The Reality of Ethno-Religious Influence on Nigerian Politics

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Introduction

Ethnicity and religion are the two-headed dragon crippling Nigerian politics as a nation. There is a general feeling among Nigerians that the issue of “One Nigeria” is a utopia and will remain utopia because of the problem of disunity in Nigeria created by ethnicity and religion. Nigeria is a country in West Africa with population of about 138 million people and population density of 149.7 Sqkm. It has a land mass of 923768 Sqkm. According to Iwaloye and Ibeanu (1997) it is located between longitudes 3.5°E and 14°E and latitudes 4°N and 13°N. Adejuyigbe (1970) states that while some argue that Nigeria has up to 240 ethnic nations; others maintain that they are less than 60 ethnic groups. But the fact seems that there are about 60 ethnic groups which make up about 240 tribes in Nigeria. The three major ethnic groups are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The Hausa occupy the northern part of Nigeria, the Igbo occupy the south-east and the Yoruba have the Western part. The indigenous languages are as many as these tribes, though it has a lingua franca – the English language – as a heritage of British colonialism. Nigeria is blessed with mineral resources like crude oil, tin ore, columbite, iron ore, phosphate, coal and others. It has three major religions which are Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion. The most powerful are Christianity and Islam.

The influence of religion and ethnicity on Nigerian politics is like the sword of Damocles which is hanging ominously on the nation to smash its unity. The problem under this study is the

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general feeling that the question of Nigerian unity may never be realizable because even the programs created by the government to solve the problem of disunity seem to exacerbate it. The problem of ethnic and religious tensions is a great threat to the cooperate existence of Nigeria as one nation. Nwaigbo (2003) argues that the rate of ethnic and religious conflicts in many parts of Nigerian society today is alarming. He also states that ethnic and religious conflicts are at the moment worsening the Nigerian economy, and threatening the quest for national unity. Sometimes the conflicts results in physical violence and at other times they go in terms of cold war as we often witness in the election or appointment of political officials and even in the case of Federal Character or quota system.

For an extensive study of the reality of ethno-religious influence on Nigerian politics we shall employ the interdisciplinary approach which will include the fields of history, archaeology, geography, sociology, religion, psychology, law, political science, public administration and philosophy. The treatment of this topic includes a brief history of Nigeria, the background of ethnicity and religious sentiment in Nigeria, a survey of ethno-religious influence on Nigerian politics, government strategies so far in solving the problem and new strategy for containing ethno-religious influence on Nigerian politics. We shall proceed by tracing a brief history of Nigeria.

**Brief History of Nigeria**

Before the amalgamation in 1914, the entity called Nigeria existed, according to Olukoju (1997), as extensive empires and kingdoms and even peripheral kingdoms and villages. In the words of Obayemi (1981) they existed as mini and mega–states. The mega–states are the Olukoju’s extensive empires and kingdoms that existed in the Western and Northern parts of Nigeria which include: the Jukun, Igala, Nupe, Bini, Oyo, Sokoto, Ife, Kanem-Bornu and others. The mini-states or peripheral kingdoms found in the south included Onitsha and Aboh. Others described as “state-less societies” include Tiv, Ibibio, Izon, Gbagyi and others. Within these societies for Obayemi, there were ecological complementarities and economic interdependence. In fact, the ethnic groups and tribes existing were about 240 as earlier stated, each possessing her own dialect. According to Olukoju, political relations took the form of warfare, diplomatic ties, dynastic marriages