

Religious and Ethno-regional Identity in the Context of Human Right Protection in Nigeria

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Abstract. The religious and ethno-regional consciousness of Nigerian citizens has generated a lot of human right issues in contemporary times. The different faith-based and socio-cultural organizations in Nigeria have continued to protest human rights violations on the basis of religious and ethno-regional identity. Therefore, this essay aimed at exploring the religious and ethno-regional consciousness of Nigerian citizens in public life and its implications for human right protection in the Nigerian state. Data for the study which was essentially generated from existing literature and careful observation of the state of the nation was subjected to historical, critical and constructive analysis. The paper reveals that the deep religious and ethno-regional consciousness and fears generated by the existing structures that promote unequal access to power and resources are being exploited by some unpatriotic individuals for sectarian and egocentric goals. This condition has indeed led to cases of unprecedented human right violations and protest in the Nigerian public sphere. The authors therefore, recommend that Nigerians should learn to accommodate the multiple identities of religion and ethnicity in the country and respect the right of their fellow citizens on issues of faith and ethnic origin. The government should be religiously and ethnically neutral in the implementation of state policies and also take proactive measures in promoting

and protecting the fundamental human right objectives of the state.

Keywords: Religious and Ethno-regional consciousness, Identity, Human Right Protection, Citizens, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Group Identity and human right issues has become attractive subject of debate both at the national and international levels in contemporary times because of the preponderant increase in the demand for human right protection by different socio-religious and ethno-regional associations. The Nigerian federation being a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic polity where religious, ethnic and linguistic divisions and identities are very strong, various interest groups have continued to advocate for human right under the banner of religious and ethno-regional identities. The nature and composition of the Nigerian State is such that there are multiplicity of religious traditions and ethnic nationalities. Basically, there are three major religions; Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion in Nigeria. Apart from these three aforementioned religious belief systems, there are several other smaller faith traditions such as Baha'i Faith, Hare Krishna, Sat Guru Maharaji, Grail Message, Echkankar, among others competing for relevance and

recognition in Nigeria (Atoi and Ogunrinade 2017). In a related manner, there are three major ethnic nationalities in the country's geographical space; Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo, and numerous minority ethnic nationalities or ethno-linguistic groups who are constantly campaigning for recognition and inclusion in the major scheme of things at different levels of Nigeria's public life. Succinctly, to understand the nature of the Nigerian State is to understand the nature of religion and ethnicity in the country. Paden (2008) opines that Nigeria is clearly a prototype state in accommodating ethnic and religious fault-lines.

It is imperative to state that Nigeria is not only a plural society with numerous religious and ethno-regional groups, but also one where religious and ethnic margins overlap. The intersection of religious and ethno-regional borderlines in Nigeria made the northern region largely Muslims and the southern region mainly Christians. This ethno-regional and religious nexus affixes disturbing twist to the configuration of the Nigerian federation. The religious structure of the country underpins the struggle for ascendancy to the seat of governance between the dominant religious and ethno-regional groups, and the marginalization of minority groups within the federation. Thus, the ethnic and religious minority groups who feel that they are being treated as second-class citizens by the major ethnic and religious groups and that their fundamental human rights are not adequately protected are pushed to adopt both constitutional and extra-constitutional means to challenge the hegemony of the major groups (Kwaja 2009). The Niger-Delta militancy quagmire and some religion motivated violence being experienced in some parts of the country are good cases in point. This issue has continued to assume a more worrisome dimension because the major players in the Nigerian public sphere have ethnicised and religionised the various government institutions and agencies within the nation-state. Little wonder, Jinadu contends that: *The state and its institutions are ethnicised and immersed in clientelist ethnic and religious networks and in ethnic/religious based struggle to implant and entrench ethnic or religious 'gatekeepers' in critical key positions in the bureaucracy and educational institutions, and in*

other public sector institutions and even in the private sector, which in many African countries relies heavily on the public sector (Jinadu 2007:11).

