THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGGRAVATING ETHNIC TENSION IN THE NIGERIAN POLITY

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Abstract

Nigeria is a multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious nation hosting over 400 hundred ethnic groups that are spread amongst three major religions, Christian religion, Islamic region and traditional African religion. Scholars of conflict studies have researched several possible factors of ethnic conflict and tension amongst the various ethnic groups that populate Nigeria. These causes range from structural and social factors, sectionalism, ethnocentrism, political imbalance and economic issues. Religious beliefs of ethnic groups are threatened by the beliefs of other ethnic groups leading to ethno-religious conflicts in the nation. However, adequate research visibility has not been given to the role of religion in ethnic tension in the Nigerian polity. It is against this background that this paper adopts the descriptive method that seeks to problematize religion and ethnic tension, particularly, the immersion of religion in the heightening of ethnic tension and how this has negatively impacted the national polity. The paper holds strongly that ethno-religious animosities result in aggravating ethnic tensions and national instability in Nigeria.

Keywords: Religion, Aggravating, Conflict, Tension, Groups.

Introduction

Religious violence in Nigeria is a consequence of rising uncompromising Muslim and Christian activism, leading to a troubling culture of religious violence, especially in the northern region. Before the arrival of Islam and Christianity, African Traditional Religion prevailed, marked by peaceful worship of the Supreme Being. However, the introduction of these new religions ignited conflicts and power struggles, ultimately leading to violence and instability. Before the current democratic experiment in Nigeria, the country witnessed several ethno-religious conflicts resulting in loss of lives and property, (Mohammed, 2005). Notable examples include the religious disturbances caused by the maitatsine sect in Kano and Maiduguri in the early 1980s, the religious disturbances in Jimeta-Yola in 1984, and the Zango Kataf crises in Kaduna State in 1992. Additionally, conflicts occurred at Kafanchan College of Education, Kaduna Polytechnic, and the University of Ibadan from 1981 to 1985. Other early ethno-religious conflicts include the Bulumkutu Christian-Muslim riots in 1982, the Usman Danfodio University Sokoto conflict in 1982, and the Muslim-Christian clash in Ilorin, Kwara State in 1986.

Consequently, since the introduction of democracy in 1999, Nigeria has experienced numerous political issues that have taken on religious dimensions. These issues have been exploited by factors such as politics, poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance, leading to violence based on religious affiliation and the implementation of religious policies. This has caused significant physical and psychological harm to many individuals. As a result, religious divisions have emerged among Nigerians who hold different religious beliefs such as the emergence of several ethno-religious militias like the O'dua People Congress (OPC), the Bakassi Boys, the Egbesu Boys, the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC), and the Igbo People Congress (IPC).

Additionally, there are the Arewa People's Congress (APC), the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and the Ohanaeze N'digbo (Daily Trust, 20/8/2002, p. 16. Qtd by Salawu, 1).

Given the background mentioned above, it is clear that several regions in Nigeria have been beleaguered by warfare, characterized by an increasing number of ethnic and religious conflicts. However, it's important to note that ethno-religious conflicts often shadow the lines between ethnic and religious tensions. These conflicts can start as ethnic disputes but evolve into religious crises, and vice versa. The examples cited demonstrate the lack of a clear distinction between the two. However, the recent surge in ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria has profound implications for the nation's political and economic progress. These conflicts manifest in riots, sabotage, assassinations, armed struggles, guerrilla warfare, and even secessionist movements. Their recurring nature has created a pervasive sense of insecurity, especially in regions where they have previously erupted. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the role of religion in aggravating ethnic tension in Nigeria's Polity.

Conceptual View of Conflict and Insecurity

Conflict and insecurity are deeply rooted in human societies and elicit strong emotional responses. However, a comprehensive study is required to gain a better understanding of these concepts. Scholars, particularly functionalists, hold differing views on social conflict. "Functionalists perceive conflict as negative, disrupting the social system's normal functioning. They advocate for peace through consensus on values. Conversely, Marxists view conflict as a normal and positive phenomenon inherent in human society. Conflict arises due to scarcity and individuals' pursuit of limited resources. Marxists argue that conflict is necessary for society, not taboo or a curse" (Asukwo in Faleti, 2004)

Conflict is not always negative; it can be constructive if managed properly. Realists, such as Thomas Hobbes, St. Augustine, and Sigmund Freud, argue that conflict is inherent in human nature due to the pursuit of self-interest. They believe that imperfections in the world lead to selfish and conflict-prone behaviour in society.

