

## **Ethno-Religious Violence in Nigeria: A Major Impediment to National Integration**

**KAUSAR NEYAZI ANSARI**  
Research Scholar, Ph. D.  
MMAJ Academy of International Studies,  
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi (India)

### **ABSTRACT**

Ethno-religious violence has become the order of the day in Nigeria, particularly after its democratic set up in 1999. It has been threatening the very foundation of newly built democracy in Nigeria. The religious minorities, particularly the Christians, harbor grievances against the majorities for their unequal allocation and distribution of natural resources in Nigeria, which often manifest in violent conflicts among them. To a greater degree, the ethno-religious violence has led to tensions, loss of lives and properties in the country. In fact, the violence has become a major obstacle for socio-economic and political development in Nigeria. Consequently, it has made a negative impact on the national integration of the country. This paper analyses the major causes of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. It finally concludes, inter alia, with recommendations for strong leadership and good governance to bring transparency and accountability in the conduct of affairs of the nation and also to control violence and promote peace and stability in the country.

**Key Words :** Ethno-religious violence, Democracy, Good governance, National integration

### **INTRODUCTION**

With a population of more than 160 million and over 300 ethnic groups in Nigeria<sup>1</sup>, belonging to several religious sects, it has remained a multi-ethnic state since its independence<sup>2</sup>. The country has remained failure in unifying the diverse ethno-religious groups socially, economically and politically and it has been trying to cope with the problems of ethno-religious violence for the last several decades. The country is further divided into rival groups based on regions, the most basic division being the north versus the south. Religion is also an important area of concern. Roughly half of the population is Muslims, with a large Christian minority numbering about 40 per cent. About 10 per cent of Nigerians continue to embrace Indigenous religions. Islam, highly driven by theocracy, stands against the secular nature of the state in Nigeria. This has threatened the internal stability of the country.

Since gaining its independence in 1960, Nigeria has seen many phases of corrupt and ineffectual civil rule and repressive and corrupt military rule. Political instability, economic

**How to cite this Article:** Ansari, Kausar Neyazi (2017). Ethno-Religious Violence in Nigeria: A Major Impediment to National Integration. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, 4 (11 & 12) : 516-523.

decline, and 'divide and rule' policy are among the problems that have increased group divisions within the country to a dangerous point. One of the major crises was the civil war in the late 1960s, which ensued shortly after independence. However, violence has become more pervasive and intense in the post-civil war period, particularly since 1990s<sup>3</sup>.

Ethno-religious violence has escalated in Nigeria due to increase of ethno-religious politicization and mobilization after democracy opened up political space in 1999 after a long period of military dictatorship<sup>4</sup>. These issues generate the fiercest contestations over the control of state power; resource allocation, such as oil and land ownership; and citizenship rights. This ultimately leads to violent ethno-religious conflict, which further leads to loss of lives and destruction of properties as well as damage to national integration, trust, and confidence. As a consequence, it has become a grave challenge to the existence and legitimacy of the state in Nigeria over the years.

The paper examines the frequent occurrences of ethno-religious violence and its socio-economic and political impact on the country. This study finds that the religious minorities, particularly Christians often harbor grievances against the Muslim majorities due to unequal access to national resources of the country. In effect, these grievances are often manifested in ethno-religious crisis and violence<sup>5</sup>. The study has used secondary sources of data to support the arguments. To understand the Nigerian society and the causes of ethno-religious violence, historical and analytical approach has been adopted. Thus, the study examines the implications of ethno-religious violence for national integration in Nigeria.

### **The Concept of Ethnicity and Religion:**

To understand the discourses of ethno-religious violence, it is pertinent to explore the concept of ethnicity and religion, and the relationship between them. Now-a-days the phenomenon of ethnicity has attracted wide attention around the contemporary world. It has become the central concern or cause of individual anxiety, group conflict and political turmoil. Although widely studied by a number of scholars since 1960s, ethnicity and by extension ethnic groups, ethnic diversity and ethnic conflicts have been highly contested concepts. Despite 'slippery and problematic'<sup>6</sup> nature of ethnicity, a number of political scientists and economists have used ethnicity in their analysis. They have especially used it for explaining social and economic outcomes most notably relating to violent group mobilization, secessionist movements, and economic growth differences.

