Religious Sectarianism and the Threat to Internal Security in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, religious sectarianism has threatened the corporate existence of Nigeria. Christianity and Islam have spread rapidly in the country at the expense of indigenous religions from its beginning resulting in a situation where these religions become dominant. Since 1980, sectarian violence, resulting in thousands of death, injuries, and arrests has engulfed the country creating a general sense of insecurity. This paper looks at the sectarian clashes in Nigeria and their ramifications on the internal cohesion of the country. Aside the violence in Nigeria, the paper discovered that these clashes are likely to continue until the Nigerian government recognizes that the problem requires more than military action, as those clashes have in fact much stronger concerns like the uneven distribution of power and wealth.

Keywords: religious sectarianism, sectarian clash, violence, internal security.


Kata-Kata Kunci: sektarianisme agama, konflik sektarian, kekerasan, keamanan internal.
Religion is a social phenomenon that is continually in reciprocal, interactive relationship with other social units that make up a society. Throughout history people have engaged in religious activities. Many in society, particularly the religiously committed, think of religion in different ways. Yet, despite its concern with the spiritual, religion affects everybody socially and religious rights remain an important topic of debate. The Nigerian constitution grants freedom of religious worship to all Nigerians. The constitution provides that “the Government of the Federation or of the State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion” (the 1999 Nigerian Constitution in Uzoma, 2004, 656). Though ethnic cleavages generally remain dormant, religious sectarianism has over the years emerged as the most potentially explosive social divisive factor in Nigeria. Politically, to describe a group as ‘Sectarian’ is to accuse them of prioritizing differences and rivalries with other close groups. Thus, aside the violence in the Niger Delta, sectarian strife between Muslims and Christians is a principal threat to domestic security in Nigeria.

Since 1980 there had been several out breaks of sectarian violence, resulting in thousands of deaths, injuries and arrest in the country. Today, religious pluralism threatens Nigeria’s social stability and her hard-won democracy by pitting different religious and cultural beliefs, particularly of new, radical Christian evangelical and fundamentalist Muslim sects against one another. Just as safety and survival are critical at the level of the individual, they are also very important for the nation itself, for without it, no meaningful development can be effected. The objective of this modest discourse it to examine the fundamental imperatives of national security in Nigeria against the background of religious sectarianism. The ultimate goal is how to reposition a very polarized society like Nigeria to enhance the attainment of national development.

On Sectarianism in Nigeria

The indigenization of Nigerian two major religions started in the twentieth century. Today, about half of all Nigerians are Muslims, most of who live in the Northern two-thirds of the country. In the same token, about 40 percent of Nigerians are Christians, residing predominantly in the south, and particularly in the south-east. The prevalence of Muslim sects in Nigeria is perhaps as old as the religion itself. This is because the early Muslim merchants and scholars who planted the religion in the county did so in the cacophony of their divided doctrines. As a consequence, converts unwittingly bought into the belief and doctrines that were arguably incongruous with orthodox Islam.
Differences in culture between Christianity and Islam have been a source of social conflict in Nigeria. While adherence to Islamic beliefs allows only a unity of the state and religion (denies the secularity of the state), the Christian beliefs allow a bifurcation of the state and religion in a mutually reinforcing relationship. The resultant social conflicts from the cultural differences between these two great religions have been manifested in numerous religious riots in the country’s political history. Much of the religious conflicts that have occurred in Nigeria were consequent upon the activities of the fanatical sects and movements among the Christian and the Muslim adherents.

For the purpose of this paper, the dichotomy of an established religion and sect identifies two polar types of religious organization (the religion and the sect occupy the ends of a social continuum that has several gradation points in between). According to Demerath and Hammond (in Johnstone 1983), sects can be distinguished from mainstream organized religion from two perspectives: one concerning the internal characteristics of the organization, the other the external relationship of the group with the features of its social environment. Focusing on internal differences, a sect sees itself as a fellowship of the elect (an embodiment of true believers) and encourages spontaneity of religious expression involving extensive group participation. The group may maintain its footing within an organized communion or it may actively take up separate existence. Thus sectarianism is the act of belonging to a sect (Whitley 2002).

Since the Protestant Reformation, Christianity has divided into numerous sects and the division is ongoing as evidenced by the recent astronomical growth in the number of new Christian denomination and evangelical sects. The new Pentecostal churches are characterized by their radical approach: they are more militant in their evangelistic and proselytizing movements, particularly with respect to their style of witnessing. Many fundamentalist sects have also sprung up among the Muslims. Extant Muslim groups include: Sunni of the Maliki school which boast of the largest followership. Not a few belong to the Tijaniyan and Qadiriyah Sufi brotherhood which have acquired unique characteristics during their century’s long presence in the country. The last and perhaps the most violent sect among the extant groups is the Shiite. Though the movement may not boast of large followership, it has proven to be the most controversial, uncompromising and fundamentalist.

