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ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND ITS EFFECTS ON DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study investigates the effect of ethno-religious conflict on democratic governance in Nigeria, focusing on the challenges posed by recurrent conflicts across the country's diverse regions since the return to democracy in 1999. These conflicts have resulted in loss of lives, destruction of property, and have undermined democratic governance and nation-building. The study adopts Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory to analyze how group-based identities shape intergroup relations and influence political stability. Employing a qualitative research design, the study relies on secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports, and credible media accounts. Findings reveal that the government's inability to effectively manage diversity and uphold the constitutional principle of secularity has intensified ethno-religious tensions, eroding public trust, hindering development, and challenging the stability of Nigeria's nascent democracy. The study concludes that entrenched structural and institutional weaknesses exacerbate conflict and limit democratic consolidation. It recommends constitutional reforms to better reflect the country's diversity and greater fiscal autonomy for subnational governments to enhance local governance, promote social cohesion, and mitigate the impact of ethno-religious conflicts on democratic practice.
Keywords: Constitution, Democracy, Ethno-religious Conflict, Governance, Social Identity\

Introduction

Ethnic and religious politics constitute a pervasive phenomenon that has significantly constrained the growth and consolidation of democratic governance across various regions of the world, including Europe, Asia, and Africa. In the United Kingdom, which operates a parliamentary system of democracy, enduring ethnic cleavages have manifested in the long-standing conflict involving Northern Ireland, as well as in ethno-regional tensions between Scotland and the Westminster government. Similarly, Ireland has historically experienced

ethno-religious divisions between Catholics and Protestants. Beyond Western Europe, ethno-religious and ethno-regional politics have undermined democratic practices in countries such as Bangladesh and the former Yugoslavia, particularly among Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro, as well as in Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Armenia, Albania, Myanmar, and Vietnam. In South and Central Asia, ethnic and religious intolerance has continued to impede democratic development in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Minakov, 2015).

In Africa, ethnic, regional, and religious intolerance has equally posed serious challenges to democratic governance. Countries such as Rwanda, Somalia, Kenya, Niger, Ethiopia, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Gabon have experienced varying degrees of ethno-political instability that have undermined democratic processes. Likewise, ethno-religious conflicts have adversely affected democratic practice in Sudan, Djibouti, Egypt, and Algeria. In the Nigerian context, ethno-religious intolerance has remained a persistent feature of the political landscape since independence in 1960, continually threatening national unity, peaceful coexistence, and democratic consolidation. In recent history, only a few states in Nigeria have not, in one form or another, experienced ethnic or religious conflict (Igbede & Adesiyan, 2023).

The sustained incidence of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria has generated deep concern among policymakers, scholars, and peace practitioners. Despite successive government-initiated development plans aimed at strengthening and sustaining democratic governance, tangible outcomes have remained limited due largely to the persistence of ethno-religious violence. Such conflicts often engender hostility among ethnic groups and adherents of different faiths, thereby undermining democratic norms, institutions, and practices. One of the most profound effects of ethno-religious conflict on democracy is the creation of deep-seated sentiments and identity consciousness, which frequently translate into political intolerance, electoral violence, and institutional fragility (Goodnews & Chioma, 2021).

The absence of national cohesion within Nigeria's polity has further manifested in the current democratic dispensation through sustained agitations for political restructuring and calls for a sovereign national conference in various parts of the country. These agitations have been accompanied by recurrent waves of political, inter-ethnic, and sectional violence, as well as demands for greater resource control and self-determination. Following nearly three decades of military rule, Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 was widely perceived as an opportunity to reap the dividends of democracy. However, for many groups, the transition also provided a platform for articulating long-standing grievances, the consequences of which have been the recurring outbreaks of ethno-religious and political conflicts (Isah, Dando & Mukhtar, 2018).

Nigeria embodies a complex configuration of identities, with ethnic, religious, regional, and sub-ethnic affiliations constituting the most salient bases for political mobilization and violent conflict. These identities are not only central to citizens' political engagement but are also frequently invoked in everyday struggles over citizenship, access to resources, and socio-economic privileges. Given their interrelated nature and mutual reinforcement, scholars often conceptualize these identities as ethno-regional and ethno-religious in order to capture their compounded effects on political behavior and conflict dynamics (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

While several plural societies around the world have successfully harnessed diversity as a source of democratic strength, Nigeria has struggled to do so, with diversity instead emerging as a major source of political instability. The country's heterogeneous composition continues to pose serious threats to national unity, rendering its democratic future uncertain. This reality is reflected in the recurrent occurrence of ethno-religious and political conflicts both before and after independence. For instance, ethnic and political divisions were evident during the constitutional crisis that followed Chief Anthony Enahoro's motion for independence in 1953, which exposed deep regional and ideological cleavages among

Nigeria's political elite (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015). Since the advent of the Fourth Republic in May 1999, Nigeria has witnessed no fewer than one hundred politically, ethnically, and religiously motivated conflicts, many of which have significantly undermined democratic growth and consolidation. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the persistent waves of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria and interrogates the extent to which they pose a fundamental threat to the country's fragile and nascent democratic order.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory was propounded by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, provides a foundational framework for understanding inter-group relations and conflict. The theory posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept and sense of belonging from their membership in social groups. These groups may be defined along various social categories such as ethnicity, religion, race, nationality, or gender. According to the theory, individuals tend to categorize themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups, a process that often gives rise to in-group favoritism and out-group bias, which in turn can manifest as prejudice, discrimination, and inter-group conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Social Identity Theory seeks to explain the cognitive mechanisms and social conditions that underlie inter-group behavior, particularly in plural and deeply divided societies. By emphasizing the role of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison, the theory accounts for how group-based identities become salient in political and social interactions, especially in contexts characterized by competition over power, resources, and recognition. These dynamics are especially pronounced in multi-ethnic and multi-religious states, where group identities are frequently mobilized for political purposes (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

The relevance of Social Identity Theory to this study lies in its capacity to elucidate the impact of ethno-religious conflict on democratic practice in Nigeria. The persistent salience of ethnic and religious identities in Nigeria's political landscape has fostered inter-group intolerance, mistrust, and hostility, thereby undermining democratic norms such as inclusion, participation, and political equality. In this context, inter-group behavior is often expressed through ethnic and religious polarization, which inhibits national cohesion and weakens democratic institutions.

