ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISES IN NIGERIA AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION: THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH

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ABSTRACT
The increasing wave of ethno-religious crises in the Nigeria polity had been a deep subject of concern to all stakeholders. Political scientists, religious leaders, legal experts, economic analysts and even the ordinary citizens have been alarmed by the devastating consequences that these increased ethno religious imbroglios had occasioned to the continued existence of the polity and cohesion of the Nigerian society. Many are of the strong opinion that the continued presence of ethno religious crises, social imbroglios and political upheavals dread the very essence of having to live together interdependently in the society. These social unrests and political imbroglios have put the people in a state of perpetual fear, uncontrolled anxiety and increased insecurity in the day-to-day dealings with others; many have been compelled towards opening their eyes to certain things they would ordinarily not be concerned about; many are pushed to put in place security measures in their various residential places and caused them to be unusually and abnormally hypersensitive to any state of unrest and disorder with many reputed to call anyone who exhibit terrorist-related behaviour in their mode of dressing, way of behaviour, manner of words they speak as “boko haram” and all other satirical names. This state of affairs had also compelled and enhanced the government to devising methods on the way to combat such deadly, malignant phenomenon. Generally, this has raised the consciousness of people even to the smallest minute details, making them to be thorough and exhaustive in their relationships with other people. All in all, the ethno religious crises had done more physical, mental, emotional, societal harm than any benefit. Thus, this paper seeks to delve into an indepth conceptualisation and understanding of the phenomenon of ethno religious crises; examining its nature, extent and effect on the Nigerian polity. Then, the paper will go on to demystifying and examining the whole concept of national integration accentuating upon its primal importance in times of increasing wave of ethno-religious crises. Finally, the paper would then consider the pivotal role the youth can play in achieving a long-lasting, enduring and sustainable national integration in the Nigerian socio-political system.

INTRODUCTION
Two main plagues bedevilling and eroding the growth and advancement of the Nigerian socio-political and economic system are of two fold; ethnicity and perverted use of religion. These two devastating concepts are subsumed in the term “ethno-religious crises”. These two phenomena, often considered an “evil” can permanently destabilize and debilitating the life of any community or nation and then operate collectively to spell
an unimaginable doom or disaster to the nation. The Nigerian polity had tended towards experiencing the full-bloomed presence of these “evils” at the very heat of the system. In fact, these ethno – religious crises is now known as daily and weekly phenomena in the Nigerian society. This has been accompanied by the unimaginable doom or havocs it wreaks upon the polity. Nigeria had tended or more provoked towards disintegration as cohesion, togetherness in the wake of increasing trend of these plagues is fast fading. Many tragedies, mishaps and devastations had become noticeable and felt due to the domineering, overbearing manifestation of ethnic violence and religious genocide. Many have been killed, others maimed while other people’s property had been destroyed. The situation even saddens the heart when all these takes place with impunity; no repercussion of judicial redress and moral approbation had been given to all these violence.

In the light of all these killings, genocide and violence, the need or expedience for an enduring, long lasting and meaningful national integration becomes particularly germane. Many advocated and earnestly clamoured for different shades of national conference in order to holistically address these issues and proffer auspicious panaceas towards nipping them in the bud. This clarion call had often been sounded and re-echoed by political observers, social analysts, legal experts and religious leaders that a national integration be vigorously pursued in these perilous times. The concept of national integration would be closely examined in the same light.

This paper would then critically and constructively examine the often-needed and most pivotal role that the youth must play in the achievement of the long-awaited national integration in a bid to restoring or engendering peace, justice, stability and moral rectitude in the society, It is thus intended that the paper consider and cover all the necessary issues on this point.

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISES IN NIGERIA: NATURE, EXTENT AND SCOPE

The term ‘Ethno-religious crises’ is split into two different terms viz. ethnicity (ethnic crises) and religious crises. The terms would be given conceptual clarifications differently. Ethnicity is often interchangeably used with the word tribalism. Thus, Abnor Coham defines ethnicity as “strife between ethnic groups in the course of which people stress their identity and exclusiveness and conflicts, Its major attributes are ethnocentrism, common consciousness, exclusiveness and conflict”. Ethnicity has brought about multifarious problems of socio-political instability. The ethnocentrism (that is, pride and inward looking attribute that members of an ethnic group exhibits ), common consciousness, exclusiveness (with an intense struggle for separateness) and conflicts ( which arises from the points of contacts or convergence between the ethnic groups) are the components of ethnicity prompting the continual dread it is having on
socio-political stability. Ethnicity is a main clog in the wheel of our progress and a monster rampaging the political unity and societal cohesion in the country.

