

# ETHNO-RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL CONFLICTS: A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA



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## **Abstract**

*The amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria by Lord Lugard in 1914 marked the genesis of religious and political conflicts in Nigeria. Scholars from various schools of thoughts argued vehemently that the colonial settings laid the foundation of future political conflict in Nigeria. For example, Richard's constitution of 1946 introduced by elective principle put in place in 1922, paved way for the division of the country (Nigeria) into three major regions which was dominated by a major ethnic group. For instance, the Northern region was dominated by the Hausa-Fulani, while the Igbo and Yoruba dominated Eastern and Western regions respectively. With this division, the minority groups felt neglected and marginalized, hence clamoring for resource control since the attainment of independence, the foundation of Nigeria nation has been plagued by series of tensions, conflicts and political insurrections that have affected the nation's sustainable development. It is against this background that this paper focuses on ethno-religious and political conflicts vis-à-vis national security in Nigeria.*

Nigeria inherited a series of socio-political conflicts and economic downturn as a result of her colonial experience. As a result of the multi-ethnic nature of the country, conflicts remain a critical problem that requires a total attention of all and sundry. According to Olowo (2013), Nigeria as a nation has experienced conflicts of dangerous impacts and dimensions between ethnic groups, religious groups, communities as well as political parties. The unresolved issues cum socio-political matters have generated a lot of controversies which threatened the peace and unity of Nigeria. The situation has become worrisome since the beginning of the current democratic dispensation. In agreement with the above assertion, ikuejube& Salami (2013) lamented that the structural imperfections of the Nigerian state led to a series of rivalries and hostilities. They stressed further that the reasons for political acrimony are the various ethnic groups brought together by force of arm and unresolved mutually suspicious relationships and the inability of Nigerian government to institute meaningful strategies to address the contradictions.

Also, there is agitation for shift of power, marginalization of the minority groups, resource control among others complaints led to ethnic and militant violence. In the West, there is the cultural militant group called Oodua People Congress (OPC), Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) in the North as well as the recent religious fundamentalist religious organization called BokoHaram. In the East we have the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). Going by these ethnic affiliations, the evolution of Nigeria as a nation with cultural and religious dichotomy has contributed in no small measure to the near disintegration of the nation. Nigeria in July, 1966 recorded her first civil war which necessitated the blood bath that shake the social, economic and political foundations which have not quite stabilized.

Nigeria is more disintegrated and polarized today than it was at independence; and the situation seems to be getting worse every day. In 1993, Nigerians from all walks of life, across ethnic, religious and regional lines, voted massively to no avail for a muslim/muslim ticket in a presidential election still considered to be the freest and fairest in the history of the country (Edun 2013). Akanle (2012) lamented that Nigerians see themselves within ethnic prisms rather than within national frameworks. This, he argued, is at the root of the several ethno-religious crises as well as the intractable massive corruption as people see national resources as national cake which ethnic nationalities must do everything to corner. Based on this assertion, most Nigerians finds it difficult to relate. It is most natural as Edun (2013) put it, to identify oneself as Ijaw, Yoruba, Tiv, or Fulani than the Utopian Nigerian. Hence, most Nigerian voted out of primordial considerations and merit is often sacrificed on the altar of ethnicity and nepotism

### **The Threats to National Security in Nigeria**

In most nation in the world, political, economic and social instability are threats to national security .But in Nigeria, religious intolerance, armed robbery, chieftaincy

disputes, ethnicity, students unrest, restiveness in the oil producing areas are additional threats to national security in Nigeria. Over 50 years of Nigeria independence, findings revealed that the nation never experience free and fair election. Several election crises have been experienced at various times. Johnson (2004) reported that Nigeria experienced political instability in many parts of the country. For instance, the Kano riot of 1953, Census crisis of 1962/63, Action Group crisis of 1962, Federal election crises of 1964, Western Nigeria election crises of 1965 which resulted to the first military coup d'état of 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1966, Kaduna State Executive Legislative crisis of 1981, and military coups d'état of 1966, 1967, 1976, 1984, 1985, and 1993 and the maitasine Riot and Bauchi Religious killings.

Nigeria is ranked among the countries of the world where the state of peace is very low (Tell; 2012). According to the 2012 Global Peace Index, released by the Institute of Economic and Peace, an International Research Institute that measures the level of global Peace, Nigeria is ranked 146<sup>th</sup> and is one of the 32 countries marked with red. Other red category Countries are Sudan, 156<sup>th</sup> Afghanistan, 157<sup>th</sup> and Somalia 158<sup>th</sup>. Given the state of security in Nigeria, according to Bagbe, Olanusi and Adewolu (2013) much is left to be desired. Nigeria is bedeviled with increasing number of security problems; ethnic militias, Kid kidnapping, Robbery, Ritual killings, and lately Boko Haram insurgency. Ethnic violence increased sharply as militant ethnic and nationalist minded militias emerged in different parts of the country and started operating within their domains. For example, in the Yoruba speaking community in the South-west we have Oodua People Congress (OPC), the Egbesu Boys in the Niger Delta; the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB); and Bakassi Boys in the South-east; and the Arewa People's Congress (APC) in the North.

