

KARL POPPER'S CRITICAL RATIONALISM AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN NIGERIA

JohnMary U. Odinigwe

&

Charles C. Nweke

Department of Philosophy

Nnamdi Azikiwe University

Awka-Nigeria

Abstract

Nigeria is a densely populated nation, blessed with myriad of material resources. The country also enjoys a huge diversity in ethnicity and religion. However, Nigeria's diversity, rather than being a source of strength, is apparently a huge source of adversity. The three major tribes (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) are always openly in a struggle for power and domination. The two predominant religions in the country (Christianity and Islam) offer another unwanted dynamic in perpetuating the political crisis in the country as power is often decided and divided based on religious sentiments. Ethnic and religious sentiments are therefore paramount factors undermining political order in Nigeria. Nigeria is not the only multi-ethno-religious country in the world. Why then is her ethnic and religious diversity a huge setback to her political and economic prosperity? What is it about the average Nigerian psych and his disposition to nationhood that makes him more disposed to ethno-religious sentiments than national interests? Should it be concluded that Nigerians are naturally unpatriotic or is there some historical mental block or some artificial factors being engendered to keep Nigerians under the grip of uncouth religious and ethnic sentiments? These questions capture the concerns that amount to the problem studied in this article. The article addresses these problems with precepts inspired by Karl Popper's doctrine on critical rationalism using the method of philosophical analysis. The work finds out that ethno-religious chauvinism is the gravest challenge to the practice of democracy in Nigeria. This anti-nationalist tendency exists in Nigeria due to the inability of the average Nigerian to reason constructively and independently, free from the control and deception of unscrupulous political elites. The article therefore recommends the Popperian principle of critical rationalism as a panacea to help exorcise the Nigerian psych from the damages due to ethno-religious chauvinism.

Keywords: Critical Rationalism, Democracy, Ethnicity, Politics, Rationalism, Religion, Tribe.

Introduction

The ethnic and religious polarities in Nigeria have made some to argue that Nigeria is not a nation practically; it is rather a group of uncompromising people hurriedly packed together into a common space as one nation in the service of imperialism. Proponents of this view may not be totally wrong since it is historically established that in 1914 the two protectorates existing at the extreme sides of the North and South poles were “forced” together into a nation by the imperial regime without regards shown to their cultural and religious differences. Obi-Ani et al affirm that “The Nigerian people were lumped together forced into an unholy wedlock and denied the privilege to accept or reject this marriage of convenience” (28). Anyarogbu adds that “Nigeria is therefore a nation hurriedly put together illegitimately (against the overriding consent of the people) by the colonialists to serve the subservient political needs of the brutish British Lords” (6). Unsurprisingly therefore it was not out of place to hear some Nigeria nationalists berate the “hideous” amalgamation and its product- Nigeria. Obafemi Awolowo, one of the country’s pillars, observed that “Nigeria is a mere geographical expression” (52). Another patriot, Sir Ahmadu Bello bemoaned the union as the mistake of 1914 (Meredith 77). Even Gen. Gowon at the height of the 1966 crisis opined that the basis of the Nigerian State was no longer there (Obi-Ani et al 27). These point to the fundamental differences inherent in the Nigerian project from the very beginning; differences heavily punctuated with apparently ethno-religious irreconcilable dilemma. This irreconcilability invariably led to the Civil War in 1967. Since then it has continued to perplex and undermine national integration and genuine nationhood. Religion and ethnicity are good values in themselves but when politicised and parochialised they can wreck the greatest damage to a nation. Such is the story of Nigeria since 1960.

Effort is made in this article to study the problems ethno-religious jingoism poses to governance and national integration in Nigeria. Karl Popper’s philosophical exposition on critical rationalism is employed to further expose the danger of this dangerous disposition among Nigerians; and hence proffer solution to the problem. The work proceeds with a critical exposition of identity and religious politics as products of ethno-religious chauvinism.

Ethnic chauvinism and identity politics in Nigeria

Nigeria’s ethnic groups could be broadly divided into ethnic ‘majorities’ and ethnic ‘minorities’. The majority ethnic groups are the Hausa-Fulani of the North, the Yoruba of the Southwest, and the Igbo of the Southeast; their numerical and hegemonic strength within the nation gave Nigeria its tripod ethnic structure. Each of these three major ethnic groups, thus, constitutes a pole in the struggle for political and economic resources of the

nation (Mustapha 45) There are also ethnic minorities in the nation who at times (with intention of wrestling to have their share of national cake) form alliances to have a formidable force and enough respite against the three dominant ethnicities. This always generates conflict as the three hegemonic groups also fortify themselves to ensure their continuous dominance in governmental activities. In contemporary Nigeria, however, the Igbo ethnicity appears to no longer enjoy the same majority dominance similar to Yoruba and Hausa.