So far as the term 'ethnicity' is concerned, it has no universally accepted definition. Ethnicity is generally characterized as a sense of group belonging based on the ideas of common origin, history, culture, language, experience and values. Further, for the formation of ethnic identity, common descent whether real or putative, socially relevant cultural or physical characteristics, a set of attitude and behavior is necessary. In some cases, physical attributes, such as skin colour or body shape provide the foundation of ethnic identity. The members of an ethnic group shares ideas, behavior patterns, feelings and meaning. They distinguish themselves from others as well as perceive that they share a common destiny<sup>7</sup>.

There are a number of definitions of ethnicity given by different scholars. According to J. Milton Yinger<sup>8</sup>: "an ethnic group is a segment of a larger society whose members are not thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and to share important segments

of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients.”

Thomas Erikson considers ethnicity as aspects of relationship between groups which consider themselves, and is regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive<sup>9</sup>.

Prema A. Kurien defines ethnicity in the following manner<sup>10</sup>:

“ethnicity refers to the identity, culture, and practices of a group of people who feel a sense of connection based on a notion of common heritage. In addition, to be considered an ethnic group, its members should have a sense of being distinct from the rest of society and should have institutionalized boundary making mechanism to maintain and emphasize their social separation.”

Besides, different scholars have defined ‘ethnicity’ in different ways. In reality, the meanings of ‘ethnicity’ vary depending on the positive and negative connotations assigned to it. For example, in the USA, problems associated with population other than those of the Anglo-Saxon background are considered to be related to ethnicity. In the former USSR, ethnicity was largely associated with the problem of national minorities. In Nigeria, in particular, such problems emerged due to relative deprivation, unequal access to resources and socio-economic development. Thus, the phenomenon of ethnicity is the expressive aspect of ethnic identities. It involves consolidation, mobilization, goal setting, and goal attainment. It is a part sentimental, part ideology, and part agenda as nationalism, assimilation and cultural pluralism have ideological content within themselves.

In recent decades, ethnic movements have played a significant role in most of the underdeveloped and under-developing countries. These movements have their own ideologies to meet with their own goals and aspiration. In many cases, the practice of prejudice and discrimination against the ethnic minorities has created the feelings of ethnicity. When economy is retarded and inequality prevails among the groups, some groups organize themselves on ethnic lines to fight for their cultural autonomy, political freedom, economic justice, and fraternal social order. In such situations, violence occurs between the groups due to the desire for more equitable order or to retain privileges that finds expression through ethnicity.

The term ‘religion’ is derived from the Latin word ‘religare’ meaning thereby ‘to bind together’. It is generally stated as the human response to reality perceived as sacred. Commonly, religion embraces a creed, a cult, a code of conduct, and a confessional community. Here a creed defines the standard of beliefs and values concerning the ultimate origin, meaning, and purpose of life. It develops from myths and finds official expression in doctrines and dogmas. Cult encompasses the prayers, devotions, spiritual disciplines, and patterns of communal worship that give ritual expression to the creed. A code of conduct defines the explicit moral norms which governs the behavior of those who belong to the confessional community. Thus religion mainly constitutes an integral culture, capable of forming personal and social identity and influencing subsequent experience and behavior in profound ways.

In the late twentieth century, the combinations of creed, code, cult, and type of religious community were as numerous and diverse as the social identities, political parties, and legal claims. As a community of response to creed, a religion can be world affirming or world renouncing, intricately structured or loosely organized, monotheistic, or polytheistic. Thus, it is hardly a matter of surprise that status, cases, and regulations of various countries adopt

the definition of religion in different ways, which are difficult to integrate<sup>11</sup>.

For the last several decades, ethno-religious problems have become pervasive throughout the world. About three quarters of the violent conflicts are of such origins. Both religion and ethnicity have appeal to the emotions and sentiments and, in fact, they overlap each other<sup>12</sup>.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

To delve deep into the study, instrumentalist approach shall be adopted as the framework of analysis. This approach basically argues that people can change membership and move from one ethnic group to another. The change can take place either because of circumstances or according to Paul Brass, because of manipulation by political elites. He regarded ethnicity as a product of political myths, created and manipulated by political elites for their advantages and power. In this context, the forms, values, symbols and practices of ethnic groups become resources of elites in the competition for political power and advantages.<sup>13</sup> In the view of Otite (2000), ethnicity and religion act as symbols and become weapons of power game in a democratic setting. This also becomes instrumental in the rise of ethno-religious crisis in a newly-built democracy in Nigeria. The political elites mobilize and manipulate the masses to serve their own interests.

