



## Religious conflict in Nigeria

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### Abstract

This article examines how African continent that consist of 54 countries, out of which many of these have shown lot of potential for development like South Africa, Mauritius and Nigeria still have not been able to undertake rapid development due to ethno-religious conflicts and social inequality. One finds that, Nigeria has the largest population and economy in African continent and in recent years has undertaken lot of reforms nevertheless has been crippled by democratic instability, poverty, social inequality and religious violence. Nigeria has plenty of problems at hand where in right after independence in 1960, it started on the path of democracy but soon intervention by military dictator has derailed the process of development in the country. Nigeria is said to be a country where it is estimated that about 54% population consist of Muslims and 46% population are Christian. Christian and Muslims have sizeable population Both the religious communities compete for land and other natural resources by the way of political domination. As a result of which we find that generally, the President of the country would either belong to Christian community and other time a Muslim community.

**Keywords:** Religion, democracy, constitution, dictatorship, violence, civil war, civil society, secular, sharia, state

### Introduction

Nigeria gained Independence from British rule on 1<sup>st</sup> Oct, 1960. It wanted to tread on the path of democracy but that did not happen and in the past about 63 years, Nigeria had to face constant military coups that derailed the democratic process of the country and established military dictatorship in the nation several times. Nigeria had to adopt new constitution in 1963, 1979, 1993 that reversed earlier constitutional provisions and only after 1999 Constitution, Nigeria has been able to attain some kind of democratic stability in the country. At present, governed by 1999 Constitution, it has plenty of problems at hand like Military coups, civil war, oil crisis and religious conflicts. All of these have contributed to the derailment of development process in the country. Three indigenous religions of Nigeria namely Igbo, Hausa Faluni and Yoruba soon after independence got involved in a civil war known as Biafra war that lasted from 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1967-15 January, 1970. Millions of Nigerians died due to this civil war in the country. Soon after this indigenous religion paved way for the rise of Islam and Christianity as two main religions in the country. Since the late 1970s, religion has become a major factor to consider in the analysis of Nigerian Politics. The linkage between religion and democratic process in Nigeria takes a variety of forms. Religion has generated one of the most controversial issues in drafting the Nigerian Constitution. The Nigerian have been continuously searching for alternatives to or an adaptation of western Political Model that has led to the examination of what religion can contribute. For instance a number of ulama have insisted that the answers to the country political and democratic problems lie in Quran and Hadith and the collective Islamic experience rather than borrowed models from the west which may provide for an alternative ideology. The difficulty of institutionalizing military or democratic regimes provides religious leaders with a high platform that is political in nature. Religious leaders and organizations have become part of broad based civil society, that continues to challenge the state and to demand democracy.

As an avenue to express opinion, places of worship have been used to make far reaching political statements, condemn corruption and even to demand deep political reforms and democracy.

A reaction to the country deep problems has been religious violence. Religious tensions led to encroachments on individual liberty. There is a perception by the Christians that northern Muslims dominate politics for their own good and to further their interest. There is equally a perception among the Muslims that Christian benefitted the most under the British Rule and have used this opportunity to entrench many Christian Practices into both private and public lives of Nigerians. Finally, there has been a need to factor religion into the distribution of political and bureaucratic offices to attain not only a "Federal character" but also a "religious character" to reflect the country's pluralism.

In Nigeria, not only were the new areas converted to one of the two universal religions of Islam and Christianity but values and ideas also continue to be drawn from religion. Islam and Christianity, both are competitive religions and have tried to displace each other. There have been attempts to impose the domination of one over another. Historically, there has been an imbalance in the spread of religion in Nigeria. One finds that while Islam is prominent in Northern part of the country Christianity has been dominating in the eastern part of the country while both register their due presence in the western parts of the country. Both the religions try to consolidate their positions by winning new converts in their religion.

