Assessment of the Roles of Religious Leaders as Panacea for Sustenance of Peace and Security in Nigeria.

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Abstract

This Paper discusses the role of Religious leaders in Peace building and National Security in Nigeria. It believes that as a critical stakeholders, religious leaders can promote peace because they are well respected and have powers to influence, raise awareness and influence behavior and practices. The researcher employed secondary method of data collection for the study. The analysis of the findings revealed that they are the most respected figures in their communities and play a powerful role in shaping attitudes, opinions and behaviors as their members trust and confide in them. They are thus well placed to promote peace based on the values and ideals of their religions. The findings further confirmed that most religious leaders are unequipped to manage violence in their communities because of lack of capacity building on issues like conflict, tolerance, peace building and stereotypes. On the basis of these findings, the research recommends training in areas of negotiation, mediation and other non – violent approaches to resolving conflict.

Keywords: Peace, National Security, Religions, Nigeria.

Introduction:

Nigeria and most other African Countries today are facing serious security challenges as a result of bad governance characterized by corrupt political institutions, injustice, unemployment and poverty. In the case of Nigeria, political, ethnic and religious conflicts have drawn the country to the precipice of disaster. It has engendered huge carnage, internal displacements and refuge crisis, loss of investment, strained internal communal

or inter-ethnic relations. This has also threatened internal security and public order. Peace has now become illusive and life in the country is becoming unbearable as it is bedeviled by suspicion, uncertainly and distrust. (Martins, 2014).

Aminu (2019) observed that that the high level of insecurity in Nigeria has generated serious challenges capable of threatening the unity the country has enjoyed since its political independence. This state of anarchy might have been the predictive yard stick which United States National Council used to report in 2005 that Nigeria would explode within fifteen years (Agbaje, 2005). To counter the devastating effects these challenges posed to our security, peace and stability, it is important to re-examine the role which religious leaders can play in restoring peace and national security for effective and responsible governance.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine the role of religious leaders in peace building and natimal security. The specific objectives are as follows:

(i) To discuss the constraint to achieving peace building and national security by religious leaders

(ii) To proffer recommendations on how they can excel on their role in achieving peace in the country.

Research Methodology

The research adopts secondary method of data collection. This involve review of related literature from text books, Journals seminar papers, speeches, Newspaper and occasional publications.

The research is divided into various parts namely introduction, conceptual framework, challenges to national peace and security in Nigeria, religions leaders role in peace building, constraints, conclusion and recommendation. It is important at this junction to examine the major concepts of the topic before taking a step further on the discussion.

Conceptual Clarifications

i. Peace

Aminu (2020) believed that Peace is a state of harmony characterized by lack of violent conflict, commonly understand as the absence of hostility. Peace suggests the existence of healthy interpersonal relationship, prosperity in matters of social or economic welfare, the establishment of equality and working political order that serves the true interest of all. In international

relations, peace is not only the absence of war or conflict, but also the presence of cultural and economic understanding and unity.

Peace therefore, is not merely the absence of war and hatred, but also the presence of cooperation's, compassions, and justice. But some people have argued that peace is not the absence of conflict as it is generally acknowledged that no human society can be without conflicts. However, it is also true that no society can survive without a stable and effective system of conflict management.

ii. National Security

The key to solving development problems has been identified as security. Without security, there cannot be peace and an atmosphere devoid of peace cannot achieve meaningful development. Security in a nutshell, is about development . That is development of human resources that could in turn develop the natural resources for the benefit of the people. According to the National Orientation Agency's Political Education Manual (2014), National Security is the requirement to maintain the survival of any country. Although there is not a single Universally accepted definition of National Security (Abari, 2019)

A typical dictionary definition, in this case from Farlex Dictionary, defines National Security as "the requirement to maintain the survival of the nation state through the use of economics, military and political power and the exercise of diplomacy" A nation has security when it does not have to resort to war or threat of war to preserve its legitimate interest. Elements of National Security include the military security, political security, economic security, environmental security, food security, energy security etc.

iii. Religious Leaders

Religious Leaders are the largest and most organized civil institution in the world, claiming the allegiance of billions of believers and bridging the divide of race, class and nationality. They are often the most respected figures in their communities and they play a powerful role in shaping attitudes, opinions, and behaviors because their members trust and confide in them (Sanni K, 2014). They have powers to raise awareness and influence, behavior and practices. They can also shape values in line with faith based teaching. Leaders of religious equally have powers to promotes and support public policy. Apart

from top government officials who have direct control over security operatives to maintain peace and security in the nation, religious leaders have been playing profound roles in the quest for peace and stability in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, their role has been very paramount and successful. It is a popular knowledge that the first point of call of Nigerians who are in dispute or distress is religious leader. People and members have direct touch and access to them.

iv. Religion

Ibitoye (2022) sees Religion as the belief in God, god or group of gods. It is an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used in worshiping a God or gods. Religion play plays vital roles in our society citizens belong to any religious group through their quest for worshiping a deity. Nigeria is both a religious and secular nation. Akinyele (2014) believes that religion when properly managed, could serve as an integrative factor for achieving unity, cohesion, and national integration especially in a pluralistic nation as Nigeria. Religion could also make or mar the progress of a country if not properly used.

Challenges of National Peace and Security in Nigeria.

In addressing the challenges of peace and security in Nigeria, it is important to consider security issues and problems that have affected or capable of affecting the attitude, confidence and cooperation of all groups and segments that make up Nigeria. Some of the major security problems confronting the country include political conflicts, socio-economic agitations, ethno-religious crisis, ethnic militias, boundary disputes, cultism, criminality, kidnapping, farmer/herders conflict, Boko-haram, Banditry and other organized crimes. These security problems collectively and individually, constitute threats to the security of the country. Invariably, they have implications for the continuity and survival of the nation democracy and if not properly checked, could lead to alarming dimension and consequence.

