RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AND NATIONAL SECURITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Religious conflicts have become a reoccurring decimal in Nigeria and have continued to negatively impact on the country's economic, political and social landscape. These conflicts are propelled by a variety of causes, including religious intolerance, theological disagreements, fanaticism, poverty amongst others and the desire for dominance among religious groups, particularly between Christians and Muslims. Historically, Nigeria's complex religious structure has led to tensions, exacerbated by colonial amalgamation and political manipulation, which often instigates these conflicts. This paper focuses on the link between religious conflict and national security in Nigeria and its implication for community development. The paper revealed that religious violence disrupts economic activities, creates political instability, and fractures social cohesion, which leads to significant losses for businesses and communities and increases the level of poverty in various communities. It often manifests in violent confrontations between Muslims and Christians, especially in regions where there is a significant religious divide, such as the Northern and Southern regions of the country. These conflicts undermine national security by threatening the stability and development of the country, as resources are diverted towards the restoration of order rather than developmental advancement. It is, therefore, obvious that this issue poses a serious challenge to Nigeria's development goals, necessitating coordinated and collaborative efforts from religious and political leaders as well as law enforcement agencies to prevent further escalation. The paper argues that addressing religious conflict is quite essential for securing Nigeria's future and achieving community development. It also emphasizes the import of dialogue among leaders of religious groups, tolerance and education.

Keywords: Religion, Religious Conflict, National Security, Community, Development.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an integral part of the daily activities of the human person. It arises as a result of disagreements in the activities in which people are involved in. Conflict is bound to happen and in fact, expected to occur because the human person is a unique being with his/her sense of reasoning and preferences which, in sometimes, does not align with the other. There is a popular saying that once an activity involves more than one person, there is bound to be conflict. This is because there is the likelihood of each of them having different suggestions as to how such an activity will be executed and if this is not properly managed, it can lead to conflict. This implies that proper management of disagreements is very crucial avoiding conflicts. There are different kinds of conflicts, but for the sake of this paper, emphasis will be laid on religious conflicts.

Religious conflict simply refers to conflicts emanating from the misunderstanding of the practices of various religious groups or sects. According to Samuel and Anadi (2021), religious conflict is a situation in which religious adherents are involved in a serious disagreement or argument with one religious group or another. This is a situation in which there are oppositions in ideas, opinions, feelings and wishes. It exists in a situation where one religious group, through whatever means, tries to claim superiority over the other, or where there is a lack of tolerance of the activities or programmes of a religious group. Auta (2017), asserts that religious conflict is the disagreement, dispute or controversy in ideas or viewpoints held by two or more adherents of different religious communities or two or more religious groups. This means that the foundation of religious conflict is ideological. In other words, it is usually based on disagreements in the ideas upon which religious bodies or groups are founded or established.

Religious conflict is also common in a situation where one religious group feels threatened by the existence of another or where one religious group tries or actually imposes itself and doctrines upon another. This is a common reality in communities or environments where there are many religious entities or bodies; for instance, Nigeria, though, constitutionally identified as a secular State, is known to be profoundly religious. The country is home to several religious bodies which by the constitution, are allowed to exist as co-equals. Examples include African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam, and Christianity among others. While adherents of the ATR are found both in the Northern and Southern part of the country and seem to be comparatively fewer than others, at least by virtue of public profession of their practice, adherents of Islam are found majorly in the North while those of Christianity perceptibly dominate the Southern part of Nigeria.

Every religious organization has its own belief system and practices otherwise known as doctrine which every member is expected to strictly adhere to if he or she must be recognisedas a faithful follower of the religion. It is this strict adherence to religious teachings and practices that sometimes results in conflicts with the likelihood of degenerating to violence if not properly and quickly managed. This is because everyone is trying to protect his or her religious interest, recognised as a faithful follower and identified as worthy of benefits promised and kept for faithful members. This sort of religious conflict is quite familiar between the Muslims and the Christians, for instance.