In most underdeveloped multiethnic Nation-states, the high level of ethnic diversity has been shown to contribute enormously to their very slow pace of development owing to the fact that governance is undermined by a daredevil kind of ethnic politics. Easterly & Levine explained that in a comprehensive cross-section of African states (Nigeria inclusive), ethnic assortment was associated with bad economic policies on the part of political leaders, slow economic growth and low levels of per capita income coupled with internal disharmony and instability that underpin the pluralistic framework of African society (1205). Observably, ethnically divided countries always have a poor quality of governance, insufficient provision of socio-political and economic goods and frequent socio-religious and political crisis hinged on the promotion of ethnic agenda by political leaders instead of promoting policies that drive the process of nation-building (Easterly and Lavine 1205). Today, Nigeria is one of the countries ranked low in indexes such as health care delivery, poverty alleviation, capacity building, educational standard, and general infrastructural development. One major reason for this is the entrenchment of ethnic politics in Nigeria's political space spearheaded by prominent members of the political elite. Frank & Rainer were therefore right when they suggested that ethnic diversity, poorly managed, often leads to rent-seeking by different ethnic groups thus generating conflict over provisioning of public goods (300). The constant domination of Nigeria's national life by the Hausa-Fulani from the north, and Yoruba from the south-west (and sometimes, the Igbo from the south-east) and subsequent ideological conflicts among political leaders of these ethnic groups, consequentially, is a threat to the country's socio-economic development, national security and peaceful co-existence. In ethnically heterogeneous societies like Nigeria, it is a common feature for the ethnic groups that produce the leader (head of state/president) to approach developmental policies that commandeer the ethnic losers and limit the production of public goods as well as representation in government to deprive those outside the ruling group of the benefit of getting stronger, most importantly within the realm of economic relevance. Therefore, amongst the numerous challenges to socio-political and economic development in Nigeria, is ethnic politics.

Osaghae notes that in Nigeria, there are four closely related and visible levels of ethnic politics; inter-group, intra-group, ethnic-state and individual (61). These levels operate in the same political realm; yet they present different socio-political and economic dynamics and issues. At the individual level, for example, individual actors invoke the ethnic card at every slightest opportunity while pursuing in actual fact personal and private goals and most importantly ethnic goals. Ethnic politics can thus be described as a philosophy which individuals employ to resolve the uncertainties arising from the power structure within which they are located. A change in the ethnic group in power, therefore, translates to a change in sociopolitical and economic policies across the groups as well as a change in the distribution of political goods; hence, the low accountability of political leaders. The Buhari led administration for example, is said to have strayed into ethno-regional sentiments and hence his hard-line opposition to any form of restructuring, to please his support base. Critics suggest that his elevation of sectionalism to a near state policy compromised national security to the extent that marauding Fulani killer herdsmen are given the leverage to destroy lives and property across Nigeria. Hashmi and Majeed affirm that “the failure of states to engage a pluralistic framework that includes constitutional designs where the protection of ethnic identity is guaranteed leads towards a conflictual situation in which one ethnic group feel insecure against the dominance of others thus driving the feelings of antipathy which in the long run force ethnic groups to pursue their demands” (325). The present Bola Ahmed Tinubu (BAT) administration is not free of the same accusation of ethnic politics as the key political appointees within the executive cabinet are mostly from the Yoruba ethnicity of the South-West region.

Ethnic politics is one of the most crucial factors that have wrecked the most havoc to the development of party politics and good governance in Nigeria. The first open display of ethnic chauvinism in Nigerian party politics was evident in the episode of Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) in 1941 when the party broke-down due to ethnic sentiments (Coleman 55). The post-independence party politics and system of governance in Nigeria took off under the influence of ethnic prejudice. Iroanusi argues that “The major factors responsible for the post-independence economic and political turbulence in Nigeria: ...were the shaky tripartite federal structure with strong regionalism, disparity in the sizes and populations of the three regions; three regionally based and tribally sustained political parties and a weak political class driven by ethnic ideologies” (Iroanusi 102). Obviously, this ethnically charged atmosphere affected the foundation of party politics in Nigeria since independence in 1960. For instance, during the First Republic, three major political parties contested in the 1959 General Elections: Action Group (AG), Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC) and National Council for Nigerian Citizen (NCNC). All the parties were apparently rooted on ethnic chauvinism and identity politics, instead of national interest.

Even in the Fourth Republic, the same ethnic sentiment remained massively at play in the leading political parties in Nigeria- the APC, PDP are completely enmeshed in ethnic politics. Party positions and tickets for political representation are generally determined by ethnic sentiments (and religious affiliations too). Competence and patriotism are almost totally disregarded. This is the damage ethnicity has caused to Nigeria.