There is no gainsaying that religious and ethno-regional sectarianism have found fertile ground to flourish in the Nigerian social space, since it is crystal clear that many Nigerians do not have strong desire for national consensus or a binding ideology that will promote national unity and common identity (Maier 2000; Idike and Eme 2015). In Nigeria today, important national issues are linked to citizenship within the context of group identities and interests, which is rooted in the politics of inclusion and/or exclusion and this has continued to create human right crisis among various interest groups in the country (Ibrahim 2000). There have been series of accusations from various quarters of the Nigerian state that the government of the day has been very partial in the issues of human right protection on the basis of religion and ethno-regional identity. This indeed has continued to have serious implications for inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations among the diverse ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. As it is with all social cleavages; fault lines within societies formed along religious and ethno-regional identities create opposing interests. These differences of interest, in turn, offer themselves to potential or occasional violent conflict among the different groups agitating for one form of human right or the other (Thomson 2007; Idike and Eme 2015).

In the light of the foregoing, this essay explored the religious and ethno-regional consciousness of Nigerian citizens in public life and its implications for human right protection in the country. Data for the study which was essentially generated from existing literature and careful observation of the state of the nation was subjected to historical, critical and constructive analysis. Aside from this introductory segment, the remaining part of the paper is divided into four sub-headings. These include the notion of identity and human right, religious and ethno-regional consciousness in Nigeria's public sphere, religious and ethno-regional identity

issues and human right protection in Nigeria, and concluding remarks.

2. The Notion of Identity and Human Right

Identity as a social concept has attracted tremendous attention in modern and post-modern intellectual engagements in the humanities and social sciences. From a broad sense, it is delineated as any group attribute that provides recognition or definition, reference, affinity, coherence and meaning for individual members of a group, acting individually or collectively. As a socio-political ideology, 'identity' has both an individualist and a collective meaning (Osaghae and Suberu 2005; Idike and Eme 2015). According to Elebeke (2010), identity is a process located in the core of the individual and in the core of his communal culture. Erickson (1968) says identity is "a person's sense of belonging to a group if it influences his political behaviour." Identity is not only about individuality and self-awareness, but also about identification with, and commitment to shared values, interests and beliefs in a social collectivity into which a person belongs (Idike and Eme 2015). Pye articulates that "those who share an interest share an identity; the interest of each requires the collaboration of all". Thus, ordinarily, identities serve as rallying and organizing principles of social action within the civil society, and in state-civil society relations (Pye 1962).

Moreover, identity is said to be always anchored both in "physiological givens" and in "social roles." According to Idike and Eme (2015), the attributes of identity comprise "commitment to a cause", "love and trust for a group", "emotional tie to a group", as well as "obligations and responsibilities" relating to membership of a group with which a person identifies. Such physiological givens as gender and age, and sociological characteristics such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, kinship relations, or even workplace affiliations can, and often do create a basis for identity which shapes association and antagonism in many human societies, especially the modern world. In the competition or struggle over societal resources, collective demands tend

to be predicated and organized on shared interests, which in turn hinged on either physiological 'givens' or, as is more often the case, on shared socio-cultural identities (Idike and Eme 2015). Little wonder, Huntington (1996) argues that in the new world, cultural identity is the central factor shaping a country's associations and antagonisms. Larsh and Friedman are of the opinion that the formation or construction of identity space is the dynamic operator linking economic and cultural processes in modern societies (Larsh and Friedman (1992).

Furthermore, some scholars have argued that some forms of identities are stronger than others. Lewis and Bratton (2000) contend that religious and ethnic identities are more fully formed, more holistic and more strongly felt than social class identities. This is evidenced in the fact that whereas those who identify with religious and ethnic communities are almost universally proud of their group identities; those who see themselves as members of a social class are somewhat more equivocal about their pride.

