

Dynamics of Ethno-Religious Identity Contestation & Nigeria Nation Building in Islamic Perspectives

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Abstract

Ethno-religious identity contestation has a lot to contribute to national development in Nigeria particularly if it is maximally managed. Nigeria is characterized with this phenomenon of diverse ethnicity as well as religious persuasions. These phenomena have been a stumbling block in the progress of national development. There has been however, number of research works on how Nigerian nation has been suffering from maladministration. The work adopts the combination of historical, descriptive and intergroup relation theory to examine the dynamics of these issues and come up with a working-tools to ameliorate the situation. This work tends to assess the implications of ethno-religious identity contestation and the extent to which it has robbed the country of rapid development. It briefly traced its causes and look at how Islamic measures could be used to curtail and ameliorate its consequences in future. The work therefore posits that the idea of unhealthy rivalry, segregation and personal aggrandizement is abhorred in Islam. It concluded by coming up with suggestions from Islamic perspectives on how ethno-religious identities and contestation crises could be resolved among the populace.

Introduction

The combination of ancestral heritage and religious affiliations in Nigeria is no doubt what people see as ethno religious identities in the country. People over time tend to tag a particular religious belief to certain tribe. For instance, someone coming from certain part of the north is usually believed to be a Muslim while from south eastern part are known for Christianity and then we have people that shared the two particularly in the southwestern part of the country, where we can have the mixture of Muslims and Christians. The two religions are predominantly recognized in the country but we cannot completely deny

the fact that we some minority that are also of traditional religion.

This implied that already the issue of separating segregation I terms of tribe or religion are already inbuilt in our system, which is one of the major reasons causing contestation and conflicts between people of different religions and regions. Removing this phenomenon may not be an easy thing. However, seeing Nigerians as one unified community would have done the country a lot of good than the other way round. Everyone tends to attach affiliation to his religion and tribe thus causing the contestation and eventually lead to conflicts in our society.

Going down the history in Nigeria on ethno-religious conflicts one will talk of Kafanchan-Kaduna crisis that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000 and the Jos riots of 2001 Several hundred lives were lost during the Kaduna crisis of 2000 and the Jos insurrection of 2001 (Osaghae & Suberu19).Nigeria is usually characterised as a deeply divided state in which major political issues are vigorously some would say violently contested along the lines of the complex ethnic, religious, and regional divisions in the country (cf. Smyth and Robinson 2001). The issues that generate the fiercest contestation include those that are considered fundamental to the existence and legitimacy of the state, over which competing groups tend to adopt exclusionary, winner-take-all strategies. These include the control of state power, resource allocation, and citizenship. As a consequence, deeply divided states tend to be fragile and unstable society. This can tear society apart. (Osaghae and Suberu 4).

By virtue of its complex web of politically salient identities and history of chronic and seemingly intractable conflicts and instability, Nigeria can be rightly described as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa. From its inception as a colonial state, Nigeria has faced a perennial crisis of territorial or state legitimacy, which has often challenged its efforts at national cohesion, democratization, stability and economic transformation (Dudley et al 73).

Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to look at the dynamics of ethno-

religious identity contestation in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper intends to:

Find out the determinant factors/causes of the contestation and conflicts
Unravel its consequences and implications on national development
Proffer solutions to the problems from Islamic perspectives
Recommend the way to avert future occurrence that ethno-religious identities and contestations could lead to.

Conceptual Clarification

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

Ethno

Ethnicity is generally regarded as the most basic and politically salient identity in Nigeria. This claim is supported by the fact that both in competitive and non-competitive settings, Nigerians are more likely to define themselves in terms of their ethnic affinities than any other identity. According to the authoritative 2000 survey on “Attitudes to 8/27 CRISE Working Paper ethnicity “is demonstrably the most conspicuous group identity in Nigeria” (Lewis and Bratton 2000: 27). In essence, close to two-thirds of the population see themselves as members of primordial ethnic, regional, and religious groups. In other words, “Nigerians tend to cluster more readily around the cultural solidarities of kin than the class solidarities of the workplace” (Lewis and Bratton 2000: 25). What is more, “religious and ethnic identities are more fully formed, more holistic and more strongly felt than class identities” as evidenced in the fact that “whereas those who identify with religious and ethnic communities are almost universally proud of their group identities...those who see themselves as members of a social class are somewhat more equivocal about their pride” (Lewis & Bratton 26).