Interestingly, the perpetrators of religious conflicts both claim to act in obedience to the laws or commands of God. Similarly, rather than promote peace and love which is claimed to be at the core of their religious doctrine, they end up creating a strong divide between the Muslim North and the Christian South which according to Onuoha (2014), is one of the enablers of insecurity in the country. In other words, religious conflict constitutes a significant danger to the security and so all stakeholders must put head together to ensure that conflicts, in whatever form, are prevented and security sustained.

On the other hand, security refers to freedom from any form of danger, anxiety and fear. It refers to a situation where people feel safe and are actually safe from any sort of harm. In the broader sense, security is seen as the struggle to secure the most basic necessities of life such

as food, fuel, medicine and shelter (Obafemi, 2016).National security, therefore implies a situation in which is people feel free and safe from internal sabotage or external attack. National security, according to Onuoha, (2014), refers to the ability of a nation to prevent all forms of threats to its survival ranging from external aggression to threats of economic, political, military and environmental insecurities, whilst grappling with the challenges of nation-building and good governance. This implies that as long as there is insecurity within a country, such a nation may never attain its potentials for development. This means also that both religious and political leaders as well as law enforcement agencies and individuals have to find a way to mitigate the challenge posed by religious violence in all parts of the country so as to ensure sustainable development in the country.

The concept of Religious Conflict
Nigeria as nation has a complex socio-political landscape which, according to Chidi (2022), is characterized by a diverse population comprising various ethnic and religious groups. The dynamic and complex nature of the population is seen as one of the sources of religious conflicts in the nation. As highlighted earlier, the population in Nigeria could be split along three main religious groups which are: African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam and Christianity. However, the existence of religious conflicts is, to a large extent between Islam and Christianity. This may be due to their overwhelming population and the desire to gain more followers. According to Chidi (2022), religious conflict in Nigeria can be traced back to colonial rule and the subsequent amalgamation of diverse ethnic and religious groups in 1914. This is because, before the arrival of the British colonial administration, the people in the territory later known as Nigeria existed as kingdoms, emirates and communities and had different religious practices such as Christianity and ATR in the south and Islam in the north. This obvious disparity did not prevent the British colonialists from merging the north and south together (Samuel &Anadi, 2021).

Though the colonialists were able to manage the conflicts that emerged from this amalgamation, the division became more pronounced when Nigeria gain independence in 1960 especially as political elites began to exploit religious identities for political gain (Onuoha, 2014). However, since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has witnessed a resurgence of religious conflicts. There are several notable incidents that can be used as examples of religious violence in Nigeria. They include:

Benue State
On 2nd of March, 2019, herdsmen killed 16 persons in an attack on Gwer West LGA. The government blamed the attack on allegations of theft of cows by livestock guards made by the military. Residents said the herdsmen brought along many cattle and took over their lands for grazing.

Borno State
The Koshebe conflict in BornoState took place on 28th November, 2020 in the village of Koshebe, in Borno, when as many as 110 civilians and peasant farmers were killed and six were wounded as they worked in rice fields in Koshebe village, near the northeast Nigerian city of Maiduguri. About 15 women were also kidnapped.

Ilorin

In 1986, militant Muslims attacked Christians during a Palm Sunday procession in Ilorin, leading to significant destruction of churches and loss of lives. This incident is emblematic of how religious festivals can become flashpoints for violence (Adabembe, &Adedayo 2022)

Jos

The city of Jos has experienced recurrent violent clashes between Christian and Muslim communities since the early 2000s. These conflicts often stem from competition over land and political representation but are exacerbated by underlying religious sentiments.

Kaduna State

On the 19th of October, 2018 Christian's in Adara community and Hausa Muslim youths had a fatal fracas. A dispute in the market led to the death of two people from the Adara community. In retaliation, a communal conflict erupted; the Adaras attacked the Hausa community killing dozens of people. The conflict resulted in the death of 55 persons.

Kafanchan-Kaduna Crisis

This conflict erupted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, fueled by tensions between Christian farmers and Muslim herders over land use and religious differences. The violence resulted in numerous deaths and displacement of communities.