In the most recent past, Nigerians saw ethnic chauvinism in full sway when the APC decided to fly a muslim-muslim, Yoruba-Hausa ticket at the presidential level in the 2003 elections totally ignoring the cries to cede power to the South-East. The same is evident in the primaries that led to the emergence of Atiku Abubarka as the flag bearer of the PDP. Ethnic politics is therefore an essential component of party politics in Nigeria from 1960 till date and it is a fundamental reason for the abuse of democratic order and the prevalence of bad governance in Nigeria. This is because emphasis is shifted from national interests to tribal and sub-regional interests; competence is also sacrificed on the altar of nepotism and parochialism. The consequence is long term marginalization of minority ethnic groups who are never favoured in the distribution and allocation of the wealth of the nation since resources are allocated according to tribal sentiments. The tribes with the best representation in government always get the lion share of the State's resources.

Religious Fanaticism in Nigeria Democracy

Religion has been a dominant factor in Nigerian politics especially in the post-independence era. In whichever way one sees religion, the fact cannot be denied of its interaction with politics in Nigeria. The obvious interplay between religion and politics has attracted the reactions of scholars and what seems the consensus of such reactions is the ambivalent role of religion in the growth, development, and survival of the Nigerian nation. Kukah (1993) and Obiefuna (2018), to mention but a few, acknowledge the hydra-headed effects of religion on Nigeria politics and the impact these effects have on the all-round development of the nation. While this research acknowledges the inestimable value of religion in itself and the immeasurable ways it has contributed positively to Nigeria as a political entity, the emphasis here would be specifically on the myriad of ways religion has been used by unscrupulous elements in leadership positions to undermine democratic precedence and good governance in Nigeria.

Nigeria is religiously pluralistic. Apart from the three major religions, Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion, there are several others competing for relevance and recognition. In spite of this reality, in theory, Nigeria is a secular state. This has been indicated in the constitution since independence. As stated in section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, "the government of the federation shall not adopt any religion as State

Religion.” Therefore, in policy formulation, governance, and other governmental activities, religion should not be an issue. By implication, every citizen has a right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Section 38 states categorically that:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom (either alone or in community with others and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance. No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony, or observance relates to a religion, other than his own or a religion not approved by his parents or guardian, and no religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.

The constitution further emphasizes that national integration shall actively be encouraged. Accordingly, discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic, or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited, while national ethics shall be Discipline, Integrity, Dignity of Labour, Social Justice, Religious Tolerance, Self-reliance, and Patriotism. Also, membership of political parties is opened to every citizen irrespective of his place of origin, circumstances of birth, sex, religion, or ethnic group (Umeanolue 142).

In spite of the decisiveness of the Supreme Law of Nigeria in affirming the place of religion in the country; the need for religious freedom; and the crucial gap between politics and religion, persons in power have often used one religion or the other to score cheap political goals. Some have also attempted to use the law to enforce one religion on other citizens. These have generated crisis and distrust among the peoples of Nigeria. One religious issue that has, for a long time, been a subject of debate and discord in Nigeria is the question of Sharia, the Islamic legal system. Ngwa explains that the issue of Sharia took a political dimension with the setting up of the Constitution Drafting Committee (C.D.C) in 1976 as part of the efforts to return the country to civil rule. In the draft constitution, the Moslem members of the committee wanted to make the Sharia law as part and parcel of the Nigerian constitution. When the Constituent Assembly began to deliberate on the proposed constitution, Sharia was prominent, as there were divergent views in respect of its adoption, or non-adoption (Ngwa 177). Unsurprisingly, many Muslims were in support while Christians were antagonistic. Some were indifferent, but the debate continued and a walk out was staged by many Muslim members of the Assembly, but this did not halt it. On the recommendation of a sub-committee, the

controversial provision was deleted. This was not the end of Sharia in the politics of Nigeria, as it was featured during subsequent constitutional conferences. Nwolize suggests that there was a move by the Buhari government to forcefully and secretly amend section 10 of the 1979 constitution to insert Sharia law as Federal law in 1984. The Buhari government with the support of some Northern governors got some government officials to draft an amendment to the section of the constitution. The draft was awaiting its recommendation to the Supreme Military Council when the Buhari government was overthrown on Aug. 27, 1985 (Nwolize 78). In recent times too, throughout the time of Buhari as a democratically elected leader (2015-2023), there were continuous alarm raised by concerned citizens (including notable statesmen) about secret plans to islamize (turn Nigeria into an Islamic Republic). The actions of the government of the day too did not help to douse the tension as the administration demonstrated significant toleration towards Islamic extremism in the country. More so, most of the critical political offices in the country were occupied by Moslems. This, again, reflects the unsettling presence religion has been to democracy in Nigeria.