Insecurity and conflict are closely linked, stemming from violations of societal rules and norms. Insecurity arises when individuals or groups lack confidence in themselves or their relationships with others, feeling unsafe and unprotected. This insecurity often leads to conflict when legitimate desires are denied by societal structures, resulting in disappointment and frustration. Individuals or groups may express fear and aggression towards those they hold responsible. Further study and clarification are necessary to fully comprehend these complex phenomena and address their emotional and normative aspects (Anifowoso, Aubrey, Leonard in Saale, 2008).

In his inaugural lecture titled "Conflict and Insecurity in the Human Heart: The Religious Antidotes," Saale (2023) argues that conflict and insecurity are universal experiences in the hearts of all human beings. He supports Stamps' (1991) view that the heart, not the brain, is considered the centre of human activities according to the Bible (Proverbs 4:23). Saale believes that the Bible urges individuals to guard their hearts diligently, as conflict and insecurity are among the issues of life. Saale further explains that the human heart encompasses a person's intellect, emotions, and volition, serving as the centre of human intellect. Within the heart, individuals think, reflect, and communicate with themselves and others. It is where they process information, imagine reason, doubt, ponder, believe, and retain thoughts (Saale, 2023).

The heart serves as the hub of human emotions, encompassing a range of feelings such as love, joy, anger, grief, pain, trouble, hurt, discouragement, and disappointment. It also acts as the epicentre of human volition, shaping intentions and desires, whether they are virtuous or not. Moreover, the heart is the dwelling place of courage, humility, and repentance, evoking profound sensations. Saale underscores the heart's pivotal role in governing and influencing an individual's entire persona and principles, encompassing the mind, emotional disposition, and will.

Saale argues that human character is closely connected to the human heart, acting as a mirror of one's internalized behaviour and interactions with others. Weaknesses in character strain relationships and breed conflict and insecurity. Those who lack moral and spiritual strength in their hearts lack the bravery to confront ethical dilemmas. As a result, human character plays a crucial role in shaping social conflict and insecurity. Saale's philosophy revolves around the human heart as the source of these problems,

encompassing intellect, emotions, and volition. The heart serves as a compass for human personality and values, exerting influence over one's actions. In his words

> ...My thesis is that the human heart is the domain of social conflict and insecurity. Both conflict and insecurity are activities involving man's intellect, emotions and volition. Also, human personality and values are directed and controlled by the heart. What relates to conflicts and insecurity is the fact that they reside in the human heart and operate in a vicious cycle. In most incidences, it is the internalized conflict and insecurity, which manifest outside in human society, while at other times, the conflict and insecurity occurrences in society give rise to conflict and insecurity in the heart of the individual. Conflict helps to determine the nature, type, cause and impact of insecurity; insecurity helps in the determination of conflict. (Saale, 2023).

A Brief Review of Ethnic Conflict
The period from 1952 to 1966 in Nigeria witnessed a significant political transformation, resulting in the division of the country into distinct political entities. This shift in focus from the struggle for independence to the pursuit of ethnic dominance led to instability in the East and West regions due to ethnic and sub-ethnic loyalties, while the North faced religious divisions between Christianity and Islam. The era was characterized by the politicization of ethnicity and intense competition for resources, which exacerbated tensions between different ethnic groups. Corruption, nepotism, and tribalism have been widespread in Nigeria, with politicians prioritizing personal gain over the national interest. Public funds have been misused to establish and maintain patronage networks, completely disregarding the needs that could have fostered unity within the country. Unfortunately, ethnic politics have continued to plague Nigeria since gaining independence. Elites from different ethnic groups fiercely compete to secure federal resources for their regions, often neglecting crucial issues that could have promoted national cohesion. The first republic's downfall was caused by anarchy, competition, and insecurity, resulting in a chaotic environment. This led to military intervention and a brutal ethnic war from 1967 to 1970. The marginalized Igbos of eastern Nigeria, known as Biafrans, wanted to secede due to the denial of basic human needs like equality, citizenship, autonomy, and freedom (Burton, Qtd by Jacob, 2014). Oppressed groups often resort to violence when their needs are withheld, leading to conflicts in their fight for human rights.