Kogi State

On the 7th of March, 2019, in Kwomu community of Bassa LGA, twenty residents were killed in an attack by an EgburraMozum militia in Bassa LGA, Kogi State.

Plateau State

On the 3rd of May, 2020 an ethno-religious conflict erupted in a Christian school. The Messiah College High School in Plateau state was closed down due to COVID-19, but the perpetrators stormed the on-campus home of the school's principal, Rev. Bayo James Famonure. He was shot in the head, while his wife was shot in the back and his two children were shot on the feet. The conflict further led to the death of four Christians who were ambushed by same attackers and were killed in Adu village.

Rivers State

On the 19th of March, 2019, in Khana LGA Five people were confirmed to have been killed by suspected Iceland group members in a cult attack on Kono Boue in Khana LGA. The cause is alleged to be retaliation for the killing of their member.

Zamfara State Conflict

On the 9th of June, 2019, 16 people celebrating Eid al-Fitr were killed by unidentified bandits in Kanoma Community of Maru LGA.

Boko Haram Insurgency

Since its emergence in 2009, Boko Haram has been responsible for thousands of deaths, primarily targeting Christians and moderate Muslims. The group's aim to establish an Islamic state has led to widespread violence, including bombings, kidnappings, and massacres.

Causes of Religious Conflict in Nigeria

In Nigeria, there are certain factors that are obviously breeding grounds for religious violence. These factors differ from one environment to another. Some of them are discussed below.

The Theological Factor

All religions have specific beliefs and practices which are entailed in literatures that are considered sacred and divine by the adherents of such religions. However, according to Sulaiman (2016), due to a lack of in-depth understanding, outright ignorance, misinterpretation or cheer mischief, these writings have been unnecessarily and maliciously interpreted out of context which in most instances has resulted in emotional responses and violence among the adherents of the various religions in Nigeria.

Religious Intolerance

Sulaiman (2016) posited that religious intolerance is a blind and fixated mental and psychological negative attitude towards religious belief and practices that are contrary to one's cherished beliefs and practices. It manifests itself in the inability to recognize and accommodate views and opinions of others. This is one of the major sources of religious violence in Nigeria. Nigerian religious adherents, especially the Muslims and the Christians have demonstrated intolerant attitudes to result to violence.

Religious Fanaticism

Religious fanaticism refers to the willingness, disposition and desire to protect the teachings and beliefs of one's religion through violent means. It entails the zeal and willingness to defend one's religious beliefs at whatever cost. Religious fanatics show excessive irrational zeal to defend their religions which makes destructive agents of religious disharmony in the society (Sulaiman 2014). Christians and Muslims are at one stage or another fanatical to result to violent confrontation.

Aggressive or Militant Preaching/Evangelization

This is an offensive, disrespectful and forceful process of getting members of another religion or sect to drop theirs and accept one's own religion. It entails forcefully propagating one's faith and imposing it on others who may have been considered as infidels, pagans or unbelievers.

Poverty

Poverty is an endemic issue in Nigeria. Its presence, especially in the urban areas apparently account for the bulk of violent conflicts. The existence of poverty is related to issues such as unemployment, inadequate housing, physical and social infrastructures (Sulaiman&Ojo 2013). The downward slide of the Nigerian economy seems to be placing a lot of pressure on Nigerian citizens which makes them react with commiserate violence. Sulaiman (2016) asserts

that poverty creates societal problems such as shelter, clothing and feeding. To this end, exceptionally poor persons can do anything to sustain themselves. Thus, the poor youth (Almajiris) particularly in Northern Nigeria are manipulated with small amount of money to cause religious disturbances.

Literacy Level of Religious Adherents
The level of education of the adherents of various religious groups is another factor that seem to promote religious violence. Due to the poor or low level of education some of the members of these groups, they do not possess critical thinking abilities and therefore are willing to carry out any instruction given to them without considering how right or wrong such instructions may be.

Political Manipulation
Some politicians are often capable of using whatever means within their reach, including religious conflicts to achieve their objective. It is not uncommon in Nigeria to hear politicians calling on members of their religion to ensure that aspirants from other religions do not win elections. Some refuse to publicly condemn obvious criminal activities perpetuated by members of a certain religious group so as retain their support during election periods. This politicization, in the words of Chidi (2022), fosters an environment of distrust and animosity between different religious groups.