Religion plays a crucial role (mostly negative) in determining the perception and decisions of electorates during elections in Nigeria. Umeanolue points out that religion often determines the choice of flag-bearer/running mate for the posts of the president and governor in some states (147). This is done to ensure that the interests of adherents are protected. Where this principle is adopted, there is usually a Muslim/Christian or Christian/Muslim ticket. Thus in 1979, the National Party of Nigeria (N.P.N) adopted a Muslim/Christian ticket while the Unity Party of Nigeria (U.P.N) did not take religion into consideration, hence its adoption of a Christian/Christian ticket (Ayantayo 94). According to Umeanolue, Perhaps, Chief Awolowo (the flag bearer of UPN) saw this as one of the reasons he lost, he therefore chose a Muslim from the North as his running mate in 1983 (147). Even some military regimes recognized religion as a factor in governance. For instance, the Murtala/Obasanjo era was a Muslim/Christian ticket and Obasanjo, upon becoming the Head of State, chose a Muslim as his deputy. Both Abacha and Abubakar maintained the status quo as they picked Diya and Akhigbe (Christians) as their second in command, respectively (Umeanolue 147). The system continued with the return to democracy in 1999. The Obasanjo/Atiku regime was Christian/Muslim. Yar'dua/Jonathan was Muslim/Christian; Jonathan/Sambo was Christian/Muslim. Buhari/Osibanjo is Muslim/Christian. Controversially, the present leadership defied this logic. APC insisted on a Muslim/Muslim ticket, and yet found irregular ways of winning the mandate of the people; allowing Tinubu/Shettima to emerge as winners of the general elections. However other parties retained the 'mix-ticketing' system. Religion has also

been a sensitive factor in choosing principal officers at the two levels of National Assembly.

These instances show that political parties and administrations recognized religion as a factor in governance. It is also an issue that voting and campaign, in most cases, are based on religious sentiment. In this case, religion could be used to either canvass support for a candidate or dissuade the electorate from voting for him or her. This is why some Christians will not support Muslim candidates and vice-versa. In 2003, Major General Buhari, of the All-Nigerian Peoples Party, was criticized for his extremist stand on religious matters and this, no doubt, worked against his political fortune. As a perceived advocate of the Sharia law and fundamentalist, he was quoted to have said that Muslims should not vote for Christian candidates. Majority of the masses too vote and support government policies based on religious sentiments. They vote those who belong to their faith and support them (even when they act irresponsibly) simply because they share the same faith. Corrupt politicians use religious sentiment to heat up the polity and garner support from citizens who share their faith whenever they feel less favoured or attacked by the government in power.

True democracy is dependent upon free, fair and credible election, a situation whereby the electorates are free to elect their leaders. The elected leaders shall in turn sustain the rule of law, which is the benchmark of any true democratic and civil society. Unfortunately, religious fanaticism sponsored by the greed of the political elites has not allowed the majority Nigerians to be rational and democratic with their votes. More unfortunately, where people vote on religious sentiment, mediocre leaders are most likely to emerge; and when this happens, growth and development is retarded. This is one of many crucial reasons for the backwardness of the Nigerian State. Nigeria democratic processes have become so negatively 'religionised' "to such extent that "every political process in Nigeria has religious undertone. The civil service, appointment to important positions in the government, and the entire body politic of the nation are seriously influenced by religious prejudice" (Umeanolue 152).

Popper's Notion of Critical Rationalism

Popper advocates for criticism or critical rationalism as a fundamental value and characteristics of democracy. For him, the distinguishing feature of a good system of government is that it should be open to criticism. No system is capable of doing everything right, so no system should have too much power (Harper 2). Also, "democrats who do not see the difference between a friendly and hostile criticism of democracy are themselves imbued with the totalitarian spirit" (Popper, *Open Society* 178). Since no system is capable of doing everything right, social conflict is inevitable. For Popper, the

two major causes of conflict are the difference of opinions and difference of interests, both of which needs to be resolved with toleration of one another. Thus he maintains that “there are many kinds of disagreement in social life which must be decided one way or another. How can a decision be reached? There are, in the main, only two possible ways: argument and violence” (Popper, *Conjectures* 478). The best way to tame force, according to Popper, is to attach it to a democratic institutional structure (a state), while the best way to tame power is to design institutions, which allow for political change. This argument also provides a coherent answer to the “puzzle of modern constitutionalism,” which asks for the reason we treat “some collective decisions as binding on other collective decisions” (Nedelsky 500). Here the argument is that those elements, which ensure the possibility of political change and societal transformation, are constitutive for any democratic conduct and, thus, are to be treated as binding.

