

RELIGION, ETHNIC DIVERSITY: POLITICAL RESTRUCTURING AS KEY TO NIGERIAN DEVELOPMENT.

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Abstract

One of the burning national issues in the last decade in Nigeria is the issue of political restructuring. Nigerians' ethnic and religious diversities have always influenced political decisions since her amalgamation in 1914. Several administrations have fashioned out different political structures for the country. Currently, Nigeria operates a federal system which the federal government wields enormous powers while the federating units are mere subordinates. In recent times, there has been clamour from different quarters for the political restructuring of the country. To exhaustively ascertain the above, the study employed historical research methodology, where existing data on political restructuring were thoroughly reviewed. This enabled the researcher to examine the restructuring debate in the light of the country's ethnic and religious diversities which has given rise to ethno-religious conflicts prior and post amalgamation. Political restructuring in the context of this study is the decentralization of political power in the country to ensure political balance among various ethnic and religious groups. The findings obtained showed that the fundamental issues that gave rise to the call for restructuring include ethnic diversity, religious pluralism and marginalization in the political equation of the country. These have fueled ethno-religious conflicts which have ravaged most parts of the country. Therefore, the paper recommends a form of political structure in which the federating units should be given the powers to manage their affairs in line with their ethnic and religious affiliations.

Keywords: Religion, Ethnic Diversity, Political Restructuring and National Development.

Introduction

For sustainable development of Nigeria to be maintained, there is need for political restructuring. In recent times, the mantra of political restructuring has continued to dominate national discourse, it has become challenging to establish a common meaning that will be acceptable to all. This is as a result of the diversities in religion and ethnicity in the country. Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversities have always influenced political decisions since the amalgamation in 1914. Several administrations, both colonial and post-independence, have fashioned out different political structures for the country (Abubakar, 2013). Political restructuring has been viewed from diverse perspectives, but the bottom line is the need to ensure a just and egalitarian society for the different religions and ethnic groups in the country. Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversities have given rise to ethno-religious conflicts which have led to loss of lives and destruction of property in recent times, and has undermined the rapid development of the country. However, the fundamental issues that gave rise to the call for political restructuring include ethnic diversity, religious pluralism and

marginalization in the political equation of the country. These have fueled ethno-religious conflicts which have ravaged most parts of the country. For the purpose of this study, fundamental issues such as religion and ethnic diversity necessitating political restructuring affecting the pace of Nigeria development will be the basis of the study.

Overview of the Concept: Religion

Religion as a concept does not have a universally accepted definition. It is defined in many ways and the definitions vary among scholars. Hence, Agha (2012) noted that “the definition of religion poses some difficulties to every scholar including sages and students, who attempt to define it”. Attempts have been made to define religion in different ways. Pearsall (2011) defined religion as the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods. In the same vein, Agha (2012) asserted that “religion is the conscious or unconscious belief in spiritual being and elements (forces of nature) with powers”. According to Adeniyi (2013), religion is a body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being. Religion in the context of this paper is a particular system of faith and worship, particularly Christianity, Islam and Indigenous worship systems. Religion is an indispensable aspect of every human society. It helps in moulding the individual and communal lives of the society. Religious inclinations cannot be overlooked in the governance of every society. Religion shapes all the systems in the society including the political systems.

Ethnic Diversity

Ethnicity as a concept is an immensely complex phenomenon that portrays different perceptions. According to Osaghae (2012), ethnicity refers to a social formation resting upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology. Okwudiba (2010) defined ethnicity as a phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. Ethnic group according to him is a social formation distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. Similarly, Mbogu (2014) stated that ethnicity is a concept employed by the nations to further their interests and desires. He went further to add that ethnicity is held and considered a populist phenomenon and has never been the preserve of the elite. The fact remains that the elites oftentimes employ ethnic identity as a mechanism to achieve their targets. They front ethnicity as a means to achieve political and economic powers which obviously is detrimental to the gullible and unwary followers. There are certain integrative factors that characterize ethnicity. They include religion, culture, geographical location, language, tradition and myth of common origin. It is in the light of these factors that Umezina (2012) further explains ethnic identity as “a feeling of belonging and continuity in being, resulting from an act of self ascription and/or ascription by others to a group of people who claim both common ancestry and a common cultural tradition.