Howbeit, other 'primordial' identities have gained wide currency and greater socio-cultural and socio-political significance, especially in contestations over citizenship. These include 'indigenes' and 'non-indigenes', 'migrants', and 'settlers'. These forms of identities have ethnic, religious, communal, and regional origins. They have evolved from an entrenched system of discriminatory practices in which non-indigenes, migrants and settlers are shunted out or denied equal access to the resources, rights and privileges of a locality, community, town or state, to which 'sons and daughters of the soil' have first or exclusionary access (Osaghae and Suberu 2005). It is imperative to note that contestation over resources and opportunities have created a nexus between group identity and human right in most pluralistic polity the world over.

Let us at this point explore the concept of human right. It is pertinent to state that human right ideology has gained enormous attention in the global socio-political and cultural arena. Its emergence in socio-political development discourse can be traced to the ancient Greek

philosophical thought. Ojo cited in Ozoigbo (2017) traces the origin of the concept of human rights to the stoic's school of philosophy in ancient Athens. Zeno who was the founder of the stoic school of thought propounded the theory of natural law under which human beings were supposed to have natural rights. Dada (2012) observes that today, human rights issues have not only become a global concern but remarkable interest aimed at protecting and promoting universal respect for, and observance of human rights at the international, regional and national levels. Although the concept of human right has a global colouration, nevertheless, providing a universally acclaimed definition of the concept will be a difficult task to accomplish because there has never been a generally acceptable definition of human rights among scholars, human right agencies and social commentators. However, the different definitions given by various scholars and human right agencies points to the fact that human rights are rights that are meant to be enjoyed by everybody in the world unconditionally and unalterably, and they are to be guaranteed irrespective of one's nationality, place of residence, ethnic and religious identity, sex, race, colour, language, and others. Ozoigbo (2017) quoting Aduba explains that human rights are those rights that are the very nature of every human person; hence, they define and affirm the humanity of all persons. Therefore, they exist to ensure that human rights remain sacred and guarantee that inhumanity and injustice are prevented or reduced. According to Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death. They apply regardless of where you are from, what you believe or how you choose to live your life. They can never be taken away, although they can sometimes be restricted- for example if a person breaks the law, or in the interests of national security. In a related manner, United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) maintains that human rights are rights inherent in all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status (Ozoigbo 2017).

The rights guaranteed under prominent international human right documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Right and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 documents are as follows: right to life, right to dignity of the human person, right to personal liberty, and right to fair hearing. Others are right to private and family life, right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, right to freedom of expression and the press, right to peaceful assembly and association, right to freedom of movement, right to freedom from discrimination, among others (Dada 2012). These international human rights instruments contain and convey the universal character of human rights. It is pertinent to state that the aforementioned international human right documents are domesticated in the national constitutions of many countries of the world.

3. Religious and Ethno-regional Consciousness in Nigeria's Public Sphere

The cornerstone of religious and ethno-regional consciousness in Nigeria's public sphere was laid by the colonial masters. It is pertinent to state that Nigeria as a political entity was a British creation. The process commenced with the annexation of Lagos as a crown colony by the British in 1861. The amalgamation policy of 1914 which entails the joining together of the northern and southern protectorates as a political constituent gave rise to the notion of one Nigeria (Anyaele 2004). The emergence of religious and ethno-regional consciousness in the country's socio-political landscape can be traced to the introduction of the colonial policy of "divide and rule"; commonly known as the "indirect rule" system by the British colonial administrators. Nolte et al, maintain that a significant factor that shaped religious and ethno-regional consciousness in Nigeria was the traditions of governance adopted by the colonial rulers (Nolte et al. 2009). In the northern region, the religiously empowered Emirs were placed in charge of local government administration. This is due to the presence of Islamic ideology of political administration already in existence among the people. The Islamic legal philosophy (the shari'a) which existed before colonial rule

was integrated into the colonial government of the protectorate of northern Nigeria. The shari'a and the emirate system constituted the basis of administration in the region (Nolte et al. 2009). Thus, Agbaje (1990) contends that the colonial administrators 'underwrote Islam in the northern region of colonial Nigeria, and used it as the basis of political authority in local government administration. Due to political expediency, the colonial masters did everything within their power to prevent the Christian missionaries from evangelizing in the core Hausa/Fulani northern part of Nigeria. On the other hand, Christian missionaries had overwhelming presence and influence in the southern region with their liberal religious doctrines. The substantial presence of the Christian missionary activities in southern Nigeria explains the reason for the partial success of indirect rule policy in some parts of that region (south west) and a total failure in some (south east).