Popper develops an argument for the “rational unity of mankind” according to which all are considered to be of value, and to be equal in rationality because of their common role as sources of possible criticism. He sees criticism as the most effective agent of desirable change. He reiterates the necessity of rationality in conflict resolution in a democratic state, and insists that “if things cannot be improved by the use of reason, then it would be indeed an historical or political miracle if the irrational powers of history by themselves were to produce a better and more rational world” (*Open Society* 352). It follows that rationality is an attitude that accepts critics. In other words, being rational necessarily suggests one’s readiness to tolerate other people’s rationality which involves accommodating their criticisms. Popper thus assigns certain qualities that together make up the personality of a rationalist. He defines a rationalist as, “... a man who attempts to reach decisions by argument and perhaps, in certain cases, by compromise rather than by violence” (*Conjectures* 356). A reasonable man according to him is not only the one who can persuade others but rather should have the merit to be convinced by others too. Rationality is, for Popper, an attitude of ‘give and take’. A rationalist attitude needs to have what Popper refers to as ‘intellectual humility,’ where one is humble enough to accept his own mistakes. To choose rationality is therefore a moral choice, and the precondition of rationalist attitude is to admit that:

I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth. It is an attitude which does not lightly give up hope that even where people[‘s] demands and their interest[s] clash, it is often possible to argue about the various demands and proposals, and to reach – perhaps by arbitration – a compromise which, because of its equality, is acceptable to most, if not to all. In short, rationalist attitude, or, as I may perhaps label it, the attitude of reasonableness is very similar to [...] the belief that in search for truth we need

cooperation, and that, with help of argument, we can in time attain something like objectivity (*Open Society* 431).

Popper argues in favour of attaching a monopoly of force to the state in order to provide citizens with the possibility to engage in non-violent conflict-resolution. For him, “democracy provides an invaluable battle-ground for any reasonable reform, since it permits reform without violence” (*Open Society* 369). As such, “if the state is to fulfill its function, it must have more power at any rate than any single private citizen or public corporation” (Popper, *Better World* 155). Force is thus perceived as an inevitable element of social life, which cannot be eliminated but must be restrained as far as possible. Therefore, institutions must be designed to minimize the danger of possible abuse of monopoly of force in the state. This is why Popper emphasizes the attitude of reasonableness. And the presumption of this behaviour is cooperation, that is, to practice tolerance and to endure critics and appreciate their varying viewpoints. Popper notes, “I believe that we can avoid violence only insofar as we practice this attitude of reasonableness when dealing with one another in social life; and that any other attitude is likely to produce violence....” (*Conjectures* 356). A rationalist needs to have a clear distinction between resistance or defense and aggression. He should know the limits of tolerance. He maintains that:

You cannot have a rational discussion with a man who prefers shooting you to being convinced by you. In other words, there are limits to the attitude of reasonableness. It is the same with tolerance. You must not, without qualification, accept the principle of tolerating all those who are intolerant; if you do, you will destroy not only yourself, but also the attitude of tolerance (*Conjectures* 357).

Rational attitude readily embraces cooperation, always ready to learn from trial and errors, gradual discovery of prejudice but expects the other person to do the same. Popper sees intolerance as the limit of tolerance. He points out that “if we concede to intolerance the right to be tolerated, then we destroy tolerance, and the constitutional state. That was the fate of the Weimar Republic” (*Better World* 190). That is to say, rational people must resist hostile behaviour and unfairness since intolerance eventually leads to anarchy, to unlawfulness; and to the rule of violence.

Critical Rationalism: A Panacea for Ethno-Religious Politics

The corrupt political elites in Nigeria benefit from the division among the citizens. Using tools of ethnic and religious sentiments they flame up the embers of division among the citizens. By so doing, they distract the citizens from paying attention to the activities of

governance. In other words, while the citizens fight and kill one another under the daredevil enchantment of ethno-religious concerns, the elected political leaders plunder the wealth of the nation. Disunity among Nigerians on grounds of differences in ethnicities and religions is therefore the unholy platform upon which political corruption and abuse of power spread their undying tentacles across all corners of the Nigerian State. The more polarized the citizenry becomes, the easier it is for the unscrupulous political class to disregard the institutions of the state and bend the laws to support their corrupt practices. Unguided religious and ethnic sentiments have thus rendered the average Nigerian citizen politically irresponsible and patriotically irrational. It is therefore very correct to conclude that the bane of bad governance in Nigeria is as much the problem of leadership as it is the problem of followership. Ethnic and religious sentiments have polluted the minds of majority Nigerians, crippled their power of critical thinking and render them incapable of demanding accountability from the ruling class. This poor attitude of the Nigerian citizenry is the very reason for the failings of democracy in Nigeria and the prevalence of bad governance. Popper thus insists that “it is quite wrong to blame democracy for the political shortcomings of a democratic state. We should rather blame ourselves, the citizen of the democratic state” (*Open Society* 120).