Religion and Ethnic Diversity in Nigeria

Nigeria is a diverse country with about 150 million people, it is multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and clearly heterogeneous (Ejikeme, 2016). These diversities are evidently

manifested in the citizens' cultural and religious practices. For instance, there are more than four hundred documented ethnic groups across the country comprising of millions of people who are adherents of the two major religion (Albert, 2012). In addition, there are some religions that have ethnical foundations indicating how their adherents should behave in any given society. Supporting the above assertion, Aminu (2016) is of the opinion "that religious ethics are the mere principles that guide religions and set the standard for what is and isn't acceptable behavior". Most Nigerians adhere to the two religions (Christianity and Islam), though it is widely known that there are differences in their understanding of the religions both at the intra and inter group levels. Nigeria as a nation since 1960, from all indications has not been able to attain her set objectives of unifying the diverse ethnic groups in all facets of socially, economically, politically, among others. The contributing factors to this reality could be attributed to lack of unity caused by ethnic and religious conflict. Ethnicity started during colonial era and it has had negative effects on Nigerians.

On several occasions, political leaders have promoted their religious belief to the utmost level of the country's governance. For example, the elevation of the Sharia into legal and political system, the issue of Nigeria becoming the member of organization of Islamic countries (OIC) among others. There was the formation of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) (Enwerem, 2015). However, for religion and ethnicity to promote national integration, the popular misconceptions of "religion cannot bring unity should be erased". In realizing the integrative effort of man in ensuring national integration (Okwueze, 2013) affirms that "the agencies of ethnicity and religion must work in close and harmonious cooperation". This is only attainable in a situation where peaceful co-existence among various ethnic and religious group is attained.

Religion and Ethnic Diversity: Implication on National Development

Ethno-religious diversity in Nigeria has bedeviled National integration and development; and to a considerable extent it shaken its bounds of unity and development. However, it is glaringly clear that most of the conflicts in Nigeria have ethno-religious undertone. Mbogu (2014) clearly lays credence to the above point when he states that religion and ethnicity as they present themselves in Nigeria have become critical factors in ethno-religious conflicts. At different levels, people have experienced religious or ethnic discrimination; people complain of past and present religious and ethnic marginalization, people demand for religious or ethnic rights in their states. Worst of all, states use religion and ethnicity in political discourse and action. The issues raised above and their attendant effects could be understood when the underlying factors that engineer these perils are laid bare.

Ethnicity among various ethnic group in Nigeria has become so pervasive that it serves as a means of attracting federal resources only to suit the interest of a particular region at the expense of the others and common good (Mbogu, 2014). Ethno-religious diversity to a considerable extent has questioned the spirit of patriotism in Nigeria, therefore, it should be considered as a cog in the wheel of nation building. This is the situation in Nigeria even after fifty-three years of political independence. The country has never fully experienced peace. It is surrounded by chequered history of one peril or the other.

In recent times, the frequency and occurrence of such conflicts appear to be on the increase in Nigeria and this situation has become worrisome to most Nigerians. Fifty-eight years after independence, Nigerians are still threatened with some unacceptable facts about social reality that continues to dent the integrity and unity of the nation. Especially, ethno-religious violence and fears have literally redefined the understanding and concept of trust as the basis of peaceful co-existence particularly in Northern Nigeria. For instance, “between 1976 and 2009, over 100,000 people had lost their lives and property worth billions of Naira were destroyed in more than fifty recorded ethno-religious conflicts in that part of Nigeria” (News watch, November 2, 2009; Eliagwu, 2014). These conflicts had left traces of political, social, economic, and psychological losses and pains, injured and poisoned established relationships among Nigerians. Gradually, Nigerians of different religions are feeling insecure and highly helpless in some parts of the country. Such conflicts had affected the spirit of unity and integration, which is about peaceful coexistence, unity, and harmony of the diverse people of Nigeria.