Within this framework, ethno-religious conflict may be understood as a condition in which interactions between members of different ethnic or religious groups are characterized by strained relations, mutual suspicion, fear, and a heightened propensity for violent confrontation. Such conflicts, driven by entrenched group identities and perceived threats to collective interests, pose significant challenges to democratic consolidation by exacerbating divisions, legitimizing exclusionary politics, and eroding the foundations of peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Ethnicity

According to Henri Tajfel and John Turner, ethnicity may be understood as membership in a social group within a given society. Cohen (1974) defines an ethnic group as an informal interest group whose members are distinguished from those of other groups within a larger society by shared kinship, religious, and linguistic ties. This suggests that ethnic groups are social formations differentiated from others by the communal character of their boundaries. Expanding on this perspective, Nnoli (1978) emphasizes that language constitutes the most critical variable in ethnic identity. Consequently, an ethnic group consists of individuals who share common ancestry, language, culture, and customs, and who are similarly perceived by others (Salawu & Hassan, 2011).

Ethnicity, on the other hand, refers to the interaction among members of diverse ethnic groups within a society (Nnoli, 1978). Osaghae (1992) further conceptualizes ethnicity as a social formation anchored in culturally specific practices, symbols, and cosmologies. In itself, ethnicity does not inherently pose a threat to development, democracy, national security, or national integration. Rather, it is the phenomenon of negative ethnicism, often regarded as a pathological expression of ethnicity, characterized by rejectionist attitudes toward those perceived as outsiders, that threatens democratic governance, development, national security, and national integration (Salawu & Hassan, 2011; Edewor, Aluko & Folarin, 2014; Koku, 2015).

Within the context of this paper, the term *ethnicism* denotes ethnic loyalty, defined as a strong emotional attachment to one's ethnic group (Pepple, 1985). An examination of Nigeria's political landscape since independence reveals the extent to which ethnic loyalty has undermined the country's aspiration for democratic governance (Adagbabiri & Okolie, 2017). Ethnic loyalty has produced profound negative consequences for Nigeria's democratic development, to the extent that it remains a persistent obstacle to the institutionalization of democratic values. Among its most notable consequences, as observed by Babangida (2002) and Adagbabiri and Okolie (2017), are the wastage of enormous human and material resources through ethnically motivated violence, clashes, and, in extreme cases, armed confrontations.

Furthermore, ethnicity has heightened economic fragility and distorted political processes, while posing severe threats to the security of lives and property. It has also contributed to the disinvestment of both local and foreign capital, continuous capital flight and a loss of confidence in the national economy. In addition, ethnic divisions have widened social cleavages among Nigeria's ethnic nationalities, fostering deep-seated suspicion and hostility. As a result, Nigeria continues to grapple with deficits in democratic values, human security and, distributive justice and conditions that have fueled persistent social unrest across the polity (Williams, 2018).

From any analytical perspective, it is evident that Nigeria's political trajectory since independence in 1960 has been characterized by intense ethnic calculations, particularly in struggles over power, political mobilization, elite competition and in some instances, the orchestration of violence and rhetorical confrontation. These dynamics have projected the Nigerian state in an unfavorable light and have exposed the limited capacity of the state to effectively address emerging trends of insecurity (Esidene, 2012). Such developments underscore the entrenched role of ethnic politics in Nigeria's post-independence experience.

In essence, the foregoing discussion suggests that ethnicity in a multi-ethnic society such as Nigeria often degenerates into ethnicism, which fuels primordial sentiments and undermines national cohesion. The ideology of ethnicity thus finds expression in sectionalism and prebendalism, manifesting as overt support or opposition to individuals occupying positions of authority based on ethnic considerations (Ogundiya, 2010). Consequently, ethnicity engender hatred, suspicion, political intolerance, insecurity and socio-political instability, often culminating in agitations for regime change and further weakening democratic governance

Religion

Religion, as one of the oldest social institutions in human society, remains among the most complex and contested concepts to define. This complexity arises from the diverse disciplinary perspectives through which religion is examined, as well as from its multifaceted nature and varied expressions. Consequently, religion is often described as an elusive and imprecise concept, difficult to define with complete objectivity and precision, largely because it is deeply emotion-laden (Ngele, 2008; Egwu, 2011). Religion has been variously conceptualized as a belief system through which individuals relate to a superior, albeit

unseen, power. Beyond belief, it also functions as a moral and spiritual framework that fosters social balance, order, and harmony, and thus possesses the potential to contribute to the cultivation of responsible and law-abiding citizens within society (Akinlaye, 2003).

According to Ayinla (2003) and Danjibo (2012), religion may be defined as a particular system, or a set of interrelated systems, comprising doctrines, myths, rituals, sentiments, and other related elements. A more comprehensive definition is provided by Udom and Okolie (2022), who describe religion as "man's awareness and recognition of his dependent relationship on a transcendent Being." Similarly, Ngele (2008) observes that religion, particularly in relation to public policy, often functions as a catalyst in addressing humanity's ultimate existential concerns. Alao (2015) further conceptualizes religion as humanity's interaction with what is perceived as the "holy," regardless of whether such a sacred entity is conceived as supernatural or personal. It is widely acknowledged that religion profoundly shapes human values, behavior, and interaction with the environment, to the extent that individuals may be willing to make extreme sacrifices, including the ultimate price, in its defense (Odeh, 2010).