It follows that conscientious and proactive followership (that demands critical rationalism) which is the bedrock of good governance is deficit in Nigeria. Throughout the ages, in every society that has evolved successfully, social reform and change is initiated by followership and not necessarily by the leadership class. What makes this possible is the ability of the citizens to criticize the activities of the government and assume a unanimous position concerning their like or dislike about the quality of leadership in the state. Aderounmu dissatisfied at the irresponsible citizenship in Nigeria posited that “the greatest crime ordinary Nigerians are committing against themselves is their collective passivity and their continuous hope even in the face of outright hopelessness” (5). Some have described this as the resilience of the ‘Nigerian Spirit’ seen in their ability to survive every hardship. But this same ‘resilience’ is the reason why ethnicity and religion polarize Nigerians a lot and make them less concerned about the activities and policies of government. How do one explain a situation that people are groaning but they are not acting or getting involved in what goes around in their environs? Most Nigerians are disinterested and aloof about the political activities in the polity; they are more interested in their religions and tribes. However, they are quick to complain bitterly when basic health, employment and social services are not available where they should be easily accessible by either them or their relatives. This complain too is often misdirected and short-lived as they arise only at the time of need. What justification does a disinterested citizen who has shown no interest in the political process and played no

role in ensuring that the process is free, fair and credible have to complain when the treasury is looted, hospitals ill-equipped, roads left unmaintained, education underfunded, and incompetent people appointed or elected to man institutions of the state? When Nigerians participate in electoral malpractices that produce politicians who are not fit to be head of households, who should be blame? These questions invoke the level of irresponsibility among Nigeria citizens and their failure to take the democratic process seriously. It also points to the fact that 'the office of the Nigerian citizen' is vacant. Apparently, no one performs judiciously the democratic roles of the Nigerian citizens; and when the leaders are aware that no one is watching their dealings, they are bound to seize the opportunity to perpetrate impunity within the corridors of power.

Popper's democratic ideals if adopted are prospective to the reawakening of Nigerians from their political slumber. He cautions that:

We must realize that the control of physical [political] power and of physical [political] exploitation remains the central political problem. In order to achieve this control, we must establish 'merely formal freedom'. Once we have achieved this, and have learned how to use it for the control of political power, everything rests with us.... once we have achieved formal freedom, we can control vote-buying in every form. There are laws to limit the expenditure on electioneering, and it rests entirely with us to see that much more stringent laws of this kind are introduced. The legal system can be made a powerful instrument for its own protection. In addition, we can influence public opinion, and insist upon a much more rigid moral code in political matters. All this we can do; but we must first realize that social engineering of this kind is our own task, that it is in our power, and that we must not wait for economic earthquakes miraculously to produce a new economic world for us, so that all we shall have to do will be to unveil it, remove the old political cloak (*Open Society* 337).

The 'merely formal freedom' Popper mentioned that is needed to control physical (political) power and physical (political) exploitation as it concerns Nigeria, is most importantly, freedom from ethnic and religious bigotry. These two are the biggest bondage enslaving Nigerians and undermining democracy and good governance in Nigeria. They are the reason most Nigerians do not reason critically before taken political decisions especially during electioneering campaigns. It follows logically that the future of Nigeria is in the hands of Nigerians, especially the followers. The citizens must learn to tolerate each other in spite of their religious and ethnic differences; this is the beginning of national liberation and emancipation from bad governance. This is because such would enable the citizens to have the much needed common front necessary to hold the political ruling class accountable. What Popper suggests in the above extract is the need for

proactive citizenship and this is not possible without freedom from all forms of entanglement with religious and ethnic bigotry. Commenting on the necessity of proactive followership in Nigeria, Fawehinmi Gani notes that:

The problem with Nigerians is that they worship authority too much; they worship official-dom too much; they worship people in power too much and that is why the people in power cheat them and that is why they lord things over them... Those who are in position of power should be made to be servants of the people, and if they don't serve, people should be on the streets to chase them out, through mass demonstrations... I mean we should begin the culture of resistance against the misuse of power (16).

Obviously, Popper's democratic ideals does not allow for the citizens to be either nonchalant or onlookers in governance, since a government devoid of citizen control is a potential failure. Thus, change will definitely not be dropped on the laps of the masses who are nonchalant and passive; rather, such followers will remain victims of their own smugness. The Nigerian corrupt political elites are aware of this. That is why they use sentiments of tribe and religion to becloud the judgment of Nigerians and render them passive and less involved or critical of government. While the ruling elites are united for the common purpose of staying perpetually in power and amassing as much wealth as possible, they in turn, deceive the followers by pulling clannish and religious strings since it appears to be the cheapest way of rallying their kith and kin for personal gains. Odinga notes that "tribalism is a disease of the elite; they are the ones who in competition for the resources of the country invoke ethnicity as a tool against each other" (5-6). This clearly explains why the incessant calls for and a threat of secession in Nigeria is ethnic based. As such, Nigeria as a sociopolitical entity is largely divided on ethno-religious lines which has made it practically impossible to realize national integration; an integration that is critical in doing away with the stronghold of political corruption among the ruling elites. History has shown that, only in the event of a united citizenry with a common agenda can the elites be challenged. In this light, Adujie cautions that, instead of becoming tools in the hands of inept politicians who are liable to fan embers of ethnic, religious and regional violence, Nigerians across the spectrum should realize that we have abject poverty in common, we have unemployment in common; we have concerns for safety and security in common (1). This realization should form the foundation for unity among the masses in total disregard to divisive sentiments of tribe and religion.