The aforementioned colonial style of administration in the country imprinted in the consciousness of Nigerian citizens the idea of Muslims dominated region and Christians dominated region and eventually form the basis of ethno-regional antagonism. Prior to the departure of the British colonialists, the Nigerian nationalists cultivated and nurtured the idea of religious and ethno-regional consciousness. There is no gainsaying that religious and ethno-regional division and dichotomy have always existed in Nigeria from the colonial period to the contemporary times. This is because its footprint cannot be easily erased from the history of Nigeria as a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society. As a matter of fact, religious and ethno-regional fault lines played out in some crucial national decisions that Nigerian Nationalists took at critical times in the history of the country. The first of its kind was in 1953 when Anthony Enahoro, a Southern Christian legislator moved the motion for self-government at the floor of Nigerian parliament. The motion was vehemently opposed by northern Muslim parliamentarians in the federal legislative chamber. This issue prevented Nigeria from gaining self-government in 1956 as earlier agreed by the British government and the Nigerian nationalists. The resultant effect of this

controversy was the granting of self-government to the two regions separately by the British colonial masters. The southern region was granted self-government in 1957, northern region 1959, and the country eventually got political independence in 1960 (Anyaele 2004). It is imperative to state that at the early years of Nigeria as a sovereign state, ethno-regional consciousness was more pronounced in public life than religious consciousness. According to Singh, in the first few decades after decolonization, it was ethnic and regional rather than religious-based movements that was prominent. It was only in the early 1980s, with the 'crisis of governance', that political mobilizations along religious identities became serious in the national space (Singh 2011).

Conventionally, religious and ethnic identities in Nigeria have been classified into two broad categories of majority and minority groups. It is imperative to state that out of the three major religious groups in Nigeria (African traditional religion, Islam and Christianity), African traditional religious worshippers are the least active in public life. Christian and Muslim identities have been the mainstay of religious differentiation, with Nigerian Muslims much more likely to evince or articulate a religious identity than Christians in the country's socio-political and economic sphere. This is because Islamic adherents have well-articulated political and economic oriented doctrines enshrined in their sacred traditions than Christians (Lewis and Bratton 2000; Osaghae and Suberu 2005; Atoi and Ogunrinade 2017).

Moreover, there are three major ethnic groups with regional formation in Nigeria—Hausa/Fulani in the North, Igbo in the East and Yoruba in the West. It is pertinent to state here that the southerners, especially the Yoruba are considerably more prone to define themselves in the public sphere ethnically than the northern Hausa-Fulani who would rather opt for Islamic religious identity (Lewis and Bratton 2000). According to Osaghae and Suberu, in parts of the north commonly referred to as the 'core' or 'Hausa-Fulani north', which is roughly coterminous with those states that adopted Islamic legal philosophy (the shari'a law) in the

fourth republic, religious identity is more critical than ethnic identity and in fact serves to activate ethnicity (Osaghae and Suberu 2005).

It is imperative to reiterate that ethno-religious identity has often been used for regional distinction in Nigeria. It has been utilized to differentiate the predominantly Muslim north from the largely Christian south. Ethno-religious identity has equally been used to differentiate the dominant Muslim group in the north from the non-Muslim minorities in the region. Indeed, unlike the south where majority groups are distinguished from minority groups on the basis of ethnicity, majority-minority differentiations in the north have been more religious than ethnic. Thus, Osaghae and Suberu assert:

...a member of the Hausa/Fulani majority group in the north who is a Christian is as much a minority in the overall scheme of things as say an Idoma or Igala, (both of which are northern minority groups) and is actually likely to enjoy lesser privileges than an ethnic minority person who is Muslim. Ethno-religious categories have been more frequently used to describe conflicts that involve an intersection of ethnic and religious identities (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:7).

