

Hate Speech, Corporate Existence and National Integration in Nigeria: The Hurdles and the Way-Forward

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Abstract

Hate speech is the expression of conflicts between different groups within and across societies. Hate speech is not new to Nigeria. The country is perhaps the only nation that has survived a civil war but had its corporate existence publicly attacked with such vehemence by its own politicians, journalists, and academics. Politicians started questioning Nigerian nationhood even before the ink with which Nigeria's independence was signed in 1960 was dry; earlier, critics had called the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates of Nigeria the mistake of 1914. The emergence of information and communication technology (ICT) has soured the scourge of hate speech to the next level since the returned of democracy in the last two decades. Hate speech has become a cankerworm that threatens the very corporate existence and national integration in Nigeria. This paper x-rayed the scourge of hate speech as it hinders effective national integration and unity among diverge inhabitants of the geographical area called Nigeria. Some policy recommendations were put forth.

Keywords: Hate Speech, National Integration, Corporate Existence, National Unity, Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria is a multicultural society, a conglomerate of nations with different peoples and cultures, a basket of different religions and world-views and a country with the diverse expectations of its people. As a recipe

for Nigeria's growth and development, and by extension cohesion, as such the need to recognize that none of the ethnic groups, big or small, shares a uniform dream about Nigeria (Oyeyemi, 2002). This is because the ethnic groups' worldviews are completely different such as their expectations from their leaders, their notions of government, their moral standards, their perceptions and understanding of religion, their ideas of how to live and regulate their lives and their goals and missions as ethnic nationalities.

Adibe (2015) defined and described hate as that which employs discriminatory epithets to insult and stigmatize others on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or other forms of group membership. It is any speech, gesture, conduct, writing or display which could incite people to violence or prejudicial action. There are individuals and groups in this country who openly relish the freedom to rain insults and profile others by appropriating to themselves the role of ethnic and religious champions. The problem is that hate speech is often the gateway to discrimination, harassment and violence as well as a precursor to serious harmful criminal acts. It is doubtful if there will be hate-motivated violent attacks on any group without hate speech and the hatred it purveys.

In a more elaborate term, Kukah (2016) describes hate speech as "communication that denigrates a particular person or a group on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or other characteristic. It can be in the form of any speech, gesture or conduct, writing, or display and usually marks incitement, violence or prejudice against an individual or a group". Kukah maintains that the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe issued in 1997 covers the internationally accepted definition of the term. Accordingly, "the term "hate speech" shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance." As a result it generates stigmas, stereotypes, prejudices and discriminatory practices against those who are constructed as being different.

According to Neisser, hate speech refers to all communications (whether verbal, written, symbolic) that insults a racial, ethnic and political group, whether by suggesting that they are inferior in some respect or by indicating that they are despised or not welcome for any other reasons.

Neisser (1994) argues that apart from causing danger of physical assault, hate speech risks violent reaction. Hate speech is universally used to describe any communication that denigrates a particular person or a group on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or other characteristic. It can be in the form of speech, gesture, conduct, writing, or display. Politically motivated hate speech is historically a precursor to election related harassment and violence in Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines hate speech, corporate existence and national integration in Nigeria: the hurdles and the way-forward.

Conceptual Framework

In order to do justice to the topic under discussion, it is imperative to define the concepts of hate speech and national integration.

Concept of Hate Speech

Defining “*hate speech*” is a challenging task as the term itself is vague and subject to various interpretations. Nielsen (2002) refers to a lack of consensus with regards to the content of hate speech. First, the word “hate” will be understood as “extreme negative feelings and beliefs held about a group of individuals or a specific representative of that group because of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

The term “hate speech” covers all forms of expression that “spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin.” Hate speech might derive from repressed hostility or ignorance (Leets, 2002). Ignorance holds its roots to lack of proper education, which is the original source that makes people susceptible to nationalism, to the authoritarian mentality and therefore to hate speech (Lenkova, 2016).