### Role of religion

In Nigerian Politics, religion has always been a factor of identity and political mobilization. Islam and the Jihad of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has contributed to the emergence of the Hausa Faluni power elite that has been prominent of almost two hundred years now. This elite has profited from Islam itself and is able to make claims to power thereby able to exclude its rivals. Over the past many years, several studies have shown how Islam became an effective tool in building

the northern peoples congress and providing a source of unity in the north since the 1950s. They have been profiting politically from Islam that has played a major role since the country's independence to the extent that Christians have expressed fear of being dominated. Over the past several years this fear has been compounded by a feeling of persecution and a sense of impending Islamization of the country. This perception has instigated a militant Christianity and has influenced the nature of Political Competition and Democratic Process. In Nigerian Politics, Christianity too has related to the spread of English education. Christianity is said to be responsible for the creation of first "modern elite" who are educated, mobile and ambitious. These elites are based mainly in the southern part of the country and have played a vital role in modernization of the Nigerian society. When Britishers were ruling, these elites were expecting that the Britishers will be transferring power to them but that did not happen. Christian elite perceive that Islam presents a challenge and competition that is highly political and difficult to handle. A popular organization named CAN- Christian Association of Nigeria was formed to counter challenges from Islam in the country. The creation of CAN is to be seen associated with the relevance of religion interfering in politics in Nigeria. CAN was established in 1976, originally as ecumenical group to address Christian issues especially those which dealt with governance of the country. Most of its functions were originally designed to facilitate interactions among Christians organisation and with the government in an amicable manner. As CAN itself would, its formation was owed to the government that wanted to have a unified Christian body with which to negotiate. That's why it is stated that CAN prominence and rise is attributed to the two factors- Firstly, the role of the state and secondly, the fear of Islam. Both these factors are political in nature and have played a vital role in strengthening of CAN in Nigeria. The military dictatorship prevented the emergence of active Political associations that created a vacuum for religious organisations to fill. Student, societies, trade unions and others struggle to be visible and to constitute "opposition" to the military. Religious organisations get a political push due to the high number of worshippers and as their number rises, it becomes extremely difficult for a military to ignore them or suppress them. Nigerians honeymoon with the military was short lived as military did take over the politics of Nigerian within few years of Nigerian independence. Originally, military was regarded as less prone to corruption but within few years military stood exposed in the country. It has never been difficult for CAN to get Christians to listen to criticisms of the military and the state.

For CAN, the greatest fear is of Islamic domination in the country. It can be stated that this fear is both perception and a reality. Some call it a perception because motives of domination are read into everything that Islamic leaders do. Some call it real because Islam has been used for political ends mainly in the northern Nigeria. Since 1970s, Islam has exhibited a resurgence that is expressed through increasing military violence and attacks on the state. A number of prominent Islamic leaders and preachers have called for an end to the influence of Christianity in the country in areas of law, calendar and the days that area set aside for the holidays. Furthermore, they have called for a society that will be based on Islamic values and a state that will bring religion in it's Centre. Alhaji Abubakar Gumi, the

influential Islamic who passed away in 1992 is an Influential Islamic Scholar who was at the forefront of making a case for Islam for almost three decades. Many of the actions of Islamic leaders have been interpreted by Christians as deliberate design to impose Islam on the country either by diplomacy or force. Examples of success of Islam in countries like Libya, Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh were used by many Christians leaders and writers to support their argument that Islamization was possible and that Christianity was in severe danger in Nigeria. This fear drove CAN into radicalism to the extent that relation between Muslims and Christians degenerated into violence and it was anticipated that the country might disintegrate into smaller units. Nigeria has not yet seen disintegration but at the same time it can also be stated that Nigeria is still far from being united. It is unable to manage effectively its plurality and attain stability in a democratic context. CAN has outlined number of its political objectives like:

1. Nigeria remains a secular state.
2. Islam does not assert itself beyond a limit that is tolerable to Christians.
3. Federal resources are distributed rationally and justly to both religious groups.
4. Christians are adequately represented in power at the federal level, partly to demonstrate that the country is not Islamic and has people who can represent the interest of Christianity.
5. Political sensitivity is extended to all matters relating to the welfare of Christians specially in the field of education and health.

The leader who has epitomizes the politics of CAN has been archbishop Olubunmi Okogie who became president of CAN in 1987. His predecessor Cardinal Ekandem believed in private dialogues with government of Nigeria through diplomatic and non-conventional strategy. On the other hand, Okogie rejected this approach stating that "it never worked." He has used media, protest and courts to make his point evidence t and has mobilized the people.