On the other hand, religious crises would be conceived as a state of unrests, imbroglios and dissensions often resulting from disparities among the beliefs and doctrines of major religions and the rising wave of religious intolerance among the adherents of these religions. Religion, which is meant to be the opium of the people, is now used as a weapon of perpetuation of myriads of violence and arson. These imbroglios are, in recent times, noticeable and evident from the increased activities of the common called socio-religious sect known as the “BOKO HARAM”. This sect had successfully executed life-taking, property-devastating, emotional-destructive and psychological-destructive bombing activities. This is on the increase as the days go by. Instances of the bombing of church buildings in the North, detonation of bomb in the commercial districts in Kano, the bombing of an international office in Abuja and many other boko-haram activities abound which undoubtedly points to the apparent fact that there is an uncontrolled upsurge in religious violence in Nigeria. All these have occurred with little or nothing done about it, the perpetrators of these dastardly acts have not even been apprehended not to talk of been brought to justice. The government have manifested their helplessness in this state of things; the people only hear the often-considered hopeless reassuring words of President Goodluck Jonathan that measures would be put in place to avert their activities and peace would be engendered in the country.

This made me remember the careful, instructive and warning words of Theophilus Danjuma, a serving Defence Minister, while in a state of reminiscence when he expressed fear of about religious violence in the following words;

“...I must confess that I share the fears of possibilities of religious and sectarian strife’s in this country. I believe that tribalism as a fall-back position was destroyed by the Nigerian Civil War. But I regret to say that religious and sectarian chauvinism is fast replacing tribalism as a vehicle of political cohesion. The use of ethnic and/or religious differences as a means of achieving political solidarity is fraudulent enough but it becomes more disturbing when it is used to polarise the peace and stability of the country...My greatest fear is that there may be no Nigeria after our Nigeria after our next strife”.

These fears have dawned upon us now and we can all see the physical manifestation of these fears now in our society today. Religious violence is now ubiquitous. Also, the newly appearing concept of terrorism is even blowing like a wind around the country and has reared its ugly head in the political arena.

**CONSEQUENCES OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISES IN NIGERIA**
It is no uncommon phenomenon that ethno-religious impasse have had, is having and would always have far-reaching devastating consequences. It is becoming more damaging and disastrous through its increased proliferation in the society after its monstrous emergence. Political commentators and even religious leaders consider it as an emergent political vulture ravaging the Nigeria’s socio-political landscape. It has led to the general insecurity of lives and properties, the increased aggravation of the deplorable, abysmal state of our economy, the erosion of moral rectitude and excellence and also the loss of innumerable precious lives and valuable properties. Retardation in socio-economic growth due to the exodus of multinational companies and apathetic refusal of some to come and invest into the country and erosion of political trust and will in the government by the people are also the ripple-effects of ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. All in all, ethno-religious crises had impacted rather monstrously and gruesomely upon the country’s political structures, social institutions and moral system.

THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND ITS EXPEDIENCY IN NIGERIA

The upsurge in these ethno-religious crises then calls for a holistic, concerted effort towards its eradication. Thus, the need for the introduction of the novel concept of National Integration arises with a view to engendering peace, unity and stability into the country and brings a lasting, enduring solution to these gruesome, monstrous acts of ethno-religious crises.

As noted earlier on, many political commentators, social analysts, constitutional luminaries and religious leaders had sounded a clarion call for the introduction of National integration which most collectively accepts as the only lasting panacea to these ugly-headed vultures.

At this juncture, the term national integration would be given a conceptual clarification. First, the question of what a nation is must be answered. A nation is defined as a "a large community of people associated with a particular territory usually speaking a single language and usually having a political character or aspirations "

Flowing from this, national integration can be defined as a process whereby a geographical area becomes incorporated into a system of authority and gradually consolidated into a state with international boundaries and sovereignty over the inhabitants of such territory. The process of national integration is always influenced by external and internal forces .Thus, the whole process of national integration, as suggested, would involve the following steps;
1) The creation of a sense of territorial nationality which overshadows or takes precedence over subordinate parochial loyalties
2) Creation of national legitimated authority over subordinate political units
3) Mediating over discontinuities and hardships such as ethnic conflicts, economic and social imbalances, urban alienation, elite-mass gap, religious violence and other traumas that accompany any form of social change.
4) Creation of new political and economic structures, reconstitution and adaptation of old ones
5) Expanding of the ability of wider population for focused, concerted actions.

Furthermore, the 1999 constitution (as amended) even recognises the importance and essence of national integration when it provides expressly for it in the political objectives under Chapter 2 (that is, Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy) particularly Section 15 of the 1999 constitution (as amended). It is apposite to look at these provisions and they thus state

"15(2) Accordingly, national integration shall be actively encouraged whilst discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, ethnic or linguistic associations or ties shall be prohibited
15(2) For the purpose of promoting national integration, it shall be the duty of the state to
a) Provide adequate facilities for and encourage free mobility of people, goods, and services throughout the Federation
b) Secure full residence rights for every citizen in all parts of the federation
c) Encourage intermarriage among persons from different places of origin or of different religious, ethnic or linguistic associations or ties and
d) Promote or encourage the formation of associations that cuts across ethnic, linguistic’ religious or other sectional barriers.
15(4) the state shall foster a feeling of belonging and of involvement among the various peoples of the Federation to the end that the loyalty to the nation shall override sectional loyalties”

