

ENHANCING SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA THROUGH RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

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Abstract

The issue of socio-economic development of the Nigerian nation is a worthwhile exercise that required absolute attention. Economic development as a public sector term, is the process by which the economic well being and quality of life of a nation, region or local community are improved according to targeted goals and objectives. This is measured with indicators, such as gross domestic product (GDP), life expectancy, literacy and level of employment. In an attempt to achieve these objectives, the effects of religious intolerance and violence became the obstacles as it has led to high degree of insecurity and thus devastated socio-economic structures and institutions such as schools, hotels, petrol station, hospitals, shops and workshop and scared away potential investors. Worried by this trend, the work identified lack of religious neutrality on the part of government, lack of religious tolerance, religious fanatics and wrong religious orientation as some of its causes; and therefore recommends amongst others, the need for neutrality on the part of government, upholding the sanctity of the federal constitution that authorized freedom of worship, ban on public preaching in buses and unauthorized places and giving of proper religious orientation by religious leaders to their adherent as panacea.

Introduction

The issue of socio-economic development of the Nigerian nation, has been at the front burner in both public and private discussions for the past two decades, which has resulted in the establishments of various socio-interventionist agencies in Nigeria such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), The Niger Delta ministry (NDM), The Humanitarian Ministry and Disaster Management, The N-power programme as well as “Market Moni and trader Moni” among others.

According to the Africa Union (A.U) (2017) security, peace, stability and good governance have been regarded as prerequisites for the achievement of any meaningful socio-economic development of any nation. Olukayode and urhie (2014) posited that, security challenges have continued to remain a major set-back to achieving meaningful socio-economic development in most African countries particularly Nigeria. The degree of insecurity brought upon this nation through the activities of religious fundamentalists as a results of religious intolerance and violence cannot be over emphasized, as the Nigerian nation was brought to her kneel when about 270 female students of federal government girls college Chibok in Borno State were kidnapped and held hostage since April 2014 by the Boko Haram Islamic group. The effects of this action and related ones no doubt has jeopardized socio-economic life of the nation as schools in the area were closed down and people relocating with their businesses.

It is in consequent of this, that this work is designed to critically examine the immediate and remote causes of religious intolerance in Nigeria, as well as its effects on socio-economics development, and the work concludes with strategies and recommendations on how to enhance socio-economic development in Nigeria through religious tolerance.

1Conceptual Frame-works

Economic development as a public sector term is the process by which the economic well-being and quality of life of a nation, region or local community are improved according to targeted goals and objectives. Wikipedia (2017). Evbie (2012) in his book “The Structure of Nigerian Economy” posited that, socio-economic development is the process of social and economic development in a society, that socio-economic development is measured with indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), life expectancy, literacy and levels of employment.

Similarly, Oguji and Kene (2009), assert that “economic development is the process of growth in total and per capital income accompanied by fundamental changes in the economy. Economic development is relevant to underdeveloped countries because these

countries are concerned with how to develop and use their unused resources. It requires planning and guidance to keep the forces of expansion in particular direction. For example, to increase life expectancy, there will be need to consciously plan and direct resources in the area of health services. Inwelegbu, (2011).

Religious intolerance, is lack of tolerance for the religious beliefs and practices of another person or group. It is when a group e.g. society, religious group and non religious group, specifically refuses to tolerate practices, persons or beliefs of others on religious ground Wikipedia (2018). Erhuvwjefe (2012), submitted that, religious intolerance is unwillingness to tolerate other's opinions, beliefs, religion and ideology. While the united nation universal declaration of human right in article II defines religious intolerance as an act of discrimination against individual on the basis of religion. Therefore, religious intolerance can have negative impacts on society by triggering conflicts and violence that may forestall socio-economic growth and development.

Immediate and remote causes of religious intolerance / violence in Nigeria

The likes of Ubrurhe (2010) Erhuvwjefe (2012) Isiramen (2013) and Kamal-deen Olawale Sulaiman (2016) have identified the following as the immediate and remote causes of religious intolerance and violence in Nigeria.

- i. Lack of neutrality on the part of government: The Nigeria government at the federal, state and local government levels have not adopted neutral attitude towards religious organization throughout the country. Neutrality requires that the present and future political leaders of Nigeria should not favour any religious group as regards good governance of the nation. Government favouritism of one religion to the detriment of others has precipitated intolerance and violence.
- ii. Religious intolerance: The inability to recognize and accommodate views and opinions of others is therefore one of the major sources of religious violence in Nigeria. Nigerian religious adherents, especially the Muslims and the Christians have demonstrated intolerant attitudes that resulted in violence.