In 1966, a series of retaliatory military coups occurred in Nigeria due to ethnocentrism and widespread corruption. The first coup took place in January and was led by Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna and Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, a group of young leftists. Although the coup was only partially successful, it resulted in the deaths of prominent figures, including former Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Premier Ahmadu Bello of the Northern Region, and Premier Ladoke Akintola of the Western Region. This period in Nigeria's history was marked by political instability and a strong desire for retribution. President Nwafor Orizu transferred power to General JTU Aguyi-Ironsi and the Nigerian Army due to the absence of a central government. However, another coup led by Northern military officers, supported by Northerners aligned with the NPC, resulted in Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon becoming the head of state. These consecutive coups exacerbated ethnic tensions and violence, creating a highly volatile situation. The Northern coup, fueled by ethnic and religious tensions, resulted in a high number of casualties among both military officers and civilians, particularly those of Igbo descent. The violence suffered by the Igbo community intensified their yearning for self-rule and defence against the military's harshness. As a result, in May 1967, the Eastern Region declared independence as the "Republic of Biafra," with Lt. Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu leading the way (Murray, Qtd by Jacob, 2014).

During its early stages, Nigeria was comprised of only three states, reflecting its turbulent history and the challenges of governing such a diverse nation. Before independence, sectarian tensions and violence arose from Nigeria's numerous ethno-linguistic groups. The Niger Delta region, famous for its oil production, witnessed conflicts over control of petroleum resources, leading to environmental degradation for the Ogoni ethnic group. Ethnic violence has continued, but the Federal Government's measures have brought relative peace and addressed religious violence. In 2002, the Miss World pageant was relocated from Nigeria to London due to violent protests in the northern region of the country. These protests were triggered by inflammatory remarks made by a newspaper reporter. The riots resulted in the loss of over 100 lives and left

more than 500 individuals injured. The rioters indiscriminately targeted people of all ages and genders, leading to significant casualties.

Another significant religious-ethnic tension in the country was the Kaduna/Enugu riots in Nigeria, sparked by the introduction of the Islamic Legal Code (Sharia) by certain northern state governors. In October 1999, Governor Ahmed Yerima of Zamfara State implemented Sharia, initially facing minor protests. However, tensions escalated when Governor Mohammed Makarfi of Kaduna State attempted to do the same in February 2000. Kaduna State had long-standing animosities between Muslims and Christians, with both groups having nearly equal population representation. This volatile combination resulted in violent clashes and numerous fatalities. The conflict was characterized by ruthless killings.

Manifestations of Religion in Aggravating Ethnic Tension in Nigeria's Polity
According to Omoregbe, as cited by Saale, (2023), religion refers to a person's strong belief in a God or gods, and it also encompasses the relationship between man and God. The term "ethno-religious tension" or "conflict" describes the crisis that arises from religious prejudice and bigots defending their beliefs. In Nigeria, ethno-religious conflict is characterized by disharmony, distrust, and fear among different ethnic and religious groups. This results in frequent violent confrontations. Ethnicity and religious intolerance play a significant role in various forms of nationalism in Nigeria, including demands for language and cultural autonomy, religious superiority, local political autonomy, and self-determination. Contextual discrimination in Nigeria is a result of differing socio-cultural symbols and religious beliefs, leading to strained relationships characterized by disharmony, distrust, and fear among ethnic and religious groups. This mutual suspicion and lack of harmony explain the persistence of ethno-religious conflicts in the country. Saale (2023) states that conflict and insecurity originate from the human heart, which encompasses a person's intellect, emotions, and volition. The human heart is the centre of intellect, where people think, reflect, communicate, and process information. It is also where people imagine, reason, doubt, ponder, believe, and hold things. This makes it easy for religious leaders to control their subjects. To elucidate this point, the head pastor of Salvation Ministry recently caused an interdenominational conflict among members by referring to the practices of White Garment churches as satanic and ungodly during a live-streaming sermon. This painted a bad image of the White Garment churches in the minds of his followers, resulting in conflicts between the two religious groups.

The Boko Haram group and other Islamic extremists have caused unrest in the country with their agenda to Islamize and execute unbelievers. This has created tension internally and externally. In the recent 2023 general election, the nomination of a Muslim-Muslim ticket by the All People Progressive Party heightened religious tension, particularly within the Christian community. The Christian Association of Nigeria and its sub-organizations staged critical psychological protests in response.