Brink (2010) mentions that hate speech include discriminatory epithets or attitudes that come from an ugly or violent past and aim to insult and stigmatize others. Moreover, Lenkova defines hate speech as “the use of very precise discriminatory and selective vocabulary which tries to legitimize negative thinking about all those who are not «us», those who are the ‘others’” (Lenkova, 2015:10). Similarly, Simpson

(2013) refers to identity-based contempt, irrespective of how someone uses it or how it affects its targets. According to Simpson (2013): Hate speech is a term of art in legal and political theory that is used to refer to verbal conduct – and other symbolic, communicative action – which willfully expresses intense antipathy towards some group or towards an individual on the basis of membership in some group [...] Hate speech thus includes things like identity-prejudicial abuse and harassment, certain uses of slurs and epithets, some extremist political and religious speech and certain displays of hate symbols (e.g. swastikas or burning crosses).

In this paper, hate speech is viewed as an expression of enmity and intolerance among Nigerians with the use of offensive language, by people who distance themselves from the ‘others’, who are perceived as unworthy and blamable - beyond differences of race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation etc.

Concept of National Integration

The concept of national integration is widely used to cover a wide range of phenomena and it is opened to a number of interpretations. Literally, integration involves bringing diverse parts or units together to operate as a single whole. Tihamiyu (1997) affirmed that national integration is the attempt at uniting or bringing together the hitherto multi-ethnic groups of people with diverse culture, histories, languages, religion and belief systems into one which would remove primordial and subordinate loyalties and sentiments to ethnic groups. Eleazu (1977) defined integration as a “resocialization process into the symbols of the new large community to create people in the sense of those who, in the words of Karl Deutsch have learned to communicate with each other well beyond the mere interchange of goods and services. Sanda (1999) defined national integration as the collective orientation of members of a society towards the nation and its society in such a way that micro-loyalties are not allowed to jeopardize the continued existence of the nation and its objectives, goals and ideals.

However, Odetomi (2013) believe that national integration is commonly used to refer to specific problem of creating a sense of territorial nationality, which eliminates parochial loyalties. In this sense, it is generally presumed that there exists an ethnically plural society in which each group is characterized by its own languages or other self-

conscious cultural qualities. Thus, integration is used here as opined by (Bamisiaye, 2003) to refer to the tensions and discontinuities in the process of creating homogenous, progressive, reduction of cultural and regional territorial community. This is the act or process of combing two or more resources or components so that they work together. This refers to the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a country. It means that though we belong to different castes, religions and regions and speak different language, we recognize the fact that we are all one Shona, (2013).

It can be concluded from the foregoing that, the purpose of national integration is to build a united and strong nation. Also, national integration can be seen as a process leading to political cohesion and sentiments or loyalty toward central political institution. Hence, it means attempts at unifying all the forces in the country in order to give the idea of one nation.

Approaches toward Ensuring Corporate Existence and National Integration in Nigeria

At independence, Tiamiyu (1999) highlighted some system approaches towards cohesive National integration in Nigeria. He listed a host of good indicators as means towards eventual evolution of cohesive National unity. These include the following symbols of Nigerian Nationhood:

- The Nigeria Coat of Arms (1960)
- The National Flag (1960)
- The National Pledge (1970) after Nigerian civil war
- The National Anthem (1960)
- The Nigerian Currencies (1960), modified in 1978

According to Tiamiyu (1999) the main import of these indicators is to create unity among Nigerian diverse ethnic nationalities and to put faith in her continued existence and the well-being of every Nigerian. Expectedly, the end result would be peace and progress in the country. Thus, the National flag and the Nigerian other National symbols have become 34 the symbols of sovereign authority at independence. They represent Nigeria National pride and sovereignty. So also, the National pledge is recited to reinforce Nigerian's commitment to duty and service. Nigerians are required to serve with strength, defend National unity,

and be faithful, loyal and honest in the course of their civic responsibilities.

The National Anthem on the other hand is a clarion call to National duty, which commands the respect and commitment of Nigerian citizens. It is a projection for the inculcation of Honesty, Loyalty, Service, Sacrifice and Good leadership which are considered desirable and important for bridging cultural pluralism for Nation building. It appeals to Nigerian conscience on the need to respect and protect the course for which Nigeria's past heroes have died. Not only the National symbols have been used to inculcate National integration, but also Nigeria's educational, political, economic, cultural and social policies have been reframed to foster National unity and integration after independence (Tiamiyu, 1999). The process of National Integration and development in Nigeria could be facilitated and enhanced through the following factors: A framework for promoting the very sensitive issues that often leads to problems and conflicts among Nigerians. This should include developing the mechanism to address the problems of religious differences, ethnicism, political power sharing, and allocation of economic resources and so on.