- iii. **Religious Fanaticism:** Religious fanaticism results in violent and unreasonable religious enthusiasm. Religious fanatics show excessive irrational zeal to defend their religions in Nigeria. Consequently, they become destructive agents of religious disharmony in the society. The adherent of Christianity and Islam are at one stage or another influenced by fanaticism to result to violent confrontation.
- iv. **Wrong religious orientation:** People are taught differently under different religions. When wrong methods are used in indoctrinating adherents of a particular religion, what often follows is religious obsession which invariably leads to violence.
- v. **Aggressive or militant preaching/evangelism:** This means an offensive or coercive approach to conversion and propagation of one's religious faith. This happens when any religious group or individual preachers within that group set out to convert those they considered infidels or 'pagans' to their own religious system.

Other causes are poverty, unbridled action of the press, literacy level of religious adherents, selfishness on the part of religious personalities and external influence in religion among others.

Effects of religious intolerance on socio-economic growth and development of the Nigerian nation

The past two decades in Nigeria, has witnessed an upsurge in religious intolerance, which has resulted in high magnitude of violence that has paralyzed and jeopardized socio-economic development in various sectors and sub-sectors of the Nigerian economy. Presented below is a chronicle of some of the effects of religious intolerance on socio-economic growth and development of the Nigeria nation.

- i. The Nigeria constitution (1979) provides in section I, subsection II Article 10, that 'The government of the federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion'. The constitution further explains the right of the individual as shown in section 38, subsection (a — c) that "Every person shall be entitled to freedom of religion". This is in consonance with the United Nations universal

Declaration of Human Rights Article 18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observances”. In spite of these constitutional provisions, religious intolerance has often manifested itself greatly in Nigeria. What has transpired in Nigeria for the past three decades in terms of religious intolerance and its effects on socio-economic life is overwhelming. Some illustrations may authenticate this.

- ii. Ubrurhe, (2000) informed that cases of religious intolerance attained its peak on the 8th of January 1986 when Babangida registered Nigeria as a member country of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). This singular action of Babangida, has divided the Nigerian citizenry, especially the politicians into two major religious camp; Islam and Christianity. This action, to say the least, endangers the future political peace and stability of the country. It is indeed inimical to the spirit and sense of unity, national integration and socio-economic development.
- iii. Isiramen, (1998) wrote that in March, 1987, a violent confrontation erupted between Christian and Muslim residents in Kafanchan. The details of this crisis show that a new convert from Islam to Christianity by name Bello Abubakar was preaching to a group of students and was giving testimonies about his new life in contrast with the old one. At this time, some Muslims had gathered round the scene and one of them (a lady Muslim) who could no longer bear the beautiful things Bello was saying about Christianity, felt he was degrading Islam. She went up and snatched the microphone from him violently and the other Muslims who had gathered round the scene rushed in and a violent crisis began. This show of intolerance later spread to Kaduna, Zaria and environs. Table 1 below shows the extent of damage at the end of the riot.

Table I: Damages Done in the Northern Nigeria Religious Riots, March 1987

Persons Killed	- 25
Persons Injured	- 61
Persons Arrested	- 600
Number of Churches destroyed	- 40
Number of Mosques destroyed	- 3
Number of Private Houses destroyed	- 46
Number of Vehicles destroyed	- 19
Number of Hotels destroyed	- 30
Number of Shops, workshops and Offices destroyed	- 9
Number of Petrol Stations destroyed	- 1
Number of Cattles killed	- 9

Source of Information: Newswatch March 30, 1987, P. 20

The riot was so widely spread that the police could not quell it. The army had to be brought in before order and peace could be restored. Infact president Babanginda described the situation as a civilian equivalent of military coup de'tat and the effect is still being felt today. The point of stress is that, adherent of all religions are expected to cooperate and build and not to destroy the nation. It is in light of this Isiramen (1998) asserts "rather than ameliorating, the March riots worsen our economic woes, our hard earn currency was spent on quelling the crisis. Teachers, traders, businessmen and women, people of different occupations of life had to flee the environment for safety. Thus. business, education and other

social activities necessary for the development of the country came to a stand still because nothing can work well in a state of anarchy and insecurity”.

iv. In a related development, in July 2009, there was an outbreak of violence in Borno State masterminded by a religious sectarian group named “Boko Haram”, condemning the westernization of Borno State and Northern Nigeria, and therefore clamoured for the Islamization of the Northern States. The group which was branded as Taliban (Terrorist) unleashed mayhem on innocent citizens and the outcome was catastrophic. The security operatives rose to the challenge and suppressed them violently and the leader of the Boko Haram sect Mohammed Yusuf was killed. Other casualties recorded according to Erhuvwujefe (2010) includes:

- a) 18 police stations were burnt down
- b) 28 police officers were killed
- c) 1 pastor was roasted alive
- d) 1 civil commissioner from Borno State was felled
- e) 245 persons were reported to have died during the sectarian strife.