Nigeria is a religiously plural society and constitutionally a secular state, with three major religious traditions, Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion, all of which play significant roles in national life. However, Islam and Christianity are the most dominant and widely practiced religions in contemporary Nigeria. Nigerians are generally regarded as deeply religious people; paradoxically, this strong religiosity has not translated into peaceful coexistence, social harmony, or sustained socio-economic development (Alao, 2015). In fact, religion has increasingly emerged as a pivotal factor in violent conflicts in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies such as Sudan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria. Empirical observations suggest that violence is often intricately linked to religion, particularly in contexts where religious identity overlaps significantly with ethnicity and nationalism (Danjibo, 2012).

Contrary to the expectation that religious plurality would foster unity and peaceful coexistence in a multi-ethnic and multilingual society such as Nigeria, multi-religiosity has instead contributed to heightened tensions and recurrent social unrest. This has led Udom and Okolie (2022) to argue that religion, in itself, is not intrinsically negative but rather serves as an integrative force. When religion becomes a disintegrative force, this is largely attributable to the actions of its practitioners, leaders, organizations, modes of preaching, and methods of propagation.

Salawu (2010) observes that over the past two decades, religion has been at the centre of many violent conflicts across the globe. This reality partly explains why religion has been identified as one of the major security challenges confronting humanity in the post–Cold War era (Nwankwo, 2015). Although religion is ideally expected to promote peace, moral regeneration, and salvation, it has frequently been manipulated to undermine national cohesion and stability in Nigeria. This is largely due to the powerful influence religion exerts over human consciousness and behavior. As such, it has been deployed as an instrument for political mobilization, the pursuit of parochial and selfish interests, and the advancement of ethno-sectional agendas (Odeh, 2010).

Jega (2002) further notes that many socio-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria are often reframed and prosecuted under the guise of inter-religious struggles, largely because of the significant overlap between ethnic and religious boundaries in the country's plural social structure. Supporting this view, Udom and Okolie (2022) argue that conflicts do not occur spontaneously but are rooted in deep-seated grievances and dissatisfaction that await activation under favorable conditions. Consequently, religious values are increasingly manipulated by political opportunists and extremists to legitimize violence and terror, using religion as a vehicle for expressing socio-economic and political grievances. Koku (2015) similarly contends that the pursuit of personal gain, power, and dominance has led certain actors to instrumentalize religion as a cover for selfish and egocentric ambitions. This has

fostered suspicion, hostility, and unhealthy rivalry among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups, particularly between adherents of Islam and Christianity.

In Nigeria, religious conflicts predominantly manifest in clashes between Muslims and Christians, with religious identity frequently serving as a catalyst for avoidable violence that tolerance and dialogue could have mitigated. This reality underscores Danjibo's (2012) assertion that modernization theory has failed to relegate religion to the margins of social life. Given the frequency and intensity of religious conflicts in Nigeria, the northern region has increasingly become a hotspot of religious extremism (Yakubu & Rothfuss, 2012), resulting in widespread loss of lives and property, the displacement of populations, and the creation of large numbers of widows, orphans, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and refugees. The emergence and escalation of Boko Haram insurgency, an extremist movement that vehemently opposes Western education and Christianity, has further intensified pre-existing religious and political tensions. Consequently, Nigeria's religious and political history has been marked by an unprecedented rise in ethno-religious conflicts, leading to massive human casualties and the destruction of properties worth billions of naira.

Conflicts

In defining conflict, Adetoye and Omilusi (2015) argue that conflict refers to any action intentionally undertaken by an actor to realize personal or group interests in opposition to, or against the resistance of, other parties. They further contend that social conflict involves a struggle over status, power, and scarce resources, in which the primary objectives of the parties are not only to secure desired values but also to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals. In general terms, conflict entails struggle and rivalry over objects to which individuals and groups attach significant importance. These objects may be either material or non-material in nature. Material objects include scarce resources such as wealth, employment opportunities, promotions, and positions of authority, including political offices in both private and public organizations. Non-material objects, on the other hand, encompass cultural values, traditions, religion, and language (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

From the perspective of conflict theorists, conflicts—whether political, communal, ethnic, or religious—are often driven by disparities rather than similarities among individuals and groups, particularly inequalities in power, access to resources, and social status. Karl Marx, in *The Communist Manifesto*, famously asserted that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle," emphasizing that conflict is a persistent feature of human societies across agrarian, feudal, and capitalist systems. From this standpoint, conflict may be regarded as inherent in human social relations. While this perspective has gained considerable traction, especially among its proponents, it does not imply that all social relationships must necessarily be characterized by hatred or jealousy, nor does it suggest that conflict is inevitable or incapable of being managed, mitigated, or resolved (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015).

Ethno-Religious Conflict

To properly situate and understand ethnic conflict, it is important to note, first, that ethnic conflicts encompass not only confrontations between members of different ethnic groups (inter-group conflicts) but also disputes among segments or sub-groups within the same ethnic group (intra-ethnic conflicts). Many of these intra-group disputes fall within the broader category of communal conflicts, thereby making ethnic conflict more expansive and complex than is often assumed. Second, ethnic conflicts frequently assume the character of zero-sum contests, in which the gains of one group are perceived as the losses of another. This perception significantly increases their propensity for violence (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

At the religious level, conflict often arises when individuals or groups adhering to different faiths, or divergent interpretations within the same faith, claim exclusive ownership of religious truth. Given the absolutist nature of such claims, opposing parties are unable to simultaneously accommodate competing truths, thereby giving rise to opposition, friction, incompatibility, antagonism, hostility, and, in extreme cases, open confrontation and violence (Ayantayo, 2005). In this context, inter-religious conflict may be defined as a state of disagreement between individuals or groups of different religious affiliations over claims to absolute religious truth. Such conflicts typically manifest through arguments, controversies, demonstrations, debates, and, in some instances, violent clashes over religious beliefs and practices.