In Nigeria, the political elites of the related government, in fact, have little or almost failed to manage the affairs of the country and its resources for the betterment of the people. They have failed to resolve the fundamental issues such as minority rights, devolution of power, revenue allocation, corruption and mismanagement<sup>14</sup>. The disadvantaged sections of the population more often than not fight for their rights and privileges as well as for having equal access to national resources, ultimately leading to violent conflicts. Frequent occurrences of conflicts leading to insecurity, ethno-religious tensions, unrest and internal disturbances are directly connected to ethnicity and religious differences. In reality, these tools are used by political elites through manipulation not just to advance political consciousness but to exploit the naivety of the common masses in their quest for political power and advantages.

### **Causes of Ethno-Religious Violence in Nigeria:**

After independence of Nigeria, there has been a steady rise in the number of ethno-religious violence in the country, particularly after gaining its fourth republic in 1999. These ethno-religious violence has not only become more frequent but also prolonged and protracted. As a result, the victims of ethno-religious violence have suffered a great deal of difficulties putting their safety and survival in jeopardy. In Nigeria, violence is directly linked to the accusations and allegations of domination, discrimination and exploitation of one ethno-religious group over the other.

Nigeria enjoys multi-ethnicity and religious pluralism. The individuals and groups of the country have their diverse interests on how to accumulate socio-economic and political power among them. More often than not, one ethno-religious group or the other cries over marginalization or clamours for the distribution of power and resources of the country. The marginalized groups fight for their rights and privileges in order to have equal access to power and resources of the country. In some cases, violence also occurs when they attempt to modify the dominant values, norms, beliefs or ideology. In this context, the politics of

ethnicity and religion play an important role in rising nationalism and militancy of various ethnic and religious movements in meeting with the desired goals. Besides, the failure of the Nigerian leaders to establish good governance and national integration through deliberate and articulated policies has led to mass poverty and unemployment. This has resulted into ethno-religious and class conflicts in Nigeria. Poverty and unemployment have added too much violence in Nigeria, as both the factors increase the number of people who are prepared to kill or be killed for a given benefit. In addition, one of the most important causes of ethno-religious violence is the breakdown of social institutions, which care for the well-being of the citizens, their family, education, law etc. For example, the inability of many homes to provide food, clothes etc. due to poverty tends to increase immorality, divorce, drunkenness, frustration and aggression leading again to a large reserve of youth to be employed for the execution of violence. The religious institutions are also not playing their expected roles in removing the anti-religious feelings among the ethno-religious groups. Moreover, the law enforcement agents indulge in crimes, demand bribes and collect illegal levies openly<sup>15</sup>. These factors encourage social evils in the society, which lead to severe conflict and violence in Nigeria.

According to Nnoli (1978), conflict and violence is an important aspect of ethnicity. In fact, it becomes inevitable where there is intense competition between two or more groups for scarce resources, particularly in such societies where inequality prevails. In the case of Nigeria, with a great complexity of more than 300 ethnic groups belonging to several religious sects, the dominant groups are Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo. They are concentrated in their specific regions of the country *i.e.* the northern, the eastern, and the western regions respectively. In such complexities, there are intense rivalries among different ethnic groups for scarce national resources, such as oil and land. As oil has had a profound economic effect due to its dominance of the economy, ethno-religious groups attempt to have maximum benefits from oil resources. Besides, there are many typical community related issues with industry, particularly in the Niger Delta region, such as demand for community development, community recognition, contractor-related disputes, disputes over unfulfilled promises, demand for amenities, ownership claims etc. these issues create situations of competition and rivalries among different ethno-religious groups, which ultimately lead to violence. Also there is intense rivalries and competition among the political leaders in achieving political positions in order to get economic and political resources. They mobilize and manipulate the group members to serve their own ends. Further, the age old competition between the north and the south becomes intense when the political system fails to regulate the competition over resources, which ultimately turn into conflict and violence. The police are both inefficient and corrupt. They are ill-equipped to curb corrupt practices effectively. The judiciary which is said as the common man's last hope is also corrupt in its dealings leading the aggrieved to frustration and aggression. The breakdown of such institutions compels them to take support of ethnic militias such as 'Bakkasi Boys', O'dua People's Congress etc. and other gangster outfits, which involve in the political corruption, destruction and vandalization of public property, and assaults on the lives of citizens. In some cases, the deployment of the military to suppress violence without addressing the underlying issues further exacerbates violence.