The trend ethno-regional consciousness is taking in contemporary Nigeria has since been demonstrated by Umaru Dikko in his 2004 *Daily Sun* interview where he declared thus:

Let everybody know that if any tribe in Nigeria, and I make no limit, any tribe in Nigeria thinks it can fight the Hausa/Fulani; it is wasting its time. Because our tribe is not only in Nigeria, we extend right from Sudan, Cameroon, up to Gambia. If we blow our horns and call on our tribes' men, they will descend on Nigerian and take it over... (Onyemizu, 2009:25).

Ethno-regional consciousness in the Nigerian state has led to the formation of ethnic militia groups in the various regions of the country. These include among others the *Odua* People's Congress (OPC) in the south western region, the *Arewa* Peoples' Congress (APC) in the northern region, and the *Igbo* Peoples' Congress (IPC), the *Bakassi* Boys (BO), the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of *Biafra*

(MASSOB), and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the south eastern region. We also have the *Ijaw* National Congress (INC), the *Egbesu* Boys of Africa (EBA), the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) in the south southern region. These various ethno-regional groups are becoming increasingly militant as a result of the strong agitation for protection of their group interest and human right in the Nigeria's public sphere.

4. Religious and Ethno-regional Identity Issues and Human Right Protection in Nigeria

It is a social reality that the Nigerian state is a deeply divided society where major issues in public life such as human right protection dispute are energetically and violently contested along complex religious, ethnic, and regional fault lines. There are insinuations from various quarters of the Nigerian federation that the deep religious and ethno-regional fears generated by in-built structures that promote unequal access to power and resources are being exploited by some unpatriotic individuals for sectarian and egocentric goals at the expense of national unity, peace and progress (Osaghae and Suberu 2005; Osimen, Balogun and Adenegan 2013). Some scholars have argued that the various religious and ethno-regional clashes being experienced in the Nigerian state are connected to citizenship in the context of identity, which is mostly rooted in the politics of inclusion or exclusion. It was further contended that these clashes are basically tied to claims and counter-claims over identity as a basis for determining who is included or excluded from state policy decision making, and access to the various opportunities within the nation state under the 'we' versus 'them' cliché (Ibrahim 2000; Kwaja, 2008).

In recent time, a new dimension of fear has dominated the Nigerian public sphere. This is not the physical fear of ethno-regional violence but the fear of not getting one's fare shares of the national cake, one's fare wages or just reward. Under this situation, different stakeholders identified themselves with religious and ethno-regional groups in order to protect their rights and interests. Some scholars contend

that the level of corruption aggravated by harsh socio-economic conditions and the skewing of the spoils of office for only those in the corridors of power made many people move back to the mosques, churches and ethno-regional associations as alternative modes of economic survival and socio-political expression of opposition and protest against human right violations (Ibrahim, 2003; Idike and Eme 2015).

Religious and ethno-regional identities became so problematic in the Nigerian state because they have been associated with perceptions of marginalization, discrimination, injustice, social unrest and inability of some groups to exercise certain rights and civil liberties. The main issues have been the control of political power, the armed forces, the judiciary and the bureaucracy. Moreover, there is the struggle for the control of economic power and state resources (Ibrahim, 2003; Idike and Eme 2015). It must be stated that group identity in itself is not a problem in plural societies. However, it becomes a problem when it is mobilized negatively and used as a platform on which unjust socio-political actions, discriminatory practices and organized violent clashes are carried out (Ibrahim 2003; Idike and Eme 2015). In the struggle for the acquisition of state power and the control of resources, especially in the period of economic crisis, identity politics become intensified and tend to assume primacy. The ruling party tends to resort to politics of identity for legitimizing its power, while those who felt they have been excluded from the scheme of things also resort to identity politics to contest their exclusion (Jega, 2000 cited in Idike and Eme 2015).