Religious Identity

Religious identities in Nigeria are usually classified into three – Muslim, Christian and Traditional. Of the three, traditional religions is the least politically active; numbering several hundreds of ethnic groups and

subgroups, villages, clans and kin groups; and, involving the worship of different gods and goddesses. However, in parts of the Kogi, Kwara, and Nassarawa states, masquerade activities associated with traditional religion have been a major source of conflicts. In effect, Christian and Muslim identities have been the mainstay of religious differentiation and conflict, with Nigerian Muslims much more likely to evince or articulate a religious identity than Christians (Lewis and Bratton 2000: 5). We have already referred to how this differentiation underlies the North-South cleavage (in terms of the North being predominantly Muslim and the South predominantly Christian) and sharpens ethnic cleavages in the North.

Religious identity. In fact, in parts of the North commonly referred to as the 'core' or 'Hausa-Fulani North' - which is roughly coterminous with those states that adopted Sharia law in the Fourth Republic - religious identity is more critical than ethnic identity and in fact serves to activate ethnicity. Thus, among Nigeria's "two largest ethnic groupings, the [southern] Yoruba were considerably more prone to define themselves ethnically... than were the [northern] Hausa-Fulani ...who rather opted for a religious [Muslim] identity" (Lewis & 25).

Dynamics of Religious Identity

Among Christians, there are several denominations, including: the Protestants (Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, and Lutheran), the Catholics, the Evangelical Church of West Africa, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and a host of 'home-grown', 'white garment' (Aladura and Celestial) and Pentecostal churches. Pentecostal churches, which by some accounts represent the fundamentalist segment of Christianity in the country (Udoidem 97), have witnessed a rapid growth in number in the recent past with many adherents, especially youths, crossing over from the older and more traditional denominations. Through umbrella bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), and the Catholic Bishops Conference, churches have Muslim has well has their own denomination and also different sects, notable among them in Nigeria, IZALAH, Sunni, Tariqah such Tijaniyyah, Qadiriyyah, Ahmadiyyah, Kano State Isbah Corps, Islamic Movement. Ansarudeen of Nigeria,

Darul-Islam (Nigeria) etc. The Muslim Brothers or Shiites. Purist Islam based on Sharia law. Different Islamic Organisations such MSSN (Muslim Students Society of Nigeria). Jamatul Nasirul Islam. NASFAT (Nasrul lahi lifathi Society of Nigeria and Islamic Educational Trust.

Ethno-Religious Contestation and Clashes

Ethno-religious clashes have proved to be the most violent instances of inter-group crisis in Nigeria. They have occurred mainly in the Middle-Belt and cultural borderline states of the Muslim north, where Muslim Hausa-Fulani groups between Muslim and non-Muslim ethnic groups in a “dangerous convergence of religious and ethnic fears and animosities...[in which it] is often difficult to differentiate between religious and ethnic conflicts as the dividing line between the two is very thin” (International IDEA 2000: 296). The major examples of violent ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have included the Kafanchan-Kaduna crises in 1987 and 1999, Zangon-Kataf riots of 1992, Tafawa Balewa clashes in 1991, 1995 and 2000, the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000, and the Jos riots of 2001. Although no exact figures of casualties are available, the Kaduna riots of 2000 and the Jos riots of 2001, each claimed several hundreds of lives and generated violent ripple effects beyond Kaduna and Jos, respectively.

Problems

Despite Nigeria being the giant of Africa, the economy of the country does not speak it. Insecurity has now become a normal phenomenon. People cannot sleep with their two eyes closed. Plateau state for instance. Since the emergence of the nascent democracy in 1999, Plateau State has become a permanent flashpoint of crisis. The State which had hitherto been one of the most relatively peaceful in Nigeria has been deeply enmeshed and suffused in political and ethno-religious conflicts characterized by genocidal attacks, bombing, maiming and killings of several persons, loss of business investments, and properties worth several millions of Naira. Within the space of eleven years, several violent political, ethno-religious conflicts were reported in Plateau State (Uhunmwuangho & Epelle 112).

Causes of Ethno-Religious Identity Contestation

Giving the nature of conflicts that have ensued from Ethno-Religious identity and citizenship contestation. Writers at different fora have identified its causes to some of the under mentioned points among others.

Ethno-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 (Alananmu 5). Despite Nigeria's potential for development, the distrust and intolerance among her people create an atmosphere of near-constant tension in the country (Dumoye 10).

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 (Obateru94). 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. The situation is worsened by the increasing number of unemployed Nigerians some of whom are ready recruits for criminal activities (Dowse Nigerian Tribune, 10).

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.

Rivalry 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 interethnic relations in Nigeria (Eliagwu 15). 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.

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 or religious groups. Political representation has been observed over the years to be directly linked with the access to resources, employment, social infrastructure and political appointments. (Chidi 272).

Implications and Consequences

Threat to National Security to Stability of the Country: 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 99). Ethno-religious conflicts have long been identified as a fundamental threat to stability, political order and state cohesion in Nigeria.

Loss of Lives and Property: 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 (Chidi 269).

Economic Crisis: The economic implications of ethno-religious crises 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.

