration and cohesion. National cohesion is achieved through the development of attitudes, values, symbols and loyalties that have a national outlook³⁵.

The greatest threat to wielding together Nigeria's cultural diversities, and religious and ethnic differences is insecurity. Religion is a centrifugal force; Nigeria is religiously pluralistic and each religion is fighting hard to overshadow the other and thereby making national cohesion and integration very impossible to attain. The impact of religion on National development cannot be overemphasized. Since 1999, the federal government has been baffled by the uncomfortable and painful rise in the level of violent religious conflicts in the North and many other parts of the country. Religious fundamentalism is like a monster seeking to disintegrate the country. The recent unfolding state of insecurity in Nigeria defies every known logic. As a country which must develop and become great together, the events in some part of the country where Fulani Herdsmen and Boko Haram engages in religious violence and destruction of lives and properties running into \$billions across the country present a very pitiable and disgusting sight.

These horrible events defy and vitiate the economic recipe prescribed for the country by the World Bank(WB) and other international institutions for its economic development due to the humungous level of destruction instigated by religious conflicts across Nigeria. Onumaegbu and Anakebe aptly described the ugly scenario thou:

It is paradoxical that, in nations which under normal circumstances, should have been citadels of excellence, some demagogues, faced with an option between amity and calamity, have instead, preferred the later-all in the name of religion(i.e. in the name of God). What a riddle³⁶!

History is replete with facts that, nations that engage in conflicts or are embroiled in religious violence never develop. Insecurity is anti-development, and with Nigeria's vast

resources, the country is aware of the impact of the rising state of insecurity on its economy. Hence, it is said that no nation can survive under a state of insecurity, such that the country is currently experiencing under President Muhammed Buhari-led administration since 2011³⁷.

The International Crisis Group had adduced that, the economic toll of this violence is huge and impacts heavily on the nation's economy. In 2015 for instance, the International Crisis Group noted that the federal government was losing \$13.7 billion in revenue annually because of herder-farmer conflicts in Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Plateau states. The study found that on average, these four States lost 47 per cent of their internally-generated revenues. Furthermore, in March 2017, Benue State Governor, Samuel Ortom asserted that attacks by herders coming from more Northerly States, and possibly also from Cameroon and Niger, had cost his State N95 billion (about \$634 million at that time) between 2012 and 2014. Communities and households also pay a heavy price. The ethnic Nzor-Tiv Global Association estimated that its Agatu communities in Benue State lost N65 billion in properties (\$204 million) during the early 2016 herdsman attacks. The loss of large cattle herds, and crops (due to population displacements and damage to irrigation facilities), as well as increases in transport and labour costs in post-conflict environments all increase poverty and food insecurity in affected communities and beyond³⁸.

In the Southern part of Nigeria, Niger Delta Avengers has gone as far as keeping their promise to hold the economy to stand still under their operation tagged, "Red Economy". Their constant attacks on oil production facilities or installations have worsened Nigeria's economy and standard of living. The first of their nefarious attacks was the damage to Chevron's main Electricity Feed Pipeline at Escravos Terminal CUTE. Also, according to Chevron, the said damage to the Okan Platform had affected about 35,000 bpd of its net crude production or about 15% of its output in the country. Unfortunately, according to New Telegraph(2020), these attacks on the oil facilities are persistent, sophisticated, and appear timed to inflict debilitating and disruptive effects...Specifically, the vandalism of oil assets cost the country \$825million while, while \$725million was lost to pipeline vandalism in 2019, whereas, government institutions like the police stations and military formations especially, appear to be the targets of the Gunmen and Unknown Gunmen which led to the death of several people including uniform men³⁹.

Therefore, in the events of these realities, there is no gainsaying the fact that the economy of the country is been affected adversely and it cannot be sustained owing to the magnitudes of the destruction of lives and properties running into \$billions. It is the position of this paper that, this religiously inspired violence has had a humungous impact on the nation's economy. Today, Nigeria's debt profile which runs to \$billions is

astonishingly embarrassing and many of the government projects and economic policies could not be executed nor implemented. Worse still this religious violence is fuelling food insecurity in the country. Today Nigeria is food insecure. Nigeria's food insecurity is caused by the deadly insecurities ravaging the country especially, in Northern Nigeria affecting millions of people, unless proactive action is taken the failure would be worse according to UNICEF. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) programme geared towards eradicating poverty in the country could not be attained due to the issues of religiously related terrorist attacks⁴⁰.

Conclusion

Given the realities on the ground today, the federal government of Nigeria must do everything necessary to reappraise its security architecture, build strong institutions/systems and re-strategize its governance, to meet the present security challenges affecting the nation's economy. The damage is humungous. This ugly trend and the state of insecurity in our nation are heavily affecting its current democratic transition programme as much valuable and sensitive material might be torched thereby derailing the national economy. The federal government must insist on the position of the constitution on religious tolerance among Nigerians irrespective of their different religious inclinations and beliefs which will guarantee national integration and national development.

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