Islamic leaders have adopted a different approach towards this issue. The Constitution of Nigeria Article 10 stated that, "The government of Nigeria shall not adopt any religion as the state religion". Thus, Nigerian constitution has outlined the country to be progressing on the secular lines but this provision has generated lot of political heat in the country. A number of Muslims have objected to these clause like Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), a leading Islamic organization established in 1961, defined Secularism to mean opposition to religion and also an approval of the "Worldly or material". It stated that to endorse a secular state meant Muslims were to reject God and accept disorder. Islamic leaders state that State should have no interference in religion and the state can relate with religion only when it is necessary to do sound that too without any element of power but cooperation. For the Muslim leaders specially the ulama, the idea of a secular state has no place in Islam which recognizes no separation between the temporal and spiritual. Many of the anti secular sentiments connect well with the early history of Islam and with the successful establishment of the theocratic state where the Caliph is both a religious and a political leader. To, the Ulama, the ideal state for modern Nigeria was a theocracy similar to the one demanded by Uthman Dan fadio in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Islamic leaders implied that the state should never be neutral in religion and by choice it should adopt Islam. This debate has never been resolved and continues to impose a serious hurdle in the smooth functioning of Political Process that led to military starting to tinker with the constitution and supporting the religious leaders. The Sharia law has been used in many parts of the northern Nigeria following the Jihad. The Ulama's objected to the marginalization of the issue of Sharia that did not assume any significant dimension till 1978 and only after it became part of the debate in the constituent assembly. Since 1980, Nigeria has witnessed religious riots in Kaduna, Kano and Gambe. A controversy erupted regarding Nigeria obtaining a membership of Organisation of Islamic cooperation (OIC) in 1986 during the regime of Babangida before that the country had only enjoyed a status of an observer.

When the news broke about the membership of OIC, Christians were enraged and for the first time started talking about impending war in Nigeria, those who had been talking about the Islamization agenda, this news confirmed that the Nigeria was soon to be declared as an Islamic state. Within a few days millions of Christians were mobilized to attack this decision. The first casualty was witnessed in the form of loss of Job of Comrade Ebitu Ukiwe, a deputy to President Bbangida who being a Christian had stated that the federal government has never deliberated on this issue. The Ulama's, Islamic politicians also retaliated by terming Christians as selfish, unrealistic, and mean. They wanted Nigerian government not to withdraw from the membership of OIC and rather demanded that Nigeria should sever its diplomatic ties with the Vatican City. Given the extent of anger of Christians, government of Nigeria got into a damage control mode and formed a twenty member committee under the leadership of Lt. Col. John Shangaya on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1986 to advise on how to handle this uproar. After six weeks, the committee submitted its report stating that an amicable solution should be found to this issue and harmony be maintained between two religious groups. The Christian members disassociated themselves from this report after they were warned by the Muslims against opposing their membership to OIC.

These three issues secularism of the state, sharia law and membership of OIC clearly show how Nigerians differ as to what type of state they want and how they should be governed. The confrontations over the distribution of power and political offices have raised number of issues as: Firstly, it can be stated that merit is subordinated to other considerations. Secondly, political actors can use religion to attain power. There are plenty of instances where ambitious aspirants justify their claims based on religion. Thirdly, to balance religious and political consideration, more political positions have been created thus putting more administrative cost and encouraged interpersonal rivalry. Nigeria has failed to mediate between inter religious conflicts in such a way to prevent future ones or to bring the existing ones towards better understanding between two rival religion. In 1987, Nigerian government established Advisory Council for Religious Affairs to promote national development but even the council could not achieve greater success in the prevailing condition. Years have passed and efforts have been made to bring peace and harmony in the country. At present Nigeria is governed by 1999 constitution, it has set forth various social objectives for the citizens of the Nigeria. Section 10 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution states that "the

government of the federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion". Art 17 of the 1999 constitution has emphasized upon ideals of freedom, equality and justice for every citizen of Nigeria. At present, Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has stressed on his government treading on the path Progressive ideology that shall include in it values of liberty, social justice, egalitarianism, and recognition of fundamental rights that gives a lot of hope to Nigerians for a bright future.

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