

Hate Speech and the Challenges of Nation Building in Nigeria

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Abstract:-The study set out to explore the plausible existence of a correlation between prevalence of hate speech and the current state of nation building in contemporary. Conceiving hate speech as prejudicial and derogatory comments against persons of different ethnic origin, the study hinging on the theoretical pedestal of ethnicity holds that; primordial ethnic identity and affiliations remains a major driving force behind widespread prevalence of hate speech in the Nigerian polity. Furthermore, it also holds that the incidence of hate speech is particularly more pronounced in period leading to and after national and local elections. Accordingly, it is of the view that a lot needs to be done legislative wise in terms of enacting legislations geared towards classifying and combating hate speech. Secondly, it also claims that regional and tribal elites should be cautious of their utterances so as not to incite one group against another. While on the side of the government, reasonable amount of political will is required to sensitize and educate the mass as well as inculcation of policies that will strengthen ties across rival groups in Nigeria.

Keywords: Hate Speech, Ethnicity, Nation Building, National Integration, Political Entrepreneurs and Political Inclusion.

I. INTRODUCTION

The underlying ethnicities and nationalities (hence forth groups) that constitute contemporary Nigeria have been on opposite ends for one reason or the other. The uneasy relationship that characterizes the socio-economic, political and cultural interaction amongst various groups remains a formidable threat to the enduring existence of Nigeria as a single political unit. The troubled history of Africa's most populous democracy, could be further located in the fall of three republics, incessant military incursions, religious and ethnic based conflicts, post electoral violence, militancy, insurgency to mention but the handful. Since its inception as a political community Nigeria has adopted and implemented a handful of policies and framework structures aimed at fostering national unity and integrating underlying ethnicities and nations.

Owing to the heterogeneous nature of the average African state, the preoccupation of foster integration and national building dominates policy discourse; Nigeria is no exception to this practice. Few years after independence, the collective desire for self-emancipation that united various nations, soon deteriorated into sectarianism, ethnicity and regionalism. The underlying groups that constitute the federating units that make up Nigeria have since been at loggerhead for one reason or the other. The prevailing ethnic prejudice has at its extreme led into a civil in 1963 which threatened the existence of

Nigeria as a political community. Overtime, ethnic prejudice has morphed and presently is thought to be popularly manifested through hate speech.

Hate speech is any speech, gesture, conduct, writing or display which could incite people to violence or prejudicial action. Essentially, such speeches rob others of their dignity. According to Neisser (2014, p. 337), 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. Furthermore, United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2013:4) noted that hate speech includes:

all dissemination of ideas based on racial or ethnic superiority or hatred, by whatever means; incitement to hatred, contempt or discrimination against members of a group on grounds of their race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin; threats or incitement to violence against persons or groups on the grounds in above; expression of insults, ridicule or slander of persons or groups or justification of hatred, contempt or discrimination on the grounds in above, when it clearly amounts to incitement to hatred or discrimination; participation in organizations and activities which promote and incite racial discrimination.

Based on the foregoing it will suffice to claim that hate speech essentially denotes prejudicial discrimination against another based on dissimilarities. Within this context, it is used to describe the incessant discrimination that further upholds the uneasy relationship across different groups in Nigeria. And it can be carried out against an individual or group and can be done in person or virtually (online). The former seems to gain more prominence of recent, for this study its constitute few of the unintended negative effect of Information and Communication Technology.

Nation building on the other hand is conceived by Musarurwa (2016) as the idea of constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state. Relatedly, Von Bogdandy et al. (2005, p. 586) conceive nation building as a conscious process of collective identity formation with a view to legitimizing public power within a given territory. This is an essentially indigenous process which often not only

projects a meaningful future but also draws on existing traditions, institutions, and customs, redefining them as national characteristics in order to support the nation's claim to sovereignty and uniqueness. Resultantly, the concept of nation building entails a systematic procedural strategy put in place by the state with a view to constructing first e mega identity, create a sense of belongingness and to foster national unity across different federating units as in the case of Nigeria.

In lieu, it will suffice to claim that nation building process sets out to unite and discard a sense of disunity or dissimilarity, hate speech attempts to or reinforces it. The challenges of hate speech in Nigeria are further compounded by the twin incidence of modern democracy and digital revolution in ICT. In other words the ideals of liberal democracy stipulate that citizens are entitled to expressing their opinions regarding all aspects of life. Regrettably, the waves of hateful, demeaning and dehumanizing messages against particular individuals, or groups of individuals on the grounds of their political affiliation, religious conviction, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, etc. nowadays intensify and expand infecting an ever growing proportion of the human race; it becomes profoundly debatable whether hate speech amounts to right to freedom of speech or constraining it amounts to infringement of liberty. Digital revolution on the other hand has accorded ill minded persons the medium to spread hate speech and related vice with the click of a button or tap on a screen. While there abound a host of social cum informal institutions which serves as basis for hate speech, the study will adopt ethnicity as a framework for analysis.

II. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Although scholarly endeavors at attaining a consensus as to what ethnicity entails remains largely inconclusive, hence the discourse of ethnicity occupies a central position in the analysis of the post-colonial state. They however remain a recurring obsession with ethnicity in Africa and its problems. Conceived or real, ethnicity remains a prominent and fundamental constituent of post-colonial Africa. While they abound a myriad of frameworks through which ethnicity is studied, Osaghae (1991, p. 44) claims ethnicity as a derivative of ethnic groups, have a habit of recurring in instances involving copious ethnic groups or identity with lucid elements of the us and them saga. Yakubu (2017) weighs in on the discussion, claiming ethnic groups as informal groups, whose members are divergent from members of other groups, within a joint territorial boundary on the foundation of shared kinship, religious or linguistic ties.

In contemporary Africa were class struggle are thought to be passive, ethnicity remains the medium through which individual identity is re-informed, in relation to the norms, values and beliefs of a larger group. Furthermore, Yakubu (2018) is of the view that while ethnicity is alterable and fluid, association to groups remains primordially conditioned by shared mutual history, linguistic, culture, region and similar

objectives. In isolated circumstances, membership to ethnic groups can be attained through migration and resettlement, ascription to and recognition with groups on the basis of understanding or belonging to mutual language, religion or culture.

Void of class or a vying national identity, ethnicity serves as a basis for group primordial identity, creating a sense of disunity in contemporary Nigeria. Hence, ethnic entrepreneurs have and continue to exploit the strong sentiment to create prejudice amongst different groups. This trend has found its way to the internet as have come to constitute what is now referred to as hate speech in the global space. Although a handful of legislations have been put in place their implementation on the other hand remains particularly poor, more so in developing countries like Nigeria. Accordingly, the criminalization of hate speech is paramount to curbing the menace; however that seems unlikely in the nearest future with regards to existential realities that abounds in Nigeria.

III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON HATE SPEECH

Indeed, phenomenon of hate speech has taken an extensive dimension in Africa due to poor regulations. Hate speech has permeated every nook and cranny of Africa. It has become an integral component of contemporary Nigeria. It has also diffused across the society and affected almost every sphere of human interaction in Africa's most populous democracy. Resultantly, this section set out to review some of the legislative measures adopted with a view to curbing it.

Commendably, most doctrines that established freedom of speech and expression in Nigeria added a clause to guard against hate speech, promote human dignity, societal cohesion and peace. For instance, section 39 (1) of the 1999 Constitution as amended in 2011 provides that "every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression..." More so, section 45 provides that nothing in section 39 shall invalidate any law that is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society in the interest of public order, public morality and for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedom of other persons. By this provision it can be deduced that citizens are privy to express themselves orally as long as their expressions does not harm another in anyway. This in itself is conflicting and problematic, owing to the relative nature of humans as social beings. Furthermore, pre-existing political realities have enthroned the act of hate speech as a means of discrediting the other not based on ideological disposition but ethnic, religious, regional and other social forms of identity.

Similarly, sections 95 and 96 of the 2010 Electoral Act prohibited the use of any language in campaigns that will hurt tribal, religious and/or sectional feelings. Other legal frameworks that abhor the use of derogatory language in Nigeria are the Political Party Code of Conduct (2013) and the Abuja Accord (2015). Despite these legal frameworks, there has been notable growth in the incidence of hate speech in recent times.

IV. HATE SPEECH AND THE CHALLENGES OF NATION BUILDING

In Nigeria, attempts at fostering a shared feeling of belongingness across different federating units have continued to defy numerous initiatives. Soon after independence the idea of nationalism soon degenerated into ethno-nationalism. It is in this regards that Yakubu (2017, p. 7) claims Nigeria was a product of an end to colonial domination, which saw the mashing up of various ethnicities and nationalities without consulting those affected directly. This act of amalgamation arguably birthed the inter-tribal, ethnic or communal conflicts that has plagued Africa's most populous nation and hindered the attainment of an all-inclusive political community. Over time the uneasy relationship that characterizes group interaction has resulted in a number of crisis, conflict, discrimination, deprivation based on amongst primary factors ethnicity. While inter-ethnic conflicts has waned in terms of physical confrontations, the revolution in social interaction brought about by ICT has with its unintended negative effect given rise to a contemporary form of discrimination otherwise known as hate speech.