Among the negative impacts of ethnic waves in Nigeria is in the formation of political parties. Of about 63 political parties formed in Nigeria, none has a clear political vision, mission and manifestoes. This is because they were formed and engineered by ethnic chauvinism. Ngele (2008) in this regard posits that “the growth of political parties in Nigeria was characterized by distinct affiliations of the parties with ethnic and religious based organization and lack of reasonable support in areas outside the ethnic origin of their founders”. Consequently, the ruling party is not challenged to initiate programmes that will boost the realization of the national interest. With this in mind, it is clear that ethnicity and religious diversity has divisive tendencies that is not only disastrous but has far-reaching effects on the Nigerian nation. Internationally, it portrays Nigeria in a bad image and scares foreign investors who would contribute in industrializing our state.

Ethno-Religious Conflicts and the Need for Political Restructuring Nigeria

Ethno-religious conflict according to Salawu (2010) means a situation in which the relationship between members of one ethnic or religious group and another of such group in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society is characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear, and a tendency towards violent confrontation. In a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country such as Nigeria, there is usually high level of mutual suspicions and fears as a result of the tendency towards violent confrontations by members of the different ethnic and religious groups. According to Idike and Eme (2015);

Nigeria is undoubtedly one very tense country, insofar as ethno-religious relationships are concerned. A combination of interrelated crises has stretched the bonds of unity, the fabrics of nationhood, as well as the ingredients of citizenship identity, very thin, to a potentially snapping point (p. 76).

Since the attainment of independence in 1960, many parts of Nigeria have witnessed conflicts related to ethnic and religious differences. Notable among ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria

according to Fawole and Bello (2011) are the Maitatsine religious disturbances in parts of Kano and Maiduguri in the early 1980s, Jimeta Yola crisis religious disturbance (1984), 2 angoKatof crisis in Kaduna State (1992), Bulumkutu Christian-Muslim riots (1982) and Kaduna polytechnic Muslim Christian skirmishes (1981-1982).

Prominent among the ethno-religious crises that took place in the country was the *Sharia* crisis. On February 11, 2000 the Islamic *Sharia* legal system was introduced in Zamfara state. Afterwards there was its subsequent introduction in eleven other States of Northern Nigeria, including Katsina, Kano, Sokoto, Bauchi, Niger, Gombe, Jigawa, Borno, Kebbi, Yobe and Kaduna States (Ede, 2017). In each case, the introduction of the *Sharia* law was accompanied by controversies which led to series of crises that claimed so many lives and displacement of people.

In the case of Kaduna which is populated perhaps equally by Christians and Muslims, the tension degenerated to very violent conflicts in February and May 2000, that saw to the death of thousands of Muslims and Christians, including a Catholic priest and a legislator (Ehusani, 2012).

The riots left at least 3,000 persons dead and led to the displacement of over 63,000 people within Kaduna and its surroundings (International Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2007). These displaced persons sought refuge in the police and army barracks, considered to be the safest places in the heat of the conflicts. Although *Sharia* legal system is an age-long practice among the Muslim population in the state, what triggered the *Sharia* conflicts of 2000 was the impression of the Christian citizens that the action will turn Kaduna State into a Muslim state (Alao&Mavalla, 2016). Between February 2000 and March 2002, similar *Sharia*-related riots erupted in parts of Kaduna, Bauchi, Plateau, Niger and Nasarawa States.

The emergence and activities of the dreaded Islamic sect popularly known as *Boko Haram* in the Northern Nigeria have been issues of concern to the security of the country (Banjo, 2016). The group was founded by Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state. Yusuf had a strict, fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an and believed that the creation of Nigeria by British colonialists had imposed a Western and un-Islamic way of life on Muslims. He established a religious complex which included a mosque and an Islamic school which attracted poor Muslim families from across Nigeria and neighbouring countries. The centre had the political goal of creating an Islamic state, and became a recruiting ground for jihadists (Ede, 2017).