Division, Hostility and Enmity among the Populace: The failure of government to prevent successive acts of ethnic and religious violence in Nigeria has heightened the feeling of hostility and enmity among the populace. 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.

Islamic Perspectives

The careful study and management of the causative factors of contestation and 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 citizen's 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 (Chidi 280). In view of the above, the following are some Islamic measures to erode contestation, rivalry and conflicts among the populace.

Unity in Diversity: Many people believe that contestation and among citizens is a result of diversity but contrary to this, Islam encourages us that whatever is the situation we should not be divided but work as a community. **Allah says:**

And hold fast, all of you together to the rope of Allah and be not divided among yourselves, and remember Allah's Favour on you for you were enemies one to another but He joined your hearts..." (Qur'an 3: 103)

In another verse Allah says:

O, mankind! We have created you from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another, Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has Fear of Allah...(Qur'an 49:13)

Contrary to what some overly simplistic analyses of the implications of diversity in Nigeria and other countries suggest, diversity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict. In other words, the very fact that a country has different ethnic, communal, religious, and racial groups does not make division and conflicts inevitable. And for that matter, empirical evidence shows that division and conflict are not dependent on the degree of diversity, as some of the most diverse countries (for example, Switzerland, Belgium, Malaysia and Tanzania) enjoy relative

peace and stability, while some of the least diverse are the most unstable or violent (for example, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and, perhaps, Sri Lanka). Thus, James Fearon and David Laitin (2003:75, 82) have claimed that “a greater degree of ethnic or religious diversity... by itself” is not “a major and direct cause” of violent civil conflict. (Fearon &Laitin 97).

Wealth Redistribution through Zakat and Waqf: There are so many poverty alleviation programmes introduced by Islam in order to avoid unnecessary rivalry, contestation, clashes and conflicts. Part of this is the issue of Zakat that is annual charity; Waqf is also there, Islamic endowment system. All these are introduced in order to ensure that those that have in the society, would not be envious of those who do not have. Poverty is one of the major issue that is causing conflicts among tribes and different religious affiliation but if people ensure that the wealthy people in the society assist those that are in abject poverty, the rate of crime will be drastically reduce in our society.

Equality among Mankind: It is part of the Apart from the above mentioned Qur'an 3 verse 103, which shows that irrespective of the race, tribe and gender. Allah see everyone as being equal and the only thing that differentiate us is consciousness of him. Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) also emphasized this when he was about living this world. In his last sermon he emphasized that black should not show superiority over black nor the other way round. Islam entrenched that whosoever is your leader irrespective of his tribe among you, the subject should give his allegiance and obey him. It will be contrary to the dictate of Allah for a group of people to now be determined to make the system ungovernable for the people at the helms of affairs because it is not of their religious belief or tribe.

Accountability and Transparency on the Part of Leaders: government on their own part should always ensure equal and even distribution of nation's resources and position. It is part of contestation that always ensued violence in Nigeria since some part feel marginalized in the distribution of wealth or positions in the society.

Allah says:

Allah commands that you should render back the trusts to those to whom they are due; and thatb when you judge between men, you judge with justice(Qur'an 5: 58)

Allah commands that the trusts be returned to their rightful owners. This has to do with all things one is expected to look after.

The issues that generate the fiercest contestation include those that are considered fundamental to the existence and legitimacy of the state, over which competing groups tend to adopt exclusionary, winner-take-all strategies. These include the control of state power, resource allocation, and citizenship. (Osaghae and Suberu 4-5).

Being Tolerant to the People of other Religions: Islam recognized and give freedom to people to practice religion of their choice. This is stated in the glorious Qur'an

There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path... (Qur'an 2: 256)

Allah also says: “ To you be your religion, and to me my religion”

Conclusion

This paper has looked into different dynamics of ethno-religious identities contestation and what it usually leads to. Emphasis has been made on the causes, implications on the citizens and the necessary and expedient instrumentalities that can mitigate the effects of contestation as well as promote inclusion, equity, and distributive justice between the different salient groups. This has been critically analyzed from Islamic point of views with verses of the Glorious Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet, which are the two major and primary sources of Islamic law. Thus, understated recommendations have been made to tackle the challenges of identity and contestation in our society.

Recommendations

1. Nigerians should De-emphasize on religion and ethnicity and based relationship on personality and humanity.
2. We should avoid playing ethno-religious politics in the country. A situation where people think of the religion or tribe of the contestant to determine who to vote.
3. Leaders should ensure transparency and accountability.
4. Nigerians should ensure egalitarian relationship among themselves
5. People of different religions and tribes should accommodate one another and see themselves as one.
6. 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 youths, giving out useful information that will help solve misunderstandings, preach unity and peaceful coexistence, and discourage the use of violence as means to settling disputes among groups and individuals.

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