The combination of 'Greed' and 'Grievance' is also one of the main causal factors of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. Government economic policies have not sufficiently

addressed poverty, underdevelopment and unemployment, which are breeding ground for grievances. In addition, greed has manifested itself in the Nigerian society that has made way for economic rivalry and wealth accumulation at the cost of the nation. Thus, corruption, self-centered leadership, poor implementation of government policies, the huge gap between the rich and the poor, and the arrogant display of stolen public fund by government officials etc. are some of the underlying causes of public anger and frustration that give way to ethnic and religious disagreement to erupt into violence<sup>16</sup>. The Shagamu riot of July 1999 between the Hausa and Yoruba in Ogun state is a true example of such crisis in Nigeria<sup>17</sup>.

Apart from these, religious intolerance and fanaticism play a big role in the eruption of violence in Nigeria. People are often driven by these two factors, which are believed to be the handiwork of some religious extremists. The violence between Igbira tribe and Bassa, and between Gade tribe and Gbagyi tribe over the control of a town in Nasarwa state in the year 1997 are some examples of such crisis in Nigeria. Besides, some religious leaders and fanatics through their strident and dogmatic teachings and intolerant predispositions strongly advocate for school exclusion for their followers. Moreover, they incite the people to violence against other ethno-religious groups who are regarded as enemies<sup>18</sup>. Ultimately, the end product of such teachings and opinions is the eruption of ethno-religious crisis that, ultimately, leads to national disintegration of the country.

#### **Implications of Ethno-Religious Violence on National Integration in Nigeria:**

Ethno-religious violence is a major problem confronting Nigeria. To a greater extent, the country has been continuously burdened with this problem, particularly after the democratic setup in 1999. The violence has been so pervasive that there is hardly any part of the country left which has not been affected. In fact, the ethno-religious violence is a formidable force in Nigeria that has impacted greatly on the socio-economic life of the people leading to major challenges for peace, security and overall development of the country<sup>19</sup>. In real sense, ethno-religious violence has become the defining characteristics of the democratic rule in Nigeria. Ultimately, the violence has seriously damaged the national integration of Nigeria.

The violence has undermined the unity and integrity of Nigeria. This is true in the sense that the Muslims have always clamoured for greater autonomy in the face of the secular tradition of the country. The introduction of sharia laws in eleven northern states led to major changes in all spheres of public life, which further transformed into Islamic oriented institutions. Consequently, this sponsored islamization badly affected the Christians. They were subjected to sharia proscriptions, such as the ban on alcohol and the gender separation in public places. In fact, all their life conduct came under the sharia laws. All these badly damaged the national integration of Nigeria even in terms of economic development. Just because of the fact that the foreign investors often become reluctant to establish their industries in such a crisis ridden country.

To put it further, the frequent violence has made the country more difficult to govern smoothly. In some of the cases, ethno-religious sentiments become the potent weapons by which developmental goals of the country are adversely affected. The frequent insurgency of Boko Haram has led to loss of lives and properties. A lot many people, including and children are rendered homeless and displaced. Scores of children have become orphans at

tender age which has ultimately led to socio-economic problems directly affecting to national integration of the country. Moreover, it has proved antithetical to Nigeria's democratic values. Rule of law, peace and harmony, constitutional supremacy and tolerance, etc. have suffered at the hands of ethno-religious violence. In real sense, Nigeria's political system is under the influence of ethno-religious crisis. Therefore, implicitly or explicitly, it has affected the country to achieve sustainable development<sup>20</sup>.

There has been large displacement of people and surge in inter-state migration. Besides, a great many people have become refugees, further leading to a number of social problems such as starvation, rise in mortality rate, diseases etc. According to the Nigerian Red Cross, the violence in Ihima local government area of Delta state, and Asakio local government area of Nasarwa state in April 2007 general elections led to the displacement of around 4,500 people. The IDPs temporarily found shelter in public buildings, where violent conflicts caused the destruction of their houses<sup>21</sup>. In another case, about 80% residents of metropolis in Borno state between the years 2013-14 migrated to other states for fear of attack by the Muslim fanatic group, Boko Haram.

Besides, the ethno-religious violence has led to the mass loss of lives and properties. It is estimated that more than 10,000 lives have been lost to ethno-religious violence since transition to democratic rule in May 1999. In addition to these, there have been rising questions of citizenship rights, open hostility between indigenes and settlers, and dehumanization of women and children, ultimately creating to the atmosphere of political instability, insecurity, growing apprehension in the political system of the country.