At the early stage, the group was not violent as Yusuf did not openly preach violence (Kukah, 2015). However, following the attack on the group by the Nigerian security forces in 2009 and the subsequent killing of Mohammed Yusuf, the group turned violent and started unleashing mayhem through bombing of government and religious institutions. *Boko Haram* re-emerged in 2010 with assassinations and a major raid on a prison more than a year going underground. Yusuf's deputy, Abubakar Shekau, who police claimed had been killed in the 2009 uprising, began to appear in videos as the group's new leader. Attacks gradually grew more deadly and sophisticated, particularly with the use of explosives.

Another aspect of ethno-religious violence that has claimed so many lives in Nigeria in recent times is the activities of Fulani Militia. Inter-communal violence caused by competition between local farming communities and nomadic herdsmen has plagued Nigeria's Middle Belt (Benue, Kaduna, Plateau, Nasarawa and Taraba states) for many years and is spreading to other states (Oladeji,2015). Clashes between local farmers and the Fulani herdsmen have continued to leave a bloody trail, with its attendant destruction of property, farmlands and whole communities. Human Rights Watch (2015) said that more than 1000 people were killed between December 2014 and July 2015, and that in Benue state, more than 100 villages were sacked by suspected Fulani herdsmen in 2012 alone.

In January 2013, Fulani herdsmen attacked some villages in Nasarawa state killing 10 people and displacing over 5,000 people. In a fresh attack of some villages in Nasarawa state about 33 people were killed in November 2014 (Nebie, 2014). More attacks by the armed Fulani herdsmen came in 2016. Duru (2016) reported a gruesome attack on Agatu Local Government Area of Benue state in February 2016 in which about 7,000 people were sacked from six villages by the Fulani herdsmen. Ameh (2016) observed that despite heavy gunshots by the herdsmen, no military or security presence was felt. According to him over 200 persons were killed and houses were razed. In April, 2016 there was a renewed attack on Agatu by the armed herdsmen. Statistics from the Benue state Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) indicated that no fewer than 300 persons died in the renewed violence. According to the statistics, property worth millions of Naira were destroyed while more than 10,000 persons were displaced from the villages in the Local Government Area (Abujah, 2016). In Taraba state, Fulani herdsmen attacked Angai and Ndole villages in Gashak Local Council Area on 11th April, 2016. No fewer than 44 persons were killed while others fled to neighbouring Cameroun Republic and nearby Local Council Areas (Tsoka, 2016). Uzodinma (2016b) also reported an attack by the Fulani herdsmen in Enugu state in April 2016. The herdsmen attacked UkpabiNimbo in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area on 25th April 2016 killing over 40 people. Survivors fled to neighbouring Communities. Two days after the UkpabiNimbo attack, there was another attack by the Fulani herdsmen in Umuchigbo Community in Enugu East Local Government Area of Enugu state (Uzodinma, 2016). It is very clear that the deadly escapades of arms bearing herdsmen are becoming increasingly unsettling. They have let their footprint in virtually every part of the country. In their latest outings, they have been very unsparing of the communities.

The various ethno-religious conflicts were a critical and potent force for socio-political instability; they portray the gross inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the Nigerian security agencies in securing the lives and property of the citizens (Yakassai, 2016). This can be attributed to the highly centralized security system in the country in which the states and local governments have little or no control over the security apparatus. This calls for the political restructuring of the country to allow for state police that can enforce laws peculiar to each federating unit.

Political Restructuring; Prerequisite to National Development

Restructuring, according to Bello (2017), is the process of increasing or decreasing the number of components parts that make up a system and re-defining the inter-relationship between them in such a way that the entire system performs more efficiently. Restructuring in the context of a nation requires redefining the relationship between the people and the government, including taking another look at the structures and systems of governance as encapsulated in the constitution (Dimeji, 2017). One of the dimensions of restructuring is political restructuring. Amadiet *al.*, (2017) see political restructuring as;

All forms of adjustments, alterations and cosmetic manipulations aimed at changing the formula on the basis of which economic resources and political power are shared or distributed among the Nigerian elite.

