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Religious insurrections in Nigeria

Dr. K.A. Adegoke

Abstract

Nigeria, as an independent nation, adopting the democratic system of government, has been bedeviled by multitudes of religious crisis dating back to periods before her independence. The selection of 1979 as a beginning period is for the ease of analysis. On many occasions, Nigerian citizens had been on the receiving end after each of such uprisings as many lives were lost and properties were destroyed. This paper examines the religious crisis in the Nigerian nation between 1979 and 2007. The purpose is to see the impact of such threats to political stability to the Nigeria nation under the democratic dispensation. Such analysis will help us as Nigerians to know how to check such destructive challenges to the integration of the nation. The paper suggests some solutions for religious harmony and national stability.

Introduction

Religious insurrection in Nigeria has become so frequent that it should be seen as a grave challenge to the corporate existence of the nation. Almost all the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria had witnessed one insurrection or the other. But undoubtedly the most widespread is the religious conflict which in the process of execution had brought in elements that are ethnic, political and economic. The origin of such uprisings are traceable to religious intolerance and extremism. The average Nigerian is religiously aggressive. Because of such religious intolerance and aggressiveness most other problems in the country tend to be coloured by religious interpretations. Perhaps this may not be blamed on Nigeria alone. Recent happenings in Somalia, Uganda, Ethiopia, Cote Divoire and the Republic of Chad as well as Sudan, all have traces of religious/political undertones. In Africa therefore, not the less in Nigeria religious extremism has formed a kind of network into other aspects of national life.

The present paper considers the debilitating effect of the phenomenon and concludes that if the wave is given appropriate national concern, the nation can be salvaged from premature death. If we ignore a proper radical approach, it is to the detriment of Nigerian national survival. This is a theory which extend in application to other parts of Africa.

Nigeria as a multi religious nation

The Nigerian constitution of 1999 recognizes the fact that the individual citizen

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is free to stick to or adopt any religious belief. In that light, there are three major religious groups in the country:
- The Muslim religion (also known as Islamic faith.)
- The Christian religion (also known as Christianity.)
- The traditional religion (the indigenous faith i.e. The African traditional religion)

It is this background that Arowolo (2005) stressed when he described Nigeria as a nation of religious plurality. Each of the three groups above have its own subunits. For example, the Muslims have subunits such as Nawarudeen, Ansar ud deen, NASFAT e.t.c.

While the Christians have the Catholic, the Pentecostals e.t.c. The traditionalists have various groups depending on each of the ethnic groups.

A citizen is free to adopt any religious fraternity. Both Christianity and the Islamic faith came from outside Africa. But they have both survived pushing, in many cases, the African traditional religious group to the defensive position and reducing, at least challenging their membership to the minority.

According to Fabarebo, (2005 pg 25) the African traditional religions represent the sum total of the way of life of the African people. Unlike Islam (the religious of peace) or Christianity (faith of humility of adherents of Jesus Christ) the African traditional religion is attached to which ever family - the Ogun family, the Sango or Oya" family of the tribe - Odudua or Orunmila). All of these three religious groups claim to serve a Supreme Being (Olorun, Eledumare, Chuku or Allah). To every faith all over the world, he is the Supreme Being known as God. The Muslims read the Quran, the Christians, the Bible, the African religious group - Opan Ifa or the oracular corpus, depending on which race. Ordinarily their worship does not interfere with each other. But because of the zeal to recruit, dominate and exploit each other, unnecessary competition has invaded religious relationship in Africa, nay Nigeria.

**Religious Revolts and Insurrection in Nigeria:**

Religious conflicts leading to revolts and insurrections had occurred in Nigeria even before independence. Because of the non partisan approach of the Colonial master such conflicts never posed any major threat to the political stability of the nation.

<table>
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<tr>
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Source: Authors Field Research. Above is the brief record/summary of conflicts and revolts in Nigeria. Many of them had no religious origin. Some are on land dispute or on ethnic competition. But because they, participants/agrieved are
Northern against the Southerner. Many Muslims who are Southern had been killed in Northern Nigeria because they are suspected Christians.

Causes of Religious Insurrection in Nigeria

Religious Intolerance
Religious intolerance among the different religious groups would eventually lead to religious uprisings. The inability of one religious group to tolerate or accommodate others often lead to misunderstanding and this poses a lot of danger to the security of the nation. Religious intolerance could be seen in the cases at Kafanchan, Kanoli980, Yola and Bulunkutu (Maiduguri).