Existence of common values, beliefs and rightful behavioural attitudes among Nigerians. Feelings of ethnic superiority that usually accompanied with such beliefs that political and economic domination by one's own group is natural, morally right and is in the nation's best interest and perhaps God's will should be discouraged. Such image can retard nation building and development in Nigeria. Ebong (2006:13) laments that in Nigeria, the mirror image phenomenon is common place behaviour. The Northerners, for instance, sees himself as hard working, warm-hearted, accommodating and easy-going, whereas the Southerner sees himself as civilized, intelligent and hard working as opposed to the dominating, crafty, noisy Northerner.

The implication here is that when a sense of self-respect of an individual is hurt, he fosters hatred and disgust for other groups and individuals and forms prejudice against them. Nigerian leaders should foster a sense of togetherness among all Nigerians irrespective of their ethnicity or religious background. If such mechanisms are put in place tensions will deescalate. For instance, the recent escalation of violence perpetrated by Boko Haram may have a political undertone and ideological differences. Political leaders have remained defiance to

negotiate for fear of giving out their position. For Nigeria to build a strong and viable nation, politics must not be accompanied with sentiments such as “Muslims should vote for fellow Muslims”, “Christians should vote for fellow Christians”, “Southerners must vote for fellow Southerner”, “all Northerners must vote for fellow Northerner”. Such acts retard not only development but also the process of nation building. Agi (1999:109) warns that if such sentiments (centrifugal nationalism) occurs “and when if the principle of national self-determination is applied by every ethnic group or nationality in a state. Then the authority of the central government would be so weakened that the existence of the state could become questionable”.

Effective and efficient leaders that are capable of overpowering aggression (bothv internal and external), protecting the lives and properties and providing democratic dividends to all Nigerians irrespective of their ethnicity or religious background. The problem of nation building in Nigeria is traceable to leadership. Achebe (1983) attributes the problem of Nigeria to “failure of leadership”. This may be partly because most of the leaders (i.e. inexperienced and corrupt leaders) are imposed on Nigerians by the ruling political party that controls the state machineries. Locke (1964) observes that nothing can make government legitimate except the consent of the governed. And for the consent, to be genuine, must be personal, deliberate and free. By this submission, the source of authority lies with the people who appoint the government. It is merely a means for carrying out people’s will. The supreme power must lie with Nigerians who should be allow to elect (appoint) government and remove the government if they find its act contrary to the trust reposed on it. If inexperienced and 36 ineffective leaders are imposed or voted into office on sentiments, the process of nation-building and development will be retarded. There must be a strong will for all Nigerians to live together as a nation and to toleratev one another. This can serve as a vehicle (explosive force) of establishing a single political community which may provide a unique powerful basis of allegiance instead of disintegration (Agi, 1999).

The quota system adopted for admission of young Nigerians into Institutions of learning to address educational gap or inequality across Nigeria (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013). The encouragement of the use of Mother-Tongue and Lingua Franca to foster understanding and National integration (Olajide, 2008; Bamigbose, 1999). Adequate plan,

implementation and evaluation systems based on Nigeria's National political philosophy. The objective would be to create National consciousness and unity (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013). The students' exchange programme to the various educational institutions across Nigeria, to build students' national consciousness towards national unity (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013). The National Youth Service Corp Scheme (NYSC), where young Nigerian graduates are sent to all states of the Federation to foster co-operation and understanding among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013). Encouragement of inter-tribal marriages for example, The National Youth Service Corp Scheme should be force-exposé for our young Nigerians to interact with other ethnics groups thereby promoting intertribal marriages. This would strengthen relationship among diverse ethnic group in Nigeria (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013).

Encouragement of exchange visit by traditional rulers, to enhance peaceful sociocultural harmonious relation-ship that would bring about unity. The Sultan of Sokoto is noted for such missions as reported in our Dailies. Also, the Shehu of Borno (February, 2010) undertook a similar visit to Alake of Egba land in South West Nigeria. These would definitely have positive National integrative effects (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013). Organising inter and intra cultural activities at the Local, State and National levels to promote the values of Nigerian culture; example, cultural festivals and carnivals across the country would help process national integration and nationhood (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013).