Democracy

The concept of democracy has undergone significant evolution over time. Historically, elements of direct democracy can be identified in societies where communities collectively made decisions through popular assemblies. In contemporary political systems, however, representative democracy has emerged as the dominant model, whereby citizens periodically elect representatives to govern on their behalf, as observed in parliamentary and presidential systems (Ogbeidi, 2018). Democracy as a political concept rests on certain foundational assumptions commonly regarded as its core tenets—liberty or freedom, equality, and the pursuit of interests (Graham, 1986). These principles imply that all individuals are inherently equal, possess equal freedoms, and have legitimate interests which they should be at liberty to pursue.

These democratic tenets are often traced to the notion of natural law, which presupposes the existence of inherent rights in the state of nature prior to the formation of organized political authority (Barry, 1981). Dahl (1970), however, advances a more institutional and procedural conception of democracy, identifying key dimensions such as acceptance of majority rule, adherence to the rule of law, protection of individual and minority rights, and the safeguarding of the interests of disadvantaged groups. One of the most widely cited definitions of democracy conceives it as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," either directly or through their elected representatives. In practical terms, this translates into governance by the majority, exercised within the framework of constitutional and legal constraints (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015).

Janda et al. (1992) further identify two major schools of thought on the meaning of democracy. The first conceptualizes democracy primarily as a form of government, emphasizing procedures that enable citizens to govern themselves. This procedural approach focuses on decision-making mechanisms such as public deliberation, voting in elections, and contestation for public office. Central to this perspective is the principle of majority rule, which holds that collective decisions should reflect the preferences of the majority of participants. Democratic theory also underscores the principle of universal participation, asserting that all adults within a political system possess inalienable rights to vote and to be voted for. This principle, commonly referred to as universal adult suffrage, reflects the broader democratic commitment to political equality and the rule of law (Janda et al., 1992).

Manifestations of Ethno-Religious Conflicts and Their Implications on Democratic Governance in Democracy

In Nigeria, it is interesting to note that ethnicity and religious bigotry have become a fulcrum of various forms of contestation and nationalism ranging from assertion of language, cultural autonomy and religious superiority to demands for local political autonomy and self-determination. All these sometimes lead to some forms of contextual discrimination of members of one ethnic or religious group against another on the basis of differentiated systems of socio-cultural symbols and religion. Therefore, in a multi-ethnic and religiously

diverse society like Nigeria with some forms of contextual discrimination, relationships between people may be characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear as it is the case among the ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. In fact, this mutual suspicion and lack of cordiality among the various ethnic components explains why ethno-religious conflicts have become a permanent feature of Nigeria as far back as 1980s to date (Salawu, 2010).

Thus, before the present democratic experiment in Nigeria, there were ethno-religious conflicts that claimed so many lives and property (Mohammed, 2004). Notable among such conflicts are the maitatsine religious disturbances in parts of Kano and Maiduguri in the early 1980s, Jimeta-Yola religious disturbances in 1984 and Zango Kataf conflict in Kaduna State in 1992. Others are Kafanchan College of Education Muslim-Christian riots, Kaduna Polytechnic Muslim-Christian skirmishes in 1981 and 1982, and the cross versus the crescent conflict at the University of lbadan in 1981 and 1985. Yet other early ethno-religious conflicts include the Bulumkutu Christian-Muslim riots in 1982, Usman Danfodio University, Sokoto in 1982 and the Muslim-Christian Clash during a Christian procession at Easter in Ilorin, Kwara State in 1986 (Udom and Okolie, 2022).

In addition to the above, it is important to note that foreign religious elements often contribute to the conflict in Nigeria. For instance, the extremist Boko Haram and ISWAP just like the maitatsine had foreign elements in their rank. The 1991 religious' conflict in Kano due to the plan by late Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke, to conduct a crusade tagged "Kano for Jesus". Some religious clerics mobilized their members to protest against the crusade on ground that a South African preacher, Sheikh Ahmed Deedat (1918 – 2005), a globally renowned Muslim missionary, author and orator on comparative religion was earlier denied access to the ancient city on similar religious function (King Faisal Prize 2021). There was subsequent religious violence in Kano, Jos ethno-religious conflicts, Anguleri and Amuleri ethnic conflict, separatist agitation by Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) and Oduduwa People's Congress (OPC), Ife and Modakeke conflict in Osun state, Arogbo-Ijaw and Ilaje communities in Ondo state, the Seki-Iseyin and the Hausa-Fulani in Oyo state to mention a few (Igbede &Adesiyan, 2023).

Against the background provided above, it then means that since a long time ago, many parts of Nigeria have become theatres of war, characterized by an increasing number of ethnic and religious conflict. The spate of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria has however, increased with the birth of Fourth Republic. The frequent occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts with the coming of democracy is due to freedom provided by democratic rule. The electoral process in Nigeria has always come with upsurge in violent ethno-religious activities during the movement to democratic rule followed by spikes of additional insecurity every four years of election cycle. Violent incidents carried out by ethno-religious forces spiked each election year since 1999 around national and state elections. During previous election cycles, partisan violence has escalated along ethnic and sectarian lines, resulting in multiple rounds of revenge killings. The magnitude of ethno-religious unrest was recorded at its highest in 2011 during the presidential election won by President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan when an estimated 800 lives were lost. Likewise, hundreds are reported to have died during elections in 2015 and 2019 (Collier & Vicente, 2014).