Religion has historically fueled disunity across ethnic lines in Nigeria. The competition for religious dominance and supremacy, both within and between denominations, has negatively impacted the country. According to Olomojobi cited by Afolabi (2016) Nigeria's first religious conflict occurred in 1945 in Jos, Plateau State. The conflict arose when Anthony Enahoro of the Action Group (AG) proposed the implementation of Self-Government by 1956 during a session of the Federal House of Representatives in Lagos in March 1953. However, the motion failed due to opposition from members representing the northern part of the country. The northern region was hesitant about independence at that time due to concerns of potential domination by the south, given the socio-economic disparities between the two regions. As a result, the people of Lagos, who were predominantly AG supporters, began mocking the North as colonial puppets. This led to the Kano riots of 1953, which were a form of retaliation from the north. Initially targeting the Yoruba, who were a mix of Muslims and non-Muslims, the conflict later turned towards the Igbo, who were predominantly non-Muslims. Although ethnocentric in nature, the religious divide between the two regions involved in this political altercation contributed to the demarcation of place and space based on religious identities. The riot can be seen as a politically driven conflict with religious undertones, stemming from the religious divide between the Muslims in the north and the Christians in the south. Since then, Nigeria has witnessed various forms of political, ethnic, and religious violence. It is important to note that many instances of political and ethnic violence eventually escalate into religious violence due to the strong emphasis placed on religious affiliation as a form of identity.

Since the transition to civilian rule in May 1999, Nigeria has experienced a significant number of conflicts primarily driven by religious disputes. It is estimated that over ten thousand lives have been lost to religious-based violence during this period. While most of these conflicts have been between Christians and Muslims, there have also been cases where members of the same religious sect engaged in violent conflicts due to differing interpretations of holy texts. The establishment of a democratic Nigeria in 1999 marked the end of 16 years of consecutive military rule. Mair cited by Afolabi, (2016), highlights that before Obasanjo assumed power in 1999, Islam held significant influence in Nigeria. Obasanjo's election victory was largely due to the support he received from the northern region. Upon assuming the presidency, the debate surrounding Sharia law gained prominence.

Sharia law has a long history in Nigeria, predating its reintroduction in the Fourth Republic. It was first administered in the Kanem Bornu Empire and Hausa regions during the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The British colonization of Nigeria interrupted the practice of Sharia law, but it was later implemented again in northern Nigeria through the Native Authority from the 1950s until 1960. It wasn't until 1979 that non-Muslims outside the north became aware of Sharia law, as explained by Kukah, cited by Afolabi, (2016).

During discussions on the draft constitution, a clause was discovered stating the establishment of a Federal Sharia Court of Appeal. This court would serve as an intermediate Court of Appeal between the States' Sharia Courts of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Nigeria. The court would consist of a Grand Mufti and a minimum of three Muftis, as determined by the National Assembly. Additionally, each state in the Federation could establish a Sharia Court of Appeal if desired. Christian members of the National Assembly opposed the endorsement of Sharia law, while Muslim members supported its implementation. As a result, a sub-committee was formed to present a draft proposal for consideration.

The draft proposing the inclusion of members knowledgeable in Islamic law in the Supreme Court to handle appeals from State Sharia Courts of Appeal was accepted and officially included in the proposed constitution. However, subsequent events have shown that religion has significantly influenced Nigerian politics. The Muslim community is determined to implement Sharia law throughout the entire Federation, while Christians are vigilant and united against perceived attempts to Islamize Nigeria. Religion has become a significant factor in policy-making, but unfortunately, the adoption of Sharia law has led to violent killings in the northern region.

With Nigeria's return to democracy on May 29, 1999, the stage was set for the amplification of the Islamization of politics, not only in the north but in the entire country. That was why Dickson, quoted by Afolabi, (2016), states that:

> Islamic fundamentalism acquired a more pronounced political edge as the national fortunes of the governing Muslim national elite declined dramatically with the election of President Obasanjo, a born-again Christian from the South. After playing a major, often dominant role in the government and military for almost forty years, northern Muslims felt sidelined. Among the reasons for these sentiments was Obasanjo's removal of politicized military officers, who were disproportionately Muslim (27)

The implementation of Sharia law began in twelve states, starting with Zamfara State on January 27, 2000. Opposition from non-Muslims destroyed lives and properties. Ukiwo, in Afolabi, (2016), suggests that the state's adoption of Sharia may be a response to a perceived Christian threat, supported by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). Dickson (2008) agrees, stating that the spread of Sharia is seen as a means for Nigerian Muslims to assert their political authority against perceived southern non-Muslim dominance.