In an attempt to theoretically examine the exploratory mechanism through hate speech and nation building interpenetrate or not in Nigeria, the study will highlight ethnic driven utterances and comments of principal agents and political elites, ethnic entrepreneurs with a view to conceptualizing them to constitute hate speech and their possible implications on nation building. Due to the in-exhaustiveness of such utterances, a few will be convenient selected for the purpose of this study.

V. CONTEXTUAL DYNAMICS OF HATE SPEECH IN NIGERIA

Owing to social diversities, hate and other related speeches tend to vary across time and space and possibly constrain by existential societal realities. As earlier stated, the uneasy relationship across federating groups in Nigeria, remains a definite attribute of Africa's suppose power house. The prevailing trend equally accords ethnic entrepreneurs¹ the avenue to heat of the polity and promote prejudice in the society. Notable amongst them include the declaration of the National Coordinator of the Coalition of Northern Politicians, Dr. Junaidu Mohammed a year to the 2011 general elections that, it must be a Northerner or no Nigeria... If Goodluck Jonathan wins the PDP's endorsement to contest the 2011 presidential election, there would be violence Guardian Newspaper, (November 02, 2010, Pp.4). Relatedly, a former minister of aviation Mr. Fmi Kayode espouses that; the Igbos are collectively unlettered, uncouth, uncultured, unrestrained and crude in all their ways. Money and the acquisition of

wealth is their sole objective and purpose in life Daily Post, (August 8, 2013).

In other instances the erstwhile self-acclaimed leader of the Niger Delta People Salvation Force contends there will be no peace, not only in the oil rich region but all round the country should his preferred candidate, the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan loses the 2015 general elections Vanguard Newspaper (May 05, 2013). A former state governor in the person of Mr. Peter Ayodele Fayose also hold the view that the incumbent President Muhammad Buhari would likely die in office if elected, recall that Murtala Muhammed, Sani Abacha and Umaru Yar'Adua, all former heads of state from the North West like Buhari, had died in office Thisday Newspaper (January 15, 2015). The traditional institutions of leadership are also not left out of the frenzy, days before the 2015 presidential and general elections the Oba² of Lagos Warns should anyone of you, I swear in the name of God, goes against my wish that Ambode will be the next governor of Lagos state, the person is going to die inside this water...For the Igbos and others in Lagos, they should go where the Oba of Lagos heads to... This Day Newspaper, (April 4, 2015).

While they may be a few of them, the utterances depicts that hate speech is not peculiar to any single region or group and that it cuts across a myriad of social and societal hierarchy. Penultimately, the digital revolution has given hate speech entrepreneurs and avenue to carry out the nefarious acts of heating the polity and fostering division across the federating units that constitutes Nigeria. Furthermore, it is of the opinion of the study that hate speeches are tend to be more widespread in the period leading to national elections. In congruent, the report of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in 2015 shows that hate speech preceded the 2015 presidential election and this accounted for the high level of pre-election violence.

VI. CONCLUSION

Politics by extensive the clamor for access to corridors of power and decision making apparatus of the state within a democratic setting requires and involve canvassing for votes in any modern society. Political communication as a tool involve a persuasive and strategic plan designed not only to provide consumers (voters) with information about the product(the politicians and/or the political party), but also to ensure that the target consumers are persuaded to be favorably disposed towards the product in order that the desired action will follow. Accordingly, the study is of the view that hate speeches have indiscriminately become constituents of politicking in Nigeria. Rather than elections serving as platforms for contestation that will see preferred candidate

¹ Individuals who exploit ethnic sentiments for in amongst other reasons personal gains, further political carrier, electoral gains as in the social, economic and cultural spheres of human interaction.

² In native Yoruba language the word Oba is used to describe a King. In this case this is the highest traditional authority in Nigeria's economic hub threatening his supposed subjects as well as foreigners whom are tax paying citizens.

emerge, they have been reduced to avenue for ethnic groups to act prejudiciously and indiscriminately against the other.

Hence, should any meaningful attempt at building a nation out of Nigeria be harbored by ruling elites, concrete measures need to be taken to diffuse the uneasy that characterizes interactions amongst and across federating units that make up contemporary Nigeria. while there exist some institutional measures to address the incidence of hate speech, they have proven largely insufficient as the internet space is awash with such derogatory and discriminatory comments.

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