

RELIGION, ETHNICITY AND POLITICAL RESTRUCTURING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Religious beliefs and practices indeed have influence the activities of the Globe with a particular reference to Nigeria. Apart from their diverse and extreme force, they have determined to a large extent and exerted much influence on other socio-cultural institutions of human society. The apparent differences in beliefs and practices are causing bloodshed, hatred, persecutions, discriminations, wars, suicide, bombing, terrorism etc. Nigeria being made up of three dominant ethnic groups namely: Igbo, Hausa Fulani and the Yoruba are always in power tussle. The quest for power control by each of the ethnic groups has made it almost impossible for the unity of one Nigeria. This is why people are calling for political restructuring for equity and balanced administration in Nigeria. Using historical method of research analytical approach of analysis was applied and the finding was that ethnicity if not well handled and political system in Nigeria being well restructured, that the central system of Government be replaced with true federalism, we will continue to agitate.

Key Words: Religion, Ethnicity, Politics and Restructuring

Introduction

That Nigerians are acutely conscious of their different ethnic identities is too obvious a fact. It is also an indisputable fact that since the 1940s/1950s in particular, ethnic consciousness has increasingly been transformed to the unsavory level of ethnic nationalism or some would say, 'tribalism.' Ethnic considerations consciously or unconsciously mediate in far reaching ways inter-personal and inter-group relations among Nigerians. The plurality of ethnic nations estimated at between 248 and 274 in the country makes these relations all the more complex. In no sphere of the Nigerian polity is ethnicity more visible and more exploited than in the jostle for the control of political power at the federal level. And political control, needless to stress, inheres control of the economic resources of the state. For these reasons, ethnicity along with its variants such as ethnic consciousness and ethnic nationalism, has always evoked an abiding interest among scholars, politicians, public analyst and social commentators of various hues. Not surprisingly, conceptual perspectives on the subject have varied and have produced a cobweb of confusion, if not contradictions.

Nigeria having gone through the experience of colonial rule for several years one would have thought according to Bamidele (2002) that with the common enemies (the Europeans) gone, having undermined the progress of Nigerians more energies would have been directed towards unity and national building. Rather than develop those potentials among Nigerians that attracted unity and focused on those things which intensified their division. What is generally observed is that when one ethnic group comes to power, it shares the resources of the nation almost exclusively among its members and refuse to relinquish power to any other group. The negative phenomena were reinforced by scarce economic resources, which necessitated

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With the arrival of independence, ethnic associations became largely politicized along religious lines thus, became political spring boards through which politicians ride to political fame.

Nigeria is a country with many ethnic groups. The three major groups are Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa Fulani's. These ethnic groups co-existed in pre-colonial period without tension and strife. This was due to minimal contact caused by a number of existentialist difficulties like lack of transportation which facilitate contact among various people. Nnoli (1978:69) noted, in this regard, that ethnicity cannot exist unless individuals from different communal group are in contact with one another. In the context of political power, sharing and resources allocations within the Nigeria polity, frictions and tensions developed as contacts among ethnic group, increased.

This contact made each of the three major ethnic groups to contest for power and resources. The Hausa-Fulani had the opportunity of controlling the center power more than the other two tribes who also wanted that power. Little wonder then that these inter-group conflicts were climaxed by a horrendous war, fought in the country sentencing her to chronic political and social instability and wreaking havoc on her development as a nation.

The Sharia Politics

In the past few years, we have been witnessing the clamour for a full blown sharia as state law in some Northern state of Nigeria as if to say that only Moslems are resident in those parts of the country. Paradoxically, throughout the period of military rule when many Moslems were Heads of State, the sharia, the Islamic legal system, was never introduced as state criminal law. It started as soon as democratic government was restored on 29th May, 1999. The full-blown sharia crisis was introduced by the Hausa-Fulani perhaps a response to the fact that the president of the country then, according to Heaton (2008) Gen Olusegun Obasanjo was not of Hausa-Fulani ethnic group. He is from Yoruba tribe and the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group was not comfortable to have another tribe rule them. The only way out, they reassured themselves may be to destabilize the whole nation politically.