According to Olomojobi in Afolabi, (2016), Ahmed Sani Yerima, the former Governor of Zamfara State, suspended the implementation of Sharia for a day in his state for his child's marriage. He also offered over $800 million as a gift to any state that adopted the Sharia legal code practised by Arab countries. However, Yerima later expressed regret for implementing Sharia due to the violence that ensued across northern Nigeria during his eight-year tenure as governor. This politicization of religion by the elite had negative consequences for the poor and non-Muslims, leading to various cases of political, communal, ethno-religious, and religious crises from 1999 to 2008.

In 2009, Nigeria saw the emergence of Boko Haram, a controversial fundamentalist Islamist group aiming to enforce Sharia law nationwide. Officially known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, meaning "people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and Jihad" in Arabic, the group gained global attention after sectarian violence in Nigeria in 2009. Boko Haram not only opposes Western education but also Western culture and modern science. Although established in the 1960s, it gained prominence in 2002 under the leadership of Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf, attracting over 540,000 followers, primarily unemployed youths referred to as talakawa (grassroots people/peasants) and almajiri (students of Qur'anic schools). In 2004, Boko Haram relocated to Kanamma, Yobe State and established a base called "Afghanistan." Their goal is to transform Nigeria into an Islamic state and recruit jihadists to fight against the state. They have launched numerous attacks in the northern region of Nigeria, targeting churches and mosques.

Boko Haram exploited the socio-economic conditions in northern Nigeria, where wealth was concentrated in the central and southwestern states, by requiring each member to contribute a daily levy of one naira. This resulted in a staggering monthly sum of 16 million naira. The group also took advantage of Nigeria's porous borders, with approximately 480 irregular crossings along its 4,500-kilometer border with Niger and Chad, to recruit members from neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. Since 2009, Boko Haram has carried out unprecedented acts of violence in various locations throughout Nigeria (Olomojobi, quoted in Afolabi, 2016)

Religious Factors Used in Aggravating Ethnic Tension in Nigeria's Polity
Religious violence in Nigeria has become a defining feature of the country's politics since gaining independence. Islam and Christianity have both deeply influenced the Nigerian political landscape, no longer content with mere acceptance but instead competing for dominance in shaping governance. As a result, religion and politics have become intertwined, blurring the boundaries between these two spheres. Regrettably, Kukah (1993:9), said that the religious divide that once united us has caused more harm than good, especially in northern Nigeria.

Numerous factors have been identified as contributing to religious violence in Nigeria (Omotosho 2003; Gofwen 2004; Iwara 2006; Salawu 2010; Sampson 2012). While these causes often overlap, this paper will concentrate on the immediate and visible factors used by religious extremists to fuel ethno-religious violence in Nigeria's Polity.
One such factor is the personalization of religion. In non-western countries like Nigeria, individuals often define themselves through their religion, whether it be through their attire, name, or conversations. With the advent of modernity, there has been an increased emphasis on religious consciousness and personalization. In Nigeria, particularly in the north, identity is based on primordial factors such as ethnicity, nationality, race, language, and religion. These primordial factors serve to separate individuals from one another. Religion, being one of the most significant primordial factors, has led to personalization among citizens of different ethnicities, nationalities, and languages in Nigeria.

Religious violence has emerged as a prominent characteristic of Nigeria and its political landscape since achieving independence. According to Kukah (1993:9), both Islam and Christianity have deeply influenced Nigerian society, with each seeking to dominate and shape the country's politics. Consequently, religion has become intertwined with politics, making it challenging to distinguish between the two. Unfortunately, the religious bonds that once united Nigerians have caused more harm than good, particularly in the northern region.
In the northern part of Nigeria, Islam and Christianity are the two dominant religions that have been personalized. The majority of the population is Muslim, while the minority is predominantly Christian. This has resulted in discrimination by the majority against the minority. Gurr in Afolabi, (2016), argues that discrimination against an ethnic minority provides the basis for the minority to form an opposition and protest against the perceived discrimination. Fox, in Afolabi, (2016), supports this view by stating that religious factors can give rise to discrimination and grievances, which can then lead to ethnic and religious conflicts. Essentially, the personalization of religion can lead to religious discrimination and ultimately escalate into extremism, fundamentalism, and terrorism. When religion is personalized, adherents tend to

view their religion as superior to others, creating a strong conviction to fight and even die for their religious beliefs. This is the unfortunate reality of religious violence in Nigeria.