The first leg of ethnic and religious riots in Nigeria in recent time was in July 1999, when some Oro cultists in Sagamu, in Ogun State accused a Hausa woman of coming out when the cultists were outside with their gnome. This gave rise to altercations which eventually led to full-blown conflict. Many people, mostly of Hausa and Yoruba extraction lost their lives. The infamy was however, temporarily put to check only when a dusk to dawn curfew was imposed on the sleepy town of Sagamu. Unfortunately, however, as the infamy was put off in Sagamu, reprisal killings started in Kano. As a result, many people died and property worth billions of Naira destroyed. Kano residents of Southern extraction who had

lived all their adult lives in the ancient city of Kano had to return to their native land to count their losses. When Kano city was settling down for peace, Lagos erupted with another orgy of violence, visibly as a mark of vengeance of the Kano mass killing of the Yoruba people. This time, the O'dua People Congress (OPC) moved against the Hausa/Fulani traders in the popular 'mile 12 market' and for two days, the area was turned to a killing field (Salawu, 2010).

Another ethno-religious conflict that left a remarkable mark in Nigeria was the Kaduna/Enugu riots. The root cause of the riot was the introduction of Sharia Islamic Legal Code by some governors of the northern states of Nigeria. Governor Ahmed Sani Yerima of Zamfara State first introduced Sharia law in October 1999, which was greeted with pockets of protest. Initially, there was no harm committed as a result of the protests over the introduction of the Sharia law. However, the hitherto subdue fire was ignited when Governor Ahmed Makarfi tried it in Kaduna state in February 2000. Because of the deep-seated animosities between the Muslims and Christians in Kaduna State in general and the state capital in particular, coupled with the fact that both are almost at par in population, the two went for their swords and many were slained in cold blood (Salawu, 2010).

In the Kaduna riots, the Igbo people were mostly affected, however, like the Sagamu incident and as it should be expected, Enugu and other south east cities erupted in violence when many Igbo were returned dead and those who were lucky to escape had tails of woe to tell, as they too were targets of attack by the Hausa-Fulani in Kaduna. It is important to note here that the Kaduna/Enugu ethno-religious riots present some features that look like the prelude to the 1967-1970 civil war in Nigeria. In other words, the riots constituted sufficient force that could lead to a civil war as law and order collapsed in the two areas (Salawu, 2010).

In October 2000, another ethno-religious conflict occurred. This was the Lagos-Kano mayhems. The cause of this was the misunderstanding between the Hausa residents and the Yoruba in Idi-Araba in Lagos over the use of a convenience by a Hausa resident, as a result of this misunderstanding many Yoruba residents of the area were killed with bows, arrows and machetes. Responding, the O'dua People Congress, a Yoruba militia came into the picture and things worsened. Later, Oko-Oba another Lagos suburb with a high population concentration of Hausa/Fulani stock joined the fray of madness. The violence later spread to Kano and as expected the southerners were mostly the victims (Salawu, 2010).

In September 2001, the ethnic tension between the Tivs and Iunkuns in Taraba State reached a crescendo after decades of fighting. The September 2001 ethnic tension was caused by what can be described as a mistaken identity. What this means is that some Tivs took some nineteen soldiers to be Junkuns but in fake army uniform. The Tivs youths captured and slaughtered them one after the other. The reprisal attacks by the men of the Nigerian army in Zaki Biam was devastating. Also, in the same month in Jos, the Plateau state capital, a full blown ethno-religious conflict broke out. The cause of this was the appointment of a Muslim as the chairman of the poverty alleviation program. By the time sanity found its way back to the city, more than two thousand lives had been lost in the mayhem (Salawu, 2010).

In the following month of the same year, that is, October 2001, there was another' mayhem in Kano. This was, however, caused by an international event when some terrorists attacked the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in the United State of America. Shortly, after the United States launched an offensive against the Taliban government in Afghanistan, Kano erupted with another round of ethno-religious conflict. In this case, some Islamic fundamentalists who felt that the United States of America had no reason to bombard Afghanistan decided to set the city of Kano on fire. Like the earlier conflicts in the city, the Christians and southern tribes of Nigeria were mostly the victims of the Kano ethno-religious conflict.

All the conflict events presented above and which occurred before and since the coming of democracy in 1999, remain stark reminders that the conflict hot beds and flash points around the country are always steaming and ready to explode at the slighted provocation. From the various examples of ethno-religious conflicts cited, it can be seen that there is no sharp distinction between ethnic and religious conflict. What this means is that a conflict that begins as an ethnic conflict may end up as a religious crisis and vice-versa. This explains why ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are always devastating in their effects (Salawu, 2010).

A Review of the Causes of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

As highlighted earlier in this paper, ethno-religious conflict differs from other forms of social conflict in that it involves ethnic groups adhering to different religious affiliations. In examining the causes of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria, it is important to note that both religious and ethnic factors are present in the majority of social conflicts experienced by the Nigerian populace. At various times and across different contexts, individuals encounter religious or ethnic discrimination, assert claims for religious or ethnic rights, and, notably, the state itself often mobilizes religion or ethnicity within political discourse and action. These dynamics underscore that ethno-religious conflict is inherently multi-causal, shaped by the complex interplay of social, political, and cultural factors (Salawu, 2010).

A major cause of what we now see as ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria has to do with the accusations and allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation, victimization, discrimination, marginalization, nepotism and bigotry. In every society, there is no complete agreement on how wealth, power and status are to be shared among individuals and groups. There is also no agreement on how to effect necessary changes and reforms. This is because, different groups and individuals have diverse interests in which case, some groups will have their interest met, while others will not (Ogbeidi, 2018).

