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## MILITARIZATION OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVE

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## **MILITARIZATION OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract**

Religion has occupied a strategic position in the life of many nations. It serves as an instrument of fostering unity and socio-political stability. However, in Nigeria, interreligious conflict has remained a critical factor among the numerous challenges threatening the co-existence of the nation as a functional entity. The incessant militarization of religion in Nigeria has reached alarming dimensions hence the need to unearth the remote and immediate issues underpinning the menace. This paper seeks to identify the causes of the dramatic increase of religious violence in Nigeria, its cumulative effect and to suggest ways for promoting peace for national development. Specifically the causes of religious crisis in Plateau State in Central Nigeria; the internal and external connections to North East insurgency were briefly highlighted. It is the opinion of this paper that the trend of religious crises in Nigeria were triggered by socio-economic and political realities, occasioned by the manifest drought of good governance, systemic failure and disrespect for rules of engagement. The paper suggests among other things the proactive measures in tackling religious violence in Nigeria.

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### المستخلص

يحتل الدين موقعاً استراتيجياً في حياة كثير من الأمم، فهو أداة لتعزيز الوحدة والاستقرار الاجتماعي، والسياسي في الدول، غير أن الصراع بين الأديان في نيجيريا مثلاً يبقى دوماً تحدياً من بين التحديات المتعددة التي تهدد التعايش بين الافراد و الأمة باعتباره كياناً فاعلاً. فالعسكرة المستمرة للدين في نيجيريا قد وصلت إلى أبعاد مخيفة، لذا كانت الحاجة لكشف العوامل المباشرة وغير المباشرة التي تؤدي لتنامي هذا الخطر. تهدف هذه الدراسة لمعرفة الأسباب وراء تنامي العنف في نيجيريا بالإضافة إلى أثرها التراكمي واقتراح سبل السلام لأجل التنمية القومية تحديداً الأسباب التي أدت للأزمة الدينية في ولاية بلاتو وسط نيجيريا، ايضاً تهدف الورقة لتسليط الضوء على العلاقة المباشرة وغير المباشرة وراء تنامي التمرد في شمال شرق نيجيريا. يرى الباحث أن أسباب الأزمة الدينية في نيجيريا ناتجة عن عوامل اقتصادية، واجتماعية وذلك بسبب غياب الحكم الرشيد وفشل النظام السياسي في معالجة الازمة. تقترح الورقة، من بين اقتراحات أخرى، ضرورة وجود إجراءات استباقية لمعالجة قضية العنف الديني في نيجيريا.

## **Background**

Worshiping a deity or dedication to a holy life is the simple and convenient definition of religion. Religious crisis entails disagreement between or among different religious groups militating against coherent existence or practice within or without a given religion. The disturbing waves of religious violence in some parts of Nigeria, most especially in the Northern part, have transformed the region in to a theatre of war. While it is true that there is no verifiable data on the frequency of religious conflict in Nigeria, it is equally revealing that over 50% of such conflicts occurred in Northern Nigeria. (Ezeanokwasa 2009)

From 1987 to date, a catalogue of religious violence in Nigeria has resulted in tens of thousands deaths toll, destruction of religious outfits and properties worth trillions of Naira, pervading all sectors of human endeavor (Gofwen 2004, Minchalapu 2006; Nwaomah 2010). This culminated into mutual distrust, economic and educational degeneration and national insecurity.

## **Causes and Context**

Empirical analysis has revealed that the dramatic increase in religious crises in Nigeria has reached a genocide dimension. The immediate and visible drivers of religious crises in Nigeria are among others:

### **1. British Colonial Foundation**

The seed of ethno religious discord, manifested in religious bigotry was sowed by the British colonial era. Religious conflicts were fueled and poisoned by the colonial policies of divide and rule pattern

of governance. Consequently, the crises created unending mistrust and suspicion between and among different ethnic and religious groups in the post independent Nigeria. (Ani 2012, Nnoli1987 in Uchendu etal 2013 and Hamman 2002) Justifying the colonial foundation of religious conflicts in Nigeria, Ani (2012) has these to say:

In 1861 Britain annexed Lagos and proceeded to incorporate into two protectorates the different nations that later became Nigeria. They brought Christianity within them and gradually acculturated the ethnic groups within their Nigerian protectorates. They antagonized the indigeneous religion beliefs they met, presented African religion (ATR) as the act of idol worship and at the same time, gave encouragements to Christianity.