One major issue that has continued to generate human right dispute in Nigeria is the sharia enigma. While Muslims contend that the re-introduction of the *shari'a* in the 12 core northern states from 1999 is an exercise of the fundamental human right of Muslims and one of the dividends of democracy, Christians see it as an accompanied effort by Muslims to curtail the religious freedom and citizenship rights of non-Muslims (Singh 2011). Some Christian scholars argued that the re-emergence of the sharia in the Nigerian socio-political sphere is an attempt to maintain a pure state of Islam which has

knowingly or unknowingly violated the rights and freedom of other citizens (Achunike 2008).

Another disturbing episode of human right issue that is attracting attention in the Nigerian social space is the right over farmland and grazing opportunities. This has continued to generate serious controversies between the nomadic Fulani herdsmen and sedentary farming populations across the length and breadth of the country, especially in the north central geo-political zone. In recent times, the issue of land and the right to possess it has become so problematic. Different ethnic nationalities have continued to reinforce their sacred attachment to ethno-regional boundaries. The Hausa/Fulani ethnic group has been accused in various times of not only demonstrating the unwillingness to integrate into societies outside the local environment where they inhabit but also of exhibiting territorial and expansionist tendencies. In most cases, the Hausa/Fulani cultivate the habit of renaming the environment where they stay outside their home town for the purpose of business transactions in cattle and other livestock "Garki" which implies settlement in Hausa language (Osaghae and Suberu 2005; Onyemaizu 2009; Idike and Eme 2015). This issue has generated numerous violent clashes in various communities in the Nigerian federation, leading to destruction of lives and property and violation of the fundamental human rights of innocent and helpless citizens who are constantly crying out to the governing authorities to protect them from human right violation.

Let us at this juncture state categorically that one of the objectives of the post-independence Nigerian Constitutions is the protection and promotion of human rights. It is imperative to note that the heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian state is one of the major factors that led to the inclusion of the tenets of human rights in the country's constitutions. From the 1960 constitution to the 1999 constitution, due attention has always been given to human right issues. In fact, some provisions were specifically made for human right protection. The preamble to the 1999 Constitution was essentially dedicated to the promotion of "good government

and welfare of all persons on the principles of freedom, equality and Justice". Besides the preamble, chapters two and four of the 1999 Constitution extensively deal with issues of human right. While chapter two is captioned, "Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy", chapter four is entitled, "Fundamental Rights" (1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria). Fundamental rights as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria include right to life, right to dignity of human person, right to personal liberty and many others. Moreover, chapter two, section 13 of the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria states that it shall be the duty and responsibility of all organs of government, and of all authorities and persons exercising legislative, executive or judicial powers, to conform to, observe and apply the provisions of the "Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy" (1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria).

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that the government is charged with the primary duty of protecting the fundamental human right of all its citizens irrespective of one's religious and ethno-regional identity. Unfortunately, since the inception of Nigeria's fourth republic, the government and its agencies have been accused of human right abuses. According to Ozoigbo: *Nigerians will not forget in a hurry what has been termed the 'Odi Massacre'. Odi is a town in Bayelsa state in the South South region of Nigeria where the inhabitants were agitating the way the Federal Government of Nigeria was going about the exploration of oil there which left their habitat inhabitable as a result of oil pollution. The Federal Government, democratically elected, led by Olusegun Obasabjo ordered the military to descend on the town on the 20th November 1999, which left about 2,500 civilians dead as reported by Human Rights Watch. Here the fundamental right of life has been violated by a government that supposed to protect it. Not long after the seeming holocaust at Odi community, the Nigerian military once again ferociously descended on a town in Benue state called Zaki Biam on the 22nd October 2001. In this military*

display of brutality, about 100 civilians were killed from the Tiv ethnic community (Ozoigbo 2017:29).