As each of the groups tried to gain ascendancy over others through official recognition from government or outright seizure and control of state power instability was rife. Efforts towards a common front meant to “purity Islam, to eliminate syncretism, remove all innovations
contrary to the Koran, and to encourage less devout Muslims to return to orthodox Islam” crystallized in the Uthman Dan Fodo’s Jihad of 1804 (Korieh 2005, 112). However, the holy war could not terminate the existence of unorthodox Islam but led to its expansion as many kingdoms and people came under the influence of Islam. Though these groups subsist, they have had to rethink their mutual exclusiveness and hostilities with the emergence and flowering of fundamentalist and more violent sects within the Islamic fold.

Theoretical Perspectives

Safety and survival constitute priorities of the modern state. In nowhere are these priorities more manifest than in the area of internal security. In this discourse, internal security depicts the existence of a state of tranquility, peace, orderliness and safety of persons and property in a state. It indicates the absence of any form of threats to life, property, human rights and the socio-economic and political well being of the people. In a broader sense, internal security is viewed in the perspective of the ability of a state to maintain orderliness in relation to the peaceful co-existence of all her citizens.

Samaro (in Atoyebi 2003) linked internal security to system maintenance and preservation of social justice. He argued that the breakdown of public order in a given political system implies insecurity of the state. This is similar to John Locke’s position that public order and internal security refers to the preservation and sustainability of human life and health, justice and liberty (Atoyebi 2003). Wolfer (1966) conceptualization of internal security and indeed national security in this regard is two-fold: the subjective and objective. Thus internal security in the subjective sense, lays emphasis on such values as peace of mind or absence of fear. The objective dimension, make up the values, which a nation as a whole could have or aspire to have in a greater or lesser measure. It is perhaps based on the objective connotation of internal security that Bodie (1949) argued that security to everybody is relative or is a matter of degree.

However, Davers (in Akinyeye 2001) sees internal security (by extension national security) as an absolute condition which cannot be qualified. He believes that one should not have partial security and that if the citizens of a nation are only half secure, they are absolutely not secure at all. Sharing the same view, Buzan (1981) believed that internal security implies an absolute condition. He contends that a valued element is either secure or insecure and does not subscribe to the idea of a graded spectrum that spuriously ranges between hot and cold. Although there are different perspectives on internal security the underlying
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denominator is that it is the official channel for collectively safeguarding all peoples within a polity against any danger. To Imobigh (2001), national or state security means freedom of or the absence of dangerous tendencies, which could undermine internal cohesion and the corporate existence of the nation. It also denotes the ability of a state to maintain its vital institutions for the promotion of its core values, its social-political and economic objectives as well as the maintenance of the legitimate aspirations of its people.

The two dominant perspectives on the concept of internal security are the traditional (realist) approach and the revisionist (neo-realist) approach. In the realist perspective, security is equated with massive military build up. Thus, security is built around the state, which is perceived to operate in the international system devoid of well organized, structured and centralized political authority or a strong sovereign authority in a state. Therefore, to be able to preserve the sovereignty of the state, the proponents of this school of thought believe that the state must possess offensive military capability during the time of war or peace (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (Jnr.) 1990 and Sodaro 2001).

Moreover, the eradication of collective fear and anxiety, defence of national sovereignty and protection of the national territorial integrity, provides the motivation and the driving force, which propels any state to have military weapons. It equally propels governments to effectively train its security operatives, most of all, the para-military the police and the three arms of the military. Consequently, the preoccupation of a state is to constantly strategize on how to survive the anarchical international environment, which could in times of crises and conflicts inadvertently become major sources of threat to the internal security in any given polity. Therefore, states are rationally propelled to take steps either for the containment or avoidance of crises and conflicts and its catastrophic consequences of collective fear should on no circumstance be trivialized (Mearsheimer 1994). What is palpable in the realists’ conceptualization of internal security is that the state is the custodian of peace and security of the citizenry. Based on the conception, the state through its institutionalized security agencies possesses the exclusive right to provide, maintain, and preserve peace and orderliness in the events of disorder and conflicts.

Sequel to the end of the (old War, scholars referred to generally as neo-realists sought the need to accommodate non-military and non-authoritarian strategies to the calculus of internal security. This was meant to make it more comprehensive in its ramifications. To the proponents of the neo-realist school of thought security connotes “freedom from or elimination of threat not only to the physical existence of the state but also to its ability for self protection, individual
development and the general well being of its citizenry” (Mearsheimer 1994, 5-49). Concurring, Imobighe (2001, 39-51) asserts that “it must have a positive impact on the condition of life of the individuals with the state and provide all inhabitants with the right atmosphere for their welfare, self-improvement and actualization”.