Today, what is in vogue is the Hausa-Fulani herdsmen destroying agricultural products of farmers mostly in Benue, Jos, Taraba state etc with life and properties burnt. The president of the federation according to Okoro (2017) could not stop them rather was asking each state Governor to give the Fulani rearers a space of land in their states. This statement encourages and motivates the Fulani cattle rearers to continue their damages unabated. As a negative counter railing force to national unity, the phenomenon of ethnicity in Nigeria political scene has been the pre-occupation of many writers. This we consider a step in the right direction since the ability to identify one's problems is actually the first and necessary step to solving it.

According to Onigu (2000), several sections of the Nigerian constitution recognize our federal and heterogeneous character in the regulation of our economic and political affairs. In this respect, according to Ogbu (2014), there is often a deliberate confusion when territorial separatist movement are used apparently to refer to ethnic separatism, so that the unfortunate words, North, East and West territorial zone represent three-four ethnic groups. This intellectual conceit is meant to becloud the real political and social issues. All these conceits show that our politicians have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing from our past experience.

Writing on religious differences in Nigeria, so many writers have written so well on the existing difference in religion, focusing mainly on Christianity and Islam. These two foreign religions have divided Nigeria into two opposing camps, the south and the North. The South mainly Christians try to use Christianity to ride to political power while the North thickly dominated by the Moslems use Islam as a major tool in acquiring their superiority and sustaining power over the South. Kuka (1993:3) opined that the entire agenda of the Islamic

Jihad was the establishment of an Islamic state based on the sharia. Suleman (2007) supported this when he said the jihad was meant to make the word of Allah supreme, to bring unbelief and tyranny to naught, to bring dignity and honor to Moslems and save them from the humiliation of having to live under the influence of an unIslamic power. The issues as to whether Muslims can and should live their faith within a non-sharia environment is seemingly academic, but it has been a bone of contention since the conquest of the earth by the caliphate. It has therefore continued to be a major aspect of our political engineering. This became obvious because during the Constituent Assembly (CA) in 1977/78 many scholars argued that sharia debate at the Assembly marked the beginning of the introduction of religion into Nigeria. Mathew Kukah has maintained that the real source of the problem has to do with the diametrically opposed views on the perception and definition of the basis of modern democracy as it contrasts with power and privilege among the people of Nigeria.

Beyond The Frontiers of Religious Crises

While one may agree with the notion that history does not repeat itself, some consistent patterns in history can be discerned. Such consistent patterns are supposed to serve a predictive function and thereby help in steering the ship of nationhood in the right direction. Ethnic conflict in Nigeria as apparent from the foregoing has been responsible for the failure of democracy and the institutionalization or perpetuation of 'Meritocracy' as a form of governance. In accepting the validity of these contentions the main issues may be in seeing that useful lesson can be learnt from them and how these will inform peace and development in Nigeria. Actually, a lot of Nigeria scholars particularly Nnoli have made a lot of intellectual inputs into imaginative ameliorative mechanism for dealing with ethnicity and ethnic conflicts.

However, the problem it would appear lies in the insincerity and of the leadership in applying antidotes to ethnic conflicts. The ruling elites especially the politician and their collaborator have also found ethnicity as a base from which to rise to power and perpetuate themselves. As a result, it is imperative that the most fundamental panacea to ethnic conflict is the sincerity and the will of the government to enforce strategies aimed at nipping same in the bud irrespective of whose Ox is gored. In this sense, such solutions as the quota system, federal character, and rotational presidency and of course federalism among others can only work where there is the real and genuine desire to see them work.

Call for Restructuring in Nigeria: By Who and in Whose Interest?

Today more than before, the call and agitations for restructuring are gathering momentum and gaining grounds and support even among individuals and groups from non-Igbo political extraction. When the calls came on board, some people and groups became apprehensive and jittery without first understanding what it entails and the reasons or rationale for calling for it. Among them, according to Ugwoke (2018) are the seven Northern governors, Northern caucuses and ethnic cleavage individuals who in their myopic sense of what equity and fair play, social justice, inclusives and public good entails attacked both those agitating for restructuring and the process. According to Aji (2018) the more worrisome aspect of it all is the fact that the President and commander in chief of the Armed forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Mohamadu Buhari who should accommodate the views, shades of opinion, feelings and concern of all ethnic groups in a public broadcast casually said people should forget the call for restructuring.