### **Conclusion:**

Ethno-religious violence is endemic in Nigeria. Both ethnicity and religion have impacted negatively on socio-economic and political fronts of the country. Frequent occurrences of violence are clear indications of imperfections and loss of confidence in the Nigerian state. Though the causes of ethno-religious violence are manifold, some of the underlying causes mentioned and discussed in this paper are intense competition between groups for scarce resources, institutional breakdown, lack of good governance, corruption, religious intolerance and fanaticism etc. In real sense, the violence is, implicitly or explicitly, linked to the accusations and allegations of domination, discrimination and exploitation of one group over the other that has badly damaged the national integration of Nigeria.

As Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, the federal government should strongly support and encourage the spirit of secularism and eliminate the problems of ethnicity and religion in the conduct of affairs of the nation. In real sense, strong leadership and good governance are essential prerequisite to bring transparency and accountability in the administration just to achieve greater equality among the ethno-religious groups; to control violence; to establish peace and stability; and to promote national integration in the country.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Agegbami, A. and Uche, C.I.N. (2015). Ethnicity and Ethnic Politics: An Impediment to Political Development in Nigeria. *Canadian Center for Science & Education*, 4 (1) : 59-67.

2. Osinubi, T.S. and Osinubi, O.S. (2006). Ethnic Conflict in Contemporary Africa: The Nigerian Experience. *J. Soc. Sci.*, **2** (2) : 101-114.
3. Herbst, Jeffrey (1996), "Is Nigeria a Viable State?", *Washington Quarterly*, **19** (2) : 151-172.
4. Osaghae, E.E. and Suberu, R.T. (2005). A History of Identities, Violence, and Stability in Nigeria", *Centre for Research and Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE)*, Working Paper No. 6, University of Oxford, p.4
5. Marcus, B.A. (2015). Ethnic Politics and Religion in Nigeria: Implication for National Integration. *J. Political Sci. & Administration*, **3** (3) : 1-11.
6. Brown, G.K. and Langer, A. (2010). "Conceptualizing and Measuring Ethnicity", *JICA-RI Working Paper No. 9*, March 2010, p. 2
7. Regmi, R. (1995). Ethnicity and Identity. *Occasional Paper in Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. **VIII**, p. 3
8. Yinger, J. Milton (1997). '*Ethnicity: Source of Strength? Source of Conflict?*', Jaipur: Rawat Publication, p. 3
9. Erikson, T. (2002). '*Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Pluto Press, p. 136
10. Kurien, P.A. (2002). '*Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity*', New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 22
11. Appleby, S. (2010). "Powerful Medicine" in Jeffrey Hayness(ed.) *Religion and Politics*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 26
12. R. Joseph and Todd (2011), "Ethnicity and Religion", in Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*, London: Routledge, p. 68
13. Brass, P. (1985), Language, '*Religion and Politics in North India*', New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 168
14. Egharevba, M.E. and Iruonagbe, C.T. (2015). "Ethnic/ Religious Insurgencies and Nation-Building in Nigeria". *Internat. Affairs & Global Strategy*, **29** :39-52.
15. Salawu, B. (2010). "Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: Causal Analysis and Proposals for New Management Strategies". *European J. Social Affairs*, **13** (3) : 345-353.
16. IPCR (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution), "Strategic Conflict Assessment: Nigeria", *Consolidated Report*, October 2002, p. 11
17. Adele, B.J. and Oluruntele, A. (2001). "Ethnic Agitation and Conflict in Nigeria: 1999-2000", *Development Policy Management & Policy Network Bulletin*, **7** (3) : 35-36.
18. Chris, O.I. et al. (2015). "Ethno-religious Crisis and Nigerian Democracy". *Internat. J. Innovative Science, Engineering & Technology*, **2** (5) : 363-377.
19. Aleyomi, M.B. (2012). "Ethno-Religious Crisis as a Threat to the Stability of Nigeria's Federalism", *J. Sustainable Development in Africa*, **14** (3) : 127-140.
20. Ntamu, G.U. et al. (2004). " Religion in Nigerian Political Space: Implications for Sustainable National Development", *Internat. J. Academic Res. Business & Soc. Sci.*, **4** (9) : 301-318.
21. IDMC (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre), "Nigeria: No End to Internal Displacement", *A Profile of the Internal Displacement Situation*, Nov. 2009, p. 4

\*\*\*\*\*