As a result of insecurity, Nigeria major roads are no longer safe for travellers. Bandits have taken over the roads. Herdsmen and farmer's clashes have also resulted into insecurity in many parts of the country. Farmers cannot carry out farming activities anymore for fear of being kidnapped or killed. Many banks have been closed down in some communities due to the operations of armed robbers in broad day light. Bankers and security operatives have been sent into their early graves because of robbery activities. Kidnapping is a major problem facing the country and it has become a lucrative business for those that indulge

in it kidnapping of Chibok girls, Kankara school boys in Katsina, students of Bethel Baptist High School Kaduna and Abuja- Kaduna Railway Travellers is a case in point.

Peace and security are pre-requisite for our national development. Without peace and security the much cherished social, political and economic development cannot strive. This implies that development can only be achieved in an atmosphere free from crisis, conflicts and wars. Lack of peace and security leads to disruption and abandonment of activities such as farming, mining, power generation, manufacturing, construction and trading among others. The consequences of all these are under development, mass poverty, disease, hardship, loss of lives and property and displacement as being currently witnessed in the country.

Abari (2019) observed that Nigeria is a political entity made up of over two hundred ethnic and diverse ethnic nationalities and religious groups. The consent and cooperation of these ethnic nationalities and religious groups is important to the existence and continuity of Nigeria as a nation. Unity and peaceful coexistence are important as frequent crisis and conflict could lead to divisive politics and loss of confidence in the system that will hurt the progress of the nation and indeed the consolidation of our democracy. Security challenges cloud also have the very damaging consequence of giving the signal to the international community that Nigeria is not safe and secure and as well not suitable for economic investment and activities. Peace and security are therefore important conditions which are required for stability, growth and development of any nation.

Religious Leaders Role in Peace Building and National Security

Religious leaders are opinion moulders. They preach to thousands of adherents everyday and most especially Sundays and Jumaat service on Fridays.

The role of Religious leaders in the society is enormous because they relay the message of God by constantly reminding members of their responsibility to God. They have also continued to enjoin members or worshippers to live in Peace and love with one another. The major religions in Nigeria are Christianity and Islam and none of the two religions preaches violence. They both preach Peace and kindness to members. Religious leaders are well respected by their members and known to them. In this regards, the churches and mosques attended by worshippers should continues to be a good avenue for preaching peace and progress of our country. Effort should also be made by religious leaders in the country to organize inter-faith visits to have discussion on peace matters and other communal activities on regular basis. This can be a giant steps towards achieving national peace and stability. Religious leaders has a responsibilities to promote inter-faith

understanding and respect for freedom of religions, reduce or eliminate incidences of conflicts, propagate the spirit of love, peace, social harmony among adherents of different religions and to reduce hate sermons and speeches that incite conflict, in order to bring about sustainable peace in the country. (Abari-G, 2019)

Inter-religious dialogue with the youth on regular basis by religious leaders can also promote peace. This involves bringing together both Christian and Moslems youth for sensitization on the need for peaceful coexistence. This is important because it is the youth that are often used during crisis.

Religious leaders are well placed to promote peace based on the values and ideals of their religions. They can reverse the tide of conflict and promote peace through inter-religious ceremonies like Christmas and Ramadan as such have been pivotal to changing relationship, attitude and behaviours of adherents of the two dominant religions. It is equally important for religious leaders to abide and preach principles, values of justice, compassion, reconciliation and forgiveness.

Since religious leaders are respected by their people, they should endeavour to shape the actions and views of their members, raise awareness on various political and social issues and challenge their followers. They should also represent their religious groups at peace building meetings and be involved in peace work in their respective congregation and communities.

Religious leader should always deliver holistic and unbiased sermon to their followers. Message of truth from the holy scripture must be preached and constructive criticism of the government should be made when necessary. Messages of physical, spiritual, truthfulness, sincerity, moral values love for neighbors and responsibilities to the nation should be preached.

Religious organization can form advocacy group as counselors to political class/leadership for the generality and benefits of the community through writing, awareness, seminars, campaigns and workshops.

Hate speech and unguarded preaching should be avoided. Hate speech spreads fast most especially in the social media and it can lead to religious violence. Hate sermon must not be allowed into pulpits because of likely consequences.

The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) must rise up to its responsibilities. The council provide a veritable platform to promote greater interaction and understanding among religious leaders. NIREC should be involved in dialogue of active action to make the two dominant religions act jointly and promptly on matters such as poverty, corruption, unemployment and insecurity.

It is equally important that religious leaders increase the frequency of consultative meeting to share information, exchange views and perspective on the threats that face their communities and how these can be restored.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While workshop and training have helped religious leaders to interact better with each other, much more is needed in the development of skills such as negotiation, mediation, accommodation and other non-violent approaches to resolving conflict. Many are unequipped to manage violence in their communities. So much is expected from religious leaders, but no one ever thinks of enabling environment for them to perform or function. They cannot therefore do more than their best because of certain limitations. It is therefore important that religious institutions should provide appropriate capacity building exercise for religious leaders that cover issue like stereotypes, tolerance, coexistence, conflict, positive leaderships, conflict management and peace building in order to ensure that they are equipped to prevent and manage conflict.

Religious leaders have an important role to play in peace building. They must be seen to be doing so along with other stakeholders in order for us to achieve our national goals and aspirations. Peace building requires a collective responsibility of all and sundry.

Religious leaders must also continue to engage in interfaith dialogue through purposeful, meaningful, truthful and sincere meeting. This can be a strong weapon and instrument through which peace, security, robust understanding and lasting tolerance could be achieved.

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