Concept of Restructuring

In simple terms, restructuring according to Justice Development & Peace/Caritas (JDPC, 2018) means:

- To bring to par
- To balance or bring to equity or to equal status
- To reorganize lopsided system or growing component units of such system until it become beneficial to all.

Components of Restructuring: What the calls are for Political Equalization

This means correcting imbalances in political appointment, marginalization and inequity in the number of geo-political zone, number of state and local government.

Resources Control

This means allowing states to have measure of control of those mineral resources deposit in their locality through resource allocation, retention, distribution, control and management.

Re-addressing the usage of the proceeds from abundant material resources for the advancement of a particular section of the country.

Fiscal Federalism:

This is anchored around the decentralization of Nigeria's fiscal decision making powers to accommodate sub-national government i.e. states and local governments. This allows for the transfer of certain functions, resources and authority to lower governmental structures to usher in equity, fair and acceptable financial independence in resource allocation, retention, distribution control and management.

State Policy

This involves allowing states to work out their own policy security network to curb the current Fulani herdsmen attack, Boko-Haram insurgency and kidnapping prevalent in Nigeria today which threatens the corporate existence and unity of Nigeria.

Devolution of power

Devolution of power involves the collapsing of the overwhelming, totalitarian influence and power of the centre to accommodate states and local government measures of control (Makata; 2018).

Constitutional Amendment

To address some instances and lopsidedness inherent in some parts of the 1999 constitution, constitutional amendment is needed.

Review of revenue allocation formula

To address the ugly situation where greater chunk of the yearly budget goes to the government of the centre i.e. Federal and to embark on resources diversification is also very important.

Issuance of mineral mining license to oil producing states

This is to allow oil producing state to mine, market and use the proceeds from oil to develop their area.

Local Government autonomy

To enable local governments utilize the money allotted to them in the development of the rural communities. This also aims to stop state's interference with local government statutory allocation and to solve the problems associated with the states local government joint account.

Enthroning monitoring mechanism in government

- To ensure strict compliance with job/project specifications
- To ensure best quality work execution
- To ensure transparency and interactional best practice

Who facilitates/drives the process and for whose Interest?

Ideally, accumulation of the calls and recommendations should be domiciled in the National Assembly for robust debate, acceptance and signing into law. The role of the executive in documenting the agitations and forwarding it to the National Assembly cannot be ignored. Ironically, the body language and open declaration of the leader of the executive arm and other Northern cabals about restructuring are negative despite the nod given to the issues by El-Rufai-led Government fact finding committee on restructuring. For restructuring to take place, the needful needs to be done by allowing and giving the agitators fair hearing, the executive not shying away from listening and forwarding an executive bill on restructuring to the National Assembly who in turn will accelerate its passage into law for the sake of social justice, equity, inclusiveness, peace and solidarity of Nigeria nation.

Restructuring: In Whose Interest?

Asking who will benefit from the process more than the why of it is becoming sentimental, political, logical, bias and ethnic orientated because the genuine reason for any enterprise is greater than whether it is A or B or any people or others will benefit more (Ezea; 2018). Nevertheless, the south-East and South-South Zones of the country who clamor for restructuring because they are marginalized in the scheme of things will have sense of inclusiveness, equity and fair play in a Nation that belongs to all of us when restructuring is granted on a wider context, the whole country will benefit from restructuring because it will accelerate equal development, will bring about everlasting peace, solidarity and brotherhood which have eluded Nigeria for so long now. To move Nigeria out of its present socio-economic and political quagmire is a task that will be better done with and through restructuring.

Conclusion

Ethnic nationalism and religious difference in Nigeria have in deed become a constant feature in the country and even in some other African countries. This has serious implications not only for the countries concerned but also for regional organization and the international community. Religion and politics are so indispensable that any distortion of one affects the other adversely. The two must be united for the progressing the country Nigeria. Successful harnessing of the energies and talents of this multicultural conglomerate will be the bedrock of a virile nation, while the contrary action of partiality and alienation will constitute that rock that will tilt the ship of the nation to disintegration. No wonder why there is cry of agitation and clamor for restructuring Nigerian political system today.

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