

Ethno-Religious Politics in Nigeria: A Threat to National Unity

Benike Joseph

ABSTRACT

This work critically examines the concepts of ethnicity, religion, politics and national unity as they interface in the affairs of Nigeria. Thus, it exposes the unhealthy disposition of ethno-religious politics as regards our collective quest for National Unity which is most paramount for peaceful co-existence. This strongly posit that the electorates are the keys in any political project and that people should be free to choose their leaders irrespective of place of origin or ethno-religious affiliation or considerations. The study recommends among others that ethno-religious politics should be discouraged in strong terms; Political Parties in Nigeria should have national spread instead of wearing regional toga; electoral victories should be determined by well articulated programmes which must be in tandem with our national ideology; Nigeria being a multi-lingual country every segment of the society must have a say in the affairs of the country; and inclusiveness as against exclusiveness must be our watch word in the affairs of the country.

Keywords: *Ethnicity, Religion, Politics, National Unity.*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a complex mix of multiple ethnic and religious groupings spanning over three hundred and fifty (350) ethnic nationalities. These ethnic groups are by divine providence bounded together in a geographical configuration called Nigeria. Elections, therefore, in Nigeria are becoming a do or die affair because of the apparent national suspicions: no one ethnic group wants to give up for the other. This seemingly unyielding attitude that has characterized our collective national behaviour regarding the affairs of the country is now the bane of our quest for National Unity. Electioneering are no longer issue based but rather ethno-religious, primordial sentiments and considerations as demonstrated by the build-up to the 2015 general elections in the country. It is interesting to note that when Youth Corps members were killed after the election in 2011, no body apologised to the families of those brutally murdered (Fani-Kayode, 2015). The intention of the study, therefore, is to explore the attitude of the key political gladiators in relation to their style of campaigns. It also attempts to examine the relationship between religion, ethnicity, politics and national unity.

Ethno-Religious Politics in Nigeria

Ethnicity is a complex word as various views hardly find common ground if there is any at all. Many see it (ethnicity) as a segregation of some one simply because his or her birth place is different. While others just apply ethnicity and tribalism in describing situation and

Benike Joseph is a Lecturer in the Department of Social Science Education, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. E-mail: benike.joseph@gmail.com.

taking them as the same in context and meaning (Achebe, 1983; Ngele, 2008). It may also mean a group of people or persons who share the same characteristics distinctive from other people in the human society. However, Akinlaye (2003) asserted that ethnicity is merely the ethnic groupings with their distinct number of sub-cultures. In other words, these sub-cultures mark such group of people different from other set of people. He therefore, opines that Nigeria is a complex country with plenty ethnic groups which co-exist on daily basis. In Nigeria, there are other three hundred and fifty ethnic groups but the Hausa-Fulani stock, Yoruba and the Igbos of the South West and South East respectively constitute the major ethnic groups. This is stemmed from their numerical strength resulting from the census figures officially made public over the years. In theory and practice this population strength of the aforementioned ethnic groups places them in the pole position when deciding the political direction of the country. The federal government is majorly being controlled by the majority groups (especially the Hausa-Fulani) to the disadvantage of other ethnic groups (Matthew and Charles, 2010).

Religion is a belief pattern of an individual making him or her to commune with a superior but unseen power. It is rather a function of morality, spirituality which creates a balance, maintenance of order and harmony in the human society. It therefore, has the capability of producing good citizens in our society (Akinlaye, 2003). More comprehensive definition of religion was offered by Ekwunife (1992) as man's awareness and recognition of his dependent relationship on a transient being-the Wholly Order, expressible in human society through beliefs, worships and ethical or moral behaviour. Nigeria is pluralistic in terms of religious beliefs. It is a secular State and there are three major religious beliefs: The Christian faith; Islamic faith and African traditional faith, all of which play significant roles in our national life. However, the Christian and Islamic faiths are dominant in our national life. The Catholic Church is just one of many denominations found in the Christendom. Virtually every part of the Northern Nigeria is Islamized; that is Islamic religion is primarily rooted in the Northern part of the country.