The regional spread of ethnic militias portends danger for the survival and security of the nation. The spread of the ethnic militias across the nation is a signal that Nigeria is under siege. The militias strike at random killing, bombing and hacking down innocent Nigerian citizens. Their evil activities disrupt government rule as well as paralyze economic activities. Highly placed Nigerians were kidnapped by the militias for ransoms and life is no longer save due to the militias activities in the country. Based on this, the Nigerian nation state appears to be in disunity, the inter-tribal disturbances in many parts of the Country, campus cultism, political and extra judicial killings and the bomb blasts that marked Nigeria's 50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Anniversary are indices of lack peace in the country.

### **Unresolved Issues and Problems of Nigeria Unity**

The deliberate attempt made by the colonial masters by amalgamating the Southern and Northern Protectorates in 1914 without considering the heterogeneity of the Nigerian nation marked the beginning of these unresolved problems. Howbeit, Nigerian nationalist leaders from different ethnic groups jointly fought vehemently for the independence with one voice but with different motives. The formation of political

parties, tribal and cultural organizations like the EgbeOmoOduduwa, Bauchi Improvement Union, the Ibo Union and a host of others according to Fadeiye (2005), later became the forum for political agitation. In the first republic for instance, all the political parties that emerged were ethnic motivated. The Action Group (A.G.) was Yoruba-speaking party, while the Northern People's Congress (N.P.C.) was dominated by the Hausa-Fulani ethnic groups. In the old Eastern Region, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (N.C.N.C) was purely Igbo based political party. This equally repeated itself in the Second Republic and in the present dispensation. All the political parties in the second Republic were regional based. The Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) led by late ObafemiAwolowo was Yoruba-speaking party based. While the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was dominated by the Hausa-Fulani and zik led party Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP) was Igbo based party. In the present dispensation, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) the ruling party in Nigeria has its base in the Northern part of Nigeria while other parties like All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA); Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN); Labour Party (LP) and other unpopular political parties' emanated from the South-East. In the year 1999, the Nigeria military relinquished political power after dominating the country's post-independence experience for many years and Nigerians hoped for a turn towards democratic governance and respect for human rights. Contrary to this, the Nigerian political culture today is marked by political intimidation, ethnic orientation of political parties, conspiracy of security operatives, ineptitude of electoral umpires, ballot stuffing, ballot snatching, thuggery, money politics and assassination (Falade, 2007, Ojudun 2007, HRW, 2007).

As a result of the multi-ethnic nature of the country, conflicts remain a critical problem and they frequently erupt in Nigeriaafter over half a century of experimental nationhood. Nigeria as a nation has experienced conflicts of dangerous impacts and dimensions between ethnic groups, religious groups, communities as well as political parties. The unresolved issues cum socio-political matters have generated a lot of controversies which threatened the peace and unity of Nigeria. The situation has become worrisome since the beginning of the current democratic dispensation. Going by this analysis, there is need to address the problem of conflict and other unresolved issues in the interest of national unity and Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

### **Ethnicity and Political Conflicts in Nigeria**

One of the major failures of the Nigerian state according to Alao (2012) is its inability to raise initial limitation and challenges foisted upon it by British colonialism to create supra institutions that are capable of deemphasizing sub national affiliation. In its fifty years of independent nationhood, Nigeria has not been able to appropriate its defining moments and translate them into instances of nation building for political instability and economic development. The evolution of Nigeria as a nation with ethnic, cultural and religious diversity has contributed in no small measure to the near

disintegration of the nation witnessed in the Biafran-Nigeria civil war of 1966, fraud, religious and political conflicts as well as agitations from marginalized groups in the Niger-Delta and kidnapping in many parts of the country both for ritual purposes and ransom as well as religious in surgence in the North-East have hampered development in many parts of the country and is a major hindrance to effective growth and nation building in Nigeria (Utulu, 2010).

The foundation of the Nigeria nation since the attainment of independence has been plagued by a series of tensions, conflicts and political insurrections that have affected the nations' sustainable development. The new political elite that took over from the colonial masters became the dominant class which employed the ethnic and religious diversities in Nigeria in the intra-class struggle for power. Members of the political class have also shown no restraint in manipulating the people through feeding them with prejudice against the stereotypes about other ethnic groups to win their support for achieving their own self-centred objectives (Tijani, 2008, Adedeji, 1999).