Meaning of National Security
There is a plethora of definitions of national security which makes the concept remain ambiguous and lacking general acceptance. However, proceeding logically with the understanding of security as being free from fear or harm, national security, therefore, implies preserving and protecting a nation and its citizens from fear or harm. In other words, national security refers to ensuring and guaranteeing the safety of the citizens of the country and guiding them towards continuous growth and development. Thus, a secured nation state is one that is able to protect and develop itself so that it can develop its core values, meet the needs of its people and provide them with the right atmosphere for self-improvement (Adabembe&Adedayo 2022).

According to Adamu and Ben (2015), national security refers to the aggregate of security interests of all individuals, communities, ethnic groups and political entities to guarantee safety and security, prosperity of individuals and institutes within a nation. It entails not just the security of individuals or individual citizens, but that of the entire populace of the nation. It implies putting necessary mechanisms in place to forestall insecurity from arising in the first place and combating it and quickly putting it under control as soon as it arises. This means that national security is both preventive and reactive in nature. To this extent, to ensure national security, a nation needs to possess economic security, energy security, environmental security, amongst others (Campbell & Harwood, 2018).

In the same vein, ensuring national security requires taking certain steps some of which are using diplomacy to rally allies and isolate threats, marshalling economic power to facilitate or compel cooperation, maintaining effective armed forces, implementing civil defence and

emergency preparedness measures (including anti-terrorism legislation). National security also incorporates the ensuring of resilience in critical infrastructure, using intelligence services to detect and defeat or avoid threats and espionage, and to protect classified information using counter intelligence services or secret police to protect the nation from internal threats (Auta, 2017). The absence of peace, mutual respect and tolerance among citizens and members of various religious circles is capable of resulting in violence of various degrees and ultimately retrogression and underdevelopment.

Effect of Religious Conflict on National Security
The major concerns of national security are the preservation and maintenance of a nation's interests. Sulaiman (2016) posit that 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. The need for regular discussion about religious conflict is principally due its effects on national security. These effects include;

Economic effect: The disruption of business activities as a result of religious violence or crises not only affects the business entities, but also their dependents and even the government. In most cases, business premises are looted and set ablaze by religious fanatics all in the name of defending their faith thereby incurring heavy losses for business owners. According to Chidi (2022), several businesses have either shut down or relocated from Nigeria due to religious conflict and the prevailing insecurity, causing a decline in the economy.

Political effect: Violence seems to be a way through which politicians in Nigeria score points, retain their position and relevance. This is particularly true in communities with a large number of uneducated and unemployed populace. The absence of education accounts for adearthof critical thinking abilities while unemployment makes people willing tools in the hands their political masters. When violence continues unabated, it can lead to political instability in any nation. It can also lead to the erosion of cohesion and harmonious co-existence amongst different religions in the country.

Social effect: Social implications of religious conflicts refer to the humanitarian challenges which are the outcomes of such clashes. A typical example is that of the Sharia crises that started in Kaduna metropolis, which spilled over to Zaria and Kano. This issue led to a loss of lives, increased mutual suspicion and distrust and also severed the existing friendship existing between members of various religious groups living these communities.

Implications of Religious Conflicts for Community Development in Nigeria
Religious violence has profound and far-reaching implications for community development in Nigeria. The country's socio-economic and political landscape has been shaped significantly by its history of religious conflicts, particularly between Christians and Muslims. These conflicts create a ripple effect, influencing not only the immediate victims but also the long-term development of affected communities. The implications range from disruptions in economic activities to hindrances in social cohesion and governance.

Economic Disruptions and Stagnation

One of the most direct implications of religious violence is the disruption of normal business operations resulting in significant economic losses. A typical example is the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East region which has crippled agricultural activities in states such as Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. The situation has negatively affected farmers and displaced them from their lands (Campbell & Harwood, 2018). Similarly, religious violence discourages investment in affected areas. It is almost impossible for any investor to deliberately establish his or her business in a crises prone area. This lack of investment limits opportunities for job creation, increases unemployment and inhibits economic growth, which further deepens the level of poverty in the communities.