Notwithstanding, it is difficult to define the term "politics" as there is no consensus to what the term expressively means. But suffice it to state that there are some major definitions which can be relied upon for meaningful discussion. Politics is a word derived from a popular Greek word "POLIS" which implies City-State. Politics according to Robert Dahl as cited by Ikelegbe (2005) is a persistent pattern of human relationships that involves to a significant extent control, influence, power or authority. Online definition in Merrian-Webster.com (2015) sees it as an art or science of government; art concerned with finding or influencing governmental policy. However, it is also the practice and theory of influencing other people. Narrowly, it refers to achieving and exercising positions of governance-organized control over a human community particularly a State. This definition implies that politics is a wide concept since it involves exercising of positions. It therefore, means that there are processes and these processes include election; it is one of the major components of politics. As has been said above election is one of the major components of politics. In Nigeria, it is the choosing of representatives to the Nigeria's Federal Government and various States and Local Government Areas. The 2015 general elections

still take the same form and character, but the stakes are higher this time. This can be due to the unwarranted, unprecedented incorporation of ethno-religious colourations into the political affairs of Nigeria by the key political actors: the characters in the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) as the major contenders. These main two political parties and their standard bearers nevertheless, there are other contestants in this year’s presidential elections. For instance, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan (PDP); Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (APC); Allagoa Chinedu (PPN); Ambrose Owuru (Hope Party); Ayermi Adebayo (APA); Ganiyu Galadima (ACPN); Comfort Sonaiya (KOWA); Chekwas Okorie (UPP); Rufus Salawu (AD); Sam Ebe (CPP); Martin Onouo (NCP); Mani Ahmed (ADP); Tunde Anifowose (AA) and Godson Okoye (UDP).

However, the tensed political atmosphere is primarily resulting from the ethno-religious based campaigns instead of issue-based, ideology-oriented electioneering process. This has been the major characteristics of the Nigerian Political space. Still very fresh in our memories is the 2011 presidential election that left over 800 people dead (Human Rights Watch, 2011). It went further to state that the violence started with the widespread protests caused by supporters of Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim under the platform of Congress for Progressive Change. The reason was that the incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the southern minority (the People’s Democratic Party Candidate) was re-elected. Northern States such as Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara were worse hits of the crisis. The Human Right Watch (2011) describes the situation thus: the presidential election divided the country along ethnic and religious lines, Muslim rioters targeted and killed Christians and members of ethnic groups from southern Nigeria whose churches shops and homes were burnt. Similarly, in Kaduna State mobs of Christians retaliated by killing only Muslim faiths, burning down their mosques as well. The forgoing may be the reason when Benike (2012) asserts that elections in Nigeria are influenced by sentiments as the president was voted for across party lines in the southern Nigeria as against the North. Northern Nigeria rather opted for his ace rival (Muhammadu Buhari). In similar vein, Citizens’ Security Concern Network (2015) states, while quoting Northern Emirs, that “holding this country (Nigeria) together is not possible except by means of religion of the prophet. If they want political unity let them follow our religion”.

PVCs DISTRIBUTION STATISTICS

The permanent voter’s card is the most important instrument in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. It is the identity card to say the least. The table below suggests the contrary. The PVCs collection statistics show the collection rate for each geopolitical zone

Zone	No of Reg. Voters	PVCs Uncollected	PVCs collection rate
South-East	7,028,560	3,287,530	54% of voters
South-West	14,298,356	7,411,205	50% of voters
South-South	8,937,057	3,844,370	57% of voters
North-East	10,038,119	4,735,556	75% of voters
North-West	18,900,543	4,835,556	80% voters
North-Central	7,675,369	3,909,849	48% of voters

Source: Vanguard, February 11, 2015-49

It is important to note that this lopsided distribution of the PVC took place before the controversial postponement of the 2015 general election earlier scheduled to take place on the 14th of February 2015. The Move On Nigeria (2015) asked the following pertinent questions:

- a. Is it that people in the north central, south-south, south-west and south-east have failed to collect their PVCs?
- b. How come the north-west zone has the highest collection rate of 80%?
- c. How come the north-east also has 75% collection rate despite the ongoing military conflicts in the region?

According to Fani-Kayode (2015), the whole thing was planned by APC to hurt, intimidate and prevent the president and his supporters from campaigning in the North. While the People's Democratic Party (PDP) supporters were attacked in some parts of Northern Nigeria. The All Progressives Congress supporters did not also have it good in Rivers State. This ethno-religious politics is an age-long issue as it is clearly shown in the early political parties' formation and their activities.

EARLY POLITICS AND POLITICAL PARTY FORMATION IN NIGERIA

Political parties in Nigeria were majorly formed on the basis of primordial sentiments; the reason is simple, Nigerians are classical examples of traditional or ethnic groupings (Akinlaye, 2003). His assertion is validated by the pattern and style of early political parties formation which are heavily linked to the socio-cultural organizations like Arewa Consultative Forum; Ohanaeze; INC; Afenifere etc. Typical of these bodies some of which later became political parties are: Descendants of Oduduwa Society (Egbe Omo Oduduwa) captained by Obafemi Awolowo; Bauchi Improvement Association led by Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Sa'ad Zungur and Aminu Kano; Pan-Northern Cultural Organization of Northern Muslims of Nigeria (1949); Ibo State Union; Ibibio State Union; Pan-Ibo Federal Union (1944); Nigeria Youth Movement (1933) and so on.