Obviously, the neo-realist conception of internal security is based on the fact that both internal and external forces induce conflicts. It has been observed that in a developing country like Nigeria, the struggle for power, ethnic and religious dominance, resources and crises of regime legitimacy, amongst others, underline internal security problems. Put in context, sectarian conflicts in Nigeria, with the attendant catastrophic consequences on the nation has, over the years negatively impacted its public order machinery, internal and national security. To some in this school of thought, the present predicament is essentially a function of poverty economic disasters and poor governance. Epochal changes in the orientation of international economic relations and internal poor orientation to governance by Nigerian leaders simply aggravate the conditions that nourish these crises, conflicts and break down in law and order. Therefore state vulnerabilities, national insecurity, breakdown of public order and poor internal security become the norm, as state structures become largely exposed and shattered (Adisa 1998).

**Sectarian Crisis in Nigeria**

Fanatical sects among Christianity and Islam caused most religious conflicts that occurred in Nigeria since the late 1970s. Nigeria’s two major religions, Christianity and Islam, are sometimes depicted as monolithic entities that confront each other in pitched battles (though intra-sectarian feuds within each religion often provide the spark that touches off violence). Conflicts based on religious affiliation and religious policies have indeed occurred, the first and the most dramatic of such eruption in a series of religious riots was incited by the Maitatsine, or Yan Tatsine movement in Kano in late December 1980. In the history of sectarian crises in Nigeria, the Maitatsine sect, led by late Muhammadu Marwa, stands out as the most violent and resilient group. The anti-government activities of this group were at their peak between December 1980 and April 1985. According to Ekoko and Amadi (1999, 22), “the Maitatsine riots were the most serious events that threatened the security of the state and engaged the material and human resources of the security forces to their utmost”. In addition, there were disturbances caused by another Muslim movement known as Yan Izala. This group, which created unrest in the early 1980s, protested innovations in Islam and such, was opposed to other mainstream Islamic sects. Instructively, much of these crises were intra-Islam in nature.
However, in 1987, in contrast to previously mentioned intra-Islamic disputes, religious conflicts took on new and ominous dimensions when unprecedented violence between members of Nigeria’s two largest religions – Christians and Muslims, erupted at secondary schools and universities across the northern belt of the country. It took the combined team of the Nigerian Army and Police force to quell these riots which resulted in the imposition of a curfew in Kaduna State, and outdoor processions and religious preaching were banned in Bauchi, Bendel, Benue, Borno and Plateau States. Similarly, Plateau State, one of Nigeria’s 36 states, has been the centre of sectarian massacres between different ethnic and religious communities since 2001. The state has the highest number of displaced people as a result of clashes between Christian and Muslim communities there. The predominantly Christian Tarok farmers consider the mostly Muslim Hausa-Fulani cattle herders as outsiders, and accuse them of stealing land and trying to usurp political power. These had led to the burning down of 72 villages between 2002 and the end of 2003 (Duckwall 2009). As indicated in Table 1 below, more than 1,000 people died in the sectarian clashes between Christians and Muslims in Jos, the Plateau State capital in September 2001. Then Nigerian President Obasanjo declared a state of emergency in the state, that, in itself, sparked off mixed reactions.

Table 1

Sectarian Clashes in Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sect</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Death Toll</th>
<th>Property Lost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maitatsine</td>
<td>Kano</td>
<td>18-19/12/1980</td>
<td>4,177</td>
<td>144 houses, 436 shops, 554 kiosks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maitatsine</td>
<td>Bulumkutu</td>
<td>18-19/12/1980</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>1,712 rendered homeless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maitatsine</td>
<td>Bulumkutu (Kaduna)</td>
<td>29-30/10/1982</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maitatsine (Yola)</td>
<td>Jimeta</td>
<td>27/2-5/3/1984</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>About 2,000 houses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maitatsine</td>
<td>Bombe</td>
<td>26-30/4/1985</td>
<td>105 including 3 police officers</td>
<td>11 villages and 7,231 houses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian-Muslim</td>
<td>Jos</td>
<td>September 2001</td>
<td>Over 1,000</td>
<td>Over 1,000 houses (including churches and mosques)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian-Muslim</td>
<td>Jos</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Over 700</td>
<td>Large number of houses and worship centers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Christian Muslim Clashes  | Jos  | September 2004  | Over 500  | Large number of houses and worship centers  
|-------------------------|------|-----------------|-----------|---------------------------------------------  
| Boko Haram  | Bauchi  | 26/7/2009  | Over 800  | Large number of houses and worship centers  
| Kala-Kato  | Bauchi  | 28/12/2009  | Over 30  | Large number of houses and worship centers  

Source: Enwerem (1995) and the authors’ compilations (2009).