It is in view of this Rev. Fr. Ekwunife (2002) laments thus “such violence and intolerance are not healthy for this nation, especially now that the country needed political, social and economic stability”. He stressed that such riots have sown an indelible seed of hatred, distrust and suspicion in the minds of Nigerians. Economically, the government and the affected citizens sustained a huge loss, ranging to billions of naira the statement added.

v. The likes of Ontario, (2009), Robinson, (2009) Adewakun, (2010) Olusola (2011) Okungbowa, (2011) Salawu, (2010) and Ogudu, (2012), have this to say. On the 26th of August 2011, Boko Haram claims responsibility for a suicide bomb blast on the United Nations compound in Abuja, killing 23 people. This was the first suicide bombing in the history of Nigeria as a Nation.

vi. On 25th December, 2011, a Christmas day Boko Haram attack on Saint Theresa Catholic Church in Madalla town near Abuja, killed 42 worshippers. Three

- secret police (SSS) operatives and a Boko Haram bomber died in the process. This incident was widely reported in all the National daily newspapers.
- vii. On January, 2012, four Christians were killed by Boko Haram gunmen in Potiskun, Yobe State, the gunmen opened fire on their car as they stop for fuel. The victims had been fleeing Maiduguri to their home town in Eastern Nigeria. Also, on 1st January, 2012 President Goodluck Jonathan imposes a state of emergency on 15 Local Government Areas hardest hit by the Boko Haram attacks, in Borno, Yobe and Plateau states. He ordered the closure of Nigeria borders in the North.
- viii. In a similar dimension, on 9 January 2012, Boko Haram gunmen shot dead a secret police operative along with his civilian friend as they leave a mosque in Biu, Borno State, 200km South of the state capital, Maiduguri. The President reacted thus. *Boko Haram has infiltrated the executive, parliamentary and judicial wings of government.* Infact this constitutes a threat to the government and its operations.
- ix. In a message posted on the internet on January, 12, 2012, Shekau the incumbent leader of Boko Haram sect said “his group had no other motive of fighting than promoting the cause of Allah by killing anybody who tries to stop them. This statement was not only directed to President Goodluck Jonathan, who is a Christian, but also Ayo Oritsejafor, President Christian Association of Nigeria and the entire Christian body. President Goodluck described the activities of the sects as cancerous and urged all hands to be on deck to eliminate them. On his part, Ayo Oritsejafor told Christians in the country to defend themselves, following repeated attacks on churches in parts of the North. The killing, maiming, intimidations, destruction of National and International institutions, waste of human and material resources, sabotaging of government policies and programmes occasioned by religious intolerance, has not only hampered good governance, but constituted a major security threat which is unhealthy for National Unity and integration as well as socio-economic development. Infact religious fanaticism and intolerance is an ill wind that blows no man any good.

This is a violation of the constitution and a threat to good governance and socio-economic development.

- x. And more recently, the guardian newspaper of 20th January, 2020 reported the brutal killing of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) chairman in Adamawa State, Nigeria, and the general state of insecurity in Nigeria, which gave rise to a nationwide peace protest by all CAN members, where Pastor E.A. Adeboye, General Overseer, Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) was visibly present while leading the protest in Lagos in Western Nigeria.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, it must be stated that the socio-economic set back arising from both inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts in Nigeria occasioned by religious intolerance are devastating, retrogressive, barbaric and anti-social and causing socio-economic disequilibrium in the society. In an attempt to rescue the nation from the grip of religious violence occasioned by religious intolerance and anchored the nation on the part of socio-economic development, the following recommendations are advanced.

- i. The Nigeria government at all levels, should not exhibit inclination to one religion to the detriment of the others. To this effect, there should be neutrality on the part of government.
- ii. The Nigeria constitution which authorized freedom of worship ought to be respected by Nigerians. Therefore, all act of religious intolerance should be discarded.
- iii. Proper religious orientation. Religious leaders should conscientise their followers on the value of religious tolerance in a pluralistic society such as ours through proper orientation and re-orientation.
- iv. Ban on public preaching: The government should ban public preaching, distribution of religious pamphlets and similar action capable of provoking violent reaction from different religious groups in public transport and unauthorized places of worship.

- v. Religious leaders should adopt dialogue as a meaningful way of solving religious intolerance and violence, as dialogue is now the order of the day among world religions and whenever people want to get along meaningfully together.

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