A Nigeria citizen on account of ethnicity and political affiliation is treated as an alien or foreigners in his/her own country as a result of 'state of origin' syndrome. On account of this, individuals consider themselves as a member of certain ethnic group before identifying with the state. Oluwasuji (2006) opined that Nigerians shared their loyalties between the civic state and the ethnic states. Corroborating this assertion, Mbaku, Agbese and Kineyi (2001) simply put it: "Strong ethnic identification frequently results in the exclusion and marginalization of some groups from the main streams of national policies and the economy. Groups compete to control the political machinery and once in power adopts policies that favour some groups at the expense of others (2001, P 3)".

According to Ikwumelu (1996) as cited in Shonekan, the problems confronting Nigeria derive largely from the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-national nature of our country. Conflict is capable of not only worsening inter-state relations but also has the potential of provoking hostilities. The call for rotational presidency for instance, started as a result of fear of domination and marginalization of some ethnic groups by others(s). Some tribal groups thus hold that the only way to avert this is to rotate the leadership (or the power base) of the country from one section to another. (Ikwumelu, 1996).

Nigeria's cultural diversity is threatening the peace and existence of Nigeria as a country. Salawu (2010) Opined that over the years the phenomena of ethnicity and religious intolerance have led to the incessant recurrent of ethno-religious conflict, which have given birth to many ethnic militias like Odua People Congress (OPC), the Bakassi Boys, the Egbesu boys, the Ijaw Youth Congress (IPC). Others include Arewa People Congress (APC), the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of the Biafra (MASSOB) and OhanaezeN'digbo. With the emergence of the various ethnic groups, religious intolerance has become more violent and bloody with the emergence of Boko Haram who introduced a new dimension to ethno-religious conflict with the

use of suicide bombers to wreak havoc on the people of Borno, Bauchi, Yobe, Kaduna States and the Federal Capital, Abuja. (Fabode, 2012).

Theoretically and empirically, the pluralism of a state (Nigeria) predisposes its members towards conflicts (Otite, 2000). Since resources are always limited and scarce, the contests between socio-cultural segments under various leaders are inevitable. Violence is therefore generated over resource control are academic in multi-ethnic societies such as Nigeria. Basically, ethnic and religious crisis are ill-winds which blow nobody any good. In most cases, many of the religious violence often ended up with ethnic colouration (Adetoro and Omiyefa, 2012). Also, religious crisis often occur within (intra) the same identical religious and beliefs. Examples were the Maitatsine religious crises against other Muslims in Kano in 1980 and the Boko Haram incessant violence. Within the Christians, a clash between the God's Kingdom Society (GKS) and the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star (BCS) sometimes ago in Calabar was narrowly averted by the intervention of the law enforcement agencies (Fadeyiye, 2005).

Considering the countless number of lives and properties claimed by ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, it is therefore impossible to give the exact number of ethno-religious conflicts as a result of inadequate statistical data on the issue. Despite this, Olu-Adeyemi (2006) reported that about forty ethno-religious clashes happened between May 1999 and September 2000. Ethno-religious conflicts often take the form of riots, armed struggle, guerrilla operations, Sabotage, assassination, warfare and secession in Nigeria, have implications for the security of lives and properties and even existence of Nigeria without much success.

This implies that an average of one bloody clash was recorded each month since the return to democracy. An attempt is made below to show case these occurrences. By ethno-religious conflict, it 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 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. (Salawu, 2010). Thus, before the present democratic experiment in Nigeria, there were ethno-religious conflicts that claimed so many lives and property (Mohammed, 2005). Notable among such crises are the Maitatsine religious disturbances in parts of Kano and Maiduguri in the early 1980s; Jimeta-Yola religious disturbances (1984), and ZangoKataf crisis in Kaduna State (1992). Others are Kafanchnic College of Education Muslim Christian riots; Kaduna Polytechnic Muslim-Christian skirmishes (1981-1982); and the Cross vs. the Crescent conflict of the Bulumkutu Christian-Muslim riots (1982); Usman Danfodio University Sokoto (1982); and the Muslim-Christian Clash during a Christian procession at Easter in Ilorin, Kwara State (1986).

In corroboration Olu-Adeyemi (2006) reveals that about forty ethno-religious clashes happened between May 1999 and September 2000, thus signaling an average of

one bloody clash per month since the return to democracy. An attempt is made below to show case these occurrences:

May 30-June 9, 1999: Renewal of Warri communal clash in Delta State.

July 18, 1999: Oodua People's Congress and Hausa traders clashed at Sagamu, Ogun State.

November 25, 1999: Communal clash in Lagos between Oodua People's Congress and Hausa traders.

January 25, 2000: Communal clash in Brass Local Government area of Bayelsa State.

January 29, 2000: Communal clash in Etsako Local Government Area of Edo State.