Umar (2009) aggress, writing that: “The Colonial conquest and domination through divide-and-rule policies in such areas as education and the creation of administrative structural unit, exacerbated the problem by creating additional areas of potential conflicts”

## **2. Marginalization**

There is a perfect positive correlation between poverty, inequality, social injustice and youth restiveness. Perceived marginalization by self-centered leaders, coupled with the rising tide of unemployment and fear of bleak and uncertain future, are potential drivers of youth vulnerability to the manipulation of politicians and religious provocateurs.

It is pertinent to note that, most inter-religious violence in Nigeria is as the result of “who gets what and who could be denied what?”

Accordingly, Akhumbo (2009:74) described violence as one of the dominant national features in the Nigerian society, stressing that the role of economy remain fundamental in propelling other factors in instituting the current trend of violence. A case in point was the Zangon-Kataf massacre in May 1992 where “economic and political factors were the clinching variables in the outburst of the violence”. The economic factor was occasioned by the domination of the enterprising Hausa people over the Zangon-Kataf natives.

The disillusioned and frustrated followers (common men), are traumatized by the structural inequalities, social injustice, nepotism, neglect and victimization, which degenerate into outright criminality, with attendant disastrous implications. (Salawu 2010) Specifically, the deepening structural economic crisis, the dearth of representation and irresponsiveness of developmental institutions, with ramifications in all spheres of national life, appear to be some of the major causes of violence in the Nigerian societies.

### **3. Religious Intolerance**

This has to do with animosity, hostility, bigotry or mockery of people of other religions. It is propelled by the proliferation of ill-equipped preachers who use provocative and inciting utterances. Uncomplimentary comments and ridiculing of people of other faith by religious leaders have contributed immensely in exacerbating religious violence. Also, annoying mode of worship by religious organizations, through installations of sound magnifying equipment and blockage of highways, by disturbing vehicular and pedestrian movements, are

potential triggers of religious violence (Daily Champion 2006). It has become the tradition of some religious organizations observed Sampson (n.d), to block highways under the pretext of Mass Crusades, Revivals, Tāfsir, Juma'āt or Church service, thereby blocking or disrupting many road users of other faith or even the same faith. Other features of religious intolerance are manifested in sensational journalism punctuated by disparaging publications and incitements in the media and social media platforms.

#### 4. **Politicization of Religion**

One can hardly talk of the Nigerian political situation without linking it to religion. Religious undertone is used as an instrument of political mobilization to satisfy parochial interest, to achieve ethnic or sectional aspiration.

Specifically, most religious crises in Nigeria were basically connected with manipulation of religion to attain unjustified political influence. They are masterminded by some desperate politicians under the guise of religion to perpetuate violence, incitements, reaction and counter reaction. The manipulation of religion in Nigeria as succinctly put by Usman (1989) is perpetuated by some elements within the elite of both Christian and Islamic faith:

.....to enable this class (the manipulators) to cover themselves within the religion and ethnic disguise in order to further entrench division among our people (and) slow down their awakening at any cost...this is because any single one of them (the manipulators) can not appear as what he really is in the political economy of Nigeria. He has to find a

cover...The manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is essentially a means of creating a context of this fancy ball, for this character of disguise. (Usman1987)

Lamenting on the Plateau crises of January 2010, Kaigama (2012:41) revealed that it was triggered by political struggle, socio-economic and cultural factors, which are often clothed in a religious garb. The cumulative factors underlying causes of the crises in plateau were:

...the motive behind the creation of Jos North Local Government, indigeneship certificates, the creation of electoral wards, indigenes versus settlers, the superiority complex of this or that group, expansionist tactics, non-integration, bad governance, the policy of exclusion, the denial of rights, the Federal Government not linking Plateau people, media bias, failure to respect host communities, the non-pursuit of perpetrators of violence, the partisanship of security officials, etc.