Political restructuring in Nigeria also implies divesting the central government of certain powers it wields and limiting its influence in such areas as fiscal policies, military defence, foreign policy, immigration and national elections (Nuhu, 2016). Political restructuring in the context of this study is the decentralization of political power in the country to ensure political balance among the ethnic and religious groups. It is intended to lay an institutional foundation for a more just and equitable sharing of the political space by the country's multi-ethnic religious groups.

Several issues have led to the renewed call for the political restructuring of Nigeria. Among the issues are marginalization, non-adherence to the federal character principle, ethnic diversity and religious pluralism in Nigeria.

1. Marginalization and Non-adherence to Principle of Federal Character: There have been complaints of marginalization by different groups and segments of the country in the political equation of the country in recent time (Elaigwu, 2014). People complain of marginalization in the area of appointment into key position in the country. There is also marginalization in the area of distribution of revenues accrued to the government as well as allocation of developmental projects. There has been bias, favouritism, nepotism and tribalism in the nation. People who are in positions of authority tend to favour their ethnic and religious groups to the disadvantage of others. Marginalization is as a result of non-compliance to the federal character principle which is enshrined in the country's constitution.

The principle of federal character stipulates that there should be equity in the distribution of the national wealth and appointments. The non-adherence to the federal character principle has become more pronounced in the current Buhari led administration.

Abah and Nwokwu (2017) captured the situation thus;

The age long rape on the federalist principles coupled with the apparent abuse of federal character principle enshrined in the Nigerian constitution by the Buhari led administration in the areas of appointment into key positions and alleged marginalization and neglect of some sections of the country may have awakened the consciousness of Nigerians on the need for urgent restructuring of the Nigerian Federation.

There is no gainsaying the fact that such observable imperfections in the country's policy have triggered protests, agitations and patriotic calls for restructuring of the Nigerian political structure.

2. Ethnic Diversity: Nigeria as a country is composed of diverse ethnic nationalities. Echiegu (2014) argued that Nigeria has well over 250 ethnic nationalities with three main ethnic groups (Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba). The heterogeneous character of ethnic nationalities in the country gave impetus for adoption of federalism in Nigeria by colonialist. Federalism as a system of government is believed to encourage unity in diversities as it allows the constituent units some level of autonomy to manage their own local affairs in areas of their jurisdictions (Abah&Nwokwu, 2017). The tearing force of ethnic diversity in any society makes it imperative for every plural society to operate a structure that can give all the nationalities a sense of belonging thereby promoting unity in diversities. Amadiet *al.*, (2017) observed that "the combined forces of ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity in any political society make political restructuring imperative so as to maintain unity in diversity in the system".

3. Religious Pluralism: Nigeria's diversity is not only in ethnic nationalities but also in religious affiliations. Nigeria has adherents of several religions with Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion as the dominant religions (Farayibi, 2017). The ethnic and religious dimensions in Nigeria have been closely related such that different ethnic groups are associated with different religions. The Hausa/Fulani ethnic group are associated with Islam; the Igbo of Southern Nigeria are predominantly Christians while the Yoruba are partly Christians and partly Muslims. However, the African Traditional Religion has been the indigenous religion of the people before the advent of the foreign religions of Islam and Christianity. This religious plurality has been the root cause of majority of the conflicts witnessed in the country, hence the need to give religion a considerable place in the restructuring of the country.