The establishment of Unity Schools to create an atmosphere for young Nigerians to interact, regardless of ethnic or religious differences (Ijaya and Jekayinfa, 2008). The curriculum development to educate young Nigerians on wide range information about Nigeria and her people. Educational curriculum development towards effective means of what would bring about National integration should be developed across all tiers of our educational systems. The school syllabuses, instructional materials such as textbooks and the teaching methods, should be made effective and efficient to meet the challenges of National unity, integration, economic, political and socio-cultural development (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013). The legislative provisions, where government deliberately controls the type and nature of education that is desirable for the country and relevant for National unity and development (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013).

The Nationalisation of Nigerian universities and the Federal Government's assumption of full responsibility in the financing of Higher Education which was on the concurrent legislative list. The objective is to breed high level individuals who would be conscious and committed to National unity (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013). The use of revenue formula for national integration of the military era and of the subsequent civilian regimes in Nigeria (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013). The secularization of religion which permits freedom of worship enshrined in our Constitution (1999). The framework of power sharing which follows constitutional provision or political arrangement, creating room for each geo-political zone to present the president for the country (Amali and Jekayinfa, 2013).

Hurdles towards National Integration in Nigeria

There are arrays of problems bedeviling Nigeria on the road to attain effective national integration and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. Some of them are discussed below.

The first hurdle in the path of national integration in Nigeria has been a regenerative breed of selfish and greedy political gladiators who seize power through the barrel of the gun or through stolen electoral mandates. As they competed for power, prestige and associated benefits, the political elite in a bid to secure the support of members of their own ethnic groups accentuate ethnic differences and demonize members of other ethnic groups. The brutal killings of youth corps members in the North following the declaration of the results of the presidential elections in 2011 speak volumes of the naked thirst for power and political position which brings out the beast in political leaders.

Secondly, corruption has so permeated the entire fabric of state that the issues that cause disaffection among ethnic nationalities in the country such as poverty, hunger, illiteracy and its attendant limited opportunities, unemployment, marginalization, infrastructural decay, homelessness and lack of access to quality health are products of corruption. Rather than look to the West to find solutions for corruption, Nigeria should begin to look to the East (Asia) where capital or severe punishment is meted out on corrupt state officials. Skewed federal system as it is being practiced in Nigeria today is another challenge for national integration. In their very thorough study on the failure of the federal system to address the question of unity, local rule and

development in the country, Imhonopi & Urim (2012) argue that federalism as it is presently practiced in Nigeria suffers because of lack of fiscal federalism, over-centralisation of power at the centre, laidback or non-viable states, absence of state police, among others.

The fear of losing control by the ruling class is another issue standing in the path of national integration in Nigeria. For many years now, the people of Nigeria have continuously canvassed for an opportunity to hold a national conversation to address the present political configuration called Nigeria all to no avail. Building on the scholarly work of Nnoli (1979), Ifeanacho & Nwagwu (2009) have contended that the ruling class in Nigeria inherited a state structure and has left it without any form of modification or moderation up until now. According to them, instead, the ruling class is preoccupied with the use of state paraphernalia for accumulating surplus without producing this surplus. The resultant contradiction is an institutionalized myopic and visionless ethnic-centered leadership with separatist and particularistic political outlook (Nnoli 1979). Fifthly, lack of political will to do the right thing by the political leadership has remained one reason the country has continued to flounder in the sea of confusion and tottering the precipice of ethnic division.

Another hurdle to realizing national integration in Nigeria is the existence of weak institutions of the state. It seems these institutions are kept weak to feather the political and economic fortunes of the ruling class. In Nigeria, it is criminal to be honest and honest to be criminal. Such weak, embryonic, sterile, insensitive and amoral characteristics of state institutions have further tilted Nigeria to the precipice. Lastly, lack of fairness, justice and equity in the country with regard to resource allocation and distribution, power sharing, enjoyment of fundamental human rights and punishment of criminals who hide under political umbrellas or bunkers created by the ruling classes takes the country backwards with regard to national cohesion.