Destruction of Infrastructure and Public Services

One of the attendant results of religious violence is the destruction of physical infrastructure, such as roads, schools, hospitals, and markets, all of which are essential for community development. UNICEF (2019) reported that Boko Haram insurgency has led to the destruction of over 500 schools in the North-East, affecting the education of over 280,000 children. In addition, in conflict-prone areas, access to healthcare services is disrupted, leading to an increase in preventable diseases and higher mortality rates.

Displacements and Humanitarian Crisis

Most of those who reside in IDP camps especially in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria are there due to displacements arising from religious crisis. The displacement of people disrupts community structures and hampers the continuity of development projects, as resources are diverted to address immediate humanitarian needs. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2020), over 2.9 million people have been displaced in the North-East due to the Boko Haram conflict. The mass displacement of people places a strain on local resources and disrupts community development efforts, as areas that once thrived become depopulated and impoverished.

Erosion of Social Capital and Trust

In Nigeria, religious violence tends to increase existing ethnic tensions, which further polarizes communities. For example, in Jos, Plateau State, long-standing conflicts between Christian and Muslim communities have created deep distrust and divisions that hinder efforts at peacebuilding and collective action for development (Anowai, &Okebuinor 2019). The breakdown of trust and social cohesion limits the possibility of community members to work together towards proffering solutions to community problems, which is an essential recipe for sustainable development.

Educational Setbacks

Education is quite essential for the growth and development of an individual, his/her immediate community and the nation at large. This potential development is, however, inhibited by religious violence through destruction of schools and learning centres. This educational setback limits future opportunities for these children and perpetuates cycles of poverty and underdevelopment. Without access to education, young people are more

vulnerable to being recruited by extremist groups or becoming involved in criminal activities, which further destabilizes communities.

Weakening of Governance and Public Institutions
Religious crises affect the government's ability to deliver basic services to communities as scarce resources are diverted to restoring peace and order. According to Ehwarieme, (2011), religious conflict also creates an environment where corruption and criminality thrive, further impeding development.

Psychological Impact and Trauma
Another significant albeit often neglected implication of religious conflict is the psychological perspective. Evidence abounds that survivors of religious violence, especially children, experience trauma, which can have long-lasting effects on their mental health (IOM, 2020). This situation is capable of affecting their ability to contribute to community development.

Conclusion and Recommendations
Religious conflict is a constant reality in Nigeria. It is a situation where members of various religious groups physically express dislike and intolerance of other religious groups in a bid to defend their faith. Religious conflict in Nigeria is caused by theological factors, fanaticism, aggressive or militant preaching/evangelization, poverty, literacy level of religious adherents and **political manipulation. Religious conflict is a major challenge to national security. This is because it exposes citizens to dangers of various degrees and threatens their existence which is clearly against the will of any government. More than that, religious conflicts affect the economic, political and social lives of citizens. A very disturbing aspect of religious conflicts or violence is its capacity to dwarf developmental processes or activities through economic stagnation, destruction of infrastructure and public services, educational setbacks, weakening of governance and public institutions and psychological impact and trauma. This necessitates urgent intervention by all stakeholders. In view of this, the following recommendations are proffered.**

1. **Interfaith dialogue and education** between leaders of different religious groups should be promoted, supported and sustained to foster mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect.
2. Laws against hate and inciteful speeches should be sternly and meticulously implemented as a way of deterring religious adherents from flouting the laws.
3. It is also quite essential for the government to aggressively address the issues of poverty and unemployment in society since they have been identified as enablers of religious conflicts.
4. Religious tolerance and peace education should be introduced at all levels of education in Nigeria as a way of raising a generation of people who respect persons of other religions and are properly disposed to coexisting with them.
5. There is also the need to strengthen collaboration between religious leaders, communities, and security agencies to identify and address potential conflicts in good time.

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