The most recent in the timeline of religious crises in Nigeria is the protracted Boko Hārām with stronghold in the north eastern Nigeria, Boko Hārām is coined from Hausa and Arabic words ‘Boko’ (Western education) ‘Hārām’ (forbidden). Their ideologies narratives and references conflicts with the understanding of the salaf (pious predecessors), interpreting the Qur’anic verses out of context and misquoting Muslim jurists.

With a nomenclature of ‘Jama’atu Alis Sunnāh lid Da’awati wāl Jihād’ which means ‘The Group of People of Sunnāh for



proselytization and Struggle’, the following is the backbone of their ideology, (Bukarti n.d: 1):

- a) Tākfir against Muslims‘
- b) Jihād against Non-believers is a religious duty‘
- c) Conventional Education is forbidden‘
- d) Democracy is disbelief‘
- e) Salaried employment in a secular government is forbidden

It was initially a simple protest against the perceived and apparent evils associated with Western education. The killing of their leader Muhāmmad Yusuf sparked-off their full-fledged violence, resulting into the milestone of over 20,000 death tolls .

Boko Haram took up arms and committed a lot of atrocities in the name of Islam across Nigeria, spreading to the neighboring countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger Republics, by attacking both Muslims and Christians in schools, markets, mosques, churches, military formations etc., through assassinations, suicide bombings and guerilla warfare.

With possible links with other terrorist groups outside Nigeria the domestic connection of Boko Haram is still hazy, but their connection with Global terrorist networks cannot be question. The declaration of allegiance by its faction to ‘Islamic State’ (IS) is a justification of their foreign roots.

## **Conclusion**

While religion is a fundamental issue in human life, religious crisis has been a periodic decimal in the history of Nigeria. Historical sketches of cities in northern Nigeria that have experienced prominent severe religion crises have revealed that religion is being manipulated to achieve parochial interest. This situation is propelled by lack of good governance occasioned by limited access to basic services, unstable economic fortune, and unbridled actions of the press, literacy level of religion adherents, aggressive preaching /evangelism, religious intolerance and external influence. (Babatomiwa 2010, Kāmāl-deen n.d)

Ironically, the securities are ill-equipped to respond to religious violence. This is manifested in excessive use of force, extrajudicial killings and torture .

For Nigeria to survive and maintain its corporate existence, the manipulators of religions have to be exposed. All hands must be on deck to address this security imperative, to save Nigeria from eminent collapse.

## **Suggestions and Recommendations**

- 1) Religious leaders must face the fundamentals (of religion) in their preaching, rather than dwelling on dilegitimisation and uncomplimentary comments about other religions.
- 2) To ensure rapid and tangible de-escalation of religious violence, there is the need for constructive interaction between religious leaders through interfaith dialogue, with the view

- bounce back reciprocal respect, and enhance religious tolerance and mutual trust.
- 3) There should be deliberate, consistent and pragmatic policies by all tiers of government to face the high rate of pervasive poverty and youth unemployment in Nigeria.
  - 4) Comprehensive and proactive measures should be put in place by federal government to combat the disturbing trend of religious insurgency, with due respect for rules of engagements in international law.
  - 5) There is the need for consistent and full-scale implementation of series of (previous) Probe Panels reports on religious conflicts by government.
  - 6) Government should make genuine efforts in bridging infrastructural deficits to avert rural-urban drift.
  - 7) Developing, sustaining and consolidating intelligence sharing between and among security agencies to track down religious militarism should be the top concern of government in all the three tiers.

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