Popper's idea of critical rationalism and tolerance can help ameliorate ethno-religious challenges and engender proactive followership in Nigeria. According to Popper, "if things cannot be improved by the use of reason, then it would be indeed an historical or political miracle if the irrational powers of history by themselves were to produce a more

rational world” (*Open Society* 352). This is a clarion call to Nigerians who are intolerant of one another, who at the slightest provocation either call for violence or partake in violence against each other, especially persons of other tribes and religions, to embrace critical rationalism which is a civilized and better approach to issues. The hallmark of Popper’s idea of critical rationalism is toleration and accommodation of individual difference even when one does not agree with the other’s opinion. This attitude is what is needed among the Nigerian citizenry if followership must hold leadership accountable. Popper explains, thus:

We could then say that rationalism is an attitude of readiness to listen to critical arguments and to learn from experience. It is fundamentally an attitude of admitting that ‘I may be wrong and you may be right, and by effort, we may get the nearer to the truth’. It is an attitude which does not lightly give up hope that by such means as arguments and careful observation, people may reach some kind of agreement on many problems of importance, and that, even where their demands and their interests clash, it is often possible to argue about the various demands and proposals, and to reach - perhaps by arbitration – a compromise which, because of its equity, is acceptable to most, if not to all....The fact that the rationalist attitude considers the argument rather than the person arguing is of far-reaching importance. It leads to the view that we must recognize everybody with whom we communicate as a potential source of argument and of reasonable information; it thus establishes what may be described as the ‘rational unity of mankind’ (*Open Society* 431-432).

This long extract seems to present Karl Popper as one of the founding fathers of Nigeria admonishing contemporary Nigerians on how to harness the strength of their ethno-religious diversity through inculcating the spirit of tolerance; and hence, using same to engender good governance, unity and development of the nation. Indeed, critical rationalism is an essential political virtue lacking in Nigeria since independence. This lack is the reason for the many ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. It is also the reason for the lack of tolerance for political opposition and constructive criticisms among the members of the political class. Any voice of criticism from a member of an opposition political party is treated by the ruling party as one of dissent- one that is destructive. This pervading absence of critical rationalism among the leaders and followers in Nigeria has made it almost impossible for Nigerians to tolerate one another. This is an obvious indication that Nigeria is more like a closed society, almost totally an opposite of what Popper said of an open society. He further notes that “Toleration is the necessary consequence of realizing our human fallibility: to err is human, and we do it all the time. So let us pardon each other’s follies. This is the first principle of natural right....If we

concede to intolerance the right to be tolerated, then we destroy tolerance, and the constitutional state” (*Better World* 190). This appears to be the situation pervasive in Nigeria. Due to the absence of critical rationalism, intolerance appears to prevail more among Nigerians than tolerance. The absence of same tolerance is the reason most Nigerians (leaders and followers alike) have little or no respect for the laws of the State. They rather disregard the rights of fellow citizens and disobey the constitution of the State than regard the rights of their fellow citizens and uphold the constitution. This is what Popper meant when he said that ‘If we concede to intolerance the right to be tolerated, then we destroy tolerance, and the constitutional state’. It is only when Popper’s principles of critical rationalism (and the attendant toleration) is heeded by ordinary Nigerians that they can overcome the things that divide them, and can then collectively seek to alter the unjust and corrupt status-quo.

Conclusion

One of the gravest effects of ethno-religious chauvinism among Nigerians is the widespread distrust that is so common among Nigerians, against their fellow citizens from other tribes and religions. This distrust is the reason national reconciliation and integration have not been achieved following the civil war till date. It is also the reason the Nigerian citizenry is heavily oppressed by the corrupt political elites since they cannot galvanise resistance and present a common front on national issues. This article is convinced that critical rationalism and the required Toleration that it brings is all that is needed to kill the distrust among persons of different ethnicities and religions in Nigeria; strengthen the bond within the citizenry and galvanize responsible citizenship in Nigeria. With this attitude, patriotism will overthrow tribe and religious fanaticism; national interests will overpower primitive, parochial and patrimonial sentiments. The citizens will become real safeguards of Nigeria democracy. Nigeria political institutions will automatically become robust because it will naturally feed from the strength of an organized, active and responsible citizenship. The masses will have a common voice on critical national issues. This will naturally put the excesses of corrupt political leaders in check.