January 30, 2000: Communal clash at Etsako Local Government Area Edo State.

February 2, 2000: Boundary dispute between communities in Akwalbom and Cross Rivers State.

February 21, 2000: Sharia riots in Kaduna.

February 28, 2000: Religious riots in Abia State, reprisal killing from the Kaduna mayhem.

March 5, 2000: New Epoch of Ife-Modakeke war of attrition.

March 16, 2000: Renewed hostilities between the people of Eleme and Okirika in Rivers State.

March 28, 2000: Religious riots in Damboa, Borno State.

April 8, 2000: Communal clash in Ovia South Local Government Area of Edo.

May 18, 2000: Local farmers and Fulani cattle rearer's clash in Saki, Oyo State.

May 23, 2000: Renewed religious in Kaduna.

June 5, 2000: Epoch of the Owo mayhem in Ondo State.

June 12, 2000: Communal clash in Isoko North Local Government Area of Edo State.

June 23, 2000: Communal clash between the people of Ikotoffiong and Oku-Iboku of Cross River State.

July 1, 2000: The commencement of communal clash at IkareAkoko, Ondo State.

August 12, 2000: Communal clash in Bendel Local Government Area of Abia State.

August 22, 2000: Violent clash at Agboma community in Epe Local Government area of Lagos State.

October 16, 2000: Igbos and Hausa traders clashed at AlabaRago market area of Lagos State.

December 11, 2000: Renewed clashes between Ife and Modakeke.

March 13, 2001: Renewal communal clashes at Owo, Ondo State.

April 13, 2001: Religious riot in Kano State

May 12, 2001: Communal clash between the Ijaws and Itsekiri of Delta State.

July 2, 2001: Communal Clash between Odimodu and Ogulagba communities of Delta State.

July 12, 2000: Ethnic violence in Nassarawa State. September 7, 2001:

Religious clash in Jos, Plateau State.

September 16, 2001: Religious Riots in Kano.

September 18, 2001: Religious riot in Benue State.

January 12, 2002: Oodua People's Congress clash at Owo, Ondo State

February 2, 2002: Oodua People's Congress and Hausa people clashed at Idi-Araba, Lagos State.

February 26, 2002: Communal clash between Appapum and Osaturacomunities of Cross Rivers State.

March 30-April 2, 2002: All Peoples Party Intra party clash at Ilorin, Kwara State.

August 31, 2002: Communal clash at Ado-Ekiti.

September 3, 2002: Renewed communal clashes at Owo, Ondo State.

November 21, 2002: Religious riots in Kaduna State and Abuja.

Considering the above historical analysis, one can see clearly how many lives and uncountable property were wasted on account of religious conflicts in Nigeria between 2006 to date, Nigeria has witnessed terrorism of fundamental religious organization called Boko Haram in the north. This armed religious group has caused tension and fear in the lives of Nigerians. Many lives were wasted and many churches were destroyed by this group. This however, add more to the religious intolerance recorded in the past years and a pointer to the whole world that Nigeria as nation still have more hurdles to cross. The effort put in place by the federal government to tackle this problem is yielding little progress as the faceless groups are advancing to many states on daily basis.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the foregoing discourse, political crisis, religious intolerance, ethnic crisis, economic depression among others remain critical and unresolved issues Nigeria as a nation is still battling with. From historical perspective, all the political parties that emerged in the first and fourth republic have strong ethnic affinities, on account of this, an average Nigerian citizen usually identify with his/her ethnic group before seeing his/herself as a real Nigerian. This, however led to series of rivalries and hostilities at the political realm on equitable economic sharing formula. This paper submits that for national peace and security to be achieved in Nigeria, there is need for building the institutional capacity of the crisis management board, religious body, commissions framework, frequent religious and political office seekers should not see election as a do or die affairs as demonstrated by the immediate past president of Nigeria, Dr. Good-Luck Ebele Jonathan in the just concluded 2015 presidential elections. Also, Nigerians should equally learn a good lesson from her neighboring West African nation (Ghana) after the just concluded presidential elections. Despite the keen competition, the election was devoid of ethnic chauvinism and religious sentiments.

### **Recommendations**

From the discussion so far, the paper makes the following recommendations;

1. Nigeria political elites should approach electoral competition from sport-manships perspective not as a do or die affairs
2. Political party formations should be devoid of ethnic chauvinism and religious sentiment. This, will enable Nigeria leaders to correct the past mistakes made by the colonial masters ever before the attainment of independence.
3. The Federal government should call for a real constitutional conference where issues affecting various ethnic groups, and religious bodies will be trashed and addressed for general well-being of Nigeria citizens, or implement the report of the State Constitutional Conference.
4. Also, public enlightenment should be given to all and sundry in Nigeria before and after election. This will go a long way in promoting unity and peaceful co-existence of Nigerians.

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