Blind Faith and Fanaticism in Religion
High enthusiasm and over-zealousness in the faith of religious group pluralistic society could also lead to religious insurrections. This is often exhibited by some Muslims and Christians in Nigeria during their evangelization of missionary activities in order to impose their religion on other non adherents it could come up as are the many cases at Bauchi abattoir and the Sokoto and Kano incidents of the toilet and the page of the Quran.

Lack of Mutual Trust Among Worshippers
There is no mutual trust among the various religious groups in Nigeria. This often leads to unnecessary suspicion among them. Each of the religious groups see each other as rivals on a battlefield. They attempt to rival at any given opportunity. They regard the achievement of their fellow religious group as their failure. Whenever this occurs, they unnecessarily go against the achievement of others. For instance, the return of some public schools to their former missionary owners which some Muslims and Christians went against in 2002.

Unfavourable Government Policies
Unfavorable government policies often lead to religious insurrections. If a particular religious group suspected that a certain government policy would work against their religious interest. They may result to religious demonstration to express their opposition to such policy which may eventually lead to religious insurrection. For instance, the Christians in Nigeria demonstrated against the inclusion of Shari'ah legal system in Nigerian constitution likewise, they vehemently went against the decision of Nigeria government to become a member of organization of Islamic conference (QIC).

Partial attitude of some Media organs
The undue favouritism and partial attitude of some media organs in a pluralistic society to a particular religion at the expense of the others may lead to religious
uprisings. This may come up in form of taking side with a particular religious group, exaggerating the mistake of other religious groups, tagging of a particular religious with slanderous name such as terrorist.

**Selfishness of Some Religious Leaders**
Some religious leaders used to fuel the religious insurrections for their selfish interest by directing their disciples to embark on some certain activities against other religious group in a pluralistic society which may eventually lead to religious insurrection. There are several instances in Nigeria where religious leaders would be inciting their disciples against some other religious groups by discouraging them from entering into 'inter-personal relationship with members of other religious group.

**Effect of Religious Insurrections in Nigeria**
Religious insurrections in pluralistic societies such as Nigeria has several negative effects threatening the politico-democratic structure of the country. Religious insurrections had led to the loss of thousands of lives and destruction of properties worth several billons of Naira which could be otherwise used for the development of the country. Those Nigerians who are fortunate to survive religious insurrections are usually displaced from their original settlement and made to become refuges elsewhere. As a result of this they lose the source of income as they may not be able to continue their profession in their new settlements (Adebimpe & Ogunsola, 2007:399).

Religious insurrections in Nigeria create negative image for the country in the international community. It increases the impression that Nigerians are uncivilized, barbarians and underdeveloped. It exposes the weakness of the Nigerian security system. As a result of these foreign investors are scared (Adebimpe & Ogunsola ibid).

The last but not the least is that religious insurrections may eventually lead to civil war. According to Lawal and Oyebanjo (2007:103) quoting Atanda (1989) religious civil wars could be either horizontal or vertical. It is horizontal if this war is between one religious group and other religious groups as it used to occur between Muslims, Christians and African Traditionalists. It is vertical if the religious war is between different denominations within the same religious groups as it used to occur between Tariqah Muslims and Izalah Muslims in the Northern Nigeria.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**
The paper makes an attempt to discuss the religious insurrections in Nigeria between 1979 and 2007. That Nigeria as a pluralistic and Multi-religious society had been highlighted. The author wishes to recommend the following:

i. religious leaders should discourage their followers from engaging in religious intolerance. Religions should not be taken as a matter of do or die affair,
ii. Religious leaders should teach their followers that religion leads to human salvation and could serve as a spiritual solution to their daily problems.

iii. Religious leaders should eschew involvement in the political agenda of any political group for the materials gains of such political groups. iv. Government should inaugurate inter-religious denomination bodies in which all religious groups would be represented to discuss their matters of common interest.

v. Government should maintain neutrality and balanced support for all religious groups in the country.

vi. Government should caution all media agencies and organs in the country to shun off bais and prejudice whenever reporting religious related matters. Nigeria security system should improve their alertness to nip any negative development in the bud.

References