Implications of Hate Speech on Nigeria's Corporate Existence

Despite the ambiguous status of hate speech in the academic world, its negative implications for society are clear to everyone. According to Leets (2002), hate speech violates the individual's dignity, resulting to humiliation, distress and psychological or emotional pain. Likewise, Downs and Cowan (2012) mentioned in their study that hate speech has been a strong weapon in the past that could harm individuals by

degrading, terrorizing, wounding and humiliating them. Nemes (2002) goes further by mentioning the harm of hate speech on individuals, groups and society as a whole. As far as it concerns the individuals, he mentions that hate speech can provoke pain, distress, fear, embarrassment, isolation etc. The recent potential threat on national unity posed by hate speeches emanating from various parts of the country has created anxiety and doubts on whether or not Nigeria will still remain a sovereign entity. An undiscerning mind can easily draw the conclusion that these threats posed real and potential danger, especially when viewed against the backdrop that those who expected to speak against such threats in order to douse the tension it generated are either keeping quiet or reacting a bit too late.

Hate speech towards groups of people can bring inequality problems and lead the members of that group in isolation. It creates feelings of fear and discourages them from participating in their community or expressing their opinions. Moreover, this degradation and humiliation can silence the 'victims' and therefore reinforce existing hierarchies in society (Nielsen, 2002), while it can also lead hate speech victims to become aggressive and dangerous (Parekh, 2006). Such situation gives an incline and suspicion that the elite, who are expected to condemn the hate speeches, are either in support of the utterances or are sponsoring such activities because of incompatible group interests.

Another obvious temptation is the possibility to conclude that most Nigerian elite are pursuing sectional interests rather than national interest. As Nigerians and foreigners alike pondered on what will become the fate of Nigeria when the hate speeches were taking its toll on the country, a glimmer of hope that it was not bad after all manifested when leaders and stakeholders from the Southeast met with Acting President Yemi Osinbajo. At the meeting the Southeast leaders insisted that the unity of Nigeria is not negotiable and this signified that all hope is not lost and that the situation is still redeemable.

Osinbajo's engagement with Northern leaders and their counterparts from other geopolitical zones produced similar results. The engagements and the unifying words showed the power of persuasion and responsiveness of the Federal Government and the roles it could play in dousing tension in the country. Given the facts above that concern the harmful nature of hate speech, there is no doubt that discriminatory and offensive expression is an undesirable and negative phenomenon

in a democratic society. However, it should also be taken into account, that any attempt to restrict hate speech contradicts the democratic principles of freedom of speech and the right to free expression. Cornwell and Orbe (1999) mentioned that attempting to limit hate speech would result to censorship. Similarly, Brink (2001) presented this great dilemma in his work by mentioning that regulating hate speech might bring equality but it would affect liberty. In a similar vein, Downs & Cowan (2012:1354) mention that “if speech is restricted, it silences those who may benefit largely from its expression”.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, it is concluded that hate speech and foul language is prevalent on social media platforms in Nigeria, and that it has both moral and legal consequences in the society. It is also concluded that although, hate speech has negative implications on the society. It is therefore, the general duty of the law to prohibit hate speech in Nigeria, especially on the emerging new media.

Recommendations

In the light of the foregoing, the following recommendations are put forth:

- i. The government should focus on addressing issues of injustice, transparency and inclusiveness in all affairs. This would go a long way in resolving the increasing agitations by various groups, in addition to strengthening unity among the country’s diverse population;
- ii. There is the need for high sense of responsibility and tolerance among participants in online discourse, in order to make all appreciate the obvious values of this innovation. Through regular sensitisation by governmental agencies such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA), Ministry of Information and Culture, and other non-governmental organisations, this can be achieved;
- iii. Considering the imminent negative implications of hate speech and reckless comments on peaceful coexistence, moderation in the pattern of users’ interaction on the cyberspace becomes inevitable;

- iv. Even though the constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and expression, there is the need to draw a line between hate speech and constructive criticism, as this would provide the path towards containing the negative effects of hate speech on the Nigerian society;
- v. National interest should also be placed above any other interest be it ethnic, sectional, religious and political. This is will greatly assist in national integration efforts by the government.

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