The Boko Haram sect (roughly interpreted as Western education is sin) is one of the newest Muslim sects whose activities threaten the internal security of the Nigerian State. This little known sect came into limelight when it attacked a police station in Nigeria’s northern state of Bauchi on 26 July, 2009. The incident led to a four-day armed struggle between security forces and members of the sectarian group spreading to three other states (Yobe, Kano and Borno) and leaving over 800 dead as indicated in Table 1. The sectarian attacks which followed the arrest of several of its members targeted mainly police stations, prisons, government buildings and churches in the four states. Also, in the twilight of 2009, another militant sect, Kala-Kato (“he has said”) – an offshoot of the original Maitatsine sect of the 1980s struck in the Zango area of Bauchi, the state capital. No fewer than 30 people were killed and a number of houses in Zango were set on fire by members of the sect who went on rampage demanding the release of their leader arrested by the Nigerian Police Force (the Guardian, 2009).

### Meeting the Challenge

Religious sectarianism has bred several riots that have claimed thousands of lives and billions of naira worth of damaged properties. Ethnic and religious riots, as well as communal clashes consistently threaten the fabric of peaceful co-existence among Nigerian social groups. The frightening general insecurity has made emphasizing the physical security of the individual imperative Chapter 1 Section 10 of the Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion to all Nigerians. The Constitution provides that “the Government of the Federation or of the State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion (Nigerian Constitution 1999). Furthermore, it provides that: “[e]very person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance” (The Nigerian Constitution 1999 Ch iv S 35).
Based on this constitutional provision, Nigerians are free to exercise their religious rights. Poignantly, religious fanaticism displayed by some sectarian groups, aided by some politicians use religion to further their own ends thereby inhibiting Nigerian’s Constitutional right to religious freedom. By extension, this threatens the country’s social stability and its hard-won democracy by pitting different religious and cultural beliefs against one another. The social conflict resulting from these differences has been manifested in numerous religious riots since the 1970s. Also, such conflicts have resulted in brazier abuse of the fundamental human rights of the citizens and many innocent Nigerians have lost their lives, houses and properties.

Outside influences have bolstered sectarian violence in northern Nigeria. Research data on Nigerian religious conflicts found that the Muslim students’ Society (MSS) was funded by foreign countries, namely Saudi Arabia and Libya (Hacket 1999). These findings indicted the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) meeting held in 1974 as the brain behind religious intolerance not only in Nigeria but the world at large. According to a May 2005 report from the United State Commission on International Religious Freedom, Islamic extremist activities in northern Nigeria are being funded by foreign sources (National Assembly Website 2006).

Suffice to mention here that the issue of internal security of a state is so critical that national leaders world-wide are prepared to stake anything in defence of the nation and maintain its security. Sadly enough, the general security in contemporary Nigeria is not only at very low ebb but also very frightening as the country is being overwhelmed, amongst others, by sectarian crises. For example, the Boko Haram sect led by late Mohammed Yusuf wanted Islamic laws imposed on the nation, while also campaigning against Western education, which it claimed, corrupts the society (Awofadeji 2009).

Nwolise (1985) believes that a country may have the best armed forces in terms of training and equipment, and yet be the most insecure nation in the world. This, he explains is as a result of defense and security problems from within – bad government, alienated and suffering masses, ignorance, hunger, unemployment, or even activities of foreign residence or companies. Indeed, Nigeria like several countries also experience serious threat and insecurity engendered by non-military factors such as poverty, unemployment, hunger and starvation, structural injustice and the struggle for power and resources by ethnic and religious groups. This explains why Booth (1991) advocates the emancipation of the individual. Nigerian leaders should know that threats to the security of a nation do not emanate from military sources alone, but can also come from social,
religious, economic, political, environmental and other non-military sources such as poverty and social injustice.

**Conclusion**

Without internal stability, no nation can survive to pursue its development goals. Over the years, Nigerian leaders have toyed with the security of the country. Thus, religious sectarianism has prevented national and social cohesion and threatened Nigeria’s social stability. Also the Nigerian government has not fully implemented the constitutional provision of religious freedom, resulting in feelings of insecurity across the nation.

Despite the common depiction of these sectarian conflicts as being religious, the general sentiment points to their political underpinnings. It is common knowledge that the state of insecurity in Nigeria is often manipulated by politicians for political gains. The Vanguard (in Schulze 2009) alleged that Mohammed Yusuf (the Boko Haram leader) was killed hastily “in order to shield his sponsors who are influential members of society”. The fact that militant sects in the country own heavy and sophisticated ammunition feeds this allegation.

Sectarian clashes are relatively common in Nigeria and are likely to continue in the future. The actions of foreign organizations and countries also deepen these clashes in the country. The Nigerian government would therefore be well advised to recognize this as a problem that requires more than military action as many of those clashes, have in fact, had much stronger political background than often suggested. This feeds into the uneven distribution of power and wealth rather than sectarian problems.

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