The Action Group formed in 1950 is directly linked to the Egbe Omo Oduduwa which was led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo; Northern People's Congress (NPC) is also an offshoot of Northern Progressive Front (NPF) and Bauchi Improvement Association which was initially led by Aminu Kano which metamorphosed into the Northern Elements Progressive Union. The scenario continued up to the days of second Republic: (UPN-Mainly Yoruba); (NPN-North) though it had some semblance of national party. The situation left no one in doubt that if allowed to continue it will lead to national disharmony hence the 1979 constitution crafters made provision for the following:

1. Membership of any political party must be open to every Nigerian citizen irrespective of his or her place of origin, religion, ethnic groupings or gender.
2. It (Party) must have recognizable and functioning offices in most states in order to be recognized and registered by the defunct Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) of the country.
3. It (Party) must have its headquarters situated in the federal capital territory and so on.

The term national unity may connote different meaning to different people as the issue of national unity is gradually becoming elusive in Nigeria. The most tasking challenge Nigeria needs to contend with today is the quest for national unity. It is being threatened by centrifugal tensions, resource control and self-determination, ethnicity based identity politics and religious cleavages (Ibada, 2009). This opinion expressed by the above scholar is quite scary as it runs contrary to the true position of national unity. This feeling of patriotism is apparently elusive in the Nigerian context after various concerted efforts to promote national unity, cohesion and integration. According to Edomwonyi (2015) festivals held in Nigeria are mostly aimed at promoting national unity. He went further to cite Borgu International Gani-Durbar Festival in Niger State as one of such numerous cultural festivals for national unity. Similarly, State creations in Nigeria; Unity Schools; National Youth Service Corp (NYSC); Federal character principle; the 2014 national conference and a host of others are all attempts aimed at promoting national cohesion, harmonious co-existence (Alapiki, 2005; Ibada, 2009). However, all these efforts have failed to provide the desired results towards the pursuit of national unity in Nigeria. The reason is that ethno-religious political inclinations have continued to strive as against our collective national identity since a southern Christian cannot freely canvass for votes and support in the far north and vice-versa.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2015 general election is a test case for our collective quest for National Unity. The electorates are keys in this project. Let people be free to choose who they want to lead them irrespective of place of origin, religion and other socio-cultural considerations. Nigeria is bigger than any individual's or group of individuals' political aspirations or ambitions. A united, virile Nigeria does not have a parallel. It is, therefore, a responsibility of all to make it work. Therefore, ethno-religious politics should be discouraged in strong terms. Political parties in Nigeria should have national spread instead of wearing regional toga, and electoral victories should be determined by well articulated programmes which must be *in tandem* with our national ideology. Also, Nigeria being a multi-lingual country every segment of the society must have a say in the affairs of the country. Inclusiveness as against exclusiveness must be our watch word in the affairs of the country.

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C.** (1983). *The trouble with Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Akinlaye, F. A.** (2003). *Social Studies: A Sociological Approach*. Lagos: Ziklag Educational Publishers.
- Alakipi, H. E.** (2005). State Creation: A failed approaches to national integration and local autonomy. *African Studies Review*, 48 (3), 49-65.
- Benike, J.** (2012) The imperative of a Re-modelled Social Studies Curriculum for Democratic Challenges in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Social Studies*, 15 (1), 2.
- Citizens' Security Concern Network Yoruba** (2005). Behold the Jihad. *Wednesday 13th vanguard 2015*, Pp 57.
- Edomwonyi, G.** (2015). Promoting National Unity via cultural festivals. *News Agency of Nigeria*. Thursday March 19.
- Ekwunife, A. N. O.** (1992). *Politics and Religious Intolerance in Nigeria*: Enugu: Spiritan Publications.

- Fani-Kayode, F.** (2015). The APC and the culture of violence. *Sunday 11th Vanguard P 34*
- Human Rights Watch** *May 12, 2011* "April 2011 Presidential Election left more than 800 people dead".
- Ibada, S. I.** (2009). National Unity and politics. *Journal of research in National Development*, 7 (2), 1.
- Ikelegbe, A.** (2005). *Introduction to politics*. Lagos: Imprint Services.
- Matthew, U. and Charles M.V.** (2010). Politics of Abandonment in Nigeria: Implications for National Security and Development. *A journal of Social Policy and Society*, 5 (1), 82-89.
- Move On Nigeria** (2015). Jega cannot claim to be Independent. Wednesday 13th Vanguard 2015 Pp 49.
- Ngele, O. K.** (2008). Religious, Politics and sustain Development in Africa: Challenges and Lessons from Nigerian Pluralism. *International Journal of Development Studies*, 1, 43-48.
- www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politics. Retrieved March 17, 2015.