Another factor contributing to religious violence is religious conversion. Adherents of both Islam and Christianity in Nigeria believe that their religion is not only superior but also offers salvation for the soul and the promise of an afterlife. This belief often leads to the preaching of religious conversion. Jenkins in Afolabi, (2016) argues that the process of religious conversion can promote rivalry and shift the demographic balance between adherents of different religions within a state. Thus, religious conversion can result in demographic shifts and contribute to religious violence. While Boko Haram may not directly account for religious conversion as a factor in religious violence, their activities have shifted from persecuting Christians to targeting Muslims whom they believe are not true believers of Islam. However, religious conversion remains a significant threat to Muslims in the north, where they are the dominant religious group.

The issue of isolated settlements and heterogeneous states also plays a role in religious violence. Islamic faith is predominantly practised in the northern region of Nigeria, with sixteen states being predominantly Muslim. However, there are three states with a Muslim minority, while historically; Kano, Kastina, and Sokoto have been centers of Islamic education and missionary activities. The influx of other ethnic groups from different parts of Nigeria to the north, driven by commercial activities and opportunities in agriculture and trade, has led to the establishment of separate settlements called "Sabon Gari quarters" for these immigrants. This separation is due to the practice of Islam, which divides people into two groups: those belonging to the Umma (community) and those outside the community. This division creates contention between the indigenous Muslim population and the immigrant population, particularly those who belong to non-Islamic faiths.

Religious hegemony is another factor contributing to religious violence in Nigeria. Both Islam and Christianity strive for dominance in terms of religious faith. However, Islam not only unites ethnic groups but also dominates the northern part of Nigeria. Lincoln (2003) argues that religious conflict arises when the "religion of the status quo" is used as a means of dominating "religions of resistance." This power dynamic can lead to conflict between the dominant majority and the minority religious groups. In Nigeria, Islam is often seen as the "religion of the status quo," while Christianity is viewed as the "religion of resistance."

Unemployment and illiteracy among the youth are significant problems in Nigeria, posing a threat to national security. The government's failure to effectively engage the large youth population in productive activities has resulted in high unemployment rates. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the unemployment rate in Nigeria reached 23.9% in the first half of 2011, with an additional 1.8 million people joining the ranks of the unemployed. This, coupled with the high levels of poverty in the northern states, has led to frustration among unemployed youth. This frustration has manifested in various forms of insecurity, including terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery, theft, and religious violence. The alarming rate of youth unemployment has a direct impact on the country's level of insecurity, as idle hands are more likely to engage in criminal activities.

Religious conflict has become a defining feature of Nigeria and its politics since gaining independence. Various factors contribute to this violence, including the personalization of religion, religious conversion, isolated settlements and heterogeneous states, religious hegemony, and high levels of youth unemployment and illiteracy. Addressing these factors is crucial for promoting peace and stability in Nigeria.

Recommendations

This paper proposes an ideological shift from resolution to prevention in addressing root causes proactively. Adequate and efficient security in each state is crucial to promptly respond to any ethno-religious insurgencies.

Establishing a platform for ethno-religious leaders to address grievances before they escalate is crucial. Involving civil society in conflict resolution is important. Strengthening conflict resolution institutions through legislation is necessary. The government should adopt a pluralistic and just approach. Promoting inclusivity and fairness is essential. Reducing poverty is a top priority. Ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria require immediate attention from the government. Implementing conflict management mechanisms is crucial to promote peace, stability, and unity in the country.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined religion as an aggravating factor in the ethnic crisis in the country. Ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have a deep-rooted history and are characterized by violent confrontations among diverse ethnic and religious groups. The causes of these conflicts are multifaceted. This paper discusses religious personalization, unemployment and illiteracy, religious hegemony, conversion, isolated settlement and heterogeneous state as weapons used by religious extremists to aggravate ethnic tension in the country. Despite the prevalence and history of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, past and present governments have failed to effectively address this issue through well-structured and comprehensive policy measures.

For peace to exist, agreements or contracts must be made among various groups such as religions, ethnicities, languages, and political parties. Ultimately, it is up to the people to decide how and when they want peace in their society. If every Nigerian citizen embraces a genuine sense of patriotism, religious violence would decrease significantly.

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