Implications of Ethnic and Religious Diversity on National Development

Ethno-religious diversity is a major task confronting the achievement of democracy in Nigeria since independence in 1960. Ethnic sentiment is present almost in all areas of Nigerian political economic and social organizations (Paul *et at.*, 2017). In fact, low productivity and ineffectiveness presently experienced in the country can be attributed to ethno-religious diversity. Tribal differences have given rise for diverse nature of the Nigerian nation. This indicates that though housed in one country, the ethnic groups do not have identical needs, objectives and aspirations. No wonder (Obafemi Awolowo) opines that 'Nigeria is a mere geographic expression'. 'There is no basis for unity' (Yakubu Gowon). These expressions are real judging from the happenings in the country since independence than the deceit embedded in the slogan of "one Nigeria". Most often, ethnic sentiments necessitated by ethnic and religious diversity are used in place of merit and skills. For instance, in the case of appointment, 'God fatherism' comes in, and one has to favour his people whether they are qualified or not. Ethnicity and religious diversity have been the major factors that have seriously reduced the image and glory of Nigerian party politics. The

“federal character” principle, which has been enshrined in Nigeria constitution since 1979, seeks to ensure that appointments to public service institutions fairly reflect the linguistic, ethnic, religious and geographical diversity of the country (Adamolekun, 2012). Whatever the intentions were, these actions and statements could trigger suspicion and crises between the two dominant religious groups. By this definition, it becomes a fact that political restructuring is a tool for ensuring fairness in public service over professionalism and good attainment.

The various ‘ethnoreligious’ disturbances were strong force for socio-political instability, and national disintegration (Abubakar, 2013). They described the gross inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the state security, security of lives and property could not be guaranteed. The climate of insecurity created by violent conflict deter investment. The economy becomes stagnant and democracy divide equally become an illusion. However, the growing incidence of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria is worrisome and if ethno-religious conflicts are not reduced now and completely, the memories from such could create future conflicts. In fact, ethnicity and religion have affected negatively on the development of the nation in many ways namely: socially, politically, and economically. In order to proffer solution that brings peace and promote national integration, both religious and political leaders must begin to emphasize the need to embrace peace. As the country remains multi-religious and ethno-linguistic pluralism, secularity is the best option that can uphold peace and harmony. It is certain that if Nigeria was not colonized, the issue of ethnic sentiment among the different ethnic groups would have been very impossible (Akindele, 2013). The spirit of indigene-settler and ‘federal character’ phenomenon should be discouraged by the federal government. Also, fanaticism in religion should be reduced in order to pave way for redesigning Nigerian society.

Conclusion

Though the mantra of restructuring has continued to dominate national discourse in Nigeria today, it has become challenging to establish a common meaning that will be acceptable to all. This is as a result of the diversities in religion and ethnicity in the country. Political restructuring has been viewed from diverse perspectives, but the bottom line is the need to ensure a just and egalitarian society for the different religions and ethnic groups in the country. There is no doubt that the current political structure of the country, in which the federal government wields overriding political powers to the disadvantage of the federating units, is not healthy for national development and peaceful coexistence. The country should therefore be restructured in such a way that there will be an equitable distribution of political power and resources among the different federating units. This should be done in line with the religious and ethnic backgrounds of the Nigerian people.

Conclusive, it can be said that when Nigeria is properly structured politically, the harnessing of the potentials in our religious and ethnic lives to develop the country will be ensured. Restructuring will no doubt make the country more stable politically and bring more economic progress. A properly structured Nigeria will encourage hard work and competition among the federating units, thereby allowing each unit to develop at its own pace.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are necessary:

1. In the interim, there should be strict adherence to the principle of federal character in the appointment of people in key positions in public institutions to reflect the heterogeneous character of the country.
2. In restructuring the Nigerian polity, each federating units should be given the power to operate in line with their religious and ethnic affiliations.
3. No religion or ethnic group should be given preferential treatment in the restructuring project. This will help to ensure the promotion of a sense of belonging among the different ethnic and religious groups in the country.
4. There should be devolution of more powers to the federating units with the accompanying resources. This will allow the federating units have greater control of the resources in their areas.
5. Minority ethnic groups should be taken into consideration and be protected at all levels in the restructuring project. This will give them a sense of belonging so that no single individual, ethnic group, geographical segment or social group will feel alienated or unwanted in terms of what he or it can contribute to the nation or in terms of having a fair share of national wealth.

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