What this means is that ethno-religious conflict usually occurs when deprived groups and individuals attempt to increase their share of power and wealth or to modify the dominant values, norms, beliefs or ideology. Thus, in Nigeria and going by the various examples of ethno-religious conflicts cited earlier, there seems to be a divisive interplay of politics, ethnicism and religious values which has consequently led to the rising nationalism and militancy of various ethnic and religious movements. It is interesting to note that the overall consequences of this is the escalation of various ethno-religious conflicts that are witnessed all over the country which are meant to correct any perceived form of marginalization, oppression or domination (Salawu, 2010).

It is important to note here too that the failure of the Nigerian leaders to establish good governments, forge national integration and promote what can be called real economic progress, through deliberate and articulated policies, has led to mass poverty and unemployment. This has resulted into communal, ethnic, religious and class conflicts that have now characterized the Nigerian state. Poverty and unemployment have therefore served as nursery bed for many ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria because the country now has a reservoir of poor people who are war mongers and use as merchant of violence. What this means theoretically is that poverty and unemployment increase the number of people who are prepared to kill or be killed for a given course at token benefit. This explains why all ethno-religious conflicts that ever occurred in Nigeria have a large turnout of people as fighters (Jega, 2002).

A very important cause of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria is the breakdown of such vehicles of social control that characterized the traditional African societies such as the family ties, education, law, religion and political system that cared for the well-being of all citizens. Indeed, the malfunctioning of all these important institutions has actually increased ethnic and communal conflicts in Nigeria. For instance, the inability of many homes to make

ends meet, increase immorality, broken homes, divorces and drunkenness, leading to a large army of youths who could be employed for execution of ethno-religious conflicts.

It is also important to note that the school system in Nigeria today is in shambles and cannot impact even sound knowledge, let alone instils discipline and desired type of morality. The religious institution is also not playing its expected roles, while the law enforcement agents indulge in crimes, demand bribes and collect illegal levies from motorists openly and shamelessly. All the above encourages social vices in the society thereby laying the foundation for conflicts in general (Jonhson, 2020).

The long military intervention in politics tends to encourage and legitimize the use of force and violence as instruments of social change and attainment of set goals and demands. From this, it is customary to see that as a hangover from the military era, the use of coercion and force in settling conflicts has become a tradition in the Nigerian body politics. Strongly related to this, is the uncontrolled arms supply, which has quickened the outbreak of conflicts and encourage belligerents to go on fighting rather than find peaceful settlement to disputes. The ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria also have some historical antecedent. This is because many governmental policies during the colonial rule and after independence encouraged to a large extent, the sowing of the seeds of ethno-religious conflicts that are found to be rampant in the Nigerian state today (Salawu, 2010).

As noticed by Albert (2001) over the years, many events in Nigeria have led to the politicization of mistrust, intolerance, violence and acrimonious relations between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria most especially in the northern part of the country. To this extent, there has been an unfortunate insertion of ethno-religious discrimination and incompatibility in the structures of the Nigerian State since the colonial period. In 1931 for instance, the colonial administration under the leadership of Governor Donald Cameroun did not encourage interaction among different religious belief in the country. An advice given by the governor is indicative of this. The Governor advised the Christian missions to thread softly in Moslem areas so as to maintain the stability of indirect rule. The political events of the January 15, 1966 coup and the July 1966 counter-coup further entrenched ethno-religious configuration in Nigeria. This is because the killings and counter-killings that followed the coups took ethnic and regional colorations as the north was set against the south east region (Koku, 2015).

The ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria also have some connection with a number of politico-religious developments at the international scene. According to Albert (2001), religions conflicts in Nigeria could be traced to the developments in the Middle East. In this regard, he pointed out that religious issues became particularly phenomenal since the late 1980s with the end of the Cold War and entrenchment of capitalism. With globalization, the Muslims worldwide and particularly, the Middle East were determined to reset the socio-economic impoverishment and psychological alienation that stem from failed modernization and excessive westernization in the post-Cold War era. The contemporary increase in the incidences of terrorism around the world was linked to the new ideology of Islamism (Albert, 2001).

It should be understood that the problem created by the new Muslim ideology was not limited to the Middle East as the increasing feelings of relative deprivation and alienation around the world makes developing states with large Muslim populations susceptible to militant forms of Islamism in the Middle East. This explains why the increased rate of religious violence in northern Nigeria, since 1980s can be understood from this perspective. The influence of foreign factor on ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria became obvious in 1983 when the then Nigerian Minister for International Affairs attempted to link the development of conflicts in Nigeria to the global political economy (Salawu, 2010).

It was the opinion of the government that many of the ethno-religious conflicts had foreign backing and as such ordered that foreigner without valid permit should leave Nigeria.

The main reason given for this expulsion order was that the presence of the aliens at the time threatened the security of Nigeria (Albert, 2001). Particularly referred to as the justification for the government action, was the 1980 maitatsine riots led by Marwa, a Cameroonian by nationality. In 1985 too, Major General Tunde Idiagbon pointed to the foreign connection in the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. In this regard, he alerted Nigerians about the impending conflict and the foreign supports some religious fundamentalists were receiving (Albert, 2001).

It is instructive to say here, therefore, that in Nigeria and from the various examples of ethno-religious conflicts cited earlier, grievances based on such discrimination affect the level of protest and/or rebellion in which the various ethno-religious groups engaged. In the case of the introduction of Sharia law in some northern states for instance, it was the religious framework that caused a group to take actions, which affected groups that do not subscribe to the same religious faith. Such actions as we have seen infringed upon those other groups and provoked a conflictive response. This is true irrespective of whether the group that is infringed upon occupies a dominant or subordinate role in society. This analysis is also true of all the ethno-religious conflicts that we have witnessed in Nigeria (Salawu, 2010). For instance, a mere scuffle that started between an Igbo trader and a Fulani security guard at the Sabon Gari market in Kano developed into city wide ethno-religious conflicts in which many people lost their lives and property (Albert, 2001).

The causes of ethno-religious conflicts discussed so far can be summed up under the theoretical framework developed by Ted Robert Gurr to explain ethno-religious conflicts. Gurr's theoretical approach combines the relative deprivation approach pioneered in his classic book ‘Why Men Rebel’. Gurr’s basic model is very simple and is found to be useful in explaining ethno-religious conflicts, the types we have in Nigeria. Gurr's model has three steps: first, he opined that discrimination against an ethnic or religious minority causes the minority to form grievances. Second, these grievances contribute to the mobilization of the ethnic or religious minority for political action. Third, the more a minority is mobilized, the more likely it is to engage in political action including protest and rebellion (Salawu, 2010).

The Nexus Between Ethno-Religious Conflict and Democratic Governance in Nigeria

Ethnic and religious issues are among the most persistent challenges in Nigeria’s political landscape. The problem has permeated the landscape since the colonial period, and up till the present time, there seems to be no solution in sight to the accompanying conflicts of ethnic rivalry and religious intolerance. The dominant and minority ethnic groups treat each other with suspicion, and the different religious worldviews clash at the slightest provocation (Olu-Adeyemi, 2006). Institutional efforts made to address these tendencies since independence in 1960 have proven inadequate. The long years of military rule increased the gap of distrust as the elites deliberately employed state power to pursue primordial sentiments, thereby increasing the gap of intolerance in Nigeria. The current political cum religious battles is fueled by certain quarters and individuals who benefit at the expense of the state and citizens. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2001), numerous actors have a stake in the promotion of ethno-religious conflicts because the associated arithmetic of numbers underpinning the conflicts translates into jobs, contracts, the creation of local governments and states as well as representation in the National Assembly (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015).

Ethno-religious violence appears to be the most common form of armed violence in post-military Nigeria. The reoccurrence of ethno-religious armed violence in the northern region has led to extensive killings and material destruction. The outbreak of violence is strongly linked to the growth of the Sharia law, which swept through twelve states in northern region immediately after the return to democratic governance in 1999 and which has led to clashes in many states of the region (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015).

The mere existence of different ethnic groups or diverse political worldview in one society does not automatically produce tension or conflict. People with different ethnic and political learning can coexist without tension but this may change in times of situations of mutual distrust. The fear of democracy catalyzing into disintegration due to cultural pluralism is rife but according to Claude Ake (1990), 'democracy implies precisely the assumption of differences to be negotiated, to be conciliated and to be moved into phases of higher synthesis. Former President Obasanjo averred that as human beings, we will always have friction when we live together, but it should not lead to violence or the urge to take life' (Obasanjo, 2001). This position was borne out of the idea that this wanton destruction of lives and properties is sponsored by people who want to protect their own interest at the expense of the federation.

According to Nnoli (1978), conflict as an aspect of ethnicity is more pronounced in societies where inter-ethnic competition for scarce resources is the rule, particularly when inequality is accepted as the norm and wealth is greatly esteemed. In this typical scenario, no group wants to be consigned to the bottom of the ladder. Hence groups exploit every means in their bid to remain at the top. In a democratic society, where the fight to choose is a guiding principle, ethnic groups may show undue interest in who gets what, how and when. In other words, democratic institutions in ethnically plural societies may be influenced by keen competition, ethnic rivalries and jostling for power and resources. These societies, therefore, may witness social unrest which often takes the form of ethnic conflicts. While the spirit of competition may be seen as healthy for democracy, anchoring this competition on ethnicity or religious factors may be counterproductive to the democratic process (Jonhson, 2020).

When individuals and groups turn to violence as a means of solving their problems, conflict takes the center stage. Conflict resolution becomes multifaceted as conflict itself; solutions must be sought to satisfy the hunger of individuals for justice. At every point of reflecting on the causes of the conflict, one discovers that the elites are insincere towards the need for genuine national integration. Although, democracy in contrast to monarchy or aristocracy, constitute a claim to share political power, the elites more than ever before utilize the present opportunity to pursue selfish agendas. Also, the unfavorable state of the economy gives room for the affluent in the society to influence the downtrodden for personal purposes. This nonetheless creates opportunity for Nigerians to be sponsored for conflictual purposes at the slightest provocation. Apart from the above, the several years of military rule characterized by sudden and drastic overturning of the existing structure of institutional power in favor of a particular ethno-religious group, created agitations and anger that became easily expressed under democracy (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015).

Democracy is about freedom, but it is not freedom to be irresponsible. It is freedom within certain responsibilities and understandable limits, but events in the Nigerian's Fourth Republic have shown that the freedom allowed by democracy is being abused. Although, the constitution guarantees freedom to form, hold and express an opinion, the Nigerian situation is such that the competitors for power are known to have taken control of issues that are definitely well beyond their sphere of competence and are making personal profits out of it at the expense of the corporate existence, economic revival and integration of the nation-state. Thus, concrete efforts must be made to tackle the wave of clashes across the country, since political and ethnic affiliations are human attributes and conflict is inevitable (Abubakar, 2019).

Strategies for Managing Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

As a first step towards solving the problem of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria, the government at all levels should jointly move from conflict resolution to the stage of conflict prevention. This can be achieved through the establishment of early warning system in each

state of the federation. To effectively succeed in this new process, the government should be more committed to the provision of adequate and effective security in each state of the federation that should be able to respond promptly to any ethno-religious conflict anywhere and at any time. The various states should be allowed to have their own security outfits in the form of 'state police' since crime is local (Salawu, 2010).

Another step towards managing ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria is that government at all levels must encourage dialogue in their domains. There should be effective and functional platforms for ethno-religious leaders, so that, it would be possible to establish a network for conflict prevention and management. This proposal is necessary because in Nigeria, the various political, religious, traditional and ethnic leaders in most areas of conflict hardly sit together to discuss the causes of ethno-religious violence and how to prevent future conflicts. What this means is that in Nigeria, with a bad history of ethno-religious conflicts, leaders hardly meet to build bridges and consensus of understanding that could lead to the establishment of mutual confidence and sustain a multi-ethnic society (Isah et al, 2018).

Despite measures being taking to achieve some level of social cohesion and unity in Nigeria, political, ethnic and religious violence have continued to linger thereby threatening the very existence of the country. The Nigerian constitution must be tinkered with to cater for unity in diversity. Federalism must be articulated enough to encapsulate yearnings of the majority and the minority ethnic groups. This requires that federating units must be constitutionally empowered so that they can be sufficiently independent to measure up to the expectations of their people. The present heavy reliance on the federal revenue and allocation should be discouraged (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015).

Rather than being part of the initiators of the solution, ethnic and religious leaders often become part of the conflicts, which they are supposed to solve. The establishment of National Council of Traditional Rulers by the government is a move in the right direction, which will go a long way in building bridges and consensus among religious and ethnic divides. It is however, suggested here that, such bodies should be expanded to include ethnic leaders, opinion leaders and religious leaders while the government should strengthen the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NlREC) (Salawu, 2010).

The civil society also have important role to play in the management of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Imobighe (2003) and Ikelegbe (2003) have stressed the need for the civil society to intervene in ethno-religious conflict. The civil society can effectively intervene by focusing attention on the social organization and structural patterns of interaction, the modes of violence employed, the values of the parties in conflict, the genesis of the conflict and the degree of incompatibility of goals among others (Omorogbe and Omohan, 2005). Just like the civil society, the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have special roles to play in conflict management in Nigeria. Therefore, governmental organizations or institutions at all levels should encourage research on conflict and peace studies. The government can also encourage advocacy by civil societies and NGOs on peace education for neighborhood communities (Enukara, 2005). In particular, the NGOs should be organized in such a way that they will serve as facilitators of dialogues between conflicting groups.

Furthermore, secularism should not just be conceived as the withdrawal of the state from religious affairs but as a guarantor of religious freedom to all and sundry. As a multi-religious and multi ethnic state, the Nigerian society need to be integrated in all frontiers. The 1987 report of the political bureau stated that the two organized religions have the tendency to delay national integration because of their negative tendency to create compelling social disorder. Thus, a holistic approach to tackle this tendency is expedient as democracy is being consolidated in the country (Koku, 2015).

Poverty reduction is another important step towards managing ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria. The high rate of poverty in Nigeria has affected a great number of youths and

these are the categories that could be bought over by the elites in order to distort the nascent democracy in Nigeria. Addressing this problem has become very pertinent. For example, in 1960 about 15% of the population was poor, but by 1980 this percentage had risen to 28%. By 1996, the incidence of poverty in Nigeria was 66%. To put it in glaring terms, 76.6 million Nigerians are affected by poverty. According to the World Bank estimation, about 70 percent of the Nigeria population lives under one dollar per day. If poverty is not addressed, certainly it has the tendency to fuel conflict (Isah, Dando & Mukhtar, 2018).

Also related to the issue of poverty is the problem of unemployment. Unemployment rate is very high especially among the youths in Nigeria. In 1992, estimations put unemployment rate at about 28 per cent. To tackle the problem of unemployment, the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) was established with the mandate to alleviate the problem of unemployment both in the rural and urban centres. Unfortunately, this NDE could not achieve its stated objectives. This kind of program needs to be pursued with vigor if unemployment is to be fought to a standstill (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015).

Ethnic militias should be prevented from determining inter-ethnic relations and the lots of the minorities should be enhanced. Also, the agitations for better revenue sharing formula should be favorably considered and a culture of tolerance, trust and dialogue in inter-ethnic and inter-religious issues entrenched. The mass media which include the prints, the electronics and of course, the social media have a great role to play in all these. The press will do the country more good than harm if it could carry out objective journalism. Sensitive issues should be treated with utmost caution.

Finally, governance that is devoid of corruption will bring democratic dividends to the teaming population of the country. Accountability and transparency should be the watchwords of the political leaders. This will go a long way in addressing the problem of ethno-religious and political conflicts in the country (Abubakar, 2019).

CONCLUSION

It has been established that the failure of government to provide good governance has given rise to ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria. The government has the responsibility to promote national integration, economic progress and national unity through its programs and activities. Bad governance often led to mass poverty, unemployment, communal conflict, ethnic and religious intolerance. The poor and the downtrodden are easily engaged by conflict entrepreneurs to do their bidden. A true federal system with more fiscal autonomy to states and local governments will reduce inter-ethnic friction and promote a healthy competition among lower levels of government.

Democracy in Nigeria can endure if perceptions of marginalization and acts of domination using ethno-religious subterfuge is managed to accommodate different interest groups in the society. In this sense, the present attempts at democracy as a form of sustainable socio-economic development in Nigeria can be attained. One way of tackling ethnic and religious bigotry is by adopting a political culture that makes adequate provision for all interest groups in a given society. Nigeria should therefore learn from the experiences of multi-ethnic countries that have used their diversity to advanced inclusivity and promote development.

Above all, in order to solve the problem of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, the government should run an all-inclusive administration and be just in the treatment of Nigerian citizens. It should discourage all forms of discrimination, neglect and marginalization in dealing with ethno-religious issues. The government should tackle the issue of poverty among Nigerians so that the reservoir of recruits for ethno-religious conflicts will be punctured. The paper concludes that good governance, accountability, poverty and unemployment reduction and restructuring of the federation are important issues to be

addressed in order to solve permanently the problem of ethno-religious and political conflicts that have continued to threaten Nigeria democracy.

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