There are number of cases which have ethno-regional and religious colouration currently trending in the news media, which prominent human right activists have tagged cases of human right abuses. Prominent among them are the clashes between the Nigerian security agents and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the south eastern region, and the clashes between the Nigerian military and the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (the Shiite Muslim group). Nigerian security forces were accused of killing at least 40 members of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in February and May 2016 with impunity (Ozoigbo 2017). This was followed by the popular operation python dance two which led to the destruction of Nnamdi Kanu's father's royal palace in Afara-ukwu, Umuahia, Abia state on 14 September, 2017. On the 28 October, 2018, there were series of news report alleging that the Nigerian security forces brutalized and killed some members of Shiite Muslim group who were on a peaceful protest for the release of their spiritual leader, Ibrahim El-zakzaky who was allegedly detained unlawfully by the Department of State Security Service since 2016. Femi Falana, a prominent Nigerian human right activist while responding to questions during the sunrise daily programme of channel's television on the 6 November, 2018, alleged that about 492 Shiite members have been killed by Nigerian security agents in the last three years. Falana vehemently contends that such act is illegal and a gross violation of the fundamental rights of the Shiite Muslim group in Nigeria. Recent human right abuses in most parts of Nigeria, especially in Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, and Taraba states have been attributed to religious and ethnic bigotry and sentiments. It is pertinent to state that these various issues of human right violation contradict the principles of democracy and social justice.

5. Concluding Remarks

Having explored religious and ethno-regional identity issues in the context of human right protection in Nigeria, this paper confirmed that human rights are not adequately protected in the country. There are strong allegations of human right abuses on the basis of group identity with some elements of truth currently making news headlines in the Nigerian public sphere. The inability of the government to effectively address the unabated loss of human lives and property resulting from Boko Haram insurgency, and the nomadic Fulani Herdsmen and sedentary farmers' clashes have added a troubling twist to the issues of group identity and human right protection in Nigeria. The rumors of partiality and ethno-regional bias on the part of the governing authorities have further compounded the problem. If the allegations labeled against the government are true, then, there is the urgent need for the federal and state governments and all its agencies directly or indirectly involved in public policy execution to demonstrate genuine and unpretentious attitude of repentance by coming up with good policy measures and strong political will to salvage the situation and save the country from total collapse.

In a multi-religious and multicultural polity such as Nigeria, it is absolutely necessary that the governing authorities remain impartial for or against any religious or non-religious groups, or else its relevance and value will continue to be crucified at the altar of religious and ethno-regional bigotry. It is only a secular state that is religiously, culturally, ethnically and philosophically neutral that can guarantee the equal rights of every individual to freedom of thought, association, conscience and belief (Bujra, 2006; Tar and Shettima 2010). The governing authorities at both the state and federal levels must exhibit a great sense of fair play and justice at the level of governance, putting into considerations all that is required to pilot the affairs of a multi-religious and multi-cultural polity. We totally agree with the articulation of Tar and Shettima that:

...public policies have to be religiously justified and key appointments to the armed forces, police, judiciary and various political offices have to be balanced in terms of ethnic, regional and religious composition. ...Employment in

federal, state and local government must reflect the "federal", "state" and "local" outlook in terms of geographic spread, ethnic and religious composition (Tar and Shettima 2010: 12).

It is imperative to state that the decision and compromise that was arrived at by the Nigerian nationalists prior to independence from the British colonial masters in 1960 to become the Federal Republic of Nigeria, requires that the various ethnic, religious and other interest groups within the nation state accepted to integrate in all areas of public life with one another without any form of molestation, intimidation and marginalization (Osimen, Balogun and Adenegan 2013). Therefore, Nigerians from all walks of life must recognize and respect the right and dignity of their fellow citizens and all persons legally permitted to live in any part of the Nigerian state. The government and all its concern agencies must do everything within their power to promote and protect the fundamental human right objectives of the state.

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