As a follow up to the submissions and findings in this research, the following recommendations are germane:

1. History, as a discipline, should be made a compulsory subject in Nigeria schools at all levels of education. The curriculum should be reset to adequately capture the events of the country’s past with insights on the effects on the present and future. This will, among other things, enable Nigerians understand how ‘trivial’ issues emanating from ethno-religious sentiments have, in the past, wreck serious havoc on the collective

peace and harmony of Nigeria- to the extent of threatening the continuous existence of Nigeria at some points.

2. Schools and religious centers should de-emphasize indoctrination and begin to use methods that imbue Nigerians with the capacity to think rationally and make conclusions devoid of undue external influences. Indoctrination is a dangerous method of teaching and learning. It is one of the major reasons for religious extremism and herd mentality in Nigeria, especially in Northern Nigeria. The *Alamajiri* system, specifically, should be thoroughly reformed or better still completely eschewed.

Works Cited

- Aderounmu, Adeola. "Re: Nigeria, Revolution is our last option," p. 5. <http://aderinola.wordpress.com/2011/12/28/re-nigeria-revolution-is-ourlastoption.html>. Accessed 26/01/2025.
- Adujie, Paul. "Is Revolution Impossible in Nigeria?" p. 1. <http://saharareporters.com/article/revolutin-impossible.nigeria>. Accessed 03/11/2024.
- Anyarogbu, J. "State Tyranny; Consent and Legitimacy Crisis in Nigeria." *Bigard Monthly Lectures*, 2024, pp. 1- 14. www.academia.org. Accessed 02/01/2025.
- Awolowo, Obafemi, *Path to Nigerian Freedom*. London: Faber & Faber, 1947.
- Ayantayo, J. K. "Religious Factors in the Nigerian Public Sphere: Burdens and Prospects," *Africa Development*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2009, 93-109.
- Coleman, S. J. *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*. California, University of California Press, 1986.
- Easterly, W. and R. Levine, "Africa's Growth Tragedy: Policies and Ethnic Divisions." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 112, no. 4, 1997, pp. 1203-1250.
- Fawehimi, Gani. "Gov's Wives Are not Excellencies," in an interview with Esther Oname, *The Monitor on Sunday*. Lagos: Aug. 11, 2002, pp. 4-5.
- Frank, R. and I. Rainer, "Does the Leader's Ethnicity Matter? Ethnic Favouritism, Education and Health in Sub-Saharan." *Africa American Political Science Review*, vol. 106, no. 2, 2012, pp. 294-325.
- Harper, David. *The Political Thought of Karl Popper by Jeremy Shearmur*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Hashmi, S. R. and G. Majeed, "Politics of Ethnicity: A Theoretical Perspective," *A Research Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, pp. 319-331.
- Iroanusi, S. *The Making of the Fourth Republic*. Lagos; Sam Iroanusi Publishers, 2000.
- Kukah, M. H. and T. Falola, *Religious Militancy and Self Assertion: Islam and Politics in Nigeria*. Hants & Vermont: Avebury & Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1996.

- Meredith, M. *The State of Africa: A History of the Continent since Independence*. Britain: CBS Company, 2011.
- Mustapha, A. R. "Institutionalising Ethnic Representation: How Effective is the Federal Character Commission in Nigeria?" *Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE)*, no. 43, 2007, pp. 40-60.
- Nedelsky, Jennifer. "The Puzzle and Demands of Modern Constitutionalism," *Ethics*, no. 104, 1994, pp. 490-504
- Ngwa, C. A. "Interplay of Religion and Politics in Nigeria: Insight from the American experiment," S. O. O. Amali, N. Owens-Ibie, F. Ogunleye and O. Adesina (Eds.), *Consolidation and Sustenance of Democracy: The United States of America and Nigeria*. Ibadan: HopePublications, 2002, pp. 173-181.
- Nwolize, O. B. C. "Military Governments and Assault on Nigeria's Secularity," *Bodija Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1989, pp. 75-91.
- Obiefuna, B. A. C. "Religion and Human Relations in Contemporary Nigeria: The Wounds, the Healing: An Inaugural Lecture of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Onitsha: Noben, 2018.
- Obi-Ani, Ngozika A. et al. "The Mistake of 1914: 100 Years Later," *Nsukka Journal of Humanities*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2016, pp. 22-35.
- Odinga, Raila, *Guardian Newspaper*. Friday, March 23, 2013.
- Osaghae, E. "Explaining the Changing Patterns of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2003, pp. 54-73.
- Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Popper, Karl, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.
- Popper, Karl, *In Search of a Better World: Lectures and Essays from Thirty Years* London: Routledge, 1994.
- The Federal Republic of Nigeria. *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, 1999. Sections 10,23,38 & 42.
- Umeanolue, Ikenna L. "Religious Influences on Politics in Nigeria: Implications for National Development," *Ogirisi: A New Journal of African Studies*, vol. 15, 2020, pp. 142-143.