The above provision of the 1999 constitutions (as amended) vividly and aptly captures the whole concept of national integration and the ways in which it can be fully actualised. It is there hoped that if all the organs of government and of all authorities and persons, exercising legislative and judicial powers can conform to, observe, vigorously pursue and apply the provisions of the above sections, then national integration would tilts towards been a reality rather than a mirage or figment of the imagination. The emergence and proliferation of national integration would spell a doom to the proliferation and the gruesome impacts of ethno-religious crises.
THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH IN NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND ERADICATION OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISES

No country primarily concerned with meaningful economic development, social transformation, political stability and religious tranquillity would jettison the role and impact the youth would have upon its progressiveness and advancement. A country desirous of socio-economic and political growth must invest in its youth because an investment in the youth is an investment into the future. This is so on the basis of the fact that the youth is the future of a nation and the leaders of tomorrow.

The youth are seen as members of the whole population between the ages of 15 and 30 years. The youth, according to the Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary, refers to the young people in the society. They are considered to be in the learning phase out of the three phases of learning, earning and yearning phases. They are less aged and often vibrant, virile member of the society. Thus, the youths, due to their emotional, psychological and physical state, have pivotal roles to play in the national integrative movement towards eradication of ethno-religious crises. No wonder they say that “To be youthful is to be useful”. Youthfulness connotes usefulness, No person must despise his youth (1Tim 4; 12a) and also no country must dispense with its youths. Youths are indispensables.

In the same vein, the youth is the most vulnerable to vicious and violent dispositions due to their inbuilt virility and exuberance. They are utilised by most political vultures to perpetrate their heinous crimes, further their self-centred, egocentric motives and promote the instigation of these ethno-religious crises. They are given fat promises if they execute some plans for the political leaders. Even a substantial proportion of the members of the Boko-haram highly likely comprise the youths. Youths are used as a vehicle for driving ethno-religious crises on an increased velocity to a high summit.

Even in all these, the Nigeria society must not be ignorant of the ever-available and increasing relevance of the youth in the attainment of meaningful and sustainable development hinged on ethnic balance and religious peace. Therefore, Nigerian governments should invest in human capital development founded on the youths. It is not an uncommon thing that the Youth can contribute to intellectual development and moral excellence. The monumental contribution of many a youth in driving and enriching the intellectual capital base through their various books readily comes to my mind on how youths can be so useful in our society. Thus, the following paragraphs would examine some roles they can play.
Firstly, the youths would be of immense contribution to national integrative efforts if they are given an opportunity of collective, collaborative, participatory and active involvement in the proposal, deliberation, formulation, drafting and implementation of major socio-political, economic and religious laws, plans, policies and documents that would have multiplier effects upon the generality of the people and impact on their lot. This would be an avenue for them to contribute their lofty ideas to the taming of these evils and its eventual eradication from the face of the society.

Pen ultimately, collaborative and collective action should be promoted amongst the youth to harmonise their differential efforts in the stabilisation and maintenance of peace and order in the Nigerian polity. They should be an advocate of unity and be at the forefront in the campaign for togetherness, unity, oneness and co-operation. They must help promote and propagate religious tolerance, work with even the elderly (i.e. the earners) around them and “pursue peace with all men” as well as “live peaceably with all men”. With these in place, meaningful progress would be made in this crusade.

Ultimately, youths would only be relevant in these times if they would flee from social vices, evil delinquency and immoral activities. All the youths must put on the garment of moral excellence. They should go back to their drawing boards, re-strategize their efforts and devise their plans on how they would make it in life lawfully and without any involvement in an illegal undertaking. Their desperation to make it in life at all costs and active participation in unlawful activities often prompt the older generation to use them as weapons to perpetuate and instigate ethno-religious upheavals. Aside this, our youths should become empowered financially, economically, emotionally and capital wise. They should form part and parcels of main empowerment programs in the country. Pivotal, transformative youth programs like Youth Empowerment Strategy (YES), NAPEP, Youth forums, symposia and conferences, to mention a few, should be the delight of the youths. They should be actively involved in other important private, non-governmental and governmental initiatives in order to be imbibed with certain skills that would, in no small way, assist them in their personal and professional life. Therefore, at the expense of exerting their vibrant efforts in the perpetuation and instigation of ethno-religious dissensions and vendettas and being involved in terrorist-related activities, they should direct and focus those energies in the promotion of peace and tranquillity in our socio-political and economic landscape. So, the political leaders, ethnic rulers and even religious leaders would have no one to use to actualise their evil agenda and promote their vendetta.
CONCLUSION
Finally, it is thus hoped that the teeming youth would not lose its usefulness and relevance in the attainment of national integration which will lead to gradual eradication of the monstrous evil of ethno-religious crises. Youths must fully wake up to this national clarion call that states that “help our youths the truth to know”. Youthfulness is usefulness. I hope our youths wake up fully to this clarion call and